

Preface

During my postgraduate studies at the Gregorian University I met for the first time the world of the planters through my professor, Josef Goetz, SJ. I learned to look at their religious experience in itself and not through the eyes of theism, of my own tradition. It was a new experience and it brought about a new attitude in me.

I began to question the assumption that the theistic religious experience was the only true one. I regarded it as a valid one, but as cultural like all the others. It was the one on which my faith as a Christian was based, which was familiar and dear to me, but it was cultural, hence limited. Not only it did not exclude other valid religious experiences but expected them. As the theistic experience was older, being the one of the gatherers and hunters, I expected its symbolism to continue, however, most probably, expressing new experiences.

Concretely I began to question the theological idea that God could reveal Godself only in theistic terms. The fact that the Christian Bible uses mainly theistic symbolism and condemns others, I came to believe, is a fact to be understood in its historical, cultural context, but not necessarily the sole criterion of a valid revelation.⁶ Seen in this way, theism does not exclude other symbolic systems.

I came to the conclusion that one cannot separate one's faith from one's culture. The language of religion is cultural. This is not an expression of skepticism but the realization that the Absolute is beyond human understanding and that humans can only use the symbols of their daily life—which is constrained by language and culture—to express their experience of the Ultimate. Sometimes I have the impression that we forget the cultural element in the expression of what we believe, thus exposing us to the danger of absolutizing what is cultural and not absolute. There is an absolute truth; there is an Ultimate, which for me is personal. However, I express my faith the way I do because of my cultural background and therefore I need to respect people who express their faith in the Absolute in a different way, in their own cultural way.

This attitude gave me the possibility of revisiting the religion of the planters of Papua New Guinea (PNG), among whom I was living, with a more open mind. My first reaction was to question the then current

⁶ See: Ennio Mantovani, "The Ideal of Peace and the Reality of Violence in the Bible," in Patrick F. Gesch, SVD (ed.), *Mission and Violence. Healing the Lasting Damage* (Madang PNG: DWU Press, 2009), 281-288. See this volume: Part III, Chapter 12.

interpretations of the traditional religion as animism, ancestor veneration, magic and so forth.

By applying the distinction between ideal and reality, that is to say the distinction between what *ought* to be and what *actually occurs* in daily life, I was able to go beyond what I was seeing to discover the experiences and values that motivated people and caused them to feel guilty when they failed to achieve them.

Now, having left PNG, the time has come to reflect on the forty years I spent there. However, I do not want to write a fully referenced academic treatise on the culture or religion of the people among whom I was living, adding yet another number to the list of books in the field of ethnography. What I plan to do is to record my personal, inner dialogue with the Melanesian religions. I will describe the way I experienced them, the way they challenged me and the way they still challenge me. I can testify to the way I experienced them without pretending that I fully understood them. In other words, this book tells how I experienced Melanesian religions, the way they challenged me and the way I responded to that challenge.

Since I left PNG I have presented some of the moments of my inner dialogue in various theological and missiological journals as well as chapters in other publications. The advantage of the present publication consists in bringing together what is scattered in several different publications. It does not only bring it together; it connects it as logical steps in my journey. The various chapters represent the hurdles I had to take in order to be able to dialogue without giving up my Christian principles.

What is the value of such an enterprise? First it forces me to reflect on my ideas and reactions and to put order into them. Readers will read and interact with me. In addition, the challenges I experienced and the insights I gained may be of help to other people as well. But, above all, these reflections will show my appreciation of the beauty and depth of the religion of those who welcomed me into their lives. In writing this book, I express my gratitude for the chance I had to experience their lives and to be enriched by them. This is my way of saying thank you.

This book has five parts. The first part presents the people of Papua New Guinea and some important aspects of their culture. The second part concentrates on the religions of PNG, while the third part discusses inner dialogue and the hurdles I encountered before I could overcome my inadequate and misleading pre-understandings. Part four presents a dialogue with key Melanesian realities, while the fifth presents a few challenges to traditional Christianity.