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Editorial: Biblical Interpretation and Local Culture

Fr Christopher Garland, Editor

The articles in this issue either examine, or make use of, the scope of biblical interpretation, as it is applied to local culture. Fr Michael Hough demonstrates just how wide was the scope of scriptural interpretation among the Jews and the early church. He advocates learning from the richness of their approach in teaching modern biblical exegesis, but leaves us with the question of what criteria are to be used to control the exegesis.

Marilyn Rowsome contributes a thorough examination of Paul's treatment of spiritual powers, to show the seriousness of approach in dealing with the manifestation of such powers as sorcery in PNG.

Br Silas describes how he worked with Siane villagers, to take seriously the local outbreaks of sorcery, by adapting a method of biblical exegesis (similar to those described by Fr Michael Hough), and using it to transform the understanding of the Siane myth, on which their practice of sorcery was based. The article is exciting, in that it describes a myth in action, but, as Br Silas himself points out, the counter-myth retains the strongly-dualist ring of the original myth, and so, does not fully deal with the sense of being besieged by hostile powers. The challenge is open, therefore, to see if it would be possible to devise a counter-myth, which would be more "true" to the gospel, and yet, as least as effective within the Siane context. Meanwhile, we await, with interest, a report on more long-term consequences of the use of the counter-myth.

Fr Peter Yeats shows how exegesis of the way Jesus used Old Testament texts relating to the Gentiles could provide a basis for an inclusivist approach to mission, while Marie Brimblecombe argues for a modified inclusivism.

Finally, Professor David Adamo demonstrates how Africans are using imaginative exegesis of the Psalms to relate them to their own situation.

None of the articles is, in fact, written by a Melanesian, although Fr Michael Hough's article describes the basis of his current project to enable students to carry out exegesis of the Bible in such a way as to give them greater scope in interpreting it to deal with the local context, and so it may well eventually beget articles by local writers. Also, Br Silas' article describes a project undertaken in cooperation with local people.

Since this is the last issue I shall produce as Editor, I hand on to my successor, Revd David Vincent, the challenge of stimulating theological reflection by Melanesian people on their own context. Meanwhile, the way of exploring how the Bible appeals to the whole person, to combine intuition and logic, to deal with local challenges, within a basic loyalty to Jesus Christ as Lord, seems a fruitful path to take.

In conclusion, I would revert to a contention that I have made elsewhere – that, if traditional Melanesian culture is to act in any way as a preparation for Christianity, it must have some sense of contact with the divine, and not just the handling of an impersonal thing, an “it”, but, rather, an encounter with a personal reality, a “thou”. I have recently found support for the contention in *The Christlike God*, by John V. Taylor, author of the perceptive study of African religion, *The Primal Vision*. Speaking of a general category of experiences, which he groups together with the hidden power, known in the South Pacific as *mana*, he says that even when such experiences are spoken of in terms of “it”, they still possess a personal quality. Commenting on such an encounter with numinous reality by two English female college students, he writes: “While clinging to the word ‘it’, both of them wanted to insist that the experience was not self-induced, but had been initiated, and intended, by whatever it was that had let them know it was there. The only analogy that does justice to that quality of interaction is that of the meeting of one person with another, and it is this that justifies our use of the word ‘personal’ to describe all such encounters.”¹

In the passages that follow, Taylor has some perceptive things to say about both animism and the veneration of ancestors. If he is right, as I believe, in seeing something personal about the encounter with numinous reality, then it provides continuity between such intimations of the divine and the full revelation of God in the Bible. The Word, who addresses us in veiled ways in traditional religion, even if that Word is open to a wide variety of human interpretation, is the same Word who became flesh in Jesus Christ. Traditional prayer, in Melanesia, may, indeed, include a response to a personal initiative from God, and not just be a projection from natural or psychological forces within this world. However, such a view may require, for its validation, and for the transformations of the limits of human interpretation, a dialogue with biblical exegesis, and so we are brought full circle to asking how local culture fits with biblical exegesis.

¹ John V. Taylor, *The Christlike God*, London UK: SCM Press, 1992, p. 60.