Orality: The Not-So-Silent Issue in Mission Theology

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I recently had a student from Indonesia in my class. He had completed theological studies and was an ordained minister before migrating to Melbourne with his family. He had settled into a newly formed ethnic Indonesian congregation and accepted the role as their leader. His task was to build up the congregation and to help immigrant relatives of the members to find their feet on Australian soil. Limited financial resources in the congregation meant that he was paid only a small amount of money for this ministry, and so he supplemented his income by driving a school bus in the mornings and afternoons. His love for the Gospel, his dedication to his community over a period of time, and the quality of his leadership all led to his church congregation growing impressively. As a result, he sought to become formally recognized as an ordained minister within the Australian church context, which meant that he needed to complete further studies.

From the very first day of class he impressed me as a man devoted to the Christian faith, with a strong sense of vocation to a ministry of leadership. It soon became clear, however, that if I were to impose upon him the same requirements as for the remainder of the class—namely, written pieces of critical and analytic discourse—then he would fail the course. While he was perfectly capable of handling the work, had a zeal for the class material, and impressed his class colleagues, his cultural background was oral. After some consultation with a faculty colleague, an arrangement was made for him to do his assignments orally. As a consequence, he gained a “credit” grade for the course. Soon afterward, he was formally inducted as the minister of the Indonesian congregation and continues to give inspiring leadership to his people.

This anecdote raises issues and questions beyond the field of the delivery of formal theological education. With the relative decline of the church within the Western world and the rapid increase in the membership of the church in areas of the world where oral cultures dominate, a question is raised about the very shape of theology itself. Let me illustrate what I mean by way of experience and observation over a generation of involvement in the South Pacific.

Orality as an Emerging Issue

It is notable that, in the global arena of theological conversation and engagement, the voice from the Pacific islands is almost entirely absent.1 One might gain the impression that little or no theology is being done within this part of the world. In fact, the opposite is true—the task of doing theology is being energetically pursued, and theological engagement is widespread and passionate. The key obstacle is that the form of this theology is not readily available as written and published material.
In 1992 Brother Silas, an Anglican Franciscan friar working in Papua New Guinea, commented, “Melanesia is a region where one would expect to see intense theological activity. It has a high concentration of Christians in tight-knit communities, who talk about their faith. . . . I believe such activity is indeed taking place but is often overlooked by church leaders and theologians because it is informal and presented in an unconventional way. The people’s theological insights should be welcomed and encouraged by the churches, but because they are not readily reduced to the language of formal theology they are often suppressed as wrong or relegated to the fringes of church life.”

In one of a handful of publications about South Pacific theology that has emerged in book form in the last generation, Mohenoa Puloka, from Tonga, writes, “The relatively late emergence of written language in Tonga (begun in 1826) and mostly the lack of a taste for writing in general, has made theology in Tonga exist largely in verbal form as oral tradition. The absence of any great theological work in this case is not surprising.”

The plain fact is that South Pacific cultures are oral cultures, for which the producing of material in written form is culturally alien. On a recent visit to the Pacific Theological College, in Suva, Fiji, I heard a faculty member comment, “Even our best Ph.D. students, once they have completed their doctoral dissertations, return to their home countries, and we never hear from them again—they stop writing!”

The best access to South Pacific theology is through the main journals from that region of the world, namely, the Pacific Journal of Theology (published in Suva) and the Melanesian Journal of Theology (published in Goroka, Papua New Guinea). Many of the articles come from local islanders and give insight into the issues and directions of theology in that vast and sparsely populated part of the world. Yet, in a recent *IBMR* article surveying developments in South Pacific theology and the emergence of local Pacific island voices over the last generation, Charles Forman concludes with the following telling comment: “The men and women whose thoughts have been examined here are part of the new cosmopolitan elite, the ones who have traveled around the Pacific or to other parts of the world and are at home with the use of English as their international language. They are not, by and large, village people who are steeped in the traditional society, nor are they likely to be suffering personal heartache at the loss of traditional ways like an old villager who shed tears over the loss of communication with ancestors. . . . Their writings are not for the rank-and-file Christians but for the intellectually advanced.”

The implication here is that anything that may be identified as a theology of the people within the local village communities of the South Pacific nations will not take the form of an articulately written article by an educated individual. Its form will almost certainly be oral and therefore not immediately available to people outside the village community.

What is true of the shape of theology in the South Pacific is similarly true in other parts of the world. Addressing a gathering of archivists on the importance of oral theology, African John Pobee noted, “It is often asserted that churches in Africa have no theology. When one probes what is meant by this remark the response is that they have not produced theological treatises and tomes, systematically worked out volumes which stand on the shelves of libraries. But it is not exactly true. Sermons are being preached every Sunday, which are not subsequently printed. Such sermons are the articulations of the faith in response to particular hopes and fears of peoples of Africa. They are legitimately called Theology, Oral Theology. This oral theology and oral history may be said to be the stream in which the vitality of the people of faith in Africa, illiterate and literate, is mediated. As such

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B Is “(begun in 1826)” part of the original text? Or did you add the information? If the latter, we will put the comment in brackets and change the wording to [from 1826].
the material cannot be ignored.” He then lists evangelization, conversion, sermons and preaching, hymns and songs, praying, and conversation as the media of oral theology.6

John Parratt, who has conducted extensive research in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, holds a view similar to that of Forman. In his *Introduction to Third World Theologies*, Parratt observes, “It is worth noting that what is known as ‘Indian Christian theology’ has been articulated and developed through the writings of highly educated theologians, often in the medium of English. Without questioning its validity as an indigenous expression of Christian faith in India, it should be pointed out that it is not necessarily representative of the grass-roots theologies of Indian Christians. There are many indigenous Christian movements in India which do not produce theological writing but nevertheless express their Christian faith in Indian ways.”7

In noting the energy of theological activity among African women, he comments in a similar vein: “It is also true that the theology of the majority of African women is not written down but oral. . . . It is communal theology and not individual. Professional theologians feel frustrated with this kind of theology because they cannot engage with it as done in the Western theologies. However, it is theology all the same, and Africa, which is basically an oral society, has to take oral theology seriously.”8

Acknowledging the paucity of available material from the Caribbean and the consequent claim that little theology is being done there, Parratt responds: “The truth is that Caribbean theology, heavily birthed in the oral tradition, has continued. . . . Caribbean culture is indeed an oral one . . . there is oral literature comprising the numerous proverbs, riddles, folk tales that are used to instruct persons about life issues. There is oral music with which the region is familiar.”9

**Acknowledging the Validity of Oral Theology**

In different parts of the world it is now becoming clear that forms of oral theology are beginning to be taken seriously as valid theology.

*Within the Pacific.* The year 1985 was something of a watershed year in the development of theology in the South Pacific. In that year, three important events occurred. One was the launching of the *Melanesian Journal of Theology*, another was the publication of the anthology *Living Theology in Melanesia: A Reader*, and the third was the convening of the consultation entitled “Towards a Pacific Theology.” It will be helpful to say something about each of these.

In the introduction to the first volume of the *Melanesian Journal of Theology*, editor John May explains that the purpose of the journal is to “develop indigenous theology in Melanesia.” It will include theology “in all its manifold aspects . . . it will draw on the already existing oral sources of indigenous theology in Melanesia, whether in Pidgin or in local languages: the stories and songs, the adaptation of myths, the solutions to practical problems found by prayer and consensus.” Subsequent volumes of the journal have sought to make this local form of theology available to a wider audience by documenting it and publishing it, acknowledging, of course, that the very publishing of oral material constitutes an ambiguity.10

In the anthology *Living Theology in Melanesia: A Reader*, May, also this book’s editor, speaks about the publication, the first to contain expressions of faith and theology entirely by Melanesian authors, as marking “a turning point in the development of indigenous theology in Melanesia.” The anthology is divided into three main sections. May notes that “the structure of this anthology is a statement of its priorities. Part I devotes considerable space to ‘village theology,’ on the analogy of what has been called ‘peasant theology’ in the
Philippines and Minjung or ‘people’s theology’ in Korea. . . . The real life setting (sitz im leben) of Melanesian theology is the prolonged discussion on the beach, under a tree or round the fire, the singing (festival) or lotu (worship). The community does theology by reaching a consensus in reflecting on its practice.” The section on “village theology” in this volume includes traditional Melanesian prayers, hymns, and sermons, as well as a drama of the conversion of a sorcerer, a creed set in the context of traditional culture, and the story of a mother’s death. All of these are oral forms of communication.

The special consultation “Towards a Pacific Theology,” held in July 1985 in Suva, Fiji, drew together leaders and teachers from across the South Pacific who gave attention to both the content and methodology of theological issues, as these apply to the Pacific. At the end of the gathering, a number of recommendations were agreed on. In relation to so-called Pacific theology and, in particular, to its traditional setting in an oral context, the recommendations included steps to recognize the oral foundations of the cultures and to accomplish two distinct goals: to give validity to oral forms of theology, and to seek to make this oral theology available in written form. The consultation urged that:

- tapes be used in addition to books and articles as a resource for the expression of Pacific Theology;
- the Pacific Conference of Churches provide writing workshops for theological teachers who want to publish their ideas but need help in the methods of writing;
- the churches initiate action by which the local congregations will be helped to reflect theologically through various art forms such as song, dance, drawing and decorating. We believe that the Pacific churches have a contribution to make to the entire world in the use of these modes of theological expression.\(^{12}\)

Just over a decade later, in 1996, over 150 participants from around the Pacific gathered in Aotearoa/New Zealand for a consultation on local theology. The report of the gathering makes interesting reading. It represents a move toward a culture where oral theology is preferred to literate theology. The author of the report, a Roman Catholic lecturer in theology and anthropology at Holy Spirit Seminary, Papua New Guinea, reflects: “It was not a conference dominated by tedious academic papers, but rather an interweaving of creative presentations from participants grouped according to culture.” After recounting a protracted period of conversation about a woven mat and oral discussions on marriage, death, hospitality, land, birth, and struggle, he asks: “What is special and unique about the way we do theology in Oceania? Who does theology? Where? When? Why? How?” In summing up, he writes: “It was obvious at this conference that theology can be done differently. . . . The questions were many, often leading to further questions about the nature of the theological enterprise. . . . Traditional sources of theology have their place. But those attending this conference couldn’t help but be impressed by the rich diversity of theological resources in Oceania.”\(^{13}\)

It is difficult to measure how much the impetus for the validating of oral theology within the South Pacific has been maintained since, say, the year 2000. In his 2005 survey of Pacific theology, Forman gives no real attention to it, and a fuller treatment that appears within a doctoral dissertation written by Kambati Uriam, a Pacific Islander, covering the period 1947–97, also makes little mention of it. In fact, Uriam’s summary assessment of attempts to develop a Pacific theology are rather critical, asserting, like Forman, that Pacific theology has tended to remain the activity of graduates from colleges and universities.\(^{14}\)
While it may be said that there is only limited recognition of oral theology, the issue clearly seems to be firmly on the agenda for the younger generation of local South Pacific islanders. Philip Manuao, a Papua New Guinea graduate from the local church leaders theological college, writing on the topic of communicating the Gospel in Melanesia, sets forth a series of recommendations, and then, quoting Herbert Klem, *Oral Communication of the Scripture*,\(^\text{15}\) comments: “In a predominantly oral society, the church ought to minister and teach primarily through indigenous oral media. . . . If a denomination which has a predominantly oral society depends primarily upon written material for most of its Bible study and teaching, then at the heart of its ministry such a denomination is not indigenous.”\(^\text{16}\)

Beyond the Pacific. Validating of oral theology in other parts of the world is also gaining momentum. In the postscript to his 2004 publication on Third World theologies, Parratt notes that in several parts of the world oral forms of communication are the norm, and that in an expanding number of parts of the Christian world theology is “essentially oral, expressed in prayer, group discussion and story.” He adds: “Indeed there is no alternative to this in countries where literacy rates are often very limited. Art forms and dance may also be utilised to express Christian insights and experiences. These may be no less profound than those found in a weighty tome of systematic theology, for theological insight is not the prerogative of the literate only. . . . While such oral theology may be difficult to pin down and systematise, it has increasingly become a rich source for the literate and ‘academic’ theologian.”\(^\text{17}\)

To make his own point, African John Pobee quotes well-known colleague John Mbiti: “African oral theology is a living reality. We must acknowledge its role in the total life of the church. It is the most articulate expression of theological creativity in Africa. This form of theology gives the church a certain measure of theological selfhood and independence.” Confident of the emerging importance of oral theology, Pobee then calls for a “conversion” in the way in which theology is commonly understood. “To be alive to the place and importance of oral theology and oral tradition is to undergo a conversion experience which is multifaceted. First it means giving up on our written work and creating space for the oral. . . . Most of us . . . take the written word as the norm in the search for truth. But we need the conversion experience in which we see that not everything is contained in the written tradition and culture, and that many more people in this world communicate first of all orally and in art.”\(^\text{18}\)

It will be just a matter of time before such conversion occurs, for the number of Christians from predominantly oral cultures is growing exponentially, and the literacy-preferenced West is becoming a minority voice in the theological world. Perhaps one of the clearest reflections of this conversion is in the establishment, as recently as 2005, of the International Orality Network (ION). This network traces its origins back to various forms of the communication of the Gospel—both audio and video—through the twentieth century, including Christian radio broadcasts, the insights about the power of media by Marshall McLuhan, and, more recently, the significant initiatives among evangelical mission movements to reach the “unreached” peoples of the world, over 70 percent of whom are recognized to be oral-preferenced communicators.\(^\text{19}\)

A significant step in the development of ION came in the year 2000. In Amsterdam in that year, a conference convened by the Billy Graham Association brought together 10,000 evangelists for the purpose of organizing them into an integrated group and equipping them for evangelism in the twenty-first century. One of the outcomes was the establishment of a loose association of Christian organizations committed to working together to bring the Gospel to oral peoples, to disciple them, and to nurture indigenous church communities among them. Consciousness of the issue of orality was raised, and increasing numbers of
mission groups began to think more deliberately about the communication of the Gospel among oral peoples. In 2004 the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization convened a forum in Thailand to discuss thirty-one issues of Christian mission, one of which was orality. From that conference came the publication *The Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, which was jointly produced by the Lausanne Committee and ION and has now been translated into Korean, Chinese, French, Spanish, and Arabic.

ION is a rapidly growing network, now with partners also in Africa and Asia; it convenes forums, engages in research, and helps fund field training, leadership programs, and theological education, all with an exclusive focus on communicating the Gospel among oral communities. The orality movement was a priority component of the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, held in October 2010 in Cape Town, South Africa.

**The Form of Oral Theology**

There is more to be said about the particular forms of theology that are dominant in oral communities. It is important to note the developing insights coming from those who have looked more seriously at the cultural anthropology of oral communities. It is not simply that people in oral cultures lack the ability to read and write and that, if such people were to give attention to overcoming this inability, then they would catch up with their sisters and brothers in more literate communities. Nor is it the case that the forms of theology emerging from oral communities are simply an oral equivalent of what is produced in literate communities.

The case has been made persuasively that oral cultures are not second-best cultures to literate cultures; rather, they are uniquely ordered in a way that sustains and perpetuates orality. Referring to Water Ong’s groundbreaking work on orality, cultural anthropologist Michael Rynkiewich comments, “We have come to appreciate that orality is not just the lack of literacy. Orality and literacy both presuppose a mind-set, a way of experiencing the world that is not commensurate one with the other.”

Rynkiewich then identifies three marks of distinction between oral and literate cultures. First, oral cultures employ particular means of ensuring that important things are held in memory—in particular, by repetition and the involvement of the whole body rather than simply the mind. Thus, oral cultures are marked by the use of ceremony, dance, art, poetry, and so on. Second, oral communities are fundamentally communal, and the making of memory involves the whole community, often in action rather than in the use of words. Memory, then, has more of a social character in oral communities. Third, Rynkiewich notes the importance of the distinctive relationship between the teacher and the learners in an oral community.

In my observation and experience in the South Pacific, these same three features are evident. South Pacific cultures traditionally give prominence to dance, ritual, and ceremony in repetitive ways. These cultures are also fundamentally communal—in fact, people in such cultures do not have the notion of individuality that characterizes people in Western cultures; their notion of personhood is essentially relational. Also, a special relationship is evident between the members of the community and their leader (chief), who bears overall responsibility, among other things, for ensuring the passing on of the tradition.

In his well-researched article on the use of small groups as a medium for learning in Melanesian communities, Jon Paschke lists a number of features of the dynamics of Melanesian communities. While his intention is not to compare oral and literate communities, and while he is wanting to set down some important information to guide leaders of small groups in the oral Melanesian communities, his observations are consistent with those made by Rynkiewich.
A more detailed reflection on oral cultures is provided in two recent doctoral dissertations. In his recently published study of the Buisla people of Ghana, Jay Moon identifies the features of the oral culture of the community within which he was working. Objecting to the popular advocacy of storytelling as a “cure-all” in communicating the Gospel in oral cultures, Moon claims that oral cultures have a rich diversity of features that need to be understood and used wisely. He highlights the importance of proverbs for the Buisla and uses them as a means of facilitating a contextual (oral) theology among the people. His insight into the orality of the people enables this exercise to work effectively.24

In a second doctoral work, Roy McIntyre pursues a similar approach in contextualizing theology, using a ceremony connected with cultural practices in Bangladesh as a means of drawing the people into Christian discipleship. Given his intention to “disciple oral learners,” he capitalizes on the particular importance of ceremony for this oral community, using it to contextualize theology.25

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to raise awareness of orality as a key ingredient in contemporary Christian mission and to support the emerging view that oral communities are culturally distinctive in more ways than simply their orality. Today, with the majority of the Christian world now including oral communities, and with the insight we are gaining into the distinctive characteristics of Christian theology within these communities, it is time for both local and global Christian mission to study more carefully the matter of validating oral theologies and, indeed, the redefining of theology itself.

From the point of view of an emerging Pacific theology, set as it is in oral communities, we should no longer be measuring authentic theology by the quality of a written piece of work done by an individual islander who has successfully gained the skills of a literate culture. Rather, theology—as a passionate engagement with the God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ, who seeks to be the giver of life for all people of all cultures and the head of local communities of the church across a diverse world—deserves a broader definition that will allow oral expressions of theology to find their place.

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Notes E

C Is “Buddhist” correct here? not “Muslim” or “Hindu”? Please verify. I am sure that Roy McIntyre did his field work in a Buddhist area. However, because I read the thesis in Asbury and it is not published, I cannot verify this. Noting that Bangladesh is almost entirely Muslim (about 90%) or Hindu (9%), I think it is wise to correct the text as I have indicated above.

D Please supply an author identification. Maximum 375 characters, including punctuation and spaces.

E Queries in the Notes:
n. 1. We now have “in a more recent publication the author.” Do you refer here to the 2003 edition of the Dictionary? and should we say “editors”? (If not, we should identify who is
being quoted.) Please note my corrections in the endnote n. 12. Is “Report of a Theological Consultation . . .” the name of a published volume? If so, please give the place, publisher, and year of publication. If not, we’ll put the information in parentheses with lower case (report of a theological consultation held in. . .). The latter is correct – ‘Report of . . .’ is a description and not a publication.