

Purgatory and the *mire* tree: an exploration of responsibilities between the living and the dead in the Amaki and Roman Catholic traditions

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Abstract

Although still official teaching, the Roman Catholic belief in purgatory has been neglected in recent years, most probably because of an unconscious and unnecessary adherence on the part of its devotees to a now abandoned medieval cosmology. Once renewed, however, this ancient doctrine could prove to be a great tool for evangelization and dialogue with the many world traditions that place great emphasis on a continuing relationship between the living and the deceased. The article begins with a brief explanation of the origin and historical development of the Christian understanding of purgatory. It then presents the Amaki traditional understanding of the origin of people, the perception of death and the interaction of the living with the dead. There then follows a comparison of some of the themes and theological concepts found in the two traditions. The article concludes with a note on possible pastoral implications.

Introduction

During a recent Religious Studies Department 'reading circle' at Divine Word University, it was noted that purgatory is seldom taught in catechetical circles in Papua New Guinea because it does not appear to make much sense with respect to the traditional metaphysical understandings of death. Further discussion revealed that it is not only purgatory, but the entire Christian conception of the afterlife that has not been assimilated by the traditional cosmovisions. In fact, it was opined, Christians in PNG often live a sort of 'schizophrenic existence', hopping back and forth between Christian and traditional cosmologies. And so, for instance, purgatory may well be preached, and even accepted during a Christian funeral ritual; but upon their return home, the bereaved assume what would appear, at first sight anyway, a contradictory apprehension of reality involving non-Christian rituals to the spirits of the dead.

The derivation and development of a belief in purgatory¹

A reading (2 Maccabees 12:38-46), often used at Catholic funeral services, remains the primary text for any teaching on purgatory. This early 2nd Century BC text tells how Judas Maccabees, the leader of the resistance to the Greek repression of Jewish customs, discovered idols under the cloaks of those soldiers who had died in battle. Together with his remaining militia, Judas prayed that the sinful deeds of the dead might be blotted out; he then took up a collection that he sent to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory sacrifice. 'In doing this,' the author of 2 Maccabees tells us, 'he acted in a very excellent and noble way, in as much as he had the resurrection of the dead in view; for if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been useless and foolish to pray for them in death' (12: 43-44).

This custom of making atonement for the dead in expectation of the resurrection, so well articulated in this passage from 2Mac, is apparently rooted in the Old Testament understanding that all things destined for God must be made perfect through sacrifice and intercession.² God cannot behold anything evil, anything impure; holy is the very name of God. Of course Jesus becomes the intercessor and sacrificial victim, the author of the letter to the Hebrews tells us, who leads the sinner to full communion with the Father (9:11ff). Still the early Christian communities, although redeemed in Christ, continued to see the need for purification in metaphorical fire if they were to meet God face to face.³ The early Church Fathers, ancient Christian liturgical texts and even the catacombs of Rome attest to the early Church practice of interceding on behalf of the deceased in purgatory.⁴ In time, of course, purgatory came to be thought of as a place where the souls of the faithful joyfully suffered the purification that readied them for the beatific vision.

This early Christian understanding of purgatory by no means contradicted the flat-earth, domed-heavens cosmology of Genesis 1. Even more importantly, medieval Christians had no trouble adapting it to Ptolemy's earth centered universe either. Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) perhaps best exemplifies this marriage of Judeo-Christian revelation with a Greco-Roman world view. The result was a perfect medieval universe. Could anyone imagine, let alone create, something more exact and beautiful than the spherical earth at the center of nine further concentric spheres of eternal, unchanging celestial bodies? Moreover, God had placed humanity, the crown jewel of creation, at the center of this universe and in the fullness of time the very Word that created it became

¹ Much of the material for this section is borrowed from Stollenwerk's "'The Inolerable Shirt of Flame'" which calls for a renewal of the catechesis of purgatory based not on a medieval, but rather a contemporary cosmology.

² Even animals for sacrifice and priests for intercession had to have perfect bodily integrity (see, for example, Lv 21:17-23 and 22: 22). Moses and Deutero-Isaiah are perhaps the two best examples of OT intercession for the sins of the people (see Ex. 32:30 ff; Is 52:12 – 53:13).

³ See, for example, 1Cor 3:14-15, 1Pt 1:7; cf Mt 12:38.

⁴ For a brief synopsis of the development of the tradition of purgatory from New Testament times until the Council of Trent see 'Purgatory' at the New Advent website. For a summary of the Catholic Church's teaching on purgatory, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* nos. 1030-1032.

incarnate thus unifying the heavens and the earth, the transcendent and the immanent, the spiritual and the material, the divine and the human.

Without formulas like $E=Mc^2$ around to baffle the medieval mind about time and place, in his *Divine Comedy* Dante could then easily imagine purgatory as a rather high island-mountain on the earth itself, the only land in the southern hemisphere, situated at the antipodes of Jerusalem. It was a place and time of purification and refinement for sure, but one of joy as well for it was ever so much closer to the uppermost divine sphere than any other place on earth. In fact, the original Garden of Eden rested atop the mountain of purgatory, as close as anyone on earth could have gotten to God before the incarnation and resurrection, but still lower than the least of those redeemed in Christ. By contrast, Lucifer, situated at the epicenter of the globe, as far as possible from the warming presence of God, created below the surface of the earth a bitterly freezing hell.

In a 21st century cosmology, of course, purgatory can be conceived of neither in terms of place nor time,⁵ nor can the metaphor of fire be taken literally. Nevertheless, it is still understood as a purifying event. It may be thought of as an instantaneous (if one can allude to time at all) realization of one's sin and incompleteness, but at the same time a comprehension of freedom from sin and gratefulness for having found one's 'heart's desire'. Or, to use a psychological/existential metaphor, one may say that sin, be it individual, social or historical, impedes growth. Christian salvation in Christ, along with everything else it may entail, must include at least some sense of liberation from these impediments to growth and so the realization of one's potential. Such a healing, purifying process of growth, however, may indeed be 'painful', but at the same time joyous. In much the same way that the sun, a symbol for wisdom in Plato's allegory of the cave, hurts the eyes of the protagonist before he can stare directly into it, so too the tradition of purgatory has always held that the journey to the so-called Christian 'beatific vision' must include a sort of 'painful but joyous' purification.

Such a view of purgatory, however, is relatively recent. It was more the understanding based upon medieval cosmology that came to dominate most teaching on purgatory in the centuries both before and after Dante. Even today one will hear echo of the bygone medieval imagination when purgatory is described as 'a place between heaven and hell'. It is no wonder, then, that Catholic missionaries in PNG had a difficult task teaching the concept of purgatory and the evangelized were not able to fully integrate it into their faith. The confusion would appear to be not so much in the truth within the doctrine, but in the cosmological assumptions surrounding it. The missionaries themselves did not believe in the medieval cosmology but did not know how to extricate it from the teaching on purgatory. And the evangelized approached the subject of death and the afterlife with a different metaphysics altogether.

⁵ See, for example, John Paul II's short catechesis on Purgatory where he states that '[t]he term [purgatory] does not indicate a place, but a condition of existence'.

This place between heaven and hell may be fine for Christianity, but it did not appear to correspond to the reality of the recently deceased in their midst.

But perhaps we're getting ahead of ourselves. In order to compare a more contemporary Christian understanding of purgatory with the traditional Amaki comprehension of death and the afterlife, it will be necessary to explore the metaphysical world of the Amaki, the origins and consummation of earthly existence⁶ as well as the Amaki conception of the interaction between the living and the dead. Thus it is to these themes that we now turn.

Origin, punishment and return in the Amaki tradition

In the beginning, the only life that existed on the surface of the earth was Wuparika – the supreme being in the Amaki hierarchy of spirituality – his brother Sapirika, and two sisters, Krimbakus and Amaiou, all of whom existed in the form of spirits as they still do today. The ancestors of the Amaki Village, on the other hand, lived beneath the earth. One day, however, a pig called Tuak made his way to the earth's surface. When it returned with grass and tree leaves on its skin the people were startled. The next time Tuak decided to go up, a man named Guaniamba followed. Exploring the earth's surface, he returned with vegetation, seeds, clay and stories about the beauty of plants, trees, sun light and many other things. The people became very excited and wanted to see the place too so Guaniamba invited a first group to follow him. Upon viewing the surface with their own eyes, they were even more excited and decided not to return to their place below ground. The 'hole' itself, the '*sumbupa*', from which they had ascended to the surface of the earth, turned into a stream and the descendents of these first people settled in the 'vicinity of the hole', in the '*sumbupa aka*' where they remain to this day in such places as Maiur/Awapo, Simingasai/Himinai and Pusikatuk/Yakawai. It was in these places that they recognized the *mire* tree as a '*haus tambaran*' or a spirit house.

Shaping the people: The original people to reach the earth's surface had long tails, long ears and long belly buttons. Using bamboo as a type of scissors, however, those who had arrived earlier helped to shape those who came later by cutting their tails, ears, and belly buttons. The remains were collected and stored in a bush dish known as a *limbum*. One day it happened that someone accidentally tipped the *limbum* spilling the blood of the human remains where upon the earth immediately began to quake.

Punishment and dispersal: In the bush surrounding the *sumbupa*, known as the home of Wuparika, Sapirika, Krimbakus and Amaiou, people were restricted from doing anything like making gardens, chopping trees, killing animals or collecting bush nuts. It happened one day, nonetheless, that a man named

⁶ There are many ideas of genesis, divine punishment, estrangement, law and final consummation in the Amaki narrative that deserve comparison with the Christian story of creation, fall and redemption as well. Nevertheless, as in this article we limit ourselves to comparing the two traditions' understanding of the responsibility of the living for the dead, such further themes must wait another study.

Kinakrok disobeyed this restriction. To clear the bush to make a garden, he cut down trees and set them on fire. Wuparika was partly burnt but he escaped by climbing to the top of a very tall *mesi* tree. The next day, when some of the people made their way to the place of desecration, they saw thousands of dead frogs left from the nearby flooded Wasmatumb river. The death of the frogs was followed by the death of these very people from every sort of skin disease. The last to die was the man who had cleared the bush, Kinakrok himself.

It was only after this punishment for disobedience, then, that the remaining people were scattered about. The Amaki settled at Wokinaber while the Suai Urubaj people inhabited Arukmangre/Sasokrok. Later these last two groups separated: The Urubaj put their roots down in Singiok, the Suai in Kokour. The Ablatak for their part settled in Numauaka, which is located at Simbanwartimera, also known as Yasetbau.

These three major groups, known as the Nukuma people, now live near the *sumbupa*, the hole where humans originally emerged from the earth. They were then followed by many other groups of people, like the Huguama, Yasi and Kowma, who realized that since others had come before them and occupied the land near the hole, they would have to settle further away. The restrictions continue: Later, when some of the Amaki people moved to Chimbrika, Puihapatuk and Tuhum, they constrained everyone from carrying out any activities such as cutting trees and clearing bush in the zone known as the home of the spirits. The spirits of Wuparika, Sapirika, Krimbakus and Amaiou would severely punish those who did not follow such restrictions, those who chose to disobey or show disrespect for the holy site. The deities may cause a natural disaster, bring sickness upon the disrespectful, or may even decide to afflict one of the family members of a transgressor with a deformation of the body.⁷

The return: Finally, it is believed that one day there will be a catastrophe such as another great quake that will open the earth. The Amaki, following the blood of the long tails, ears and bellybuttons that their ancestors left behind when they emerged from under the earth, will return to their place of origin.

⁷ To further warn people against doing anything foolish in this restricted area, the Amaki today recount tales such as the following story of Ningikuar and Wuparika: It happened that one night a man named Ningikuar went hunting. He heard a pig making noise in the dark and went closer. He then heard the noise clearer but it was coming from two different sides. The pig, in fact, had two heads. Ningikuar lifted his spear and hurled it towards the place where the noise was coming. The spear missed its mark, however, landing on the ground under the pig's belly. A thick black cloud covered the sun the next day. Many people, who had gone into the bush, rivers and gardens, came running home, each asking what had happened. Afterward the story was spread to all the people that Ningikuar had almost killed the spirit known as Wuparika.

There was another case as well of a father from a neighboring village who, strolling along a bush road near this place of the spirit, entered the bush to 'pass out his pieces'. Later his baby's head grew larger and larger like a huge balloon eventually killing the baby.

Thus do people believe that these spirits still live and expect respect from human beings. Anyone approaching this holy site must be very careful not to do anything wrong, anything that might cause the spirits to wreck havoc on the environment, destroy their lives or those of their family.

The perception of death and interaction with the living in the Amaki tradition

Such is the Amaki story of creation, fall, dispersion and return. Individual morality and fate, derived from this narrative, are really rather simple: There are two groups of people, the good and the bad. Upon death, the good are immediately welcomed into their ancestral home; the evil, on the other hand, face a few difficulties.

When the good are about to die, the ancestors prepare a place for them. The closest of all the departed family members call the moribund by name; the latter can hear them, even uttering on the death bed, 'Mom is coming to get me.' If the parents are still alive, then a deceased uncle or the grandparents will beckon. In either case, however, the ancestors take the newly deceased to the *mire* tree, signifying the *haus tambaran*, the house of the spirits, the center of the village's community and spiritual life. Every village has its own *mire* which is probably built near the home of Wuparika and his family, that is, near the *sumbupa*, the place where people originated. The recently deceased, then, are welcomed with a great feast and, in this rather large *mire* tree with plenty of extra rooms, the deceased will always find sustenance for many birds make their home on its abundant branches, and pigs come attracted by its shade. This belief is not without substantiation for upon the death of a villager, many have witnessed extraordinary activities near the tree. They have heard babies crying, singing, shouting and other sundry human sounds. Such evidence is sufficient to demonstrate to the people that the dead are living at this place of origin.

The ancestors, on the other hand, do not welcome with such graciousness those who have stolen in life, those who have murdered or cast spells upon another. The deceased family members make it clear that they do not wish to receive the spirits of those who have done wrong into the community of the *mire* tree. In effect, they reject them; they ostracize them.

And so where else can the ostracized go except back to wander among the living? They will give any one of numerous signs to their this-worldly family of their predicament: they may cause a baby to cry for no apparent reason; or they will turn into a dog or a cat or an owl. The living family members must discern the signs; they must, for example, be able to distinguish from amongst the various sounds an owl makes to know when it is not a bird call at all, but rather the deceased struggling to join the ancestors in the *mire* tree. For this is what the recently dead desire: reunion with the community of the ancestors.

Once the living have discerned the reason for the spiritual disturbance in their midst, they must take measures to help the dead enter the *haus tambaran*. Not just anybody, but only a special person, the '*yamba minigi ma*', who possesses the power through training, can help the spirit of the dead depart from the world of the living to find their everlasting resting place. The *yamba minigi ma* can perform either of the two rituals designated for this purpose. In the first, the *yamba minigi ma* chews ginger and spits on the baby, for example, who is being ill-treated by the evil spirit. In the second, he burns chicken feathers

allowing the incense to chase the deceased away. In either case, the symbolic actions unite with the power of the words uttered by the *yamba minigi ma* to both send the perturbed spirit away from the living and, more importantly, to assist them in entering their proper home in the afterlife.

The ceremony completes the duties of the living and reconciles the recently deceased with the ancestors. The deceased who had not been altogether good in this life are now welcomed back into the fold of the ancestral community with a large feast. They will no longer bother the baby or wail in the early hours of the evening through the voice of the owl. The ritual has accomplished its goal; harmony is established between the worlds of the living and the deceased.

Besides these rituals of assistance from the living so that the deceased may reconcile with and make their eternal home amongst the ancestors, the living and the dead continually interact in the Amaki tradition in other ways as well. When, for example, the living are in need of something unobtainable – be it something good or bad – they may seek assistance from their dead relatives. Examples of when the deceased aid the living in virtuous activities include the following: In the past, before going into tribal battle, warriors would call upon their dead relatives to accompany them, to help fight the enemies; hunters today will still seek assistance for success in their endeavors; and when a person is sick and believed to be possessed by the evil spirits, the living will ask the dead relatives to help make the sick person well.

The living may seek help from their ancestors for maleficent activities as well. They may curse another, asking their dead relatives to kill that person for having caused conflict in the community or clan. They may ask their deceased relatives to damage property or destroy the activities of the enemy. They may even request that their ancestors inflict sickness upon someone in the community.

A comparison of ritual and cosmology

Any comparison between the Christian understanding of purgatory and the Amaki understanding of the afterlife must take into consideration, among other things, beliefs in cosmologies and world views, the use of symbol and words, spiritual power and priesthood. All such considerations, of course, find their expression in ritual.

The first, most obvious, similarity is that, although the means of communication may be different, in both traditions the living are united to and continue to interact with the deceased. We have looked at a number of Amaki understandings and rituals of interaction above. Roman Catholicism has a special word for such relation between the living and the dead – the communion of the saints – and celebrates it in many forms, from daily masses in memory of the deceased, to the funeral rituals themselves, and, of course, the many and varied annual celebrations throughout the Catholic world of All Saints Day and All Souls Day on Nov. 1 and 2.

Furthermore, in both traditions the living will seek help from the dead. 'Through the intercession of...' begins many a Catholic prayer that asks the deceased to 'plead on their behalf' to the beneficence of God. Moreover, the Catholic tradition of beatification and sanctification includes the belief in the occurrence of miracles through the intercession of the dead. We have already seen that the Amaki also turn to their ancestors for assistance in this life, but we can now note two very fundamental differences. First, Catholic belief allows only for intercession: God is the source of all good; from God alone originate all miracles or blessings. Secondly, whereas the Amaki can call on their ancestors to accomplish both good and evil, Christianity seek from the dead only the good.

Perhaps the key to understanding the difference between the two traditions with regard to the assistance the dead can give the living lies in the Christian belief in the nature of divine judgment. As Ennio Mantovani points out, even in the parable of Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31), the deceased rich man is concerned with his living relatives only because, when judged, his eyes had been opened to the truth (Mantovani, p. 72). Christianity must question any belief that the dead can take revenge or payback, Mantovani continues, for it preaches not an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but rather the forgiveness and love of enemy (Mt. 5:21-23; 38-48). 'If people say they hear the voices of the dead asking for payback,' he adds, 'then it is the evil in that person who hears it, which pretends to be the voice of the dead and drives for payback and revenge. Here is the discernment of the spirits in place (1Th 5:21)' (Mantovani, p. 72). Something similar can be said of tribal war. Although it is true there is much in the Christian tradition regarding defensive/just war and even 'holy war' or crusades, still one must be extremely careful to discern any spirit of warfare, for without a doubt the New Testament favors peace over conflict. It should be noted, however, that most unwritten and written law as well as most justification for war throughout history has been based on the 'eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth' principle. Thus if Christianity's call to 'turn the other cheek' challenges the Amaki culture, it has also challenged – and has most often been ignored by – all other cultures that have had contact with Christianity as well. Nevertheless, in spite of Christian societies' failings to live up to the ideal, it does not take away from its belief that in the Christian tradition one does not seek maleficent assistance from one's dead ancestors.

But besides the assistance that the dead can give to the living, in both traditions it is incumbent upon the living to help the not-so-good to rest in peace with the ancestors as well. In the Amaki tradition, the good have no problems; the ancestors welcome them immediately into the *mire*. Traditional Catholicism teaches something similar: the martyrs and the already purified, that is, 'those who die in God's grace and friendship' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1023) will live forever in the communion of life and love with the Trinity. But it is the impure in both traditions that need a bit of help from the living. Both traditions believe, in other words, that through ritual and prayer, the malefactors are purified so as to be able to enter into some sort of spiritual, other-worldly peaceful existence.

There remains, however, the larger question of faith in the power of the ritual. In fact, it is most probably this question of the ultimate authority behind the ritual that gives rise to the largest theological – and thus pastoral – difficulties. The Judeo-Christian tradition makes it clear from the first chapter of Genesis that God is not material. There is God and there is all else. This revelation of the differentiation between God and material lies also at the heart of the disclosure of the name Yahweh to Moses (which, along with the historic intervention of Yahweh to set his people free from Egypt, forms the core of Hebrew revelation). The ecumenical council of Nicea in 325AD, within the context of the controversy over the humanity and the divinity of Christ, used the categories ‘uncreated’ and ‘created’ to help further articulate this differentiation between God and all else that exists.⁸ Thus, the Judeo-Christian tradition, in addition to insisting that there are no other gods, makes a clear distinction between God and nature; God is not creation.

As in most traditional religions, the Amaki do not make such a clear distinction between God and all else that is. The spring or the stream is often intricately united with the spirit itself. The words and burnt feathers that assist the dead to join the ancestors in the *mire* unite with the spirits to accomplish the task at hand. Thus, although it may be that neither tradition puts its faith primarily in the words or the actions of the rituals themselves, in the Amaki tradition it is not altogether clear, as it is in Christianity, if the ultimate authority behind such symbols is nature, the gods or the supreme Amaki deity Wuparika. In fact, because they have not characteristically made this clear distinction, Christianity, in the past, has often labeled traditional religions ‘pagan’. There are probably very many good reasons why the word has gone out of style today but, for comparative reasons, the concept of the distinction between God and nature remains valid.

This differentiation between the Uncreated and the created, however, still does not solve the further theological issue of the interaction of the material and the spiritual world in general, the connection between the symbol and the symbolized. Christian faith rests upon the incarnation, the belief that the transcendent did become material, the Word became flesh. Christian sacramental theology is, for the most part, based on this union. In the same way that Jesus’ miracles both pointed to and brought about the kingdom of God, so too sacraments point to and bring about that which they symbolize, be it entry into the family of Christ, forgiveness, the Eucharistic meal, etc. Besides sacraments, moreover, traditional Catholic teaching has always allowed for ‘sacramentals’ as well, that is other signs and symbols such as holy water, medals, crucifixes, palms, and even blessings themselves which can sanctify almost every event of our lives. In the case of sacramentals, then, the spiritual and material unite. In other words, Christian incarnational theology teaches

⁸ Arius, a priest from Alexandria, wishing to preserve the great revelation of Judaism that there is only one God, Yahweh (Dt 6:4), proclaimed that Jesus was the greatest of God’s creation but that ‘there was a time when he was not’. The council of Nicea responded by declaring that, although it is true that Jesus was ‘begotten of the Father’, he was ‘not made’. He is, in other words, uncreated; He is God.

that, although there is a clear and definite distinction between the material and spiritual, the symbol and the symbolized, the human and the divine, the two worlds are ultimately united as one.

It does not appear that the Amaki tradition would be opposed to such a theology of symbol that unites the other world with this one. The question arises, however, not if there can be a union of the symbol and the symbolized, but whether the distinction is also maintained. Specifically, is there anything in particular in the Amaki rituals for the dead which can or cannot be accepted in Christian practice? Certainly in Christianity, for example, blessings are not reserved to the priesthood. Anyone can bless another or the dinner that the family is about to eat.⁹ Thus, it could be argued, someone set apart by the Amaki community to bless the spirits of the deceased cannot be discounted off hand. Moreover, given the Church's definition of sacramental and its sacramental theology based on the incarnation, even the symbols and words used in the traditional Amaki ritual cannot be jettisoned forthright. In fact, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes it clear that '[t]here is scarcely any proper use of material things which cannot be thus directed toward the sanctification of men and the praise of God' (no. 1670).

The criteria for the use of sacramentals, then, it would appear, hinges on the 'proper use of material things'. And any investigation into such proper use of ritual symbol would thus return to the argument above, that is, to whether the ultimate power behind the symbol is anything other than God, whether the material and the divine have been differentiated and, though united, remain distinct. Only on-the-ground, pastoral attention, however, and certainly not an article on Christian and PNG traditions, can resolve such a dilemma. It should be recalled, moreover, that it is not only the newly evangelized cultures that are in danger of so called 'paganism'; historically the Catholic use of sacramentals has often crossed that fine line into what the Hebrew scriptures called idolatry. As always in the pastoral realm, knowledge and judgment must be balanced with wisdom and patience.

Finally, there appears to be at least one rather important difference between the Amaki and the Catholic tradition of the living's responsibility to assist the dead which does lie at the heart of Christianity and which could cause further concerns. It has been noted that, although there may always be further interaction, once an Amaki ritual for the dead is complete, there is no longer need of further prayers of intercession: the ancestors will have entered their eternal home; this world and the next will have been reconciled. In Catholicism, however, we note a difference. In an earlier, medieval dantescan cosmology, perhaps, one may have prayed to 'lessen the time' of the deceased in purgatory. And such a belief may have been valid before the advent of theories like those on relativity. Twenty-first century cosmology, however, will not allow for such a simple view of time (or space) after death. Nevertheless,

⁹According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 'sacramentals derive from the baptismal priesthood: every baptized person is called to be a 'blessing,' and to bless (cf. Gen 12:2; Lk 6:28; Rom 12:14; 1Pt 3:9). Hence lay people may preside at certain blessings' (no. 1669).

Catholics still pray without ceasing for the dead. When Christians 'fill up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ' on behalf of the Church (cf. Col 1:24), however, they do so not so much to lessen the number of times that the earth must rotate on its axis or revolve around the sun before the deceased may exit purgatory, as to unite themselves with Christ and the communion of saints in a timeless, trans-historical prayer for universal redemption. The great hope of Christianity in other words, is not only for the salvation of all people living and dead, but also for the redemption of all time and history, for the restoration of all things (cf. Rom 8:18ff).

This hope of universal and cosmic redemption, then, so well symbolized in the continuous, even timeless prayer for the deceased, does appear to be at odds with the Amaki understanding of the afterlife which seems to imply that once a ritual for the dead is complete, once the deceased no longer disturb the living, prayers for the dead can then cease as well. Moreover, although a final consummation of life does appear to exist in the Amaki tradition – in the end all of humanity will return to their original habitat under the earth – it is not at all clear whether this return is in some way cosmic redemption or regression, nor whether the living partake in the final act through prayer and ritual.

A pastoral way forward?

A comparison of rituals and cosmologies, therefore, reveals a number of similarities as well as differences – some perhaps quite serious – between the Amaki and Roman Catholic understanding of the interaction between the living with the dead. The question then arises: can there be a marriage between these two metaphysical constructs and the way they are acted out? On one end of the spectrum there are those that would say no, that the Amaki rituals of praying for the dead, intertwined as they are with nature, the gods and the supreme Amaki deity Wuparika, are simply not compatible with the Christian revelation of one God the creator and redeemer of all. As in the moral sphere with polygamy, there comes a time when Christianity must make a stand, must say no to a traditional practice that is simply incompatible with Christian revelation and natural law.¹⁰ So too, according to this outlook, the church must say no to Amaki rituals of prayers for the deceased.

The other extreme, of course, is syncretism, a mixing of two religious systems to create a third. The result may well be a vocabulary that sounds Christian, but the underlying theology will have more to do with the non-differentiation of the material and the divine than belief in Christian revelation and salvation.

We would suggest that neither of these approaches is satisfactory. The Christian tradition, most probably because it is founded upon the belief in the incarnation, has a long history of traveling the middle road between two apparent opposites, adopting and adapting the customs and philosophies of the

¹⁰ The Roman Catholic bishops of PNG and the Solomon Islands have done just that in their 'Statement on Polygamy', our copy of which was kindly given to the DWU library by Dr. Phil Gibbs of the Melanesian Institute in Goroka.

evangelized in vibrant dialectical fashion. The very development of the Nicene creed is perhaps the best example.¹¹ Another is the ecclesial calendar: many of the rituals surrounding Christmas, for example – including the date itself – come from pagan traditions; and the very word ‘Easter’ in English is of pagan origin as well. Liberation Theology, by way of a third example, amalgamates a Marxist worldview with a Christian understanding of society, history and redemption.

The list could continue, but the point seems clear: historically Christianity has been remarkably flexible at incorporating with variations the traditions of many, many peoples. The specific question for this essay, then, becomes not simply can 21st century cosmology be synthesized into a Catholic understanding of purgatory and the communion of saints, but more specifically, can Amaki traditions of prayers for the dead be adopted and adapted to Christian revelation?¹²

The discussion becomes even more complex when one looks at the state of catechesis on purgatory today which normally follows one of three paths. First, it would appear, catechists and theologians often avoid any mention of purgatory whatsoever so as to not appear to have been brought up in those unenlightened years before the Second Vatican Council. Secondly, if it is taught, purgatory is often unconsciously wed to a medieval cosmology as has been noted in such expressions as ‘purgatory is between heaven and hell’ or that the deceased ‘spend time’ in purgatory before moving onto the beatific vision. Finally, some will try to extricate it from medieval cosmology, but in so doing reduce purgatory to a metaphor for life. None of these ways is ideal. The first is insufficient not only because it avoids the further question, refuses to think and learn, but also because it rejects what could be a very useful tool for evangelization; it ignores common ground between the evangelizing and the evangelized. The second and third at least keep the tradition alive, but in one way or another remain incomplete. Thus, in order for the Catholic Church to dialogue and more effectively evangelize cultures that have some very strong views on the ties and responsibilities between the living and the dead, we are suggesting a fourth approach: To revive an interest in purgatory beginning with a discussion and better understanding of the tradition in relation to a 21st century cosmology. Then, using this better understanding, commence dialogue with other cultures on their understanding of the interaction between the living and the dead.

Such a dialogue with the rituals of a culture such as the Amaki, however, can only occur through pastoral practice and observation; time, experimentation and patience. As the old adage goes, *lex orandi, lex credendi*, the law of praying is the law of believing. In other words, belief follows liturgy, creed

¹¹ See, for example, the dialectical movement between Judeo-Christian and Greek thought as outlined in Lonergan’s *The Way to Nicea*.

¹² A similar question could be posed with respect to other beliefs and rituals. Can traditional rites of, say, initiation, marriage and reconciliation be synthesized or somehow incorporated into corresponding Christian rites without compromising Christian revelation?

follows practice, faith follows prayer. Is there a way, then, to 'Christianize' Amaki rituals for the dead? Is there a manner, for example, of adopting and adapting the Amaki 'sacramentals' in such a fashion that they point to a Christian understanding of continuous prayer with the ancestors for the restoration of all things? If the rituals can be altered somewhat to conform with Christian revelation, then belief will follow.

The alternative to engagement and dialogue is hardly ideal. It leads either to an outright rejection of the totality of one of the two traditions, or, what appears to happen in many cases in PNG, a sort of dual faith in parallel traditions without any sort of synthesis. And so, a people end up readily accepting Christian burial rituals or even a long-established catechesis on purgatory, but then returning to their more ancient traditions when the Christian rituals and teachings 'don't work', when they receive more help, as it were, from their own cultural memory than from Christian revelation.

Such a result would appear unsatisfactory for all involved – unsatisfactory and unnecessary. For it would seem that both the Amaki and the Christian traditions would agree that the human spirit longs for union not only with God, but with those who have died before us as well. Just how that union takes place in this life is up for dialogue. The Church has been accused in the past of not listening to the people she has evangelized, of not respecting cultures. PNG traditional religions such as that of the Amaki, on the other hand, have been accused of polytheism, of not differentiating the material and the divine. Both sides are probably correct and incorrect by degrees. But the important thing now is that there does appear to be an opportunity for integration. The practice will probably be quite messy at first but certainly the two traditions have more in common than in opposition.

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