Globalization of Christianity and contextualization of Christianity are concurrent processes. Christianity is placed on both sides. What happens if Christianity standing on the side of the local, the particular, and Christianity representing the wider world rub shoulders? What follows will be divided into two sections. First I look at the interaction between a group of local Christian congregations in their setting in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea and the wider National Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea to which they belonged. The second part of the paper pursues our lead question on a different level of observation taking a look at the transformation of traditional words of religious imagination under the impact of Christian eschatology and vice versa introduced Christianity being transformed under the impact of Melanesian religiosity. The missiological thesis is that it is this interaction which makes for the dynamics and specificity of Melanesian Christianity within a wider ecumenical framework.¹

1. Acting out Christianity Within One's Own Limited World: the Local Seeking a Place in a Global Religion

Habermas in his *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Theory of Communicative Action) suggests that regional systems, i.e. basic communities with their social and cognitive systems, are being colonized by the modern world, by the institutions and systems of knowledge which it has produced and spread over the globe. A freely flowing process of communication between the local and the global, the regional and the national level is becoming more and more difficult. Consequently, problems of legitimacy arise.²

Religion is a factor as the local and the wider world rub shoulders. Christianity seen against this background is placed on both sides. I want to

¹ An earlier draft of this contribution was published in: Th. Ahrens, *Grace and Reciprocity*. Missiological Studies. Goroka: Melanesian Institute, 2001. I should like to thank Charles Forman (Yale), Wolfgang Kempf (Göttingen) and Roger L. Lohmann (Western Oregon University) for questions which helped to further clarify some details.

share a few observations as to what themes and issues emerge as a church group in its local setting, that is in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea, interact with their overarching institutional/ecclesial frameworks, in our case the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea.

When the Lutheran misin came to establish the lotu (= Christianity), it came alongside the German colonial forces. The misin established a network of 'stations' operating within the wider framework of the colony and later the nation-state of Papua New Guinea. The misin translated its message into local languages (like Kate, Graged and others), and at the same time provided a system of symbols claiming an interpretative power capable of transcending the boundaries both of local culture and the state, integrating people into a world-wide fellowship.

The Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea eventually established a four-layer system of synodical assemblies built up from the parish level, through the regional circuits and districts, right up to the Synod operating at the National Church level and the 'Head Office' of the 'National Church' co-ordinating the interests of its regional church districts. Thus the Lutheran Church 'Head Office' with its institutions may be seen as a potentially important tool for mediating between the region and regional interests on the one side and wider ecumenical concerns on the other.

The system had its difficulties to cope with. I will highlight a few aspects only. A 'fact-finding survey' conducted on behalf of the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea during the years 1976-1978 was among other issues sparked off by a concern about relationships between the different levels of church life being cumbersome. Lay people, church elders, church workers from all quarters and all levels of church life were asked to share their views and their sense of needs. Among the findings the following emerged: Church workers working at congregational, circuit, district and national levels all agreed that a network of mutual 'help' was called for. However, the people interviewed differed widely as to what essential help from one level of church life to the other ought to be.

---

