AN INTRODUCTION TO MELANESIAN RELIGIONS
A Handbook for Church Workers
Book Two of a Trilogy

Edited by: Ennio Mantovani
General Editor: Lynn Giddings
Artwork by: Sr Emily Duguay smsm

First Printed 1984, Reprinted 1987, Reprinted 1995
©1984 by The Melanesian Institute
for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service.

Published by
The Melanesian Institute
PO Box 571, Goroka, Papua New Guinea
# CONTENTS

Introduction *Ennio Mantovani*  
Glossary  
1. Traditional Religions and Christianity *Ennio Mantovani*  
2. What is Religion? *Ennio Mantovani*  
3. Comparative Analysis of Cultures and Religions *Ennio Mantovani*  
4. Melanesian Religions: An Overview *Darrell Whiteman*  
5. Symbolism and Myth *Mary MacDonald*  
6. Celebrations of Cosmic Renewal *Ennio Mantovani*  
7. Ritual in Melanesia *Ennio Mantovani*  
8. Magic, Medicine and Sorcery *Mary MacDonald*  
9. Magic: A Pastoral Response *Gernot Fugmann*  
10. Cargo Movements *Brian Schwarz*  
11. Holy Spirit Movements *Brian Schwarz*  
12. Salvation in Melanesian Religions *Gernot Fugmann*

Contributors 297

Index 299
Introduction

When the first missionaries came to Melanesia, they came believing that Melanesians were ‘lost’, or at least in danger of being lost. Melanesians had no knowledge of God, or of his son, Christ Jesus, whom God had raised and given ‘a name which is above every name’ (Phil. 2:9-10 [AV]). They came too believing that there was 'none other name under heaven given among men', whereby humanity could be saved (Acts 4:12 [AV]). For the certainty of these beliefs and in the assurance that God had called them to witness to their faith, they came. They came in almost certain knowledge of awaiting suffering, sickness, deprivation, and even death. But they came with a burning faith, a missionary zeal, for were not these ‘heathen’ brethren in dire need of saving grace?

Great changes have taken place in Melanesia in recent decades. Most Melanesians, with a few exceptions, have gained their Independence from colonial rule. Today, particularly among the educated and articulate, it is fashionable to criticize past missionary endeavours, and to link missionization with colonization. It now seems arrogant and brash to insist that God had not loved or cared for the peoples of Melanesia before the coming of the missionaries, to cast their 'pagan' ancestors into hell. At the same time, scholars, particularly anthropologists, have had new insights into Melanesian cultures and customs. As a consequence, the theological attitudes of the first missionaries are no longer entirely acceptable, and Christians ‘blush’ at some of the past words and actions 'in the name of the Lord'. But the swing of the pendulum has left many confused, and caused many to agonize at the ‘watering down’ of the faith. Is it compromise with ‘things of the Devil’?

Is it syncretism? Or is it the hand of God?

What do we do with Romans 1:19, 20, which suggests that God made himself perfectly plain to all creation, that ever since he 'created the world his everlasting power and deity - however invisible - have been there for the mind to see in the things he has made'? Is it possible that God revealed himself to Melanesians before the coming of the missionaries? Could some of the ancient Melanesian rituals be honouring the same God as the Christian's God? Could their myths be prefigurements of Christ?

Could we, as Christians, be called by God to continue a dialogue that he initiated at creation and brought to perfection through the Incarnation?

In the middle of this debate, cries of complaint are heard from the field. If non-Christians have salvation through their traditional religions, where does it leave missionary zeal? Why should anyone today run the risk of cerebral malaria or dengue fever if non-Christians have their own path to salvation?
Because of these concerns. The Melanesian Institute has been asked to provide a manual to assist church workers, particularly expatriates, to understand the cultures, religions, and societies of Melanesia and the role and mission of the church in this context.

This present volume, 'An Introduction to Melanesian Religions' does not intend to answer academic questions about Melanesian religions. It plans to answer the questions Christian church workers ask when confronted by the various Melanesian religions. Those questions determined the topics of the various articles.

The choice of authors has been suggested by the fact that these authors have been working together as a team in giving this type of introduction to both national and expatriate church workers in Melanesia during the Orientation Courses which have proved to be of great help to the participants. For this reason we decided to make use of the same people and, in as far as possible, the same papers which made the Orientation Courses a success.

The reason for the nature of the articles is that what is needed is not more information about traditional religions, but some help to put order into the wealth of first-hand information the church workers possess and keep gathering. The articles in this publication intend to provide a systematic framework for understanding and ordering of the various religious phenomena one can observe in Melanesia today. Besides being primarily a handbook for the expatriate church workers, it is hoped that this publication can be used in institutes of tertiary education to give a different perspective on Melanesian religions and so to contribute to the dialogue between Christianity and Melanesian religions. In a book written for church workers and dealing with traditional religions, Christians would want to state clearly where traditional religions stand in relation to Christ. Christ is the only source of life. He is the source not only in the sense that 'not one thing had its being but through him' (John 1:3), but that through his life he revealed the Father, and through his death and resurrection he redeemed humanity.

There is no salvation but through Christ: whoever is saved is saved through him. Christ is the final, normative revelation of God. He reveals God as the loving one who has always been striving to communicate with his people. If traditional religions are a response to this revelation, then they should at least elicit the respect of Christians. Because Jesus Christ revealed God as Love, as Abba, as Father, talking to his children, we can talk about religions being the result of a dialogue initiated by God.

Darkness and shadow need light as a contrast before they can be experienced. Christ, as absolute revelation, is that light. Whatever truth or sinfulness there might be in traditional religions can only be discovered in the light of Christ. In his light we can look back and discern both the strivings of God and the human distortions. In the light of Christ we can exercise discernment and judgment.

Christ, as the self-communication of Love, is Saviour. In him is life, and in him alone.
But if traditional religions are at God's initiative, we should tread carefully before we condemn them. If we want to challenge the distortions, to replace no-trust with trust in people's lives, we must answer the call to witness to God and to be his disciples. We must respond to the call of mission. But how can we be disciples, challenging distortions, replacing trust where there was no-trust, if we do not understand how God manifested himself in Melanesia as from the beginning and if we do not perceive how he has been understood?

We can respect traditional religions, not because of what people do in them, but because of what God is trying to do through them. Christ came to set straight what people distorted, and bring all things to perfection beyond human reach. Every Christian has been called to be a co-worker with Christ in this task. May this publication help not only the expatriates, but every Christian to be a better minister with Christ in, this missionary task.

Ennio Mantovani, **Special Editor.**