

The Challenge of Communicating Christ in Melanesian Culture

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Abstract

This article deals with culture and cross-cultural communication. More specifically, the concept of *mana* in the Melanesian worldview plays a significant role in that culture. I will discuss various approaches to cross-cultural communication of the gospel that have been and continue to be used in Papua New Guinea and suggest some reasons why they have come up short. I suggest that the much-neglected field of *elenctics* must be utilized more and provide ways that this can be done in the context of *mana* and the Melanesian worldview.

Keywords

Worldview, elenctics, communication, animism, culture, gospel, syncretism, Melanesian Christianity, mission

“Tell me the secret of your power!”

Jim had been working with a certain people group in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea for some twenty years, translating Scripture and planting churches. During this time, he had built many deep relationships, but none deeper than his relationship with Upa, who was the first man to join his translation team, had spent countless days, weeks, and months working closely with Jim, had been disciplined by him and matured to the point of becoming a pastor and prominent

evangelist in the area. Now, it was time for Jim to leave and repatriate to his home country of Australia. After many tear-filled goodbyes and more “thank you” meals than he dared to count, Jim stood with Upa near the small single-prop plane that would take him away from the village and away from Upa for good. Having prayed, wept, and embraced, Jim was turning to the plane when Upa caught his arm and turned him back to face him.

“Brother Jim, please, I know that you are leaving now and I will never see you again. All these years I have worked with you and have never asked you for anything, but now I have one request for you. Please, can you tell me the secret to your power?”

“My power?” Jim asked, mystified.

“Yes, yes. Your power. Your success, your cargo, where does it come from? Where do you get it? How can I get it? You are like Elijah, and I am Elisha, and I want to know the secret to your power.”

“No, no, no. It doesn’t work like that. I have to go now. Um, ... just hold on to Christ, brother. Look to Christ, and he will give you all you need!” Even as Jim spoke these last words, the pilot was already herding him into the plane to prepare for takeoff.

As the plane flew Jim back to his mission’s headquarters, surrounded by a few boxes of goods that he was taking back, Jim was deeply troubled. He had worked with Upa for 20 years! They had suffered together. They had rejoiced together. They had studied Scripture together. And now he would ask for the “secret” to power, success, and cargo? How was this possible?

Introduction

Communicating Christ cross-culturally is a beautiful task, one commanded by Christ himself as he commanded his disciples and through them all the church to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19). At the same time, it is a task fraught with challenges, as the story above highlights. Sadly, it is not only possible but common to labor mightily for years with a person, a family, a village, or a church, only to realize that the message you thought you were communicating clearly has been understood in an altogether different way. The story of Jim and Upa was a story that I heard soon after arriving in Papua New Guinea, and it made a deep impression on me. It is a cautionary tale, but in the years since then, I have heard and experienced many variations on this same theme. In short, I want to answer the question: How can we ensure that there will be fewer stories like that of Jim and Upa?

I. *Culture and Worldview*

The reason for the Jim and Upa story is culture. Understanding how culture works helps us to grasp how a message can be misunderstood and misapplied even when one has taken pains to communicate it clearly. Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, experts on the topic of cultural differences,¹ say that culture is like an onion, with various layers. The outer layer, the most visible, contains symbols, which are words, gestures, pictures, or objects that carry a particular meaning shared by those in a particular culture. Underneath are heroes, who can be alive or dead, real or imagined, and who embody the ideals of the culture and serve as models. Deeper yet are rituals, which are collective activities that are considered socially important, such as greetings, ceremonies, and meetings. Discourse, the type of language used in each context, is included here. At its deepest level, the core, a culture holds values, which are the broad ideals that reveal how a culture feels about what is evil versus what is good, dirty versus clean, dangerous versus safe.² Since each culture is a different onion, what is communicated in one culture will often have a different meaning or connotation in another. For example, if while my wife was cooking dinner for our guests, I were continually to give her instructions like turn on the oven, put the food in, fetch some water, and peel an extra potato, I would be seen as rude and domineering in the eyes of my Western culture. In a Melanesian context, however, I would be showing appropriate concern for my guests and devotedness to my wife. This difference exists because underneath all the words, gestures, and routines, there are a host of different beliefs, assumptions, categories, and values between Melanesian and Western culture.

Paul Hiebert provides helpful clarity in his conception of the cultural onion. In his model, cultural products, patterns of behavior, signs, and rituals all occupy the surface (sensory) level of culture. Beneath this layer is the belief structure of a culture. Underneath this level, Hiebert adds the worldview themes of a culture, such as categorization, logic, and epistemology. This model essentially divides Hofstede's values level into two. This helpfully allows us to ask why a culture holds the values that it does. Why does it label some things as good and others evil? What does it believe to be the reason why things are the way they are? At the deepest level, Hiebert contends,

¹ Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010), 30ff. Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov have used surveys given to IBM employees throughout the world to quantify and study differences in cultures, with fascinating results.

² Hofstede et al., *Cultures and Organizations*, 3–9.

worldview acts as a repository for the basic assumptions and presuppositions for a culture.³

II. Mana as Central to the Melanesian Worldview

To communicate the gospel cross-culturally in Melanesia, it is necessary to understand the Melanesian worldview. Crucial to understanding the Melanesian worldview, especially about religion, one needs to understand the concept of *mana*.

The term *mana* was first described from a Western perspective by the missionary Robert Codrington in 1891.

[*Mana*] is a power or influence, not physical, and in a way supernatural; but it shews itself in physical force, or in any kind of power or excellence which a man possesses. This *Mana* is not fixed in anything, and can be conveyed in almost anything; but spirits, whether disembodied souls or supernatural beings, have it and can impart it; and it essentially belongs to personal beings to originate it, though it may act through the medium of water, or a stone, or a bone. All Melanesian religion consists, in fact, in getting the *Mana* for one's self, or getting it used for one's benefit—all religion, that is, as far as religious practices go, prayers and sacrifices.⁴

Darrell Whiteman describes this *mana* as “Life” and says, “The most fundamental value, central to Melanesian cultures and religions is the continuation, protection, maintenance and celebration of Life. Life with a capital ‘L.’”⁵ In Papua New Guinea, this concept is present, but in Tok Pisin, the *lingua franca* of most of the country, there is not one word to describe it. It might be variously called *pawa* (power), *strong* (strength), or even *namba* (prestige).⁶

The concept of *mana* cannot be understood apart from the integrated Melanesian worldview. Western culture has a dichotomist view of the world. Westerners believe on a very deep level that the things of this world are broken into many different and unalterable categories and give value to

³ Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 80–85.

⁴ Robert Codrington as quoted in Darrell Whiteman, “Melanesian Religions: An Overview,” in *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions*, ed. Ennio Mantovani (Goroka: The Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service, 1984), 98.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶ It might be helpful to understand *mana* in comparison with The Force in Star Wars. Like *mana*, The Force is impersonal and amoral. Some people have greater stores of or access to it, and its use for good or bad depends on the practitioner. Unlike The Force, *mana* is often stored in objects, and it is manipulated through ritual and ceremony, not meditation and higher consciousness.

things based on these categories. The empirical and testable is more valuable, more real, to the Western mind than the nonempirical.⁷ The Melanesian's integrated worldview does not see things this way. When Melanesians consider the world around them, they think not only of the rocks and trees, rivers and lakes, and friends and family, but also of the various types of spirits that inhabit these things: bush spirits, ancestor spirits, evil spirits, and more. *Mana* describes the impersonal force that ties all these things together and provides the explanation for why things are the way they are.⁸

Mana is believed to be infused into both natural objects and living beings. If something is large, irregular, or otherwise impressive, it may be understood to be a significant repository of *mana*.⁹ As such, it is understood that humans can use these items to manipulate *mana* for their personal benefit. The area around a certain irregular rock might be a good place to plant a garden, while washing in a certain cold, fast-flowing mountain stream might more quickly cure your body of sickness. In my short time in Papua New Guinea, I have heard many, many accounts along these lines. Take, for example, the story of a Highlands man who discovered a large crystal on his land, and from this crystal's power became a wealthy pig farmer. As the story goes, he would rent out his crystal to others to plant in their field or store in their house so that they could benefit from the crystal's power, and his customers would pay him for the crystal with piglets. The conclusion of the story was that the crystal, not the man's business acumen, was the reason for his large herd of pigs.

In the integrated worldview of Melanesians, relationships of all kinds—with nature, with spirits, with ancestors, and with other people—are essential. While people seek to gain a *mana* advantage however they can, they still understand that all things are held in a balance and that *mana* is the currency of that balance. Usually, it is understood that if one man or family is benefiting from the presence of *mana*, someone else somewhere faces a setback. Also, mishandling of relationships is a sure way to lose the benefits of *mana*. In a certain area of the Markham River valley is a deposit of clay that is very good for making clay pots. The people of that area believe that they cannot sell the clay pots for money, however, or the clay deposit will go foul. To sell the pots would be greedy, would tip the delicate balance of relationships, and would forfeit the quality of this particular clay supply. The person telling

⁷ Whiteman, "Melanesian Religions," 90.

⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁹ Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1991), 101.

me this story did not use the term *mana*, but I believe that the concept explains their actions.

The goal of life for *mana* is to gain as much of it as you can for yourself, your family, or your tribe. The accumulation of *mana* can be measured in various ways, such as good health, long life, and the acquisition of leadership, but the accumulation of wealth in terms of money, material possessions, crops, pigs, children, and even wives is the most common.¹⁰

As discussed already, it is possible to manipulate physical things to gain a greater abundance of *mana*. This means that ritual becomes very important for Melanesians. Ritual is the link between the physical, visible world and the spiritual, invisible world. Ritual can be used positively, so that a unique stone, a bone of an ancestor, or the sprinkling of water from a certain source can bring about helpful results for the ritual performer. Ritual can also be used destructively. Melanesians have a strong belief that certain people can manipulate *mana* for harmful effects, so that sickness, drought, poor harvest, death, and even general poverty, while they may have come about by some misstep that upset the *mana* balance, are most often attributed to sorcery. In my experience, even in situations where it is medically demonstrable that a sickness or death had natural causes such as malaria or tuberculosis, many will still hold that some act of sorcery was the true cause of the ailment.

There are endless ways that these rituals are carried out because the important thing for the Melanesian is not the ritual itself but rather its effectiveness. If something works, do it. If it does not work, then find a new ritual that will harness the power of *mana*. Melanesians are very religiously innovative, willing to give anything a try. *Traim tasol*, “Just giving it a try,” is a favorite expression in Papua New Guinea. Some rituals, of course, are deeply embedded into local culture and not easily changed, perhaps because they are thought to be a part of the *mana* dynamic itself. But in many cases, individuals are willing to give something new a try.

III. *Mana and Christianity in Melanesia*

Mana is an aspect of animistic religion. Animistic religions in other cultures have similar beliefs in impersonal spiritual forces.¹¹ At first, one might think that those who believe these things about *mana* are only those who hold to a primitive tribal worldview, rather than an “enlightened” Western one, or

¹⁰ Van Rheeën, *Communicating Christ*, 210; Whiteman, “Melanesian Religions,” 101.

¹¹ Van Rheeën, *Communicating Christ*, 208.

that it is sought only by those who have not converted to Christianity. But this is not the case at all. The examples I have given are all in a context where Christianity, not animism, is confessed as the dominant faith. The story told at the beginning about Jim and Upa is based on a true story and highlights the tenacity of this animistic worldview.

Christianity has been present in Papua New Guinea for nearly 150 years, and according to the 2000 Census, a stunning 96% of the population professes Christianity.¹² This number would seem to indicate that Christian mission has already been massively successful there. When I was working as a pastor in the Greater Vancouver area in Canada, a country where 67% of the population identifies as Christian,¹³ many asked me why I would go to a country that was *more* Christian to do *mission* work.

The reality, however, is that the Christianity of Melanesia in general and Papua New Guinea in particular is, as a former missionary shared with me before I came, a mile wide and an inch deep. Also, there is a great amount of syncretism happening between Christian and animistic beliefs. Further, even among church groups that seek to avoid syncretism in their missional approach and doctrine, that animistic worldview is still deeply engrained in many converts.

If we take Papua New Guinea as a test case, it seems that Christian mission has largely failed to significantly impact the worldview of its converts. Why is this? Why is the belief in the power of *mana* so stubbornly resistant to change? I believe it is because of the nature of *mana* itself, and how it interacts with the Christian gospel. In brief, the Melanesian belief in *mana* results in a quest for capital “L” Life, and Christianity promises that Jesus is key to capital “L” Life. The Christian gospel seems to answer the Melanesian quest for *mana*. The problem is, What is meant by “Life”? It is very easy to proclaim Christ in the Melanesian context, but the question is, is the full, cultural-arresting, worldview-changing message of the gospel being effectively proclaimed and received?¹⁴

¹² “Papua New Guinea,” U.S. Department of State Website, November 29, 2018, te.gov/jdrl/rls/irf/2007/90150.htm.

¹³ “Canada: Religious Affiliation in 2011,” Statista, November 29, 2011, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/271212/religions-in-canada/>.

¹⁴ The same question could be asked of Canada and its 67% of the population that professes Christianity yet appears in many respects to be an increasingly godless and unchristian country. But that is another topic altogether.

IV. *Models for Communicating the Gospel Cross-Culturally*

1. *Power Encounter*

In a chapter entitled, “Communicating Christ into the Tribal Worldview,” David Hesselgrave passes along what he says is common missiological wisdom. “It has often been pointed out that in the context of a tribal worldview *power encounter* takes precedence over *truth encounter*. In other words, people want to know what the missionary—or better, what the missionary’s God—can do.”¹⁵ This is precisely the question that Melanesians are asking. As Whiteman points out, in contrast to Europeans who are preoccupied with “complex doctrines to support their philosophical and theological frameworks of belief, Melanesians ask the more pragmatic, ‘Does it work? Is it effective? Will it bring abundant life?’”¹⁶

Alan Tippett coined the expression “power encounter,” and his reference point was the animistic religions of the South Pacific. In a power encounter, the power of ancestral gods was pitted against the power of the Christian God. Charles Kraft and other missiologists who followed Tippett have included signs and wonders as a part of this power encounter, and credit this approach with the success of Christian mission in the South Pacific, which includes Melanesia.¹⁷ Undeniably, this approach has been very successful in gaining adherents to profess faith in Jesus Christ and who self-identify as Christians. Churches like Papua New Guinea’s Revival Centers, which focus on signs and wonders, have exploded in recent years, and many other churches there, even the mainline denominations such as the Roman Catholics and the Evangelical Lutherans, have been deeply influenced by the power encounter approach to evangelism and discipleship.

Despite its prominence, I believe that the power encounter approach has been largely unsuccessful in affecting the worldview of Melanesians, and it is not difficult to see why. We have already seen that Melanesian animism’s quest for *mana* is essentially a pursuit of the means of accessing and manipulating a power that will grant success in the form of abundant life. The Melanesian is very open to new, undiscovered ways of accessing this power, so when a revival crusade sweeps through town, many are very willing to be baptized, attempt some form of speaking in tongues, and seek physical healing to “try out” what they believe to be the Christian method of

¹⁵ David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 231.

¹⁶ Whiteman, “Melanesian Religions,” 97.

¹⁷ Charles Kraft, *Power Encounters in Spiritual Warfare* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 1–2.

accessing *mana*. In terms of the cultural onion model, the superficial aspects of patterns of behavior, signs, and rituals have all been radically changed in a power encounter, but the deep structure, the worldview, is unaffected. It is no wonder that this kind of “conversion” is so common; it is hardly a conversion at all. It is merely a change of the surface structure of one’s life, while one’s fundamental beliefs, assumptions, and presuppositions remain unchanged and unchallenged.

2. *Truth Encounter*

The concept of truth encounter is often set in contrast or in addition to power encounter.¹⁸ When Gailyn Van Rheenen discusses the challenge of preaching Christ in the context of the animistic belief in *mana*, he goes straight to the matter of worldview. While he does not use the phrase *per se*, what he advocates is a truth encounter in a three-step process. First, he says, we have to communicate clearly the basic tenets of the Christian gospel: who God is, human sinfulness, God’s salvation in Christ, and how one is to respond to the gospel in faith and obedience. Second, we must teach the biblical concept of power. While God is all-powerful, in Christ, God humbled himself and became a man and was crucified in weakness and shame to rescue his people. This provides a model for Christians who are to give up using power for selfish purposes and submitting their desire for power to the lordship of Christ. Third, we must make clear that there is blessing to be found in the Christian life, but it is a “strength in weakness” kind of power (2 Cor 12:9). Van Rheenen advocates highlighting the “radical discontinuity” between *mana* and the blessing of God.¹⁹

There is a lot to appreciate about Van Rheenen’s approach. His first step aims at the beliefs level of the cultural onion, and certainly, communicating the basic tenets of the Christian faith is necessary for true conversion. His second step sets up the third. The biblical truth corresponding to *mana* must be taught first, especially the selfless and loving use of power, and only then can one hope properly to gain a biblical and gospel-centered understanding of blessing, which itself is a major biblical theme, but one the cross-cultural missionary may neglect because he fears that it will be misunderstood.

However, there are two problems with Van Rheenen’s approach. First, it fails to account for the on-the-field reality that nearly every Western missionary faces when coming to a country like Papua New Guinea: he is

¹⁸ David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 167–99. Hesselgrave includes elenctics within the category of truth encounter, while I believe it is more accurate to separate it into a third category.

¹⁹ Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ*, 212.

in general much more materially well off and therefore likely to himself be seen as a source of the life force that the Melanesian is preoccupied with gaining.²⁰ Thus, while the missionary is preaching and teaching, regardless of what he is saying, many will easily follow him, learn what he is saying, and come under his discipleship. The initial reaction of many Western missionaries upon experiencing this type of reception is an inflated sense of their own selves or the naïve belief that the content of what they are saying is drawing adherents to them. As I have preached evangelistically, sometimes to over 500 people in busy markets or bus stops all around Papua New Guinea, I have certainly experienced both of these reactions. But the reaction that comes after many years, as highlighted in the story about Jim and Upa, is much more devastating. When it becomes clear that the disciple has been following all these years, showing such devotion and unity of purpose, but has all along been seeking some kind of secret knowledge or ritual that will unlock vast stores of success or cargo, then the Western missionary feels betrayed and believes that their protégé's behavior all this time has simply been a mask for greed. Yet while there is an element of greed involved, what he fails to realize is that his protégé is simply acting according to his worldview, which has remained unchallenged during all these years of mentoring and discipleship. Communicating cross-culturally means considering carefully how I, as the communicator, am viewed and understood according to the deep structure of my host culture's worldview.

Second, Van Rheenen's approach rightly understands that there is a clash between the animistic worldview and the biblical one concerning *mana*, but there is a lot more to be said in this regard. Similarly, Hiebert presents a method for transforming worldviews that goes no further than to assert that unbiblical worldviews must be exposed by bringing them to a level of consciousness so that those who hold them can reflect critically upon them.²¹ According to Scripture, however, this approach comes up short.

3. *Elenctics*

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul tells Timothy that all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). What Van Rheenen and Hiebert miss is the element of rebuking. The word for rebuke here is the Greek word *elenchos* (ἐλεγχος). It can have the meaning of "expose" or "bring to light," but it also

²⁰ Van Rheenen does recognize this problem, but the approach he advocates fails to provide a solution (ibid.).

²¹ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 307, 319.

has the stronger sense of convict, reprove, or express strong disapproval.²²

J. H. Bavinck keys in on this word in his approach to missional communication, even calling it *elenctics*, which he defines as “the science which is concerned with the conviction of sin.”²³ He says, “The Bible from the first page to the last is a tremendous plea against the heathenism, against the paganizing tendencies in Israel itself, in short, against the corruption of religion.”²⁴ This quote is extremely relevant to the state of Christianity in Papua New Guinea, where Christianity has largely remained entrenched in its animistic and antibiblical worldview.

If we consider the approach of the apostles in the book of Acts, we see that rebuking features prominently. When Peter is full of the Holy Spirit and preaches at Pentecost to a mixed crowd from the Jewish Diaspora—in other words, people of various cultural backgrounds—not only does he expose their actions and intentions for future consideration, he also rebukes them for being sinners and murderers who are responsible for the death of Jesus Christ. When Paul preaches his famous sermon in the Areopagus of Athens, he finds himself in a place and culture that loves to expose ideas and has a fascination with new teachings (Acts 17:26). But the heart of Paul’s message is a confrontation with the false worship of the Athenians and a clear call to repent of their idolatry.

The apostle Paul speaks of rebuking in Ephesians 5:11: “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.” The word translated expose here is *elenchete*. Christians are not only to reject sinful behaviors but must also expose their sinfulness. This exposing work is fundamental to who Christians are since they are children of light and it is the nature of light to expose and drive away darkness. If the light does not expose darkness, then the sinner will remain in the darkness of their thinking and acting. But this exposing is much more than the critical reflection Hiebert mentions. Clinton Arnold states,

The verb is probably best translated as “expose” here since this is the function of light when it penetrates darkness (see also John 3:19–20), but the term was also commonly used with the sense of “rebuke” and “convict.” In this context, the purpose of the exposure is to bring conviction and correction.²⁵

²² “ἐλέγχω [*elenchō*],” Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 315.

²³ J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, trans. David H. Freeman (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), 222.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 244.

²⁵ Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians*, ZECNT 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 331.

Paul understands as well as anyone that the sinful actions of the Greco-Roman world flowed from a belief system and worldview that was antithetical to God (cf. Rom 1:18–32). Therefore, Christians must be active in exposing and convicting sin as they shine the light of Christ in the particular culture they are in.

We can learn much from the cross-cultural literature, and I greatly appreciate what authors like Hesselgrave, Van Rheenen, and Hiebert say about it. However, an important but much-neglected topic in the discussion of cross-cultural gospel communication is the work of convicting the hearers of the sinful idolatry of their worldview. Of course, as Bavinck discusses, this is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit.²⁶ But the Holy Spirit is pleased to use preachers of the gospel to carry out this work.

What does this mean for *mana*? It means that the cross-cultural communication of the gospel must aim to expose the idolatrous worldview of the culture. Melanesian Christians need to recognize that their quest for power, prestige, or wealth is sinful and is an expression of their depraved tendency to reject the true God and place themselves at the center of their universe. They must be taught what repenting of this sin looks like. Also, this approach helps to deal with the issue of the missionaries themselves being viewed as a source of *mana*. This issue often feels like a quagmire because, no matter what, I simply cannot make myself as poor and desperate as most Papua New Guineans. Even if I did cut my pay down to a bare minimum and lived in substandard housing, I simply cannot remove the *access* that I have, which guarantees me medical treatment and financial support if I so much as ask for it. But when the Melanesian Christians learn to understand their quest for *mana* as sin that needs repentance, then the presence of my access to financial and medical support becomes less of an issue between us.

4. Applying Elencitics to Mana

So, what does it look like to rebuke *mana* and the deep assumptions and presuppositions that lie hidden in the animist's worldview? In other words, how does the gospel expose the unfruitful works of the darkness of *mana*?

In the first place, the preoccupation with *mana* reveals the human-centeredness of the Melanesian worldview. The goal of the quest for *mana* is ultimately human centered because, at its deepest level, it is ultimately focused on gaining an advantage for oneself or one's family or tribe. Scripture teaches that life is not to be human centered; it is to be God centered, as Paul writes to the Corinthians: "So whether you eat or drink, or whatever

²⁶ Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 229; as seen in John 16:8.

you do, do all for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). The context of this passage is that Paul is discussing the eating of food sacrificed to idols, where he is giving careful instruction about when it is okay and when it is not okay to eat such meat. In terms of the cultural onion, eating the meat is the superficial level, the level of behavior. Paul is in effect saying that whether the behavior is acceptable or not depends on the deeper levels of the cultural onion, both of the eater and his host. The question of eating cannot be separated from the deepest and most significant factor of them all: Is God glorified in this? Does God receive worship and adoration? Is his name exalted by my eating?

The Melanesians who are considering buying some “holy water” that is said to come from an auspicious source or place a certain rock or bone in their garden to increase its fruitfulness do well to ask these same questions. Does this action give glory to God? Is God being exalted in our hearts as we carry out this ritual?²⁷ Asking this question will cause them to consider the beliefs and motivations underlying their action. When they realize that in fact, their sole purpose was to increase their prosperity and that how they were seeking to do that denies God his rightful place as ruler and governor of all things and seeks to relate to God in a manner that one would relate to a lesser, fickle, and even impersonal god, then the proper response is to recognize the action and its attendant beliefs and motives as sin, experience sorrow for and hatred of that idolizing tendency, and earnestly seek forgiveness from God through Jesus Christ.

If this is the direction that sanctification will take in the life of a person, then this must be the direction that the communication of the gospel that person must take as well. The best homiletics teach that the goal of the sermon is the application since the goal of the gospel is a changed life. “[Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Pet 2:24). Effective cross-cultural preaching will not only show that an action is sinful but will also seek to reveal the sinfulness of that sin, call for repentance and faith, and disciple the sinner to be motivated for God’s glory.

Closely related to the self-centeredness of a preoccupation with *mana*, it also reveals a heart intent on greed. *The Oxford English Dictionary* definition of greed is “an intense and selfish desire for something, especially wealth, power, or food.” This definition describes precisely what is happening in the heart of the Melanesian seeking *mana* because, in their understanding of the

²⁷ As I discussed with a national pastor colleague how to overcome cultural differences and speak the truth into a culture, he suggested that this is the very question that must be asked.

world, *mana* is merely the channel through which wealth and power run.

In Acts 8:9–24, we read the account of Simon the Magician from Samaria. Simon was famous for his power in practicing magic. However, when Philip, and later Peter and John, come to Samaria and through their ministry the Holy Spirit makes himself known in signs and miracles, Simon offers Peter and John money for the power to control and dispense the power of the Holy Spirit. Simon is clearly motivated by greed, especially for power, but likely also for money and fame. As the pre-Christian Melanesian would seek *mana* as the channel through which power and wealth will come to them, similarly Simon seeks the Holy Spirit as the channel through which to receive power and wealth. Thus his “conversion” is no conversion at all. He is still seeking the same things, but this time through “Christian” means. This is precisely what is happening for so many Melanesians who, hearing the Christian gospel (or an aberration thereof), seek the Holy Spirit or the influence of Jesus as the channel through which power and wealth will come to them.

Peter’s strong and stinging response is a classic case of elenctics. He answers with a curse, an indictment, two commands, followed by an observation.

[Curse:] May your silver perish with you because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!

[Indictment:] You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.

[Command 1:] Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and

[Command 2:] pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.

[Observation:] For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity. (Acts 8:20–23)

In this cross-cultural exchange between a Jewish fisherman and a Samaritan magician, a preacher of the gospel of Christ and a high priest of paganism, Peter offers no quarter for Simon’s assumptions about power and how to relate with the true God. Simon is guilty of wickedness and in desperate need of forgiveness (“pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven”) and the conviction of the Holy Spirit (“for I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity”) that Jesus proclaimed in John 16:8–11.

Cross-cultural preachers do well to consider Peter’s example. What message must be given when would-be converts are motivated by greed? Rebuke in no uncertain terms, expose the darkness of the sin, and point to the only but sufficient hope that sinners have, which is true, motive-level repentance

and forgiveness. Sadly, there have been many Simons in Papua New Guinea, but instead of being rebuked, they have been accommodated.

In Ephesians 5:5, the Apostle Paul makes clear that greed is idolatry. This brings us to the third and final aspect of the quest for *mana* that needs rebuke: it is idolatry. For many Melanesians of the past, this was first-commandment idolatry; that is, idolatry that worshiped false gods. However, for many Melanesians who profess faith in Christ today, this is a second-commandment idolatry. The first commandment is about who is to be worshiped. The second commandment is about how God is to be worshiped.

The idolatry of the quest for *mana* is very similar to the idolatry of the Israelites in the Old Testament. In many cases, they still professed Yahweh as their God; however, as they approached him, they approached in the manner of the pagans of the surrounding nations (e.g., the golden calf, the high places, using the ark as a talisman). Often, this manner of worship was adopted because basic to the Canaanite idolatry and worldview was the belief that God (or the gods) could be manipulated and that making and caring for an idol was the channel through which this could be carried out. The prophet Isaiah humorously exposes this worldview with his story of the man who throws one half of a block of wood into the fire to warm himself and carves the other up into an idol. “He prays to it and says, ‘Deliver me, for you are my god’” (Isa 44:17b). Melanesians generally have not carved small figurines to channel God’s favor; their cultural tradition is to prefer crude rituals. But these are merely differences in behavior, differences on the surface level of culture. Underneath, in the deeper layers of the onion, there is the same assumption that God can be manipulated, that he himself is essentially human-centered, and that physical, this-worldly blessings are the climax of his gifts. All of these assumptions are unbiblical and false. The quest for *mana* is idolatry.

Such a base rejection of God simply cannot be accommodated, either by God or those who are called to proclaim the message of his self-revelation. This is why the field of elenctics is so important for cross-cultural communication—both the theory and the practice. If the gospel of Jesus Christ is going to be fully embraced, then the sinfulness of sin must be fully exposed, and the way of receiving Christ through repentance and faith must be fully preached, with full regard to how these truths are received by their hearers.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I indicated that we would consider how to ensure that the Jim and Upa scenario does not happen. I am hopeful that

we have helped to answer that question. We have considered what culture is, how it works, how it factors into mission communication. We have seen that elenctics, the science of rebuking sin, holds promise for helping to break through some of the barriers that cross-cultural communication presents. I have spoken strongly against idolatry in Melanesian culture, particularly as it relates to *mana*. I have spoken in this way because this idolatry is easier for me as someone coming from a different culture both to see and to address. However, as a minister of the gospel, I must remember that the treasure is always housed in a jar of clay (cf. 2 Cor 4:7). I myself am part of a culture with worldview assumptions and presuppositions that are also in need of loving rebuke. Unfortunately, elenctics has typically been understood as applying to foreign, pagan cultures, as though the Western worldview has no need for correction. This is simply not the case. As I have reflected on the story of Jim and Upa, I have wondered what a similar story, but of a Melanesian missionary leaving affluent Canada after toiling there for twenty years, might sound like. What Western assumptions of the gospel would be revealed? What hidden idolatries would need to be rebuked one last time as Upa said farewell?