

EXPERIENCING THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

A Conversation Between Andrew Strathern and Theodor Ahrens

Though dialogue between missionaries and anthropologists is regularly called for, examples of such dialogue are rare. In the following interview, a missionary, who has thought and written much about Melanesian customs and beliefs, Dr Theodor Ahrens of Hamburg, Federal Republic of Germany, asks a noted anthropologist, Dr Andrew Strathern, Director of the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, about this conversion to the Pentecostal beliefs of the Mt Hagen people he has studied for many years. The interview is published in the Melanesian Journal of Theology with kind permission of the two participants and by arrangement with the International Review of Mission (see vol LXXV, January 1986).

Ahrens: Dr Strathern, not long ago you became a member of the Filadelfia church, a Pentecostal church near Mt Hagen, among a people you have worked with for many years as an anthropologist. Did the encounter with this church change your mind?

Strathern: It changed my heart. Theo! I was an anthropologist, who had worked for many years in the Highlands region of Papua New Guinea, and had developed particularly close relationships with the Hagen people there. I had taken a negative attitude to mission work, insofar as I saw it simply destroying traditional culture. Through participating in services run by the Filadelfia church, and seeing what this church could do for people, I was moved to join them. My long experience with anthropology made me feel that it's important for some people to have a true concern for people here. Looking at various matters – as I was concerned with people in the past – I could see that, at least, missions have had that concern at their heart.

Also, in the end, anthropology without any kind of belief behind it is quite sterile. It gives us quite a good basis for understanding; but I found that after 20 years of working with it, there were still so many problems in my own

life, and so many things I still didn't understand. It was pointless to imagine that anthropology, as such, was going to give me anything that I was looking for. That's quite clear I think. There is nothing mysterious about that. But – and I think it comes from a growing concern – if you stay a long time with people then you can't just study their problems. You've got to be involved in them. And when you share their problems, in many ways then, you are fighting for them as well as trying to find yourself.

Ahrens: As you searched with them for the truth of their lives, you were thrown back to the question about the truth of your own life?

Strathern: That is certainly what happened to me. They would ask me, from time to time, whether I had been through experiences they didn't yet know about. So I had to join the search with them.

Ahrens: It seems that these Pentecostal-type of Christian communities have sprung up in the last ten years or so. What do you think give them their appeal? What kind of questions do they answer?

Strathern: First of all, I think the appeal is emotional. Let us get that quite clear; their appeal is very strongly emotional. Now, to say that, does not mean to say that I think that is necessarily a good thing, or a bad thing, in itself. It is clearly answering some need that people have for an emotional involvement in their religion.

Along with that, there is a very strong personal sense of involvement. Each individual person is asked, or required, to make a commitment to remake the commitment, to continue to remake it. There is a definite appeal and claim made on *every* occasion of worship.

On the one hand, that puts really strong pressure on the individuals. On the other hand, if people feel they need it, then they always have the opportunity to respond. That's the good side of it.

Third, I think they are trying to bring alive the experience of the early Christians around Jesus Himself. They are trying to jump over the centuries of history and create a sense of that experience. There is a definite attempt to renew the faith from the Bible itself; in that sense they are a revival movement.

Ahrens: What about the response from the people themselves in terms of their own culture?

Strathern: Here I find that either, consciously or unconsciously – perhaps unconsciously – the Pentecostals are appealing to certain elements already existing in the cultures of the Highlands people.

Let me give you an example. There is a very strong understanding in Melpa or Mt Hagen culture that sickness and misfortune are the result of bad feelings between persons in the community itself. They have a term that means anger or frustration – it can be given various translations – but, around this concept, gather all sorts of ideas about bad things that may happen in life. The ancestors, who watch over life, will cause these misfortunes if things go wrong in social relationships; they will bring to light whatever is hidden or bad in relationships, and also give people the means to resolve these.

I find the Pentecostals are doing basically the same, though they are using a different vocabulary. They are using a Christian vocabulary of sin, the bringing to light of sin, of confession, repentance, and reconciliation between persons, just as, through the sacrifice of Jesus, we have been reconciled to God.

What they are going is, at one level, quite straightforward; it corresponds to the Christian understanding. But, at another level, it operates quite closely – even if unconsciously – with local ideas. This correspondence is the reason it is working.

But, at the same time, I do find there is still a lot of misunderstanding on the part of the people that causes them to use this form of worship as a sort of ritual that can sort out some problems for them, but that is not necessarily a message for their whole life. Their life is still morally compartmentalised, and, from time to time, this ritual will do something for them. But, at other times, their behaviour will be glaringly out of character with an ordinary understanding of Christian ethics. This disparity concerns me.

Ahrens: It seems that people grasp Jesus in the presence of His Spirit as a power of renewal for their lives. Against what background does that take place? Where would people in Hagen or Melpa societies see blind alleys in their lives, in their societal lives, or in their ethical systems?

Strathern: The basic problem is how to handle conflict between persons, what sort of reciprocity to establish. It is very strongly ingrained, that you pay back in kind and to measure for what has been done to you. It is also quite clear that that is categorically what Jesus said we were not to do. That is a very, very difficult conflict for the Highlands people. It is at the core of every problem, as I see it. And the Pentecostals attempt to overcome it by emotional means, by a special appeal to the Holy Spirit to bring about a complete spiritual change within a person.

Their appeal to the Holy Spirit is one of their important themes, and their church rituals are concerned with that. And, I may say, Theo, that I experienced it myself, though I did not expect to, when I joined this church. After all, I have been studying things, looking at them from outside for many years, and I have never had an inner experience of this kind. But I did experience it. I don't believe that everyone who goes through a certain form of behaviour in the church has really experienced the Spirit, because observation of their lives subsequently would suggest that they were not filled with the Spirit. If they had been, that would have changed everything they did. Now, that is a problem; the problem lies in the fact that, underneath, there is still a strong adherence to their own cultural principles that exist on an unconscious level.

Ahrens: Are you suggesting that the key issue between Christian faith and the principles of traditional culture is the issue of reciprocity?

Strathern: I think it is. At the same time, there are many things about traditional culture that have been opposed, like dancing and decorations, but they have been opposed at the wrong level. I am for dancing and decorations. It depends what meaning you put into these things. The spiritual meaning you put into an activity is an activity of the mind and the heart, and that can vary. An activity may have had one meaning in the past; it can have a different meaning now. We need to look at the problem in this sort of way.

There has been too much negative rejection, and destruction of traditional culture, without any real understanding of what the issues are at a deeper level. That has upset and confused people for long periods of time in the Highlands. And it is still, I think, an issue that distracts their attention from the deeper problems they are facing. They think: Oh, if I give up decoration, then I am a Christian. That is just like observing some kind of taboo. It is on the same

level as the spirit cults that they have also and in which, Theo, I have been a member as well.

If you oppose those things out of fear of what that cult may do to you, then you accept literally the power of the cult. You may even identify the power of that cult with the power of Satan. You can, however, also say that these are simply traditional customs with certain beliefs that underpin them; we happen to think now that these beliefs are not true. That is a very different point that I have never seen argued or discussed, and that distresses me. I want to see this discussed by people who are seriously concerned about the impact of Christianity. I do not want to discuss whether you should or you should not dance. We must discuss about people's minds and hearts, and the deeper underlying principles that inform their lives, because that is what Christianity is about. I see a very real problem in this question of reciprocity. Has any theological study been made on biblical material referring to this issue?

Ahrens: Offhand, I couldn't quote any major study, but certainly reciprocity is an issue dealt with permanently, both in the Old and the New Testament. There are many stories and sayings illustrating the point that, while God's blessing seems to be in response to good faith and proper behaviour, His punishment seems to be provoked by misconduct and sin.

In terms of social relationships, reciprocity is an issue. A "tooth for a tooth" may represent some sort of limitation of retaliation, while, before, an eye may have been taken for a tooth.

But to return to the previous point, obviously there was a stage when the prosperity of the wicked (Ps 73:3) proved to the faithful that they could not rationalise their fate on a customary logic of example, one just person potentially saving a whole city of evildoers (Gen 18), or those who come late for work in the vineyard receiving the same amount of pay as did those who joined already in the morning.

In other words, a logic of retribution is still operational, but now it is centred around the experience of grace and reconciliation.

But then, of course, the question whether success or luck are just man-made or a blessing, as the stories about Jacob and Abraham may suggest, remains.

Strathern: In a way, what I feel I need is more contact with theologians. This business about blessing is very important in the Pentecostal form of worship. People go to church to get blessings. If they come out, and they feel they have not got a blessing, they say: "Oh, I did not get a blessing today". What people are feeling, depends, in many ways, on how the service went, which is a corporate phenomenon.

Ahrens: What makes blessing so important?

Strathern: Blessing is one of the prime values, because it is associated with success. Now, here is another case where there is an opportunity for cultural imprinting. If blessing is assumed to give you success, then people can think that it has something to do with material success.

And that they do. In fact this is a definite part of it. Now, in the church, people are told that if you are blessed with some kind of success, including material success, you must not take pleasure in the blessing itself, but you must give thanks to God for it. So the church attempts to pull this cultural imprinting back into the framework of Christianity. But, for some people, it does not work like that. In other words, for some, this idea of the blessing is used as a form of magic to ensure various forms of success, in an automatic way, as a result of their ritual performance.

This, I think, is a misunderstanding of the Christian idea of a blessing. Certainly, it is a part of Christian belief to feel that God can answer our prayers, or can give us blessings according to His own plan for us, and these we accept with thanks. But we cannot necessarily induce these blessings by a ritual. We can, however, pray, and we can leave some of our problems in God's hand through prayer, and ask Him to bless us if that is His will.

But let us return for a moment to the Old Testament. What about the biblical stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob?

Ahrens: In those stories, blessing is evidently a key issue. Blessing is evidenced in the promise of land, of a son, fertility of the herds, continuity of the clan, etc. There seems to be something like a double layer, or a dialectic understanding of blessing, however, because Abraham, though promised a land to live in, remains a nomad, and never possesses more than just a burial-ground in Israel. Or, shortly after being promised a son through Sarah his wife, in a moment of danger, he is ready to give away his wife to strangers. And, when, finally, the continuity of his clan seems to be secured through his son, he learns that he must be ready to sacrifice him.

Perhaps the Abraham stories reflect a more-sophisticated understanding of blessing than the Jacob cycle, where the concept of blessing seems to be more straightforward. Jacob knows a certain magic, and his herds grow faster than those of his father-in-law. Still, Jacob is portrayed not simply as a winner, but as someone who goes through many beatings and much fear before he is finally blessed in his reconciliation with his brother. In other words, to me, it seems that there is, in the Old Testament stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, this layer, where blessing is equated with success. But then, as generations reflected on these stories, and handed them down to their children, another layer of experience was added to it, saying that Yahweh's blessing cannot be simply equated with success, fertility, growth, continuity of the family, and security of the clan; the concept of losing, failure, and sacrifice must be integrated into a biblical understanding of blessing. I'm not an Old Testament scholar. But, to me, there is something of a dialectic in the biblical notion of blessing brought about by these layers of tradition that were added to the old one.

Strathern: That is a good way of putting it. There are some ways in which the notion of the ancestors, as the underlying forces ensuring that things go well in life, is similar to the first idea of the blessing that you have expressed. But, of course, there is the conflict, in that we are talking about God, in one case, and about the ancestors in the other case.

Ahrens: Well, where are they? Are they in the person of Christ? How does he relate to them, and they to him? Or are the ancestors silent?

Strathern: That question would be refused by the Pentecostals. I have explained to you that there is a way of thinking about these things that forces all matters to do with traditional culture, to be seen as manifestations of Satan. I don't believe

that. Nothing in my conversion experience has brought any message to me that has changed my idea that there are some things that are good in traditional culture that we have got to look at. But that is the way in which the whole issue is pushed aside. Anything that is pushed aside in that way, of course, is likely to come back later, and cause problems.

Ahrens: Now it seems, though, that people, from the very experiences of their daily life, are reaching out for some sort of renewal, really looking outwards for the source or power of renewal. Is that so?

Strathern: Absolutely. This is a very strong factor in the success of the Pentecostals over the last few years, and it is something that one admires. I can see it does something for people. It gives them even a positive feeling about not drinking beer (alcoholism is a big problem in the Highlands, nowadays). It gives them a feeling of achievement. I have seen this in people, and it is similar to the feelings I had myself. Where I can identify directly with it, of course, I can understand it better. It does give people a positive feeling about acting in a certain sort of way. It gives them an emotional commitment. It gives them also a sense of community.

One of the important elements in every church service is shaking hands with as many people as you can. It is a community ritual of a kind easily recognisable from other cultures and contexts. They ask you to say certain things such as, "bless you". Or, "I love you with the love of the Lord", looking into the other person's eyes. That can be good and healing between persons. And, if they leave with a genuine good feeling from this, then it is bound to have some effect outside. My concern is that, sometime, that effect lasts only for about five minutes. I would like to see the effect prolonged.

It is not only that these congregations provide a refuge from the escalation of social problems outside, they also provide a very positive and good feeling inside the congregation. So, you are not just running away from something. You feel good, because you have got something else positive.

Ahrens: So, against critics, you would maintain that this is not just an escapist religion, compensating for the evils on earth with the promise of some transcendent salvation, but that Pentecostal religion has a positive, integrative function in the community here and now?

Strathern: I'm sure it has.

Ahrens: Is this integrative function comparable to the function that religion played in traditional society?

Strathern: I would say that it is doing exactly the same thing; if we agree that these functions are important, and that only religion can fulfil these functions, then we must recognise that there is also something worthwhile among the traditional practices as well. The point cuts two ways. It indicates that there is something good about what is happening in Pentecostalism; but it also indicates that there was something good before, something that now needed replacing. I would just ask them (the leaders of the church) to be conscious of that.

Ahrens: Looking back on the history of my own church, I recall that those local responses to the Christian message that concentrated too heavily on the pragmatic aspect of blessing, connected perhaps with a focus on ritual, were not only categorised as cargo cults, but as evil coming from Satan. In other words, non-Christian belief was objectified as something we were looking at from the outside; in more recent years, we have learned that whatever non-Christian, or un-Christian, form of belief we encounter, this will be recognised as such only because we know it from our innermost struggle for integrity and clear expression of Christian faith.

Strathern: I am very interested to hear you say that. Indeed, the former approaches of churches were too simple – too much was destroyed for reasons that were not understood at that time. The enemy we have to identify is not some particular aspect of a traditional culture but what is identified by Jesus himself: “There is nothing outside a man, which, by going into him, can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him” (Mark 7:15). That is the meaning of original sin. But it lies at a universal level in all human experience, not in the details of one particular culture.

Referring again to the passage from Mark that I have cited: Jesus shows there how the details of food taboos are to be transcended. Evil comes from the heart of man, and it is this that we need to combat. In a way, one could argue that the taboos, central to the previous covenant between God and the Israelites, are shown to be neutral and irrelevant in the new phase initiated through God's placement of Jesus in the world. They need not therefore be attacked as such,

but Christians will not need them. This is the wider part of the message, and it provides a new model for the appropriate relationship with the cultures into which Christianity penetrates from outside.

Ahrens: Earlier we touched upon the motive of moral regeneration. Let me ask a further question about this. Do you recognise any millenarian overtones in the people's hope for moral regeneration? What is the horizon of their hope?

Strathern: This depends on what one means by "millenarian". There is certainly a strong emphasis on the idea of the second coming of Jesus, a sense of foreshortening of time, and a need to get people saved before Jesus comes, so that they may go to Heaven. This does not mean, however, that we are dealing with another version of "cargo cult". They are quite clear that it is moral regeneration that we are seeking. They themselves don't always relate this strongly enough to the social context in which they are working. If they did, I think it would be more valuable for the people.

Ahrens: Let me press a bit further on this issue of millennialism. Is not one aspect of millennialism to be concerned with the realisation of the kingdom in the here and now?

Strathern: Of course, that's true. There is a lot of discussion about the kingdom of God in this church, and I think to many of the congregation members this is a great mystery. The kingdom of God, insofar as it ever does occur, or will occur, in our lives here and now, is a kingdom that comes about from the change of our hearts. The kingdom of God is not about eating and drinking, but about righteousness, peace, and joy. And this comes from having faith in Christ in your heart. This is definitely what they are trying to say.

Ahrens: Allow me to pick up one earlier thread of our conversation: the ancestors. In what sense have they been the focal point of conscience in traditional society? Are they feared or loved or both?

Strathern: Feared. But that fear one needs to qualify; they are feared only because they are still part of oneself. They are not feared as the other, as something different. And, in that sense, they are not bogey figures, demonic figures, or satanic figures. They are family members, still. All that has changed

is that now “they can see things more clearly”. That is a very strong Hagen idea.

The ancestors see things that we do not see. It is almost like “seeing through a glass darkly”. Their role is to point out things that are wrong morally in the community. When there is somebody dying, there will usually be some divination to get their ghost to help solve certain problems that are unsolved in the community, suspicions that people have of each other. The ghost is asked to identify the truth by some sign, because it now has the power of sight that before it did not have. Of course, the dead person loses all human senses, but the spirit is thought to have greater powers.

Ahrens: So, what about Christ?

Strathern: Well, Christ is, if you like, an enormously exalted ancestor figure, in the sense that He sees everything through the power of His Father. The power of the ancestors may be limited to seeing problems inside their own lineage, family, or community. But the power of Christ is not limited in that way.

Ahrens: Looking back some 30 years or so, we may say that the Lutherans and Catholics made a very great impact in Hagen and Chimbu, and other Highland areas.

Strathern: Yes, they did.

Ahrens: As I travel and observe our present situation, however, I am left with the impression of a certain tiredness, or may I even say staleness.

Strathern: Well, that is a common phenomenon. It happens to all organisations as organisations. Some of the people who belong to the newer sects seem to be getting a bigger “kick” out of them, and some are coming from Lutheran and Catholic backgrounds.

People say: “The Spirit is dead in them – it is alive in us”. That’s what they claim.

It is one way of rivalry, of course, on the local scene. I think there is also a danger in too much innocence. If renewal is not underpinned by deeper thought and deeper study on the part of somebody involved in that enterprise,

then that enterprise is going to collapse as well. If one could have some of the harvest of reflection, thoughts, and care that have gone into the building up of some of the senior churches, and inject into that the rather innocent and fresh, yes, spontaneous feeling of the Pentecostal worship, then, I think, you would have a really good, strong religion. But, at present, I see that they are lacking on both sides. In that sense, and for that reason, the way forward for the churches in Papua New Guinea has to be through a reaching out towards ecumenism.

Ahrens: In some places does the tension between established church authorities and those moved by the freshness of the Spirit coincide with the social conflict between the young and the old?

Strathern: Yes, new things are popular with the young. I think that the senior churches are making greater efforts now to provide some of these things within their own fabric for the younger people.

The guitar is of great significance in all this, because the guitar is a young people's instrument. They play all sorts of secular songs with it. They also play sacred songs, often to the same tune, with different words. The guitar enables the young people to be creative. And the guitar also irritates and annoys some of the older people who are not used to it.

Ahrens: In Africa, the World Council of Churches encouraged more-established, senior churches to relate positively to this new, spontaneous, charismatic-type of movement, in particular to establish a forum where some dialogue with their leaders could take place. Do you think something like that might be helpful on the Melanesian scene?

Strathern: Oh, I would like to see it happen. But there will be many problems to overcome. You see, people really do get upset about other people's forms of worship. What is all this emotionalism? What is this and that? I went through that, and the only way I overcame it was to try to understand what is behind it. What are they reaching out for? You may not like the forms they use to begin with, but if you understand that they are reaching out for something, that is the important thing. And you understand that they are doing something for people, and that is the other important thing.

Ahrens: If you compare the two types of Christianity – let us say the established-type of senior church, like the Lutherans, the Catholics, and so on – could the approach of the established, more-senior churches be characterised as: “If we have got a social problem, let’s draft a social action programme to deal with it”, whereas the Pentecostals would say: “If they come to faith, everything else will be solved”?

Strathern: Yes, you are more or less right. The sad thing, it seems to me, is that both these positions have truth in them. And they can be true, either in combination, or they can be true separately. I have seen cases where people have been helped by education without going through one of these emotional experiences. Then there are documented cases of “rascals”, who have been converted through an emotional experience, and they have stuck with it. They have not become “rascals” again. So it can do something wonderful for them.

You can have false versions of this, of course. Satan is always ready to assume the appearance of truth. So, it happens, that you get false conversions; you can also get true ones, purely on an emotional basis. Conversions of “rascals” occur when they have become defined as outcasts; there is no acceptable way for them to re-enter society. Only a very powerful change of a ritual nature can bring them in and legitimatise them. So, a Lutheran method of education, will always fail in relation to certain cases. But, on the other hand, once they are in, if no education is provided, they are just as likely to flip out because there is nothing to underpin the experience. That is my view.

Ahrens: Could not one also look at established churches as being tempted to try and justify religion by morality, or ethics, in the same way that any enlightened humanitarian could, or actually does, do?

Strathern: Exactly.

Ahrens: In other words religion has a purpose in itself.

Strathern: Quite. I accept that fully. The Pentecostals have made that point very clearly. That is their strength. It is also what affected me. It is the first time I saw that.