Epilogue

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It is always of value to know what participants to colloquiums of this kind take with them at the end. How they reflect and make sense of the theoretical arguments, themes and/or stories shared with them. In this epilogue we offer in particular the reflections of Fr Andrew Murray of Australia and Msgr Etuale Lealofi of American Samoa. These reflections share some points of similarity and difference between participant perspectives. Both are personal testimonies to the potential for positive dialogue among people of different cultures and religions.

They highlight how if the conditions for creating open dialogue are achieved, the ability to address fears and misconceptions can be more realistic. It is not possible to address something one does not know anything of.

In writing his post-colloquium reflections, Fr. Andrew puts himself in a somewhat vulnerable position. He engages in what Paul Ojibway describes as “the way of peace”, to reconcile through open and sensitive admission the shortcomings of his own cultural history with his aboriginal brothers and sisters. In so doing, he opens himself up not only to negative criticism, but more importantly to the creation of a real and genuine human spirit and indigenous dialogue – a dialogue that shares equally in the reconciliation of pain and the celebration of growth and progress.

Such a spirit is sorely needed among those who share a national identity, but have historically, politically and emotionally lived apart. The fact that Andrew Murray felt compelled to write this epilogue statement is evidence enough of the power of intercultural, interreligious dialogues of this kind. As editors we have titled Fr. Andrew’s reflections: ‘Reconciling misconceptions’. Fr. Andrew was one of the colloquium presenters.

Reconciling misconceptions

I wish now to add a thought that was not in the original paper. It could not have been there because it is something that I have learnt through the days of this conference.

[258] I am an Australian of European descent. That means that I belong to the New World, a world with a beginning but with no precedents. It is imagined to have begun afresh in new empty lands without human tradition. Therefore, the Christian religion which I grew up with was uncomplicated by prior religions of the land, unlike those countries here in the Pacific, which we called ‘missionary’. In my youth and even during the time when I first studied theology, I assumed both that this was a normal situation and that the religion we practiced was, therefore, pure. My first assumption was destroyed when I went to Europe two decades ago and learnt that even there and in Rome itself, Christian shrines are built on top of ancient pagan temples and that the memories remain. My second assumption has been destroyed here in this Colloquium.

I would like, therefore, to recognise the presence in this colloquium of my Aboriginal sister and to acknowledge that the Australian nation and the Australian church will not become mature until we are able to make our own the understandings and meanings of the land achieved by Aboriginal peoples through tens of thousands of years and, indeed, until we take on as our own the pain that they have suffered through the dislocation that we brought.
Some old questions revisited

The story of how Saul, the Benjaminite, became the first king of Judah is documented in the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures (1 Sam. 9). The story begins with Saul being sent by his father to look for the family’s missing donkeys. The donkeys apparently returned home on their own, but we are told that when Saul eventually returned home, he was already a king. A certain man of God by the name of Samuel cut across the path of the donkey-searching Saul and anointed him king (1 Sam. 10). Some people may use this story to make fun of the kingship, especially in Israel, but I am reminded of it when I was asked by my bishop, J.Quinn Weitzel of Samoa – Pago Pago, to represent him in Samoa at a colloquium with a tongue-twisting mouth-full-of-a-title. Besides its tongue-twisting title, the date when, and the place where it was to be held, I had not the faintest idea of what, the why, and the wherefore of said colloquium. But out of obedience to the bishop, I went – reluctantly, I may add.

If I am now to describe my unspoken but very real attitude at the time, I would probably say I was cynical: “yeah, another one of those meetings that blows much hot air and goes nowhere”. After the three days of pressure cooker activities and a whole wealth of information not to mention the warmth of fraternization, I returned home all enthused, having forgotten all about the few days rest to which I was so looking forward during those three days I attended the colloquium.

The colloquium reawakened in me a couple of questions that used to nag at me when I was a young priest in the early 70s: (1) Is the indigenous religion of Samoa, which the Christian missioners were supposed to have stamped out, really dead; or is it still alive under the guise of Christianity? (2) At a time when feelings of nationalism were surging all over the world in reaction against colonialism, would the Pacific be affected; and if so, would Christianity be identified as part of that colonialism and thus be rejected along with everything else associated with colonialism?

The first question resurfaced especially during the presentation of the Rev. Professor Godfrey Igwebuike Onah of the Pontifical Urbaniana University, where he graphically and vividly described the traditional African belief regarding the spirit world in a hierarchy of a Supreme God, the divinities, the spirits and the ancestors. When he mentioned that many cultural groups in Africa had no cult of the Supreme God, although all acts of worship were directed to the Supreme God, but indirectly through the divinities, the good spirits, and the ancestors, [260] it reminded me of what I believed to have been the way the Samoans dealt with their gods. While Tagaloa was acknowledged to be the Supreme God, in practice, it was the lesser spirits – the gods of the various daily activities (house-building, boat-building, fishing, bush cutting) - and their tapus (taboos) that the

Fr. Andrew Murray SM
Australia

Etuale Lealofi presents us with the final word in this text. Like Andrew Murray’s statement, Etuale Lealofi provides us with insight into his perceptions of the colloquium and its profound impact on him by its end. He too implicitly argues for its potential to actively explore methodological and pedagogical tools for developing and/or engaging wide, deep and open interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Msgr Etuale tells of his reactions to the colloquium with more than a little twist of Samoan wit and religious bias. But he raises an important point on the oft-quoted juxtapositioning of “old faiths” in a “new world”. His title: “Some old questions revisited”, speaks to this. The reawakening of old questions raised during his early priesthood about the relationship between indigenous and Christian religions, between nationalist and religious beliefs, echoes the thoughts and struggles of many who work and write in this area. Some of whom were able to participate in this colloquium.

While both Msgr Etuale and Fr Andrew are Catholic priests, their sentiments come from different sides of the indigenous/non-indigenous camp, so to speak. Notwithstanding their Catholic backgrounds, the above statement by Fr. Andrew Murray and the reflections of Msgr Etuale Lealofi below, express the sentiments of gratitude held by many of us who attended and actively participated in this colloquium, for the intellectual and spiritual insights gained and the warm fraternity experienced. These are, some might say, the necessary ingredients towards moving beyond cultural and religious differences that engender violence, towards achieving peace and good governance for all in the Pacific and the world.

[259] So to end this colloquium book it seems most apt to leave readers with the insights and words of Msgr Etuale Lealofi, who as an ‘indigene’ of our colloquium host communities (Samoan and Catholic), has this to say:

Some old questions revisited

The story of how Saul, the Benjaminite, became the first king of Judah is documented in the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures (1 Sam. 9). The story begins with Saul being sent by his father to look for the family’s missing donkeys. The donkeys apparently returned home on their own, but we are told that when Saul eventually returned home, he was already a king. A certain man of God by the name of Samuel cut across the path of the donkey-searching Saul and anointed him king (1 Sam. 10). Some people may use this story to make fun of the kingship, especially in Israel, but I am reminded of it when I was asked by my bishop, J.Quinn Weitzel of Samoa – Pago Pago, to represent him in Samoa at a colloquium with a tongue-twisting mouth-full-of-a-title. Besides its tongue-twisting title, the date when, and the place where it was to be held, I had not the faintest idea of what, the why, and the wherefore of said colloquium. But out of obedience to the bishop, I went – reluctantly, I may add.

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Samoans had to deal with in their daily lives.

The popular beliefs of those Christian traditions which honour the angels and the saints – and this was my immediate cause of concern in those days of yesteryears as a young Catholic priest – fit in well with the set up of the Samoan view of the spirit world. There is the Trinitarian God, the Creator-Redeemer-Sanctifier, who is supreme over all. But this Holy Transcendent God is in His heaven; the immediate contacts despite the incarnation, is popularly viewed as the angels and the saints. These are the spiritual messengers and ministers who do God’s Will; they warn, guide, and protect human beings. That’s how it seems to be with the Catholic tradition, especially among the adherents of some popular devotions.

If this is so with the Catholic tradition, how about the adherents of the reformed churches? I believe, the angels, the pastors and all those connected with God’s work in a special way are considered as immediate intercessors, which accounts for the great respect and high regard in which the pastors and servants of God are held in society.

This apparent switch is fine and may go unnoticed when conditions are normal. There are critical times, however, when the subconscious seems to break out into the open. The critical moments are when there are unexplained causes for illnesses or for extraordinary happenings in life. In the traditional religion of Samoa, there was the Faataulaitu, (dealer with the spirits) the medicine man who can give an explanation and prescribe a remedy for illnesses and make known the causes for extraordinary happenings. There is no equivalent of the Faataulaitu in Christianity. So even the most (apparently) Christian of our Christians would seek out in times of crises, the so-called fofo (massage), which is more than a massage, or faipele (card dealer/fortune teller). It is these practices, which are still rampant today that originally raised for me the question regarding the state of the indigenous religion in Samoa.

It was January 1, 1962, that Samoa became the first island nation of the Pacific to gain its legal status as an independent state. Shortly thereafter, many other island nations of the Pacific gained the same civic status. At the same time many African and mid-Eastern countries were either fighting for their independence through nationalistic movements or were trying to rid themselves of the remnants of colonialism, including a violent movement against some institutions and people associated with colonial powers. That situation raised the question in my mind: If Christianity was to be associated with colonialism in those places where colonialism was being thrown out, and if the same spirit was to affect [261] the Pacific with so many of its islands trying to become independent, what would happen to Christianity? My simplistic proposed solution to this latter question at the time was inculturation, and a wrong notion of inculturation at that: give Christianity a dress the nationalists can identify with and all will be well.

These two questions may seem unrelated, but in listening to the presentations at the colloquium, they resurfaced as two facets of the same question, namely, if the indigenous religion of Samoa is still alive under a Christian guise, would it not be better to face that reality and see where in the indigenous religion we can find the seeds of the Christian Gospel, and how they are expressed in cultural terms; then consciously bring those into integration with the Christian message in the process of inculturation (not just dressing up, but informing one with the other). Would that not be better than suppressing it to fester in the religious unconscious, making us neither fish nor fowl in the religious sense?

Listening to all the presentations at the colloquium, I was impressed by the similarities of values and world-views from different indigenous cultures, geographically and historically diverse. I was above all impressed at the many Christian values expressed in the indigenous religions and cultures. Peace and good governance were the focal and key points of the colloquium. It was not surprising, therefore, that the peace which leads to good governance received much attention, but in dealing with peace, one can already get a feel of much of the indigenous values, both social and religious.

Peace as a personal sense of well-being arising from being in harmony with one’s surroundings – with God, with human persons, with the physical and spiritual world – is basic to understanding peace in its social and cultural context. This is akin to the Biblical notion of shalom. It is the “fullness of life” that Professor Onah was talking about from the point of view of the traditional indigenous religion and culture of
Africa. Isn’t this what the Pauline letters call “maturity in Christ” (Eph. 4:13; Col. 1:28; 4:12; Heb. 6:1; cf. 1 Cor. 3:1-3)? From this notion of peace as a personal asset, we can easily understand the other cultural social values (cf. Romans 12:6-21): [in Samoa] the libation to God or the gods at the ava ceremony, hospitality and the importance of the aiga (cf. importance of the gafa/genealogy and the faia/family ties), the consensus in decision making, the ifoga to atone for wrong-doing, a moral life, and so on.

Perhaps the second question I raised before and my resultant fear were unfounded in the original historical context, but it may still be relevant in the way I proposed it in relation to the first question, namely, using what we as Samoans have inherited and which may still be part of our motivational lives, as a positive contribution to the planting of the Gospel seed in Samoan soil, and helping to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ, is much more preferable than pretending to ignore the existence of indigenous religion (as I have proposed), and then finding it popping up in unexpected and unwanted ways in our religious lives.

I respectfully submit these thoughts as an appreciation for the colloquium I originally attended reluctantly, but by which, in the end, I was so very much nourished and enriched. I also propose herein a few thoughts that a younger and more energetic scholar may take forward in a research which can either affirm or deny my concerns with proof.

Msgr. Etuale Lealofi
American Samoa

Soifua (Peace be with you all).