BAPTISM AND THE ELEMENTAL SPIRITS OF THE UNIVERSE

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Introduction

The pages that follow will be concerned with a topic, which has already received considerable attention: the Melanesian belief in the spirit world. More particularly, we shall explore how this belief might be reflected in a corresponding theology of baptism.

Firstly (I), the problem will be stated in terms of the interior conflict facing the recent convert. An attempt will then be made (II) to understand the problem, in the light of two key anthropological categories. A theological response (III), in terms of a two-fold model, will then be proposed. Finally (IV), attention will be focused on an appropriate theology of baptism as a response to the problem.

I. Schizophrenia of the Spirit

"It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless, and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of miracles."[1]

It is no longer unfashionable to have reservations about this statement. Melanesian Christians, among others, though citizens of the modern age, do not experience any such conflict. They find little difficulty in accepting the world of the New Testament. Indeed, it seems clear that one of the reasons for this is that their traditional experience of the supernatural in

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[1] Rudolph Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1952, p. 5.

their daily lives very much reflects what Bultmann dismisses as the New Testament world of miracles.

It is perhaps ironic that this vivid experience of the supernatural, which they share with the New Testament, may bring with it a problem of another kind. Speaking of African Christianity, Desmond Tutu has spoken of "a split in the African soul" resulting in "a form of religious schizophrenia".[2] He is referring to the fact that, not only has there been a failure to integrate their traditional worldview with Christianity, but there appears to be a conflict between the two. Hence, the split in the soul of the Christian, for whom the traditional worldview continues to remain central to his or her experience.

It would appear that a similar situation exists in Melanesia. One author describes it, perhaps less dramatically, in terms of a spiritual vacuum.[3] Alternatively, it has been described as a superficial adherence to Christianity, which fails to penetrate to the deeper levels, a compartmentalisation, or, indeed, a conflict situation within the newly-converted Christian.[4] The evidence for this personal dualism has, in recent times, been too widely documented to need recounting here.

If the symptoms of this religious schizophrenia are widely recognised, so, too, is one of its causes. In this regard, recent criticism has pointed the finger at earlier missionary strategy. While acknowledging the complexity of the issues involved, it is a criticism, which seems justified.

When confronted with an unfamiliar worldview, and with practices, which were too easily categorised as "primitive" or "superstitious", the missionary response was probably inevitable. In the opinion of one author (though her

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[2] Desmond Tutu, "Whither African Theology", in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, Edward Fasholè-Luke, et al, eds, London UK: Rex Collings, 1978, p. 366.

[3] Wendy Flannery, "Mediation of the Sacred", in Wendy Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today (3), Point* 4 (1984), p. 147.

[4] Darrell Whiteman, "Melanesian Religions: An Overview", in Ennio Mantovani, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions, Point* 6 (1984), p. 114; Gernot Fugmann, "Magic: A Pastoral Response", in Ennio Mantovani, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions, Point* 6 (1984), p. 213.

remarks are confined to witchcraft), the missionary reacted in one of two ways. One reaction was based on the assumption that the beliefs in question were unfounded, and, therefore, should be ignored. Alternatively, it was assumed that they were demonic, and, therefore, required deliverance.[5]

In either event, there was no effort at theological engagement with the beliefs in question. Indeed, any such engagement would have been thought to be a contradiction in terms. Conversion meant the substitution of the Christian way for the traditional.

In practice, of course, it was not, nor could it have been, quite so simple. The new Christian was certainly an authentic believer. But the traditional mentality did not simply disappear. This was particularly evident at times of crisis, when it very definitely resurfaced. Officially, this was not supposed to happen. Indeed, the new Christian, himself, or part of him, shared the official view. This was a recipe for the religious schizophrenia, already referred to.

II.   Conflicting Worldviews

The crisis, it has been suggested, is the result of conflicting worldviews. Since this is not always recognised – indeed, failure to recognise it is part of the problem – a closer examination of the matter seems indicated. We shall, therefore, following the categories developed by Mantovani, distinguish between two worldviews, the theistic and the biocosmic. It is to be hoped that the distinction will serve as a useful hermeneutical tool for further theological reflection.

One might say that the theistic, symbolic system is vertical. That is to say, the transcendent God is visualised, in relationship with the individual items of creation, including the human individual. "That reality, who is called God, gives the rules of behaviour and punishes transgressions. God enters

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[5] J. B. Kailing, "A New Solution to the African Christian Problem", in *Missiology* 22 (1994), p. 496; cf. Fugmann, "Magic", p. 214.

into every aspect of life. He is very near though He is in heaven, i.e., He is totally different from the creature."[6]

By contrast, the biocosmic, symbolic system is horizontal, in the sense that the individual is part of "life", which permeates everything. Reality is viewed in a more-holistic manner.[7] It is, consequently, less fragmented, and compartmentalised, with no clear boundaries, for example, between the physical and the spiritual.[8] Life is experienced, less as personal, but with more of a communal dimension, which ensures a sense of unity, not only with others, but also with ancestors, and the land itself.[9]

It is, therefore, clearly important that the two systems not be confused, for example, by interpreting one system in terms of another.[10] And yet, the cultural-evolution school of anthropology routinely dismissed alternative worldviews as "primitive", or "aboriginal", precisely because they had canonised one worldview, which then became the standard. There is considerable irony in the fact that many missionaries, ideologically opposed to evolution, readily embraced, and put into practice, the philosophy of the cultural-evolution school.[11]

In this climate of cultural imperialism, it is easy to see how the reality of the spiritual and psychic world was dismissed,[12] how, in Freud's view, "spirits and demons were nothing but the projection of primitive man's emotional impulses", and how witchcraft was reduced to "a trait of primitive people, which will disappear with Westernisation".[13]

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[6] Ennio Mantovani, "What is Religion", in Ennio Mantovani, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions, Point* 6 (1984), p. 32.

[7] Gernot Fugmann, "Salvation in Melanesian Religions", in Ennio Mantovani, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions, Point* 6 (1984), p. 282.

[8] Whiteman, "Melanesian Religions: An Overview", p. 88.

[9] Mantovani, "What is Religion", p. 33; Fugmann, "Salvation", pp. 283f.

[10] Ennio Mantovani, "Ritual in Melanesia", in Ennio Mantovani, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions, Point* 6 (1984), pp. 169-194.

[11] W. R. Shenk, "The Role of Theory in Mission Studies", in *Missiology* 24 (1966), p. 38.

[12] H. Hill, "Witchcraft and the Gospel: Insights from Africa", in *Missiology* 24 (1996), pp. 323-344.

[13] Ibid., p. 328, which is also the source of the Freud quotation.

It is true that the climate may have changed for the better. If contemporary academic literature is anything to go by, it is a view, which has been discredited. But there remains the inherent danger, when faced with an unfamiliar reality, to interpret it in terms of one's own worldview. For instance, the pig festival, when interpreted in terms of the theistic, symbolic system, is seen "in terms of sacrifices to ancestors, and so, in terms of idolatry".[14] When interpreted in terms of the biocosmic, symbolic system, however, it emerges in a very different light. "From a theological point of view, the pig festival can be understood as a statement of faith that the whole cosmos utterly depends on something, which is not of the cosmos, but, without which, the cosmos cannot exist. That something, I call 'life', a life that is not only biological, but spiritual as well."[15]

To say that the two symbolic ways are different, does not mean, however, that they are contradictory. They are simply two ways, with different emphases, and different perspectives. For instance, by contrast with the theistic worldview, God may appear to have receded into the background in the biocosmic, symbolic system. In fact, however, it is rather a question of a different perspective.

Of the many areas, where this difference in perspective needs to be taken into account, one might mention that of salvation. Clearly, according to the theistic worldview, salvation is tied up with the relationship between the Transcendent and the individual, and, in particular, with the matter of sin. The biocosmic worldview sees the matter in very different categories. "The salvific experience of any individual is intrinsically interwoven with that of the cosmic community, to which he or she belongs. Such a cosmic community embraces the living and the dead, all things visible and invisible, beings, deities, and various powers in the cosmos. This cosmic community understands the experience of life as being interrelated to such an extent that it affects the whole tribal cosmic world. So, actions of one member have a bearing on the others."[16]

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[14] Mantovani, "Ritual", p. 162.
[15] Ibid., pp. 161f.
[16] Fugmann, "Salvation", pp. 282f.

In particular, the biocosmic concept of salvation is tied up with the spirit world, and with people's relationship to it. It seems clear that, in the spirits, lies the key towards establishing a correct cosmic relationship. There are various hazards in the way of maintaining the right relationship, in that the spirits can be, sometimes unwittingly, offended.[17] In the face of such hazards, the symbolic ritual system, so typical of the biocosmic worldview, has emerged.

A theology of salvation, defined in terms of the more theoretic concept of sin, reflects a particular worldview, and, as such, is a valid theology. But it is not thereby universally valid. Indeed, its exclusive focus on sin, possibly in overly intellectual terms,[18] means that it has not yet learned to dialogue successfully with the biocosmic worldview.

III.   A Model for Interaction

The distinction between the theistic and biocosmic worldviews serves as a useful scientific tool to highlight the missionary problem. In particular, it suggests the occupational hazard of a form of cultural imperialism, even in evangelisation, which, in turn, can result in a schizophrenia of the spirit, on the part of the potential Christian convert.

From a missionary point of view, therefore, it is not a question of supplanting traditional culture with the Christian religion. For one thing, this would reflect a failure to appreciate the inherent God-given value of all cultures. For another, it fails to recognise the extent to which the "Christian message" is itself enculturated. And, from a practical point of view, it simply does not work. It may be that both the missionary and the converted thought there had been a successful transplant. But it is becoming increasingly clear that the traditional way of thinking has merely been driven underground. This is not a salutary process. What should have been a health-giving exercise has ended in a festering of the wound, resulting in the religious schizophrenia of which Tutu speaks. The missionary enterprise has, therefore, defeated its own purpose.

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[17] Mary MacDonald, "Symbolism and Myth", in Ennio Mantovani, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions, Point* 6 (1984), pp. 123-146; Fugmann, "Salvation", p. 285.
[18] See Whiteman, "Melanesian Religions: An Overview", pp. 96f.

If the cultural evolution model of mission is, by its nature, doomed to failure, there arises the obligation of finding a more-adequate approach. Specifically, it becomes imperative to explain how the two worldviews might interact in an evangelical context. Obviously, one is not here concerned with laying down the ground rules. It is rather a question of finding a model of interaction, which respects both worldviews. Two such models will be considered.

1.   The Incarnation Model

The Christological image of the incarnation might serve as a useful model. It serves to convey the profound relationship, which should exist between two worldviews, by suggesting the incarnation of Christianity in the local culture. By definition, incarnation can only take place in terms of the symbolic system of the receiver. Thus, a positive affirmation of the local culture is not just a matter of good manners, but is essential to the missionary strategy.

This is perhaps easier said than done. Cultural imperialism can be difficult to resist. History is replete with examples of accusations of magic, which turn out to be nothing more than name-calling on the part of the accuser. This is equally true of the time of Jesus[19] as it is of our own day.[20] It is tempting to dismiss unfamiliar practices, whether it be the cult of the dead in medieval Christianity, or ancestor veneration in Africa or Melanesia, as the resort to sorcery or superstition. Conversely, it is equally tempting to canonise a particular cultural expression of the faith. For example, it is easy to assume that the Hellenistic or Thomistic expression of Christianity is "traditional", in the sense of being of the essence of the faith.

Both temptations will have to be resisted, if the message is to be incarnated. Each practice must be seen in its wider context. For example, witchcraft, admittedly a complex phenomenon, is also a phenomenon with a positive social dimension. It reflects a recognition of the spiritual and the

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[19] J. M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition*, London UK: SCM Press, 1974, pp. 1-4.
[20] Ennio Mantovani, "Comparative Analysis of Cultures and Religions", in Ennio Mantovani, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions, Point* 6 (1984), p. 78.

supernatural, which has been lost in many Western cultures. It respects the reality of the unconscious, in a way not always appreciated, perhaps, even by the church?[21] In a word, it represents a more-holistic approach, from which much can be learned.

One could go on. But even these few random examples illustrate what a fertile ground there may be for the incarnation of the Christian message. It shows how self-defeating it would be for the missionary church to ignore this fact. Indeed, it shows further, that the encounter should be an enriching one for the donor church.

Though the point may appear self-evident, and it is given wide recognition at the academic level, it would seem to be a point that still needs to be made. For instance, one finds the following, apparently absolute, statements in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC): "All forms of divination are to be rejected" (2116), "All practices of magic or sorcery, by which one attempts to tame occult powers, so as to place them at one's service, and have a supernatural power over others – even if this were for the sake of restoring their health – are gravely contrary to the virtue of religion" (2117). It is true that, by its nature, a catechism has its limitations. It is also true that, even within these limitations, CCC does achieve a certain level of perspicacity.[22] For all that, one would have hoped for a more-graduated treatment of the issues involved. It would be regrettable if such statements were seen, as they well could be, as a rejection of a particular worldview.

Unless the imperialist temptation is resisted, a form of docetism is the result. There is only the appearance of an incarnation, but there is no meaningful immersion into the local culture. There may, of course, be indications to the contrary, in the form of different expressions of the receiving culture. These are merely cosmetic. They convey the impression that a true incarnation has occurred, when, in fact, the change has been merely superficial. In a word, this is a form of docetism.

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[21] Hill, "Witchcraft and the Gospel", p. 334.
[22] For instance, art 2117 deals more subtly with "Spiritism", and "so-called traditional cures".

2.   The Paschal Mystery Model

It would, of course, be naive to conclude that a positive affirmation of a particular worldview is equivalent to an acceptance of everything therein. There are sufficient documented examples of syncretism[23] to suggest that this represents a danger.

It goes without saying that no culture or worldview is without its defects, which need transformation. The incarnation of the Word was not an end in itself. Rather, it found its culmination in the paschal mystery, whereby the person, incarnated in a particular time and culture, was transformed at the resurrection.

The Christian engagement with the local culture, therefore, must be a creative embrace. This is not the same as an unqualified acceptance. There is a sense, in which something new emerges from the encounter. This new element, while being consistent with biblical and Christian tradition, need not necessarily have been articulated there. Its emergence results from, and requires a creative encounter with, another culture.

In this, there is both a caution and a challenge. On the one hand, there is a danger of simply reacting against the alleged imperialism of earlier missionary practice. This can be reflected in a romantic view of traditional culture, and an idealisation of its qualities. It may take the form of cataloguing the parallels between biblical and Melanesian cultures.

Obviously, such comparisons are not only useful, but essential to the theological process. But, similarity between two cultures is no guarantee that there will be an encounter. On the contrary, it may lead to a sense of complacency, which does justice to neither. But no culture is static, much less perfect. The accusation that there is an element of this romanticism in some recent literature is probably not entirely without foundation.

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[23] See Mantovani, "Celebrations", p. 164, n. 2, for a careful definition of "syncretism", a word, which should be used with care.

A romantic idealisation of the local culture is the mirror image of the old cultural imperialism. It is to focus exclusively on the incarnation, and to forget the transformation of the paschal mystery. Herein lies the challenge.

Needless to say, it is only the concrete situation, which will determine how the challenge should be met. But, it is possible, at least by way of illustration, to take an example.

IV.   A Case Study

The backdrop for the present discussion has been the Melanesian belief in the world of the supernatural. Because of the emotive terminology, which is necessarily used to describe the various manifestations of that belief (witchcraft, sorcery, etc.), it is difficult to discuss it dispassionately. But, it can, at least, be said that the simple solutions are not solutions. It is as futile to reject such beliefs as "superstitious" as it is to accept them *tout court*. The issue is, how to harness these beliefs in the service of an authentic Christianity.

The sacrament of baptism may serve as an example. This may, at first sight, appear surprising, for it is by no means clear, from current thinking on baptism, how it is relevant to the matter of belief in a spirit world. For example, CCC, which, no doubt, reflects common teaching on baptism, gives the traditional list of the effects of baptism (1262-1274), namely, the forgiveness of sins, "a new creature" (member of Christ, and temple of the Spirit), incorporation into the church, sacramental bond of unity of Christians, and finally an "indelible spiritual mark".

In this context, the Melanesian concept of sin is of some interest. It has been said that the primary concern of the Melanesian is, not the reality of sin, and the threat of its ultimate consequences, but the potential threat from the world of the spirits.[24] It is obvious that, in such a society, a theology of baptism, which highlights its redemptive role, by the conquest of sin, and neglects its cosmic role, runs the risk of being irrelevant.

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[24] Flannery, "Mediation of the Sacred", p.147; Ennio Mantovani, "Celebrations of Cosmic Renewal", in Ennio Mantovani, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions, Point* 6 (1984), p. 151; Fugmann, "Salvation", pp. 281-282, 289.

Indeed, it can be counterproductive. For when the sacramental ritual is considered to be irrelevant to the person's innermost concerns, there is the risk of the spiritual schizophrenia alluded to at the outset.

It is only fair to acknowledge that CCC 1237 does refer to this part of the baptismal liturgy, noting that "Baptism signifies liberation from sin, and from its instigator the devil". But, it needs to be pointed out that the catechism makes the point, as part of its description of the baptismal rite, but not when it deals with the effects of the sacrament. Secondly, and more importantly, one notes that the baptismal exorcisms and liberation from the devil are mentioned, exclusively, in the context of sin: since the devil is the "instigator" of sin, liberation from sin means liberation from the evil power.

Now, it may well be that the sacrament of baptism does not lend itself to addressing the Melanesian need of liberation from the perceived threat from the spirit world. It would appear, however, that, not only does baptism so lend itself: but this aspect of baptism is, in fact, to be found in Christian tradition.

In other words, the CCC summary of the effects of baptism is not a complete traditional list. For it seems clear that, from earliest times, baptism was also seen as a participation in Christ's victory over the spirits and powers.

Though the relevant theological literature does not do it justice, there is considerable evidence for this dimension of baptism. It is reflected in the baptismal liturgy, not only in the renunciation of Satan, but also in the exorcism(s), which were part of the ritual. Furthermore, there is a solid New Testament basis for this particular emphasis. Some of the evidence has been examined elsewhere.[25] For our present purposes, however, it may be more pertinent to confine ourselves to a single example, namely the letter to the Colossians.

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[25] J. Downey and E. Perdu, "Witchcraft, Baptism, and the Role of Theology", in S. O. Abogunrin, G. L. Lasebikan, and C. O. Oshun, eds, *Christian Presence and West African Response Through the Years*, Ibadan: WAATI, 1984, pp. 130-152; J. Downey, "1 Cor 15:29 and the Theology of Baptism", in *Euntes Docete* 38 (1985), pp. 23-35.

There is wide agreement among NT scholars that the letter to the Colossians was written to address a problem in the local church, which is generally identified as the Colossian error.

The error in question is concerned with what are variously called the elemental spirits of the universe (2:20), angels (2:18), rulers and authorities (2:10, 15). It is not easy to determine the precise nature of these beings. But, it is clear that they occupied a position somewhere between God and humanity. They are "in-between powers".[26] They were thought of as containing, in some way, the fullness of the Godhead (cf. 1:19; 2:9), and had part in creation (cf. 1:15-17). They exercised some authority over the earth, and human destiny was in their hands.

The result was that human beings had to establish the correct relationship with them, which the Colossians thought to achieve by the "worship of angels" (2:18), the observance of festivals, new moons, and sabbaths (2:16), and certain forms of asceticism, in the matter of food, and drink, and, possibly, celibacy (2:16, 21). For the rest, one can only speculate, but it is probable that they hoped to gain a form of esoteric knowledge, by which the initiate could control the elemental spirits.

It needs to be noted that the error, which the author wishes to correct, did not involve a denial of Christ, or of the Christian faith. Rather, it was some form of syncretism, in which belief in Christ was combined with belief in, and worship of, the powers.

How the Colossians rationalised this position is another question, which is of only relative importance, and need not concern us. More importantly, are the reasons, which made such a rationalisation necessary. One answer, which is consistent with the evidence of the text, is summed up by Lohse: "For the forgiveness of sins, conferred in baptism, did not seem to provide adequate security against the cosmic principalities and powers of fate."[27]

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[26] D. Greenlee, "Territorial Spirits Reconsidered", in *Missiology* 22 (1994), p. 510.
[27] F. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1971, p. 130.

If this is the case, the syncretism, which was the Colossian error, consisted not in their relying on baptism for the forgiveness of sin, but in having resort to "the worship of angels" (2:18) to maintain a right relationship with the elemental powers.

The letter to the Colossians represents a response to this syncretism. This response is of interest, not only because of what it says, but also because of what it does not say. Nowhere in the letter does the author deny the existence of the powers, in which the Colossians placed so much store. On the contrary, the reality of these powers seems to be taken for granted by the author, throughout his response. To this extent, one could conclude that he shared the beliefs of his flock.

What he did not share, however, was the means used by the Colossians to cope with the threat from the powers. The burden of the author's message is that Christ has been victorious over these powers. He visualises Christ as having subjugated them, and as having celebrated His victory with a triumphal procession, in which He leads them captive behind him (2:15). This, however, is not a purely personal victory. It is one, in which the Christian participates. He is, thereby, freed from the oppressive influence, which the powers had hitherto exercised over him. Consequently, those other means, which the Colossian Christian had used to ensure his liberation, become a superfluous anomaly (2:15-19).

More specifically, this participation in Christ's victory comes about through baptism. While there are numerous baptismal allusions in Col 1, this point is most explicitly made in 2:12-15. Baptism is typically defined as a new life in Christ, and the forgiveness of sin (2:12-13). This is brought about, first of all, by the cancellation of the bond, which "stood against us" (2:14), and, secondly, by the subjugation of the powers (2:15). The point is summed up with what looks like a baptismal formula: "with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe" (2:20).

It is revealing to compare 2:12-15 with another Pauline baptismal text, Rom 6:2-10. Both Romans and Colossians make the same basic point: the Christian shares in Christ's victory through baptism. But there is also a difference: it is only Colossians, which mentions victory over the powers in

this context. The explanation is self-evident: the question of the powers was a Colossian, but not a Roman, problem. What is of interest, however, is that the Colossian problem has become the catalyst, which was instrumental in adding a new dimension to the Pauline theology of baptism.

This development of doctrine takes place, because the author, as has been already noted, accepts, and possibly shares, the Colossian belief in the "in-between spirits". To have recourse to the more-technical terminology employed earlier, the author accepts the worldview of the Colossians, but brings it face to face with the Christian message. The encounter has been a creative one, in that, from the incarnation of the message, a theology of baptism emerges, which, though consistent with the traditional theology, has now a new dimension.

It is of considerable interest that not all commentators agree that Paul accepted the worldview of the Colossians. One author, ironically writing on a missiological rather than a biblical topic, considers that the "in-between spirits" "are not recognised ontologically".[28] This looks very much like special pleading. For one thing, the text does not lend itself to this conclusion. Furthermore, it appears as if the author is reading his own thinking (i.e., worldview) into the author of Colossians, who conveniently believes in Satan and demons, but not in territorial spirits. The author of Colossians begins to look suspiciously like a 20th-century Western conservative Christian. This is tantamount – to return to the more technical terminology – to the substitution of one worldview for another. One can be grateful that the author of Colossians was more creative.

Conclusion
Colossians has been dealt with at some length. This is partly because it represents part of the New Testament basis for a dimension of baptism, which is relevant to the present discussion. But it also serves as an example of how, from the earliest times, Christian tradition has adapted itself, in a creative way, to a new cultural context.

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[28] Greenlee, "Territorial Spirits Reconsidered", p. 510.

The point, in any case, is that one element of the baptismal ritual and theology, namely the biocosmic dimension, has, over the centuries, fallen from service. There is nothing unusual or reprehensible about this. In a society, such as that described by Bultmann, whose worldview finds no place for the existence of spiritual beings, either of good or evil, such a development is perfectly natural. Indeed, it reflects a positive encounter between that particular worldview and Christian belief.

By the same token, however, other cultures will need a different emphasis. A culture, for whom the existence, and power for good or ill, of spirit beings is a vivid reality, seeks reassurance, in the face of these realities. Traditionally, such reassurance was found in ways, which were often too easily discussed as "superstitious". The validity of the search needs to be recognised, in a creative meeting with the Christian faith. This may result in a new development, though, in the present instance, there is a solution to hand, which involves the rehabilitation of a traditional Christian doctrine.

But, whether it is the rehabilitation of traditional teaching, or the development of new insights, the crucial point is that a particular need is being addressed.

This suggestion may, or may not, be correct. It is merely meant to serve as a paradigm for what should emerge from the creative encounter of a particular culture with the Christian message. As with any encounter, the results will be less than clinical, the edges will be frayed. It may be that some of the missionaries were correct in detecting "heterodox" practices. But they were wrong to take the clinical solution. Any attempt at contextualisation should be reconciled to a process of trial and error, with some wrong turnings on the way. What is important is that the process has begun, and remains a living reality.

It should come as no surprise that the challenge may be painful. That is the occupational hazard of any form of growth. But, then, the paschal mystery was also a journey in pain. What is important is that the pain should not be a pretext for inactivity, or for the simple solutions, either of cultural imperialism, or romanticism.

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