

## **Vatican II Council as An Open Gate For The Church's Mission In Postmodern Society With Some Case Studies From Flores-Indonesia**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Drawing on case studies from Flores-Indonesia, this article aims to show how the Vatican II Council in the 1960s opened a gate for the Catholic Church to a new style of mission in the postmodern world. Keeping this aim in mind, the author will start by defining what postmodern society is all about, then relate it to some basic reforms carried out by the Catholic Church at the Vatican II Council. The author will then link these definitions to a number of matters relating to the Church's pastoral mission in Indonesia, especially in Flores. The method used in this study is literature studies and direct observation on the overall development of missionary activity in Flores-Indonesia. One of the findings of this study is that the Catholic Church warmly welcomed postmodernism in a broad sense at the Vatican II Council by abandoning a number of grand narratives. The church embraced postmodernism before the council, challenging the previously long-standing adage *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the Church there is no salvation), which prioritized Church truth over all others. The church bravely opened itself up to the sparks of truth, wisdom, and morals cherished for ages by the world's diverse religions and cultures. This openness will undoubtedly bring abundant fruits for the Church's missionary work. Christian mission work is about giving the light of salvation to all people, as the author observed and experienced in Flores-Indonesia.

**Keywords:** *Modernism, postmodernism, Enlightenment, Vatican II Council, Ancestor Veneration, Black Magic, Non-medical Cause of Illness, Alternative Healings*

### **INTRODUCTION**

I wrote this article in the framework of the ASPAMER (Asia Pacific Mission, Education and Research) Conference under its main theme: "Christian Mission in the Postmodern and Post-Truth Society" held at the Widya Mandira Catholic University of Kupang on the 22<sup>nd</sup> -25<sup>th</sup> of June, 2022. The main theme is, in my opinion, very broad and very difficult to articulate. Moreover, it is suitable only for academics who study philosophy and not suitable for me, who specializes in the study of practical theologies.

With this difficulty in mind, I tried to narrow down this theme into a topic entitled "Vatican II Council as an Open Gate for the Church's Mission in Postmodern Society with Some Sample of Studies in Flores-Indonesia." With this topic, I will start with my understanding of the problem of postmodern society, then relate it to the basic

reforms carried out by the Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council. Then I will link these reforms to a number of matters relating to the Church's pastoral mission in Indonesia, especially in Flores.

I will specifically argue that the Catholic Church wisely welcomed postmodernism in a broad sense at the Second Vatican Council by abandoning a number of grand narratives. Namely, it complicated the notion expressed in the adage, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (Outside the Church there is no salvation) by bravely opening itself up to the sparks of truths, wisdoms, ethics and morals cherished for ages by world's other religions and rich cultures. Then I will present examples resulting from and at the same time as the fruits of the openness of the Catholic Church to other world religions and to the rich cultures of nations since the Second Vatican Council, which I particularly saw and experienced in my studies in Flores-Indonesia.

## **POSTMODERNISM AND VATICAN II COUNCIL**

### ***The Main Tenets of Postmodernism***

Postmodernism cannot be summarized in just a few words. It is a broad and complex philosophical issue. As a result of its broadness and complexity, there is almost no exact and no complete definition that can explain what exactly it is and consequently there may not be a single definition that everyone, especially scholars, can accept. Some of its aspects are contradictory to other aspects. Definitions given by a number of dictionaries are overlapping, as stated by Abdulazim Ali N. Elaati in his article entitled "Postmodernism Theory."

Scholars debate about the definition of the term "Postmodernism" due to the multiplicity of its concepts and its implications from one critic to another. Dictionary.com in 2016 described the term as: "a number of trends or movements in the arts and literature developing in the 1970s in reaction to or rejection of the dogma, principles, or practices of established Modernism, especially a movement in architecture and the decorative arts running counter to the practice and influence of the International Style and encouraging the use of elements from historical vernacular styles and often playful illusion, decoration, and complexity" (Dic, 2016). In Merriam-Webster, the term is defined as: "...of, relating to, or being any of various movements in reaction to Modernism that are typically characterized by a return to traditional materials and forms (as in architecture) or by ironic self-reference and absurdity (as in literature)" (web, 2016) (Abdulazim, n.d.). Craig Browne, in his article entitled "Postmodernism, Ideology and Rationality," also provides a similar definition as Abdulazim Ali N. Elaati:

*Postmodernism has regularly been understood as a mode of thought that rejected many of the central tenets of modern western rationality. Indeed, even postmodernism's proponents rarely made a strong case for it as a perspective that sought to reconsider and refine the notion of rationality. The fact that the latter position did not appear a logical outcome of*

*postmodernism's questioning of reason and rationality certainly reflected its initial oppositional stance. It equally displayed the limited self-understanding of postmodernist discourses and the deficiencies of the exemplifications of the categories they deployed, like transgression, heterogeneity, and discontinuity (Brown 2010).*

In general, postmodernism is a movement that appeared at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a challenge to modernism, which came into existence in the 18<sup>th</sup> century under the same era of industrialization, market-oriented capitalist economies, new social classes (the bourgeoisie), democracy, Enlightenment and secularization with a particular claim on the superiority of human reason or rationality (Abdulazim, n.d.). As said by Peter L. Berger, one of the ideas of secularization brought by Enlightenment was that modernization would necessarily lead to a decline of religion both in society and in the minds of individuals (Berger, 1999:2). Since religions are not reasonable to the human mind and cannot be empirically proved, modernization would, then, make religions obsolete.

Rationalism that entered the world stage imbued by Enlightenment claimed that something should be considered scientific and true when it appeals to the reason the human mind and can be empirically verified. Conversely, something that is not reasonable to the human mind and that cannot be empirically verified must be considered superstitious, untrue, and non-existent. With this reasoning, beliefs in the practices of communicating with supra-natural beings such as spirits—both world spirits and the spirits of the dead—and the practices of various forms of black magic—sorcery and witchcraft—must be classified as unreasonable and untrue. They must all be rejected and abandoned as nonsensical.

However, that is not what has happened in many parts of the world. Peter L. Berger says in his *The Secularization of the World: Resurgent Religions and World Politics* that this key idea of modernization has turned out to be wrong (Berger, 1999: 2-4). Berger further writes: “On the international religious scene, it is conservative or orthodox or traditionalist movements that are on the rise almost everywhere. These movements are precisely the ones that rejected an *argionamento*, a *modernization*, as defined by progressive intellectuals” (Berger, 1999: 6). In the USA, Berger noted the persistent rise of Evangelical Protestantism and the survival of the Amish Community (Berger, 1999: 6).

As for what the origins of the worldwide resurgence of religion are, Peter L. Berger points out one possible reason why rationalism did not overwhelm religion: “Modernity tends to undermine the taken-for-granted certainties by which people lived through most of history. This is an uncomfortable state of affairs, for many an intolerable one, and religious movements that claim to give certainty have great appeal” (Berger, 1999: 11). In my opinion, this motivates millions of people to maintain traditional religions throughout the world, especially in Asia and Africa. In my opinion, this is the very reason why religion stubbornly survives up to this day.

## **The Openness of the Vatican II Council**

As Peter L. Berger noted, although at first the Catholic Church was very suspicious and opposed to modernism with all its revolutionary content at the end of the 19th century, the 20th century marked a shift. At the beginning of the mid-20th century, precisely on the occasion of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Catholic Church wisely made peace with modernism. This was guided by the principle of *aggiornamento* which means bringing the Catholic Church up to date with the modern world (Berger, 1999: 4-5). The Catholic Church decided to adapt itself where necessary by opening itself up to modernism and the world at large, including other religions and nations' cultures.

Although this openness brought its own tensions and problems for the Western Catholic Church, for the Catholic Church in Asia and Africa this openness was welcomed with joy as an open gate for a new form of how the Church should carry out her mission in the modern world. The Catholic Church, since the Second Vatican Council, without having to mention it explicitly, abandoned one of its great narratives, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* – outside the Church there is no salvation – and recognized the good and sacred values of other religions and cultures of nations, while at the same time maintaining its faith in Jesus Christ as the only Savior for the afterlife, as solemnly stated by the Church in *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Time):

*The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in other religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women. Yet it proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (John 11:14) (Aetate, 1965: art.2).*

The recognition of the good and sacred values in other religions and the cultures of nations then became the basis for the Church to encourage its members in dialogue with people of other belief systems and cooperate with them wherever possible. Regarding this matter, *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes* stated:

*The Church, therefore, urges its sons and daughters to enter into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions with prudence and charity. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge and preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture (Aetate, 1965: art.2). ...theological investigation should be encouraged and the facts and words revealed by God, contained in sacred scripture, and explained by the fathers and magisterium of the Church, submitted to a new examination in the light of the tradition of the universal Church. In this way it will be more clearly understood by what means the faith can be explained in the terms of*

*the philosophy and wisdom of the people, and how their customs, attitudes about life and social structures can be reconciled with the standard proposed by divine revelation (Gentes, 1965: art.22).*

### **Some Fruits of the Church's Mission in Postmodern Society in Flores**

Without any doubt, the openness of the Catholic Church to other religions and to the cultures of nations since the Second Vatican Council has produced abundant fruits in the form of various efforts to inculturate the Church's liturgy and theology. Yet it must be kept in mind that it is not the purpose of this short paper to present this enormous and complex theological problem. What I want to show here is how a number of cultural aspects and religious practices of traditional societies in Asia and Africa, especially in Flores, responded to modernism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Christian believers in Flores, who historically were judged as irrational, incorrect and superstitious, finally got a fresh breath to speak their truths since the Second Vatican Council.

For this short presentation, I will particularly point out the following as samples. They are 1) the popular practice of venerating the spirits of the living dead *alias* ancestor veneration, 2) the practice of black magic, and 3) the phenomena of non-medical causes of human illness and alternative healings for human diseases by various paranormals.

#### **First, Ancestor Veneration**

Ancestor veneration, or honoring the dead, is a widespread religious practice. It still plays a significant role in the life of many Christians around the world, especially in Asia, Africa, Latin America, Melanesia, and Australia (among the Aborigines). It has been popularly practiced as a part of religion since ancient times in Rome, Egypt, Greece and by Semites, Babylonians and in powerful ancient civilizations – Aztec, Maya and Inca of Latin America. Unfortunately, before the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church looked at ancestor veneration suspiciously and even considered it a pagan religious practice: superstitious and indicative of idolatry.

With the opening up of the Church to other religions and cultures since the Vatican II Council, there has been a great deal of study on this religious practice, including the studies I made in this area (Jebadu, 2009). In short, ancestor veneration is neither superstition nor idolatry. It has at least two fundamental truths in it. First, ancestor veneration presupposes faith in life after death, which is a common belief in almost all religions; second, ancestor veneration presupposes belief in the Supreme Being or God as the origin and ultimate goal of life. If trends of ancestor veneration are carefully studied, they do not conflict with the faith of the Catholic Church. On the contrary, ancestor veneration is compatible. Therefore, it should be received into the church's heart to enrich its members' faith and worship (Jebadu, 2010).

## ***The Practice of Black Magic***

Sorcery and witchcraft are two types of black magic that are almost as old as human civilization. Black magic is practiced universally by almost all ethnic groups in the world from ancient times to modern times. The ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans practiced it (Hill, 1987:89-92; Betz, 1987:93-97; Culianu, 1987:97-101). Black magic is mentioned in the Holy Bible, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament (Zec 10:2; Is 8:19-20, 47:9-13; 2Ch 33:6; 2K 21:6,35; Nu 22:6, 23:23; Ex 7:11, 8:18; Ac 13:6-8, 19:18-19; Rev 18:23, 21:8; Ga 5:19-21 and Ro 8:38-39) and in the Koran (Al-Baqara 285-286; Al-Araf 54-56, 117-122; Al-Ahqaf 29-32; Al-Mu'minum 115-118; Al-Jinn 1-9; Al-Rahman 33-36; Al-Imran 18-19; Al Hashr 21-24).

In the 15th-18th centuries, there were attempts to suppress and eradicate the practice of black magic throughout Europe by the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church in collaboration with states of the time. In 1484 Pope Innocent III published the *Malleus Maleficarum*, which ordered the eradication of the practice of black magic throughout Europe. Between the years 1450-1750, about 100,000 people suspected of being perpetrators of black magic in Europe were tortured, burned alive and killed (Hansen, 1969:1-9; Trevor-Roper, 1969: 27-34).

Contemporary societies almost all over the African continent and Asian nations such as Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines or Papua New Guinea still practice so-called witchcraft and it remains one of the sources of social conflict, both among people living in remote villages and those living in modern cities (Zocca, 2009; Golomb, 1993; Nitibaskara, 1993; Peletz, 1993). On the occasion of the ASPAMER conference in the Philippines in April 2017 under the theme "Sorcery and Witchcraft in Asia Pacific and Christian Healing," I had to undertake a marathon of research on black magic in Flores Island, Eastern Indonesia, for a scientific research paper that would have to be presented on the occasion of this conference. This was, in fact, my first opportunity to learn in-depth about black magic. I read all available literature on the subject and conducted field research (Jebadu, 2010). To my satisfaction, I learned quite a lot about the world of black magic.

Like in other parts of Indonesia, sorcery and witchcraft in East Flores can be categorized into two types of black magic. These are universally practiced by almost every contemporary ethnic group in Flores, both in modern cities and in remote villages. Witchcraft continues to be one of the sources of social conflict in almost every village. The practice of sorcery and witchcraft is real even though it is invisible and rationally difficult to validate. It has destructive energy that causes its victims to fall ill without logical explanation. The existence of sorcery and witchcraft and their destructive forces can be detected by certain people popularly known as paranormals who are known to have a "sixth sense."

On a number of occasions, such as during the Sacrament of Confession, many sorcerers and witches revealed their practices of sorcery and witchcraft to priests

and they provided reasons for why they bewitched their victims. According to the experiences of people among whom I did my research, sickness believed to be caused by sorcery and witchcraft could be released by appealing to divine power's help. For Catholic victims, for example, they would recover from illness after being prayed over by people who are believed to be close friends of God such as priests. Recovery was particularly effective if their bodies, homes, or belongings were sprinkled with holy water.

### ***The Non-medical Causes of Human Illness and Alternative ways of Healings***

Sickness and disease are part of human life. There is not a human being who does not get sick. As for the causes of illness, there are various factors. Since modern times under the European Enlightenment of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the causes of human disease have been increasingly reduced to factors that can only be understood rationally, namely those that are empirically verifiable and therefore medically treatable.

According to the proponents of modernism brought by the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century European Enlightenment, infectious diseases are invariably caused by viruses and bacteria. There are diseases due to old age which the rationalists call degenerative disease. There are genetic diseases that grandparents pass down through the parents of the sick person. There are diseases caused by unhealthy lifestyles and unhealthy eating patterns. All of these illnesses and diseases, except genetic diseases *alias* inborn diseases, are commonly called medical diseases and can be medically treated by administering various chemical drugs or simply by changing one's lifestyle and eating patterns as well as one's diet (Fuhrman, 1995; Kulze, 2011; Fuhrman, 2013; Null, 2013).

However, what about other diseases caused by factors other than the ones previously mentioned? That is, illnesses that are not caused by viruses or by bacteria, old age, unhealthy lifestyles, unhealthy eating patterns, or genetic disorders passed down by grandparents through the parents of the sick person. Say, for example, some people claim that they are sick because witches or sorcerers bewitch them. Do we denounce this as nonsense because it may not be empirically verifiable? If we do, we become like the Europeans who have been almost one hundred percent possessed by the rationalism of the Enlightenment born in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Marwick, 1970:11). Do we still think that the destructive practices of sorcery and witchcraft are just myths or fairy tales that are not real but merely fantasy?

Based on the experiences of peoples of every generation in every part of the world since ancient times, including in contemporary societies in Flores Island with whom I have been conducting field research since 2017, the practices of sorcery and witchcraft are real even though they are beyond human understanding. They are real even though they are not comprehensible to the human mind and, needless to say, it is beyond the human capacity to fathom how this invisible destructive power works.

Even now in Flores, such diseases are commonly identified as non-medical diseases and as a result they cannot be healed medically but only through non-medical

means. When people who are sick go to the hospitals, doctors and their medical teams sometimes are unable to identify the cause of illness. Or other times medical personnel simply deny that the person concerned is sick despite clear evidence that the patient's health is failing. In such situations, people often seek healing through non-medical means. People go looking for paranormals or psychics who are believed to have some kind of the sixth sense: this to obtain special alternative healing methods and free themselves from their sufferings due to this non-medical illness. As a Catholic pastoral agent who is imbued by rationalism, should I regard the experiences of these people as nonsense and untrue simply because their actions are incomprehensible to my human mind? My answer is an emphatic no.

At St. Paul Ledalero in Flores, Indonesia, we have a 65 year old SVD brother – Br Hilarius Embu SVD. He has long been known as a kind of paranormal or psychic and is believed to have a sixth sense. He is able to detect the cause of someone's illness. Through his own way of praying to invoke divine power, he is able to detect whether someone is suffering from a medical or non-medical illness. If the person is suffering from a medical illness, then he will recommend the person go to the hospital. If the person is suffering from a non-medical illness, then there are several possible causes. They can be black magic, gas or groundwater running underneath their homes, an old grave underneath their homes, or an error in constructing their homes. For example, one cause of illness might be that the wooden beams of a home are installed upside down. Another cause of illness might be due to unhappy souls of dead or ancestral spirits who are neglected by the living, who have not conducted a ritual of reconciliation to pacify souls in the afterlife. Amazingly, for every non-medical cause of these illnesses, there is always a psychic or paranormal means of healing that is suggested by Br Hilarius Embu SVD, and almost everyone he counseled is healed from the suffering of non-medical illness (Jebadu, 2019:11).

Last but not least, at a village near my home, there is a person who has the ability to heal broken bones by non-medical means, namely by simply making an appeal to the help of the spirits of the dead and with certain herbal medicines gathered according to special instructions given by the spirits of the dead. Even patients with broken bones that cannot be treated in modern hospitals heal with traditional doctors like this one. Amazingly, these people are cured. Their broken bones slowly heal and their livelihoods are restored.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the context of the discussion on "Christian Mission in Postmodern and Post-Truth Society" brought up by ASPAMER Conference, I specifically raise three issues for discussion, namely the continuing potential role of the spirits of the dead in the frame of the practice of ancestor veneration, the ever-present problem of black magic as a real human experience, and thirdly the non-medical cause of human illness and alternative healings. In my opinion, these are three examples of

contemporary issues that are not comprehensible to the human mind according to the rationalists of the Enlightenment since the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and as a result have been denied or suppressed as false. However, these phenomena have real and lasting impact. They are experienced by various contemporary human societies even though they are beyond the human mind's capacity to rationally comprehend them.

For the Catholic Church, postmodernism in my opinion is not a setback. The Catholic Church itself wisely opened itself up to the hidden good and sacred values as well as the sparks of truth that exist in other religions and in various cultures of nations. The question now is, as trusted religious figures, how are we to accommodate multiple belief systems theologically? How are we to conduct Christian missions while acknowledging these rich human experiences, and at the same time acknowledge Christ as the supreme and only savior of the world and humankind?

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