The varieties of Melanesian Christian experience: a comment on Mosko’s ‘Partible penitents’

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In December 1970, Louis Vangeke prostrated himself before Pope Paul VI at St Mary’s Cathedral in Sydney and was raised as the first indigenous Roman Catholic bishop in Papua New Guinea. He was a Mekeo from Beipa, born in 1904, and made a priest in 1937 after attending seminary in Madagascar. Thousands of other Melanesians have made similar journeys, beginning on hard log pews in village Sunday schools and ending up as clerics, nuns, medical workers, and social activists. Hundreds have passed through seminaries, spending countless hours puzzling over biblical stories and theological conundrums, composing theses seeking out the commonalities and critical differences between orthodox Christianity and Melanesian cultural values (Trompf 1987). One became the first Prime Minister of Vanuatu; another, a martyr to the cause of Kanak independence in New Caledonia. Successive censuses reveal Papua New Guinea as among the most Christian nations in the world in terms of church membership (Gibbs 2006). Not a uniform Christianity, of course, but a vibrant mix of holy rollers, starch-shirted Adventists, gospel rockers, Catholics celebrating the Eucharist to the beating of garamut drums, prophets awaiting the return of Jesus and other ancestors, and entrepreneurs hawking dreams of personal prosperity through faith.

Anthropologists are latecomers to the study of Christianity in Melanesia (Barker 1992). Still, they bring something undeniably fresh to the inquiry: insight into the ways that local peoples make Christianity their own. The best village-based ethnographies – including those reinterpreted by Mark Mosko in his essay¹ – combine an intimate knowledge of the history and culture of a local people with a critical awareness of the wider history and varied impact of missions and churches in the region. Anthropological contributions are becoming increasingly sophisticated, moving from traditional community ethnographies to multi-sited explorations of women’s church groups, millenarian and independent church movements, rapidly growing urban-based Pentecostal churches, Christian interventions in the HIV/AIDS crisis, translations of biblical themes in sermons and vernacular bibles, Christian rhetoric in electoral campaigns, and much else. Mosko’s arguments need to be measured against this literature, which reveals a much livelier and more diverse set of approaches to

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contemporary Melanesian Christianity than represented in his crude ‘bifurcated’ model of regional anthropology.

Mosko’s severely constricted conception of Melanesian Christianity is exemplified by his own North Mekeo ethnography. He pictures the Mekeo world as prescribed by primordial ‘understandings of procreation, food exchange, spirits, magic or sorcery, and renown or fame’ predicated upon gift-exchange and ‘the mode of partible person- ality’ (p. 228). Conversion to Christianity has led to several major shifts in local society and cosmology: an enlarged role for women in church affairs and introduction of Christian figures like God (Deo) and Satan (Diabolo) into the spiritual pantheon. Yet because Christianity and Mekeo culture supposedly share ‘analogous understandings’ of personhood (p. 232), such changes involve a merging of introduced and indigenous elements ‘reconfigured around the dynamic potentialities of personal partibility’ (p. 217) rather than ‘rupture’ or even ‘syncretism’.

Mosko’s Northern Mekeo represent a rather extreme instance of a common phenomenon. Christians everywhere perceive their faith in part through the filter of their own cultural orientations and experiences. Not surprisingly, reciprocity figures prominently in many accounts of vernacular Christianities in rural Melanesian societies (Gregory 1980; Schwimmer 1973). This has long been an important area for ethnographic research, requiring sensitivity to the kinds of interpretative issues raised in the ‘New Melanesian Ethnography’. Yet to focus exclusively upon such indigenous appropriations of Christianity, even when recast as the merging of common elements, obscures much more than it reveals, largely by eliding evidence of change and diversity in favour of cultural continuity and conformity (cf. Robbins 2007). To begin with, Mosko’s approach precludes the possibility that Christian conceptions might have independent semantic effects upon indigenous worldviews, although strong evidence is emerging from ground-breaking linguistic work on sermons and biblical translations that such effects appear early in the conversion process (Schieffelin 2007). Second, it neglects the social implications of the often sharply distinct theological and moral teachings of different denominations (Burt 1994); the impact of sectarian rivalries (Jebens 2005); and the entanglements of missions and churches in wider colonial and modernist projects (Smith 1994). Third, it discounts the cumulative impact of Christianity: the reality that second- and third-generation Christians have a different sense of their faith than early converts (Eriksen 2008). Fourth, it ignores the regional and global dimensions of Christianity, in particular the ease with which Christian forms and ideas – like Melanesian Christians themselves – move across the landscape; and thus what appears as local may be anything but (Jorgensen 2005). Fifth, it disregards the differentiation of Christian knowledge and experience: the fact that the universe of Melanesian Christianity includes rural villagers, city dwellers, and clerics like Bishop Vangeke, with distinctive perspectives on their faith. Finally, and for anthropologists most significantly, it obliges us to close our ears to what many Melanesian individuals explicitly say about the ethical implications of their faith (Barker 2007). Mosko seeks to limit Christianity to ‘detachable’ elements, such as Jesus or the Eucharist, which feed into indigenous systems of dividual exchange. This insight by itself cannot take us very far.

What of Mosko’s broader claims: that Christianity is premised on partible person- hood and that the anthropology of Melanesia is ‘bifurcated’ between New Melanesian ethnologists and everyone else? Neither stands up to scrutiny. ‘Traces of partibility’ can be found anywhere. If this very low threshold is all it takes to signal the presence of a
partible system of personhood, it is hardly a challenge to ‘prove’ that Christianity, or anything else, is dividual. The claim tells us nothing specific about Christianity, but it does serve to sideline the inconvenient fact that so many theologians and ‘penitents’, not least Melanesian Christians, explicitly reference matters of the self. Christianity is neither ‘inherently’ individualist nor dividualist, but is expressly concerned with the ethical problems faced by individuals in society. Mosko’s construction of a disciplinary ‘bifurcation’ in Melanesian anthropology transparently, and unfairly, traduces Foster (1995) and many other synthetic works in order to bolster a rigidly partisan version of the partibility model. His rarified unidimensional argument is oblivious to the larger realities of Christianity in Melanesia and thus warps our understanding of local patterns as well. It is a throwback – albeit a sophisticated one – to an older style of analysis more concerned with preserving village-centred ethnography than grappling with the lived complexities of Christian Melanesians.

NOTE

1 I have resisted the urge to respond to Mosko’s mangling of my writings on Maisin Christianity. I take comfort in being in excellent company and urge those intrigued by this debate to examine the sources.

REFERENCES


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