

SILAS ETO, THE “HOLY MAMA”, AND THE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP CHURCH*

– **Esau Tuza**

In case you are not familiar with the Christian Fellowship Church, I would like to give you a short historical account of Silas Eto, the man, and how his movement became a church; this, I think, may help us to raise some of the issues that are important in the Melanesian religious movements. This will help us to think about theology in Melanesia.

First, then, a portrait of the man. He was born about 1905, and he died last year (1983). This is the man who is called “Holy Mama”. Holy Mama means Holy Father; or, some would say, God. He went to college about 1928, and he came back to the village where he was born, called Dive in the Kolobagea area of the Western Solomons. He went to a Pastors’ College, which was run by the Methodist mission, and he graduated in 1932. When he went back to his village, he started to build a very big church at Kolobagea, a huge church, which was to be the Church of the Trinity. On its front door, he had a cross, with biblical words underneath it, a text from John 3:16. Inside this church building, he had a crucifix with a human figure at the foot of the cross, holding a shield and spears (this symbolises Solomon Islanders during the headhunting days, who are now coming under the cross of Jesus Christ). And then he wrote a text underneath, saying that we are no longer under the Law of Moses, but under the grace of Jesus Christ. This was attached to a post in the middle of the church; everyone could see it. The Methodist people, particularly the leaders, were very curious about this crucifix. They did not like a crucifix in the church, because they considered it idolatrous; they liked to see an empty cross. So they criticised Silas Eto (some even accusing him of being a follower of Roman Catholicism). Apparently, when Eto did this, the church became alive. Methodist worship, as you know, consists of a hymn, a scripture reading, then another hymn, a sermon, a prayer, and a benediction; it was a one-man show, with no participation by the community. He was quite different; he encouraged people to sing and clap their hands, and when he went to the church, he would say: “Good morning, Jesus”. By 1932, revival began to take place in his church, a revival rather like a Holy Spirit movement. There, people fell unconscious;

some of them sang praises and raised their hands, some cried, and some felt a shooting pain in their hearts. This continued on for a number of years under the supervision of a particular person, whose name was Revd J. F. Goldie. He was a unique character. He accepted criticism from expatriates, but he looked after this movement in such a way that the leader of it could see himself closely allied with Goldie, the chairman of the district.

Eto's church thus spread to about three-quarters of the Methodists in the area. After the "descent of the Holy Spirit", as they called it, Eto went about and built villages in orderly fashion. The houses would be in rows, very straight, the sleeping houses on one side, and the cooking houses behind them; and the church would be either in front of the rows of houses, or in the middle. Then he would have one area, which he said belonged to those who were yet to be born. Nobody was allowed to make any gardens around there. Gardens and other forms of development took place at the rear, at the very back of the village. After he had done that, he also encouraged people to work on their plantations. Gradually, he established villages with 15 plantations. If any church is localised financially in Melanesia, it is the Christian Fellowship Church. It is financially independent, as well as liturgically independent.

By about 1950, this movement swept into the Methodist churches under the direction of other church leaders. The person most concerned about this was the one who took the place of Goldie, the Revd George Carter. He became chairman in the late 1950s, and he was actually witnessing the kind of worship which started in Paradise, as Eto's settlement was called, and was now spreading around other village areas of the church. Partly because people didn't like the kind of worship Eto did, but partly because people thought he was being fêted with prestige from the people, the church leaders, particularly the catechists and the ordained ministers, were very curious about Silas Eto. And so they tried to crush his movement in his own particular area. Unfortunately, the people of other areas also requested Eto, but the leaders said to him: "We do not want you to come here", and they asked him to go away. But he said: "Stop! You didn't ask me to come, but the people asked me; do you think the Holy Spirit would ask me to go?" That was his kind of logic.

This movement was so great, and so catching on the people, that, by 1969, there was a clash between the Methodist Church and the CFC. At that time, they were not yet called CFC, but “The Way”. There was a confrontation between these church leaders of “The Way” and George Carter, in which it was said that the CFC church was the church of the evil spirit. They replied: “No, we are the church of the Holy Spirit!” And so a schism began to take place, and, by 1960, the CFC broke away. They recognised themselves as a church, and, between 1960 and 1966, they worked on their own constitution. By 1965, they were established and recognised as the Christian Fellowship Church. They wanted to call it the Methodist Fellowship Church, but the Methodist people resented that. This, briefly, is the history of the movement.

Now, Silas Eto is called the Holy Mama; and with that we are entering theology. Holy Mama means Holy Father, and for many it would also mean God. They would say: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and of the Holy Mama”; it’s not complete until the Holy Mama is mentioned with the triune God. In other words, we have a Quaternity rather than a Trinity. This is a coinage which the Methodists did not like, because they said: “We cannot worship man; we can only worship God in the Trinity.” We can debate whether this is heretical or not. But history shows that the concept of Holy Mama contains a profound sense of liberation – “liberation” in inverted commas, if you like! First, you have witnessed how the followers were manipulated by Methodism. They could say: “In the Methodist mission, we never had experienced the Holy Spirit; we never experienced ourselves as people in the church; we didn’t feel indigenous. Only when we experience the Holy Spirit do we know who we are in the face of God.” In my research, I have made some record of people, who feel liberated from the Methodist mission, and are now part of the United Church.

Some people experience forgiveness through contacting Holy Mama, and there are references in my thesis where people said: “In the Methodist church, we felt as if we were nothing but inferior, selfish people, and we were never treated as equals. But, with Holy Mama, we forget our sins, we feel our burdens have gone; we feel as if we are free” (I say “liberation” in inverted commas!). Holy Mama also performed a lot of healing. He healed

the sick, the lepers, he prayed for women who were barren, and they gave birth, and he healed people who were *longlong* (mentally deranged). I have seen him, in 1978, healing a woman who was said to be trapped by a *vinaroro* (erotic) magic. (In Melanesia, there are certain men who want women, and they perform certain rituals for this purpose.) This woman would call the name of the man, and she would run off into the bush every day, and people would try to calm her down. Holy Mama visited the village, and they brought this woman – I shall call her Mary – and he asked the people who were holding her back to release her. So they released her, and he provided a little chair, on which she sat, and then he asked the people to tell their stories about how this *longlong* came about. They told the story, and then he put his hands around the woman, and he said: “God in the front, the Holy Spirit on my right, Jesus Christ on my left, Holy Mama on your back; go and be cured!” And she stood up. I haven’t heard of any further occurrences of the *longlong*. He also healed two children, who were affected by charms; he went and prayed over them and they were healed.

They also saw Holy Mama with the Spirit. He was encountered in worship. (I’m not sure whether this is the Wesleyan jargon of the “warmed heart”.) When their heart “grew hot”, they would see Moses, Jesus Christ, and Holy Mama. This happened, either in Eto’s presence, or when he was not present; and it is mainly because of these things that people began to call him Holy Father. Holy Mama did not invent the title, and he seldom used it in the first person singular. He would say, “The Holy Mama”; he would not say “I am the Holy Mama”, because the Holy Mama is simply the same as saying the Holy Father. He would say “the Holy Mama did this” rather than “I did this”. The unique observation I made in 1981 was that, for him, the Holy Mama is still alive, but is no longer in the body of Holy Mama: he is outside of Holy Mama, so that, in their worship, they no longer focus the worship onto the Holy Mama, but mainly onto a string between two poles. Holy Mama and the people would be worshipping, and they would want the vision of Holy Mama there – not the Holy Mama “inside” Silas Eto. It is peculiar, and hard to grasp.

In an article, which I wrote in 1981, called “The Demolition of Church Buildings by the Ancestors”, presented at a seminar in Brisbane (to

be published this year in Garry Trompf, ed., *The Gospel is not Western*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books), I spoke about this kind of worship. No longer was worship in the church building; if it was in the church building, it is a community meeting with the people, and the Holy Mama sits in the middle of the church. But now it is worship outside the church building, and the Holy Mama is worshipped *in the body*, not in the churches. I do not know what we can say to that. It reminds me of a book written by Vincent van Nuffell, *The Theology of the Temple*, Waigani PNG: UPNG Press, 1975, in which he talks about the temples, and says the churches or temples are living images of what people should be, and that what we expected out of the churches should be internalised in the body of man; and that would be considered true worship. It is a fascinating book, with a fascinating collection of art, various buildings, and structures of world religions, where you can see how they have tried to put into the church buildings the mirror image of moral man, the inner feeling of man, the inner heart of man. I can see pictures like this in this particular kind of worship. Holy Mama used to build a huge, wide church building, bigger than any Methodist mission ever built; not simply as a meeting place – there are a lot of other places for that – but Holy Mama said: “The worship is in the body”.

So much for the demands of the theology of liberation. I would like to repeat again the theology of incarnation. I think that is the greatest thing that can be said about the way in which we think about Jesus Christ. I have explained to you that the qualification people give to the Holy Mama shows the way in which they see themselves as being forgiven, as being liberated, as being healed by him; and to them, Holy Mama is talked of as God, or Jesus Christ, or the Holy Spirit. Now if you think of it from a systematic theological point of view you’ll probably query this. But if you think of it mainly from the experience of people about Holy Mama, you’ll see a different kind of story – but I’ll leave that to theologians to think about. It is a controversial issue on which Methodists and the CFC never got together, and I hope that, one of these days, they will be able to come to terms with it.

The other aspect of the Holy Mama, which I think is very important, is the emphasis placed on the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is immediately

in the lives of people at worship. I think you would probably agree with me that in a lot of new religious movements today, the Holy Spirit is the main factor. One thing we have to look into is whether the “spirit” can be considered as the Holy Spirit, in the sense we take it to mean: the Christian Holy Spirit, theologically; or have we to do with some ancestral worship? It’s up to us to work on this; but my own reflection seems to suggest that we are scrutinising *both* in these movements. Certain features of the spirit movements will tell you that the kind of feelings that people have had from the Spirit, they have gone through in the traditional ancestral worship. I asked them: “What do you feel when the Holy Spirit comes upon you?” They would say: “We begin to feel some weight over us; then gradually it moves down; and then all our body is cool; and then our spirit listens; and then we are in a different world.” Now, if you consider that this is the Holy Spirit, a person who knows about traditional ancestor worship will say, “No: that is an experience of the so-called *sabusabukai* cult.” And whether all Methodists have it, or have other experiences of the old traditional worship, the kind of feeling these people have is the kind of feeling they have experienced in our particular kind of worship, in our traditional worship. So you may say to yourself: “Is this the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ?” Is it the Holy Spirit or our *tumbuna* (ancestors)? In any case, you must realise that the Holy Spirit liberates, whether it is from ancestors or from “Christianity”; I would like you to think about that. Those who would like to learn more about this should read the three issues of *Point*, Nos. 2-4, published by the Melanesian Institute on spirit movements right throughout Melanesia; because they are the ones who can speak to us theologically, and we would do well to listen to them.

NOTE

- * Esau Tuza made this contribution to the MATS Study Institute at very short notice, and spoke impromptu. His talk has been transcribed from a tape kindly made available by Kristen Redio, Lae. For a more detailed account of Silas Eto and the CFC, see Tuza’s essay, “Silas Eto of New Georgia”, in *Prophets of Melanesia: Six Essays*, Garry Trompf, ed., Port Moresby: Institute of PNG Studies, 1977, pp. 108-145, 2nd edn, 1981, pp. 65-87.