A New Creation?

—the challenge of the resurgence of ancient rites

Barry Oliver



See C V in Vol 5 #1

The addition of a 28th Fundamental Belief to the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists is particularly pertinent for the South Pacific Division (SPD) given that the majority of people who now comprise the membership of the Church in the SPD have come from an animistic background. The new statement reads as follows:

> By His cross Jesus triumphed over the forces of evil. He who subjugated the demonic spirits during His earthly ministry has broken their power and made certain their ultimate doom. Jesus' victory gives us victory over the evil forces that still seek to control us, as we walk with Him in peace, joy, and assurance of His love. Now the Holy Spirit dwells within us and empowers us. Continually committed to Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, we are set free from the burden of our past deeds. No longer do we live in the darkness, fear of evil powers, ignorance, and meaninglessness of our former way of life. In this new freedom in Jesus, we are called to grow into the likeness of His character, communing with Him daily in prayer, feeding on His Word, meditating on it and on His providence, singing His praises, gathering together for worship, and participating in the mission of the Church. As we give ourselves in loving service to those around us and in witnessing to His salvation, His constant presence with us through the Spirit sanctifies every moment and every task.[1]

This brief survey will describe some examples of beliefs and practices held prior to acceptance of Christianity and Adventism in particular, which are outside the theological and practical framework of Seventh-day Adventism, but which continue to be held to a greater or lesser extent after alignment with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The discussion will confine itself to examples in the SPD; specifically to those areas in which animism was the primary belief structure before comparatively recent contact with Christianity. The areas from which examples can be drawn include Melanesia (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Fiji) Micronesia (Kiribati and Tuvalu), Polynesia (Tonga, Samoa, French Polynesia, Cook Islands, and Maori New Zealand), and Aboriginal Australia. Eighty-five percent of the church membership in the SPD is to be found in these areas.

Spiritual Strength

Typically those who have become Seventh-day Adventists from an animistic background have a very highly developed spiritual consciousness and awareness of the supernatural. The sense of the presence of God is infused into all aspects of life and there is little evidence of the dichotomy between the secular and the sacred. This sense of the supernatural is not derived from rational argumentation. It is accepted a-priori as a given.

In such a context, sacred space, sacred place and ritual are very important within the spiritual psyche of the people. Traditionally the supernatural was encountered in a particular space or place. It was associated with complex rituals which were developed and passed down through the 'medicine man' and the story tellers. Each clan or tribe developed its own distinctive cultural norms and forms which identified and gave structure to spiritual expression.

When people from this background become Seventh-day Adventists they carry with them this a-priori spiritual world view of their traditional cultures. The reality and presence of the supernatural is accepted without question. The power of prayer, the reality of signs and wonders including dreams are such that their presence often renders people who hold other presuppositional world-view incredulous. To the onlooker, it appears that faith and belief are usually experienced in a simple but powerful way, without question or doubt.

Residual Inherent Issues

However, the situation is not necessarily as it first seems to the casual observer. While there is indeed a strong



A sacred grove on the island of Malekula in Vanuatu



The cave of skulls-dead ancestors live on through the spirit world



The bones left after a cannibalistic feast

consciousness of the supernatural in the everyday lives of those who have accepted Christian faith, that consciousness is not necessarily grounded in a strong intellectual assent to a body of doctrine. Often in this context the cognitive foundations of the faith are not perceived to be the priority.

In addition the priority given to sacred space-sacred place-ritual can mean that it is often perceived adequate to be in or near the sacred space/place on Sabbath morning, close to where the 'rituals' are taking place. Participation and intellectual engagement are not at all perceived as the priority. Presence is the priority.

This lack of engagement, participation and intellectual foundation for faith together with the strong consciousness of the supernatural leaves the individual or the family/clan vulnerable to vestiges of animistic spiritism. In the rural areas of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, for example, fear of the masalai—the spirits of the big bush—and stories of the tumbuna — the gods of rock and wood— continue to strike fear into the hearts of far too many of our people long after they have become Seventh-day Adventists. People will habitually not walk on certain paths at certain times, nor visit specific areas, nor wash in specific rivers and streams because of the residual belief that those areas are the domain of the masalai. Too many people habitually resort to the 'traditional' practices of the local medicine man rather than utilise the services of conventional medical practitioners. While some of the traditional medicines may appear to be akin to natural therapies, in every case they also involve appeal to animistic/spiritistic powers which cannot be condoned by orthodox Christian faith. In far too many instances, church members who fall ill blame a witch doctor or 'poison man' for their malady (this person may even be an Adventist) rather than realise that the cause may be malaria, tuberculosis or unhealthful lifestyle practices.

Tragically, in some areas which have long been almost exclusively Seventh-day Adventist, younger generations who in typical uninformed youthful exuberance have wanted to rebel, have reverted to covert animistic practices while appearing to maintain a veneer of Seventh-day Adventism. On the island of Mussau, Papua New Guinea, for example, there are reports of youth exhuming bodies in order to carry out traditional rituals. In the Solomon Islands, some are reinvigorating the 'pela' which is the ability to change oneself into a bird or a snake. In Vanuatu, some Seventh-day Adventists are getting involved in a practice where people 'fly' or 'travel' in the 'spirit' from one place to another.

The alarming feature of such examples is that in no case do the participants renounce their Seventh-day Adventist faith. Rather they hold to such syncretistic practices in the mistaken belief that they can be reconciled with their Seventh-day Adventist identity. Not all attend church, but they continue to regard themselves as Seventh-day Adventists.

Specific examples of what has been stated could be multiplied. It is sufficient to affirm that the Church does have work to do in affirming the power of God over the forces of darkness and emphasising a strong discipleship program which facilitates systematic teaching and study.

Notes:

[1] Biblical references: Ps 1:1, 2; 23:4; 77:11, 12; Col 1:13, 14; 2:6, 14, 15; Luke 10:17-20; Eph 5:19, 20; 6:12-18; 1 Thess 5:23; 2 Peter 2:9; 3:18; 2 Cor. 3:17, 18; Phil 3:7-14; 1 Thess 5:16-18; Matt 20:25-28; John 20:21; Gal 5:22-25; Rom 8:38, 39; 1 John 4:4; Heb 10:25 ◆

The Editor is Listening

Master Ji—an Indian teacher's service in Fiji (Vol 5 No 1, p29)
While Brian Townend's correction of 2 dates on page 29 (Vol 6 No 1 2006 p 71) is accurate, the errors were not made by Kenneth Singh, the author of the article. *His dates were the same as Townend's. The editor takes full responsibility for the errors and apologises to Kenneth for any inconvenience caused.*

Compassion and Treatment : Togoba Hansenide Colony (Vol 6 No 1 p 18)
Author June Macaulay is correct in stating it was 'midday' and not 'midnight' when the DC3 plane landed at Mt Hagen in PNG. *The error is regretted.*

A Missionary Nurse in PNG (Vol 6 No 1 p 32)
It was Bert and Edna Grosser, not the Pascoes, who lived in the two houses pictured at the bottom of the page. The location was Seure on the Rai Coast, PNG. We have reprinted pictures of both these houses in Edna Grosser's story in this issue. They do show the conditions many of the early missionaries endured. *Our aplogies to Edna and Bert.*