

Foreword

At a meeting of the United States Catholic Mission Association in the mid-1990s, I was having dinner with my good friend, the late Father Joseph (Sjef) Donders, a member of the Missionaries of Africa. We were talking about the strenuous objections of another Orbis author to Sjef's remarks on a recent book by that author on the inculturation of the Gospel. Sjef said that it was "the best book he knew on the inculturation of the *Western, Latin Catholic* version of the church and the Gospel." The author, also an admired friend of mine, did not miss the not so subtle sarcasm of Sjef's remarks. The book, Sjef judged, did not begin to touch the depths of the kind of intercultural dialogue needed to nourish the faith that missionaries had planted but only Africans could bring to maturity. Sjef's question raised, of course, the extent to which the achievements of the first eighteen hundred years of Christian inculturation in the West were obligatory in the Global South in the third millennium.

Sjef told me that it might be possible to translate the essential doctrines of the church into African and other languages. Nevertheless, when that was done, he said, inculturation would still not proceed organically. Although the view that translating the scriptures and doctrines of the church and establishing its structures, with a number of necessary adaptations, is what recent popes have had in mind when speaking of inculturation, both Joseph Donders and Ennio Mantovani know this will not suffice. The orthodox view, briefly stated, is that under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the canons of the great ecumenical councils—Greek and Latin statements that clarified the faith in a Hellenistic-Roman cultural environment—were necessary in places like Papua New Guinea. Those councils issued statements that guided the church for many centuries concerning what is to be believed about the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. They taught that he is the unique Son of God, that the Holy Spirit is likewise divine, and that the "God" (*theos*) of the New Testament is the Father of Jesus, and that all of them exist from all eternity as three "persons" in one Trinitarian Godhead.

Making sense of those doctrines in Nairobi, among the Maasai of the Serengeti, and the Simbu (pronounced "Chimbu") of the Papua New Guinea Highlands has, in other words, been considered an essential part of passing on the faith. In reality, the preacher of the Word must also step back and let the Holy Spirit guide the people to discover what it *means* to follow Jesus.

Throughout the late 1960s and into the 1980s, another strand of thought grasped the deeper dimensions and was, if not common, at least prominent in thinking about what the New Testament and its Western interpretation meant in the Global South. Without necessarily denying

the dogmatic traditions of the church, missiologists and missionaries who were thinking this way were attuned to the ways in which world views are complex realities shaped by long histories of passing on stories from generation to generation. Hearers of these stories learned the languages in which the great stories were embedded, and the stories and ritual and other practices shaped their basic world view. Those who knew the cultural history of Christianity also knew that the inculturation of Christianity would be more complex than translating and preaching the classic creeds. Nor would substituting modern, scientific cosmology and Western Christianity in PNG quickly supplant traditional cosmologies that were the intellectual furniture of the Melanesian mind.

One way of concretizing this alternate perspective was the proposal that African and Melanesian stories, Indian Vedas, accounts of the Buddha's life, and the teaching of Confucius could function in much the same way that the Hebrew Scriptures had within Christianity. That is to say, they were asking and attempting to answer a question: Could these religious and cultural systems provide a valid moral, epistemological, and ontological structure within which the "universal truth" of Jesus of Nazareth could be interpreted and incarnated? Phenomenologically considered, this was how the Hebrew Scriptures functioned in Christian history.

My own research in this area was sparked by a chance mention by Stephen Bevans of a book that examined the way in which Germanic world view came back over the Alps to influence the shape of both medieval and modern Catholicism.¹ Further conversations with Andrew Walls made me aware of the complex patterns by which Celtic, Scandinavian, and Germanic influences shaped the emergence of Romano-Germanic Catholicism between the 9th and 13th centuries. That Catholicism differed greatly from the various Celtic, Latin-Catholic, Greek-Orthodox, Eastern-Syrian, and Nubian-Ethiopic forms of Christianity that arose in the first five centuries and existed in a form of communion that was, in some cases, fairly intimate, and in other cases in almost total isolation from one another. And despite believing they were returning to the age of the New Testament and rescuing the core of the Gospel from all these Catholic accretions, Protestants in both the 16th and 20th centuries were unconsciously reading ancient Christianity according to their early modern and modern cultural outlooks.

¹ I refer to James C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). See also: Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, Vol. 1: *Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

The book that the reader holds in his or her hands does not go into this history, nor does it linger in the realms of theory. But it is, in my opinion, an accessible way of entering a conversation that takes seriously the way in which basic world views determine how a body of doctrine and practice, such as those embodied by Christianity, are transformed in the intercultural dialogue that takes place when missionaries or merchants begin giving an account for their hope to a people that did not know Jesus.

The strength of *The Dema and the Christ*, I suggest, lies in the way Ennio Mantovani helps his readers grasp the pre-history of the peoples of Melanesia, as they lived in communities which, in that stage of culture formation, produced a profoundly satisfying, holistic explanation of the universe in which these peoples lived. That stage is commonly spoken of as the culture and religion of hunters and gatherers. They roamed the forests, the river basins and coasts of this massive island—at 820,000 square kilometres, including the islands around it, the second largest in the world (after Greenland).

Not writing primarily as a theologian or missiologist, Mantovani helps us to understand the religions of the hunters and gatherers, and then to grasp the magnitude of the changes that came about when they discovered through the instrumentality of the “Dema” how to use digging sticks to plant tubers, thus liberating themselves from the need to wander in search of food. Once one mastered the techniques of planting various kinds of taros and yams and understood the soils, the seasons and waterfall patterns, a community’s rituals changed from one of marvelling at the way in which a “more-than-human” provided for them to an account of how the character Mantovani calls the “Dema” made possible a richer life for the gardeners.

Born in 1932 in Riva in the province of Trent in northern Italy, Mantovani was ordained for the Divine Word Missionaries in 1958 and pursued doctoral studies at the Gregorian University in Rome, after which he went to Papua New Guinea in 1962. He spurned the more normal trajectory of holders of PhDs in the Society of the Divine Word. Instead of staying in PNG for a few years to gain “practical mission experience,” Ennio decided that his scholarly work would not just centre on academic studies of Christian inculturation in PNG. He would stay there for the rest of his life. As time goes on, his family misses him and hopes he will return to Europe to teach. In a November 1969 letter to his brother, however, he writes,

You know that I am not a friend of the pen, but I have found work that is much more attractive and useful: talking to missionaries. My publications in Europe would feed only

people's curiosity, while my talks here directly serve the pastoral work.

... It is true that I could lecture in Europe as well, however, the place where pastoral policies are made, where a "second Congo" can be avoided is here in PNG, and here I intend to remain.²

On the other hand, my ideas are new, revolutionary if you want. I need to test their value in the field before they can be made known. Now you will understand that without Yobai I would be without a "laboratory" to test my theories; I would be a theoretician building castles in the air. My father gave me common sense, Rome the theory, and Yobai must give me the experience.³

In November 1976, seven years after Ennio wrote this letter, he and I were invited to a consultation to reflect on the topic "Christ in Melanesia." It was sponsored by the Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service, which published the papers presented there the following year.⁴ Ennio and I shared a room at the Lutheran Mission Guesthouse in Goroka, and I clearly remember him telling me he was disappointed at the way he had presented his paper "A Fundamental Melanesian Religion." The discussion, he said, had been good, but he wondered if the ramifications of his thesis had been grasped.

He was right to wonder. I certainly did not grasp fully what he was about. One of the greatest blessings of my life, however, has been the friendship with Ennio that was nourished and deepened as he sent me the growing body of his writings, writings in which he was going ever more deeply into the phenomenon of Melanesian religion. Slowly I began to see the implications, realizing that he was, first, bracketing the implications of what he was learning in dialogue, not allowing premature Western Christian objections to overwhelm the reality of the world mediated by the stories and ritual practices of his PNG interlocutors. He sought, instead, to understand—in *Melanesian-PNG* terms of reference—the ways in which the various religio-cultural habits of mind and

² "Second Congo" refers to the bloodbath that followed the independence of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Kinshasa) from Belgium. Thousands died then, and the underlying causes of the conflicts have still not been resolved as of 2013.

³ Ennio Mantovani, *Mission: Collision or Dialogical Encounter? A Chronicle of St. Paul's Parish, Yobai, Papua New Guinea* (Nettetal, Germany: Steyler Verlag, 2011), 192.

⁴ *Christ in Melanesia: Exploring Theological Issues* (Goroka, CHP, Papua New Guinea: The Melanesian Institute, 1977).

heart expressed fundamental attitudes to the universe and how they coalesced around what he called “life.” He moved from full-time missionary work in Yobai (where he lived and worked from 1962 to 1976) to join the Melanesian Institute, under whose auspices he taught courses to new missionaries and delivered lectures around Papua New Guinea. Especially important was the realization that, when he was working with Papua New Guinean catechists, church leaders, and other ministers, their reception of the ideas in *The Dema and the Christ* convinced Ennio that he was onto something.

Concretely, the way in which he articulated the notion of “life” and the way in which it constituted a sort of “matrix” (my word, not his) that underlay all the varied manifestations of what Westerners called “religion” brought forth a spontaneous eureka moment among his PNG dialogue partners.

I leave the unfolding of the argument to Ennio. What I will say is this: The author of *The Dema and the Christ* is one of a not numerous group of men and women who had both the linguistic and intercultural skills and who dedicated many years to entering into the world view of another people. He has returned with a reliable report on what the people of Papua New Guinea were saying yes to when they became Christians.

The Dema and the Christ is truly the *capolavoro* of a *maestro*. More than mere scholarship, this is a book that I hope will be pondered, and not just by academics. It has implications also for all who attempt to understand the radicalism of the task of engaging the culture of secularized men and women in the West. Much of what goes under the title of “missiological studies of Western culture,” I fear, is mainly the attempt to staunch the haemorrhage of members and to shore up failing institutions. Ennio Mantovani’s patient life of dialogue with his beloved people of PNG is a model of a different kind of engaged scholarship that can serve as a handmaid to the “new” evangelization that Popes Paul, John Paul, Benedict, and Francis have called for. What is needed is the kind of long-term dialogue and respect for others that Ennio Mantovani personifies.

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