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REPORT ON MATS 2019: NATURAL THEOLOGY

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The Melanesian Association of Theological Schools Conference is held annually by its member theological institutions. In 2018, the conference was hosted by Pacific Adventist University, Port Moresby, and the theme was “Inter-Faith and Ecumenical Dialogue in Melanesia.” In 2019, the conference was hosted by Christian Leaders' Training College, Banz, and the theme was “Natural Theology.”

According to the website introducing the Gifford Lectures on natural theology (www.giffordlectures.org/overview/natural-theology), this branch of theology is generally described as the endeavour to attain understanding of God and God's relationship with the universe by way of human reason. Traditionally, it was a form of theological discourse that attempted to prove the existence of God and divine purposes through observation of nature and the use of human reason. It is a part of a theology that does not depend on revelation. To the extent that revealed theology, which presupposes that God and divine purposes are not open to human understanding, is engaged at all by natural theology it is to address the issue of the possibility that revealed theology can be reconciled with reason. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, attempts were made to establish a natural religion, by which people might respond to harsh charges and actions against doubters of revealed religion. The classic work arguing for a rational derivation of divine purpose is William Paley's *Natural Theology*,¹ but the rational arguments for the existence of divine reason at work in the world can be found as early as the writings of Plato (c. 427–347 BC).

The theological institutions that participated in this year's conference were: Catholic Theological Institute (CTI); Pacific Adventist University (PAU); Christian Leaders' Training College (CLTC); Martin Luther Seminary (MLS); Lutheran Highlands Seminary (LHS); Sonoma Adventist College; Good Shepherd Seminary; and other individuals and observers from

¹ William Paley, *Natural Theology or, Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* (London: R. Faulder, 1802).

non-member colleges within Jiwaka and Western Highlands Provinces. Two member colleges—Rarongo Theological College and Newton College—could not make it to the conference because of financial constraints.

Our keynote speaker, Associate Professor John Flett, delivered three lectures during the conference. He raised a question in his first lecture: “What is the problem for which natural theology seems a solution?” In asking the question he noted that natural theology invites the question of contextualization and of the significance of pre-Christian custom, religion, and culture for the faith. However, the problem Flett identified, which drives the interest in natural theology, in other words, is the experience of Christianity as a foreign “white man’s” religion. Reference to natural theology can be seen as a way of recovering a local culture and custom. However, Flett cautioned, natural theology, as it has been practised, depends upon the idea of a universal knowledge of God that is not informed by culture. As a result, local culture adds nothing of material importance to our understanding of the gospel.

In his second lecture, Flett illustrated this problem with reference to the famous debate on natural theology between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner during the middle part of the twentieth century, and the interaction between the Nazi project and the German missiological approach in the early years of the twentieth century. This included some details of the work of German missionaries in Papua New Guinea during that period. They saw their task as identifying the “primordial ties” that God had left in creation as a permanent witness. This approach was important in the preservation of local cultures but was accompanied by a strong sense of the superiority of European culture. In short, this approach to natural theology proved to be a form of cultural imperialism.

With these concerns regarding the project of natural theology, Flett’s third lecture returned to the key concern within world Christianity that the entrance of the faith to Melanesia included also the erasure of cultural memories, the destabilisation of social institutions, customs, and laws, and the resulting disconnect between being Christian and being who we are as children of this place. His response was to argue that a theological account of the validity of each local cultural heritage requires first a revised theology of history. The beginning point, Flett argued, lies in the resurrection, for the resurrection is a story of God redeeming the past, the dead. Using the metaphor of the rhizome plant, Flett concluded that this opens our cultural

heritages to the gospel, because God acts to save. God called us—God calls us as we are—and no people exist without a history. God recognises our histories and saves also those histories. This includes the salvation of our ancestors because we are not who we are without our ancestors. And because it is God who acts, the identity of the community of God is never static. Identity in the Spirit is the following of Jesus Christ into the world and so the encounter of ever new histories in him. Christian identity cannot be possessed, it is an identity directed to reconciliation of the world. It means both a valuing of contexts as the location of God's acting and our own embodiment, and a moving beyond our own contexts in the mutuality of becoming the people of God.

Space does not permit a fuller account of Flett's important argument, but his lectures will be published across the next two issues of *Melanesian Journal of Theology*.

After each day's keynote lecture from Dr. Flett, a variety of papers was presented by the conference participants. The first group of participants—Joseph Vnuk (CTI), Brandon Zimmerman (CTI), Modest Eligi Sangia (CTI), and Paul A. McGavin (Catholic Institute of Sydney)—presented philosophical and theological insights into the theme of the conference.

Vnuk's paper argued the importance of natural theology's ability to help us understand the biblical teaching on predestination. He reasoned that the biblical doctrine of predestination easily can give rise to ideas that are certainly not biblical, either because they depict the merciful God choosing to create people whom he intends to condemn to hell, or because they remove any motive for human action: why preach, or pray, or have any concern about our salvation or the salvation of others if everything has already been decided by God? He argued that understanding predestination requires a close examination of what it might mean to say that God knows of or wills the relationship between time and eternity, and of what it means to talk of God creating a free creature. In these areas, Vnuk believes that the Bible often presumes rather than teaches and suggests that solid natural theology can clarify these issues and provide useful distinctions, not to explain the mysterious depths of God, but to keep the imagination on the straight and narrow way, so that God's free choice to save us, which no natural theology can prove, may inspire us with the freedom of the children of God and boundless energy to work for God's glory.

Zimmerman's paper was based on a Thomistic approach to the question of a Christian doctrine of creation and how this is compatible with contemporary science. Zimmerman reasoned that Thomas Aquinas' investigation of the meaning of creation as a model can be of help in thinking about whether the Christian doctrine of creation is compatible with contemporary science. He noticed Aquinas's threefold distinction regarding how to study creation. First, there is the fact and essential meaning of creation, which is discoverable through natural theology and is a part of metaphysics, which in turn is the branch of philosophy that investigates *being*—both in general and the causes of being. The metaphysical doctrine of creation does not depend on any specific physical (scientific) explanation of the universe. Second, Scripture confirms and clarifies the fact, meaning, and details of God's creative act. Third, the question of interpreting how the world came into existence, which requires an exegesis of Genesis 1, can provide a nexus between metaphysics and the creative act of God.

Modest Eligi Sangia's presentation was based on the concept of God and the nature of humanity. Modest explained that throughout history humans have had a natural desire to know God and studying God has occupied our mind and time. Furthermore, humans alone have the capacity to inquire into God, having the rational capacity that is part of human nature. We are able to comprehend a concept of a being responsible for bringing into being all creatures and understanding the history of philosophical thinking. Modest, therefore, argued that humans are rational; and using this power of reason alone, humans are capable of attaining the knowledge of the existence of God, as the creator of the universe. Yet, without revelation, human beings cannot know the nature and the will of God. Hence, though humanity is capable of knowing the existence of God as the creator of the universe, revelation is important to begin to understand God's will and nature. Natural reason and revelation complement each other in our knowledge of God.

Fr. McGavin discussed natural theology and Christian ethics with applications to Melanesia. McGavin explored natural theology methods for an inductive approach to theological ethics. Against the reasoning approach typically seen in Catholic natural theology, which is syllogistic, McGavin proposed a phenomenological manner of reasoning and focused on the ways that we may discern theological ethics using an inductive approach. He argued that this manner of "doing theology" displays a natural lawfulness in both physical and metaphysical respects—and is then aligned with the

witnesses of Scripture and tradition to show where there is congruity between what can be learnt from a phenomenological approach and the apostolic inheritance of the church. The applications highlighted the danger point where phenomenological ethics may drift into positivist philosophical method, and also where the apostolic tradition requires contextual readings of sources and discerning contextual readings of our own cultures—Melanesian in the case of the Conference context, and Australian in the case of the author’s personal culture.

The second group of participants comprised Dr Joses Imona (PAU), Dr Tim Meadowcroft (Laidlaw College), Dr Charles Dufour (Good Shepherd College), and Barrie Abel (Sonoma College). This group presented biblical and theological insights from various books of the Bible and from individual passages that reveal what the Bible teaches about the theme of the conference. Joses Imona reflected on understanding natural theology in light of Paul’s theology as seen in Romans 1–3. Paul’s writings in these chapters, have been seen as an important basis for and endorsement of natural theology, especially passages like 1:20: “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead.” (KJV) Imona suggested that Melanesian theologians can relate to such important theological subjects.

Tim Meadowcroft reasoned that Psalm 19 can be seen as an apology for “natural theology interpreted.” Meadowcroft explained that the switch in focus halfway through Psalm 19 from creation to the Torah has occasioned much debate as to the coherence of the psalm. Based on this observation, he argued that the psalm should be considered as a unity, but that its coherence lies in more than a poetic progression of thought. The coherence is also theological in that it makes an important statement about the nature of God’s speaking in revelation of Godself. This speaking is heard both by observation and appreciation of God’s creation and by reading and considering the words of God in the Torah.

Charles Dufour looked at a demonstration of phenomenological methodology in the study of God’s forgiveness of sins in John 20:19–23. Dufour reasoned that one of the significant issues in natural theology is the belief that God’s revelation can be gained through creation, human reason, and experiences. This would imply that theological research can draw from social science methodologies that focus on observation of people’s

experiences. Therefore, Dufour asserted that phenomenology can be used to understand God's forgiveness of sins in John 20:19–23.

Barrie Abel presented a paper on God, the natural world, and Jonah's freewill. Abel made a narrative analysis of the Book of Jonah to reveal the prophet Jonah's misconceptions about the God who called him to Nineveh. He discussed whether the notion that the natural world is God's language for reaching humans is true, as presented in the Book of Jonah.

In keeping with the guidelines of the Conference, a third group of participants presented general biblical and theological papers not directly associated with the theme. These presenters were: Rev Dr William K. Longgar (CLTC); Jacklyn Nembai; Lionel Tom (CLTC); Simon Minigamba (CLTC); and Newton Ekoda (CLTC). William Longgar presented a theology of holistic development. Longgar approached the topic based on an incarnational model of development. From this standpoint, Longgar argued that development is holistic, embracing the context of the Melanesian culture and traditional spirituality that perceives nature and the environment as sacred, because nature is as gift from the ancestors to us, their progeny. He believes that the traditional understanding of the sacredness and the spiritual value of nature and the environment is affirmed by the biblical teachings that God created the whole world and everything in it (Genesis 1–2). By virtue of God creating the whole earth, he rightly owns the earth and everything in it (Ps 24:1). This in itself becomes the basis for theologizing, that is, the construction of a development theology that may correct a lop-sided notion and practice of development in Papua New Guinea.

Jacklyn Nembai presented a paper on the "Seven Righteousness Passages" in the Gospel of Mathew. Nembai examined three interpretational positions: 1) a human response and responsibility; 2) God's gift; and 3) both a human response and responsibility and God's gift. She argued that righteousness in Matthew is not exclusively either a "demand" or a "gift." Rather, it is a human responsibility in that a human response is required to God's initiative and salvific activity.

Lionel Tom examined Acts 17:22–23 and especially verse 23. Tom concluded that the ascription to an unknown god was not possibly ascribed to the God of the Bible. He believes that, therefore, it may be erroneous to use this passage to claim that the unnamed gods or supreme beings in Melanesia may be ascribed to the God of the Bible. Simon Minigamba

explored Jesus' teaching in John 17: 1–17 and reasoned that abiding in Christ is important for spiritual growth and maturity.

Newton Ekoda considered the matter of premarital sex among the young people in the Anglican Church of Papua New Guinea. He reasoned that a lack of sound biblical teaching, lack of open sex education for young people within the church, and openness in home about the topic of sex before marriage is fuelling the problem of young people turning to sex education elsewhere, and that leads to premarital sex among the young people.

Aside from other theological and biblical papers presented at the conference, there was a general feeling that both natural theology and revealed theology complement each other. But the understanding of the nature of the complementarity may differ based on various theological convictions represented in the conference. Because of diversity within our ecumenical community, this year's conference suggested that the theme for next conference be "Theology and Social Issues." This was endorsed by the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools Annual General Meeting. Rarongo Theological College generously offered to host the next MATS conference in July 2020.

On the second day of the conference, the annual meeting elected a new MATS executive: Maxon Mani (President); Joses Imona (Vice President); Brandon Zimmerman (Secretary/Treasurer); Jenny Tobul, Barrie Abel, and Peter Gigmai (Members at Large); and Newton Ekoda (Student Representative).

At the AGM the editor of *Melanesian Journal of Theology* reported that the 2018 issue will appear in July 2019. He also said that there are enough submissions such that the 2019 double issue will also appear by the end of the year. The plan is to return to semi-annual publication in 2020. He wishes to explore EBSCO providing access to MJT. He has visited five member schools this year and is thankful for hospitality of Rarongo, Sonoma, CTI, PAU, and CLTC.