

MELANESIAN RELIGION

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THROUGH the medium of his senses man comes in contact with the outside world, his mind is peopled with facts. Then, meditating and reasoning on these facts, he arrives at conclusions and attains to the knowledge of many truths. Nevertheless, no matter how well trained his intellect, how keen his reasoning powers, the farther he gets away from material and sensible things, and deals in abstract and spiritual concepts, the more elusive and difficult of attainment truth becomes. From a contemplation of nature, from the observance of cause and effect, man can attain, indeed, to the knowledge of God's existence and many other religious truths; but unless God comes to his aid with revelation he can never gain a knowledge of supernatural truths. Moreover, the experience of centuries has taught that without the aid of revelation humankind finds it morally impossible to learn *all* the natural religious truths which are possible to the human intellect. Alone, unaided by revelation and grace, the human race has wondered from the truth and has sunken into the morass of superstitions, divinations, witchcraft and the worship of false gods.

In the beginning God favored man with the revelation of certain necessary truths of the natural and supernatural order. As time went on these truths were obscured, almost lost to the vast majority of mankind. However, revelations were repeated by God and finally reached their completion and perfection in the Incarnation.

We believe it will prove interesting from this point of view to examine the religious beliefs and practices of a group of people who have been cut off almost completely from civilization and positive revelation. Except for a few transient contacts during the age of discovery almost four hundred years ago the Melanesians have been completely isolated until recently from outside thought and influence. Let us look into their religion as it

was before the preaching of Christianity and see what were its elements of truth, and how much error was mixed therewith.

A short study of the map of the western Pacific Ocean reveals Melanesia, a curved belt of islands roughly following the outline of the Australian coast, some fifteen hundred miles to the northeast of it. These are the Solomon Islands, the Santa Cruz group, the Bank's Islands and the New Hebrides, and New Caledonia with the Loyalty Islands. The discovery of these islands was continued for three hundred years and was carried on by the Spanish, French and English. The earliest discoveries were those of the Spaniard, Mendana, in two voyages in the latter half of the sixteenth century, and of Quiros and Torres in 1606. Mendana was commissioned by the Viceroy of Peru and reached Melanesia in 1567, landing first on the island which he called Santa Ysabel de la Estrella. Working from this base his command discovered and named other islands of Melanesia. To these islands he gave the name Solomon Islands, on the conjecture that he had found the ancient sources of King Solomon's riches. This article will draw its chief illustrations of Melanesian religion from the practices of the Solomon Islanders, although many details from the religious practices of the other islands will be included.

In a general way, "religion is the knowledge and consciousness of dependence upon one or more transcendental personal powers to which man stands in relation." In the Catholic religion God is the one supreme personal Power to Whom all men owe service and obedience. From an external standpoint religion is the sum of outward actions in which religious beliefs find expression, as prayer, sacrifice, sacraments, liturgy, ascetic practices, ethical prescriptions, and so on. "Religion is not philosophy or science or ethics, it is nothing more or less than a communion with the Divine Life, whether it be regarded from within as the act of communion itself or externally as a system of beliefs and practices by which man brings his life into relation with the powers that rule the life of the universe."¹

Besides the study of the facts which can be properly classed as religious, other elements of Melanesian life, such as magic, witchcraft, divination will come under consideration. It is necessary to study these because they possess three main elements in common with religion, namely, the intellectual, involv-

¹ Dawson, *Enquiries Into Religion and Culture*, p. 293.

ing some faith, belief or theory; the volitional, implying some practical attitude toward the supernatural; and the emotional, a certain awe or feeling of reverence toward the supernatural. These elements differ from religion in that they seek to influence the supernatural by coercion while religion seeks to accomplish this end by persuasion. In Melanesian life persuasion and coercion exist side by side and usually are so tangled and interwoven that a separate treatment of the two is practically impossible.

For an understanding of Melanesian religion it is necessary to take into account the idea of *mana* or magic, for the Melanesia mind is entirely ruled by it. For him it is *mana* which effects and does everything which is conceived as beyond the ordinary powers of man. Everything outside the common forces of nature is ascribed to it, and it is manifested in events which can be due only to its influence. Impersonal, it is always connected with some person, spirit or ghost who directs it. If a man is distinguished by success in any field whatsoever, it is a sign that he has or can control *mana*. Through *mana* the Melanesians control and direct nature, influence the elements, produce health and sickness, predict the future, cause good luck and prosperity, or curse their neighbor. "By whatever name it is called, it is the belief in this supernatural power, that is the foundation of the rites and practices which can be called religious; and it is from the same belief that everything which may be called magic and witchcraft draws its origin."² Although it is impersonal, it and all the elements of Melanesian life connected with it have a religious aspect because all is done by the aid of the ghost or spirit who is behind the *mana* or magic.

All Melanesians believe in the existence of ghosts and spirits. Spirits are beings who were never men. Ghosts are the souls of men. Thus in the Solomon Islands ghost worship or ancestor worship predominates and strongly influences the lives of the people. It is the common thing to call upon deceased relatives and to address prayers and rites to them. Not every ghost becomes the object of a cult, but only those who were conspicuous in this life by their possession of magical power. It is believed that they retain the preëminence in the next life that they had in this; a dead chief is still chief in the life beyond the grave. If this power is manifested in any way the deceased

² Codrington, *The Melanesians*, p. 192.

becomes the object of a cult. Belief in a devil, in an evil spirit, has no place whatever in the native Melanesian mind.

In the other islands spirits have a much more predominant place in the lives of the people than in the Solomons. Thus in the Banks' Islands and in the northern New Hebrides the purely spiritual beings are numerous and unnamed. Spirits are conceived as beings without a body; but when it comes to individual representations the natives are unable to conceive of them without a body of some kind. Hence their stories represent a spirit as a man, but with larger powers. From the evidence at hand, the nearest approach to a belief in the Supreme Being is found in the *Qat* stories and beliefs of the Bank's Islands and in the *Koewasi* and *Kahausibware* stories and beliefs of the Solomon Islands, and in the *Tagaro* beliefs of the Leper's Island. *Qat* was in some way the originator of the human race and fixed the natural condition of things. *Koewasi* and *Kahausibware* were two spirits conceived to be in some way originators of humankind, although they were not the objects of worship.

The ancestor and spirit worship of the islanders finds expression in the various sacrifices which are offered to them. In the Solomon Islands we find the formal sacrificial act and a greater development of the sacrificial system. Their sacrifices can be roughly grouped into two divisions, first-fruits sacrifice and bloody sacrifice. Thus the most common and simplest sacrificial act is that of putting aside the first bit of food for the dead. This food is not offered precisely as food, but for the purpose of pleasing or gratifying the dead. Sometimes it is eaten, sometimes thrown into the fire. This act is performed with reverence and awe. The sacrificer is the man who knows the particular leaves pleasing to the ghost, and the words of *mana* by which he is approached. There are public and private ghosts to whom sacrifices are offered. There is no organized priesthood, although in the case of the public *tindalo*, or ghost, the chief of the village is the sacrificer. In the case of the personal *tindalo* or ghost only the person who knows the particular leaves or formula of *mana* by which the ghost is approached can sacrifice. This knowledge is obtained personally by a dream, strange experience, or imparted by a predecessor. There are two general sacrifices during the year, when the canarium nut is ripe, and at the time of the harvest. We find individuals sacrificing to their private ghost or spirit in time of a fight, when cursing an enemy, at time of planting, or at the beginning of

a canoe trip. When the crop is harvested a part of it is burned in sacrifice to the proper ghost. On the island of Malanta in case of danger or when returning from a journey a son will set aside food for his dead father; in failure of crops a pig is burned; in sickness a dog or pig is sacrificed, and the ghost is called upon to take away the affliction. In the Bank's Islands and New Hebrides the sacrifices are much the same, though simpler. They are made to spirits instead of ghosts. The offering usually consists of money, and consequently is not burnt, but strewn around the sacred stone or sacred place. In Melanesia human sacrifices are made occasionally; but only bits of the flesh are eaten to give the eater fighting *mana*. Human sacrifices are considered more effective. In Bugotu of the Solomons the head of an enemy killed in a fight was brought in in triumph and pieces were cut off and offered as sacrifice.

Like sacrifice, prayers are offered everywhere in Melanesia to spirits, to ghosts or to both. A set form must be used. In the Solomon Islands the prayers are made to ghosts at time of the sacrifice and at times when at sea. They are made when in danger from the sea, for aid in fishing, in praise after a good catch, for help in battle, for good crops, in case of sickness. As is to be expected, most of the prayers are simple. Thus we find: "Do thou draw the canoe, that it may reach the land; speed my canoe, grandfather, that I may quickly gain the land, and rise on shore." After a good catch: "Powerful, *mana* is the *tindalo* (ghost) of the net." Also: "Save us on the deep, save us from the tempest, bring us to the shore." In the other islands we find almost the same forms. When the oven is opened at Moa a leaf of the cooked food is thrown to the dead with an invocation. When drinking *Kava*, the drink of the islands, a few drops are offered to the dead, thus: ". . . grandfather, this is your lucky drop of *Kava*; let boars come in to me; the money I have spent let it come back to me, etc."

Closely connected with the idea of prayer and sacrifice we find the sacred places and things. Sacred stones are important in the religious life of the Melanesians. Sacred places and stones can not be treated separately, because sacred places always have sacred stones in them. Stones become sacred because of the graves of the dead or because some ghost or spirit is associated with them. Places are considered sacred because of sepulture; the grave and shrine of a dead person to whom a cult is directed will be sacred. Everything in the sacred place is likewise con-

sidered sacred and the natives fear to desecrate them, fearing the wrath of the ghost or spirit concerned. Again, places are considered sacred because there has been some wonderful occurrence there, which the natives consider the manifestation of a ghost. Stones, streams, pools, eels, sharks, alligators, snakes, are all considered sacred because of association with a ghost or spirit. In the Solomon Islands the belief connected with sacred places and things centers around the belief in ghosts, in the other islands around the belief in spirits.

Such is a rapid, bird's-eye view of Melanesian religious belief and practise. The data has been necessarily sketchy and confined to a few of the more important islands. New investigations may give us a more thorough knowledge of their religion. We have seen that amidst a vast amount of error and falsehood, they have a good idea of man's dependence and subjection to higher powers. They have a fair conception of sacrifice and of the power of prayer. The formulas and practices connected with magic, witchcraft and divination may be viewed as a form or ceremonial and ritual, though they lack a developed priesthood. They have some notion of survival and future life, but their life in the next world does not differ much from the present life; ghosts eat, drink, marry, and in some cases finally die. Their idea of the Divinity seems to be very obscure. The conviction that magical powers are efficiently working in the universe and in the affairs of men dominates their lives. Even their prayers and sacrifices as well as their cult of places and things are tinged by this error. They call upon the souls of their deceased ancestors not for intercession with the Deity as Catholics invoke the saints, but for direct aid.

Though not losing hold entirely of the truth, the Melanesians wandered far from it, as is the case everywhere and always when the guidance of Divine revelation is lacking. For, we repeat, supernatural truths can be known only by God's revelation. Even the majority of the natural truths which are within the reach of human reason, can be learned only by a few scholars and after a long time, and then with an admixture of error. History and experience prove this. The Melanesians have served as an illustration of this rule. Not barbarians only, but civilized nations also, without revelation have fallen into error grievous and manifold concerning religion and morality. Only few men, considering the effects of original sin and the conditions of ordinary human life, can reach all the truths knowable by unaided

reason, because the majority of men lack the genius of intellect and the mental training necessary, or are too taken up with every day affairs, or are too indolent to embark on the difficult journey in the search of truth. Even the leisured scholar can arrive at these truths only after a long period of study, because many of these truths are so profound and mysterious and the passions and allurements of life are ever drawing him astray, Even were the scholar willing to devote all his time to the search and able to resist the attractions of the world, still the results would be discouraging. The tired and worn seeker would arrive at the truth, but a truth mixed with many errors. God alone, Who is Truth, can teach us truth in its fulness. This He does by divine revelation, through His Church and the Scriptures.