

## **Postmodern Faith Response to Sorcery Accusations in Papua New Guinea**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this paper I discuss how a plurality of mini-narratives, logics, worldviews, and interpretive frameworks, typical of a postmodern understanding of the world contributes to the complexity of dealing with the issue of sorcery and witchcraft accusations and violence in contemporary Papua New Guinea. The standard response of missionaries has been to appeal to people's intellect, inferring that those believing in witchcraft accusations are ignorant and they should be educated based on the findings of modern science. However, such a scientific approach has had limited success. Religious faith as an interpretive framework can provide an alternative or helpful accompaniment to views based on scientific logic and causality. A pre-scientific "magical" view is one possibility, but there are more appropriate alternatives, taking post-modern developments into account, if the Church can inspire and motivate people to pursue alternative causal thinking leading to peaceful solutions to life's misfortunes. I propose that a faith response can be relevant, not as a master-narrative from a position of dominance, but in encountering truth by responding respectfully to the "multiple belonging" of narratives, logics, worldviews and interpretive frameworks typical of a post-modern approach to reality. I suggest four possible ways forward: further reflection on a theology of death, relevant Biblical studies focusing on Jesus' ministry, consideration of the magical mindset compared with the Christian mind-set in assigning cause to an event, and a realistic liberative Christian response to current-day social concerns.

**Keywords:** Postmodern, faith, Sorcery, witchcraft

### **1. INTRODUCTION: THE POST-MODERN CHALLENGE**

In the last ASPAMIR Conference at Tagaytay in 2018, I presented a paper on "Witchcraft Accusations: A Modern Missionary Challenge (Gibbs 2018). There I shared three possible responses to Witchcraft accusations: the devotee, the scientist and the sceptic. The devotee believes in the reality of God's intervention in history. The devotee holds that God is in control of everything, whether seemingly "good" or "bad" — a way of responding to the perennial problem of evil (why do bad things happen?). The scientist represents those who take an agnostic position when it comes to the "reality" of witchcraft. From a scientific perspective, evil spirits, curses and Satan are forms of superstition having more to do with emotion and psychological processes than "reality". One is dealing here with phenomena that many Westerners label as

“magic” and that Papua New Guineans often associate with occult forms of power labelled “*sanguma*”.

The sceptic may respond to claims of witchcraft saying that, “Malicious magic or witchcraft will not harm you if you don’t believe in it.” I have heard priests and pastors using this argument, but unfortunately such a response raises ontological and epistemological issues because it presumes that malicious magic or witchcraft are “real” and can possibly harm you if your faith is weak. Priests may advise Christian believers that they can protect themselves with prayer, or devotional items such as a Bible, a cross or rosary beads, or by blessings with holy water. While appealing, this course of action seems like warding off “bad” magic with “good” magic.

At that last ASPAMIR conference I argued that we missionaries can learn from all three: the devotee, the scientist and the sceptic. Scientific interpretation of religious experience has not eliminated Christian faith. We must learn from the scientist and guard against delusion, however in reality many people do believe in witchcraft and the occult with associated consequences. I noted how whether enlightened by rationalism or taking demonic power seriously, the Christian theologian must integrate both temporal and spiritual realities without promoting a dualistic worldview or some form of spiritual schizophrenia. I concluded that Christian faith can inspire people to seek alternatives to witchcraft and discover constructive and peaceful solutions to life’s tragedies.

In this conference we are asked to reflect on Christian mission in a postmodern and post-truth society. Post-modern thinkers are moving away from the monopoly of scientific knowledge as the only true and valid knowledge. They promote different kinds and forms of knowledge: scientific, aesthetic, religious, political, historical, mythical, theological etc. with their different logics. Post-modernity is opposed to metanarratives, giving more attention to mini-narratives which are local without any claim to universality, rationality, stability and absolute certainty (Yip, 2016).

The introduction of the post-modern perspective in this 2022 ASPAMIR conference provides a chance for further reflection on a missionary response to Sorcery Accusation Related Violence (SARV). It is a timely challenge since in my research and pastoral ministry in recent times I have encountered different mini-narratives, logics and diverse ways of thinking associated with the movement of peoples and the world of communication and cyberspace, resulting in people participating in different realities at the same time. One finds what has been termed “multiple belonging” (Asmara, 2014), in which people grapple with competing demands of fragments of cultures occupying the same conceptual space and contexts. Such multiplicity is part of the experience of people throughout the world today, including current-day Papua New Guinea. People concurrently hold differing worldviews or interpretive schemas, placing more emphasis on one over another depending on the circumstances.

I intend to discuss how this plurality of mini-narratives, logics, worldviews, and interpretive frameworks contributes to the complexity of dealing with the phenomenon of sorcery and witchcraft accusations and violence in contemporary Papua New Guinea.

## **2. RECAP ON SORCERY AND WITCHCRAFT**

Narratives of sorcery and witchcraft take many forms in Papua New Guinea. Some are very recent, appearing only in the past decade. In the Jiwaka province, both men and women are accused of transforming into bats and sucking people's blood. In the Enga Province a recent narrative holds that some women are *sangumas*/witches who "eat" the hearts of others. The origin of the Enga narrative reputedly comes from the actions of some women who travelled to the neighbouring Simbu province to purchase magic spells that would restrain their husbands from taking other wives. They are said to have been tricked into buying and introducing the far more harmful *sanguma* magic instead. Narratives such as these are at their most powerful at times of death, when people are gathered together in mourning, often affected by extreme grief and sometimes aided by alcohol. The question is asked who caused the death, and talk turns to identifying who might be responsible.

Such narratives influence people by setting the framework for certain behavioural responses (Forsyth & Gibbs, 2019). The sorcery narrative explains a particular event as something attributable to human agency. The regulatory force of this is to encourage identification of the individual responsible, in order for them to face justice, or to reverse the magic, or to simply stop them doing it again. Such talk can often turn into extreme violence. We have documented cases of women being burned with hot irons, buried alive, or forced to hold dead babies, demanding that they "put its heart back".

## **3. RESEARCH WITH DIFFERENT SCENARIOS FOR SORCERY ACCUSATIONS**

In order to test for different responses I developed six scenarios for consideration by focus groups with Engan students at Divine Word University. The group of three male and three female students met five times during the months of September and October 2018. I wrote the scenarios, based on actual cases I had encountered.

Scenario 1. The first scenario concerned a village situation where a young boy has been found unconscious and talk spreads that this is because a neighbouring woman has "eaten" his heart. She is a 40 year-old divorced woman who makes a successful living from selling food at the market. Talk has circulated that she is a suspected witch and some people are saying that early the next day they will arrest and burn her with heated iron rods to make her confess and to force her to put back the heart of the young boy.

Students in the focus group responded in various ways. One said he would go fetch the police for them to enforce the law against such violence. Another, taking a more

magical approach, said she would get a diviner who could reveal the truth of whether the woman had eaten the boy's heart and reveal what other witches were involved. Another, who as a Christian, considered the work of a diviner as evil said how good and evil or light and darkness are opposed and that a diviner would only cooperate with what he considered the work of Satan. Another responded with empathy: What if the unconscious boy was her relative? Surely she would want to find out more about the condition of the boy and to take him to the local hospital for examination. We see here many worldviews at play including the magico-cultural, the modern scientific and a Christian religious view – all relating to the same scenario.

The discussion turned to some of the students relating similar experiences of suspicion and accusation, one telling how, "We were feeling scared so we got the *glasman* (diviner) to prove it, and the *glasman* called the names of the other women. Later when they tortured them they actually admitted that they had removed the heart of the young lady."

Scenario 2. The second scenario involved a situation in which a boy has been killed in a car accident while the other passengers in the car escaped death. Some of the dead boy's relatives are claiming that his death was caused by witchcraft.

Again responses varied. One student said that people drive cars and not spirits and that perhaps the driver was drunk. Others presumed that the boy must have done something wrong to have been the one to die. One student offered the view that it is wrong to blame the death on witchcraft because it is God who gives life and takes it back again. Another student referred to a customary belief in the power of the spirit of angry deceased parents to cause the death of their children. Again we see arguments coming from various worldviews.

Scenario 3. The third scenario was about a young girl who returns to the house at night having seen small lights moving behind the trees at the back of the house, and she thinks that they may be spirits of dead relatives who could come back and cause others to get sick and die.

Student responses varied from the view that such lights are simply fireflies and she should not be afraid, to the view that in fact they might be spirits of the dead and that she should simply pray and go to sleep. One even suggested that she should stay indoors because they were not spirits of the dead but probably the light of torches from the girl's boyfriends. Discussion turned to the foolishness of visiting a graveyard at night where one might encounter a ghost, and the difference between spirits of dead relatives and the malicious spirit entities known as "sanguma" in Papua New Guinea.

Scenario 4. The fourth scenario was one where there were tensions in the community because of a land dispute over coffee trees and the ways the profits should be shared. A man who had spoken out strongly in the dispute has had his cousin die suddenly. The cousin was a prosperous businessman. People are planning to hire a diviner to find out who may have used "posin" (sorcery) to kill the businessman cousin?

Among the students there was immediate reference to prosperous businessmen getting fat “blowing up like balloons” and that he must have died from a life-style disease. Another referred to the customary belief that “bad thoughts” such as jealousy could become so real and powerful as to cause a person’s death.

Scenario 5. The fifth scenario was one where at a secondary school, a female student was found dead in the dormitory. Some said that it was suicide. Others said it could be caused by witchcraft. Students surmised that she may have been upset with her boyfriend being unfaithful. Others thought that it might involve satanic cult practices that have been common in PNG schools. Students reflected on their own life journey and beliefs and how formal education had provided them with a range of causes of death so that they would not immediately assume it was witchcraft or some other occult cause.

Scenario 6. The sixth and final scenario was where a baby had died and people had accused a woman of witchcraft causing the death of the baby. They have begun to torture the woman with hot iron rods demanding that she give life back to the baby and that she reveal who are the other witches in the community. Several of the students had faced similar situations, and admitted that with the strong social pressure they would simply watch because to try to stop the violence would expose one to being accused as an accomplice and subject to the same violence or worse. “We had a case and my father tried to stop them and they threatened to cut his throat. He did convince them to take the dead baby to the hospital and there the doctor said that the baby had died from worms.” The students discussed the social status of women in Enga society and the tendency for men to accuse women of being the source of anything bad. They found it very different in the University setting.

#### **4. FACTORS INVOLVED IN INTERPRETATION**

From analysis of the focus group discussion a number of factors emerge as significant in holding to a particular worldview or changing to another. Such factors include:

1. education
2. religious conversion
3. travel and change of location.
4. communication and social media.
5. personal cultural experiences (especially as children).
6. empathy
7. personal experience of being accused or having a close family member/ friend be accused.

1. Education. One student related: “I think a change of worldview happens in a moment when everything changes. For example, with the fireflies — as a child I was scared of fireflies. My family told me they were ghosts. My mind was working in a way that I caused fear in myself. When I saw fireflies I would be fearful and it was true to me at that moment. As I grew older I came to realise that it was really just fairy tales.” When asked whether she was influenced by education, she replied, “It was partly because of education, I had read some articles about how the mind works and I realised that my mind was causing fear when there was nothing to be afraid of, and I had to tell myself that and afterwards I was not fearful anymore.”
2. Religious conversion. A student responded, “I believe in *sanguma*, but I believe that good and bad are opposed, so if I am in the light, the darkness will not affect me. If I am in the light they cannot attack me. I do believe in *sanguma* spirits but they will not attack me because as a Christian I am in the light. If you are in the darkness then they will work together and you will be affected.” Another student contributed, “I was baptised in Madang in 2016. It made a big difference to me. I think now that it is the End Times and the devil is trying to confuse us.
3. Travel and wider experience. A student noted, “My worldview started to evolve when I was exposed to literature, and church. My last seven years away from the village has changed and grown my worldview. It was like in becoming a member of a church one changes one’s worldview. Just because people at home spend their time there, they still have those customary ideas and beliefs. They have grown up with those views. The environment affects the way you think and the sort of view you have. It was religion and education and social media and travel that prompted me to change my views. I have lived away from Enga now seven years”
4. Media. A student said, “As an educated person it brought me shame when I saw my country through social media, out there for others to see — this behaviour whereby they put women out into public and violate their bodies. I feel ashamed that we are not educated enough to control our society.” Another added, “People are sorry for the abused woman when they see it on social media. Because they are witnessing through the media it is not really happening and they would express grief for the woman — but if they were really physically there it would be different.”
5. Through personal cultural experiences. A student commented on an actual case she had witnessed, “Later when they tortured the women the women actually admitted that they had removed the heart of the young lady.” “If I met the woman again I would feel scared because she admitted that she had taken the heart. It is like if you see a snake in one place you will be scared every time you go to that place”. “I did not believe in *sanguma*, but after it happened in my village, I believe in it.”

6. Through empathy. A student said, “When I went to talk to her husband of the woman who was tortured and died he was speaking with tears in his eyes and I completely switched and I empathized and agreed that he was right. His whole family turned against him. He said, everyone was against his wife and I didn’t know what to say. He was forced to do things like send a farewell message for his wife before they killed her.”
7. Experience of being accused. A student admitted, “I was of two minds whether to believe in the customary view of *sanguma* or whether to take a scientific or a religious view. Then last year I was helping a woman with her job application. She had been accused of witchcraft after the death of her husband the year before. After working with her for a number of days I became seriously ill and ended up in hospital. The woman heard of this and came to visit me in hospital only to find that my brother chased her away claiming that it must be her that was bewitching me and making his brother sick. I heard about this and realised that this was a case of *sanguma* accusation and I knew very well through experience that it was not true and that she is a normal woman and not a witch. I realised that it is a total lie and I now have what I think of as a scientific viewpoint strengthened by my Christian faith.”

## 5. GRAPPLING WITH COMPETING INTERPRETATIONS

Discussion in the focus groups mentioned in the sections 3 and 4 above reveals how people grapple with competing interpretive frameworks when it comes to dealing with death and misfortune. Students would offer their opinion, but when asked how their friends and siblings at home would respond, very often they spoke of a different response. With the first scenario of a woman being accused we see the various responses as the students sought to respond in a hypothetical situation. When it came to considering actual cases and their experience, some acknowledged feeling afraid and opting for the diviner and the use of torture.

With the second scenario where a boy had died in an accident, again student explanations rely on various worldviews, from a magical-religious view to a practical observation that spirits don’t drive cars. However, when conversation turns to experience, it appears that people habitually attribute death to something evil and either it must be that the deceased did something wrong, or the wrong lay in someone who was jealous of the deceased and cursed him. The focus group members grappled with causes for the accident coming from the view that accidents are not “accidental” and that any accident demands an explanation.

In the third scenario about fireflies, one student spoke of her grandfather “who was well known as a person who would perform rituals or magic spells. He would perform a ritual and then say - that thing that is troubling you is gone now.” They had learned about such traditional healers and about the potential malicious works of spirits of the dead (ghosts). Times have changed. “People still talk about ghosts but now when

people die we would be more likely to think it was caused by witchcraft. With ghosts, they may be dead but they are still your relatives like your uncle or grandmother — *sangumas* (witches) are not.” The move from family to the demonic signals a new move from custom to a more radical magical/religious worldview (Gibbs 2020).

In the fourth scenario about the businessman cousin who died, discussion turned to the topic of “bad thoughts” where the thought of killing someone becomes real enough to actually kill. Communities can be divided over whether and how to search for causes of death. A student told of a situation at his home where after a man died, one group from his clan who were church-goers wanted to take the body to the church, but another group fought to have the body available for a diviner. After a lot of wrangling the Christians sent the diviner away, telling him he had no “evidence”. One wonders how they would respond if the diviner was able to produce some form of evidence.

In the fifth scenario with the case of a girl who died in the school dormitory, discussion turned to how students’ thinking has changed to operate from a different worldview. Several told of a disenchanting experience where they came to realise that some of the stories they had heard as children were not true. However, at least one found that the transition was in another direction. “I grew up in the town and I had a different view from the village. I heard stories of witchcraft in the village and sometimes in town settlements too. When I went to visit the village I did not think witchcraft was real and I thought they were just killing innocent people in the village. But then I had experiences of a woman in the village who people accused and I noticed how she was weird and acted strangely and I think my view started to change through the experience with that woman. It changed my view on witchcraft and I was afraid.”

In the sixth scenario there was heated discussion among the students because there had been an actual case of sorcery accusation violence in the home village of one of the students just a few weeks before. It seems that the accused woman under threats and torture had admitted to being a witch and had named a number of others, including her husband as accomplices. Students said that this only adds to the confusion in peoples’ minds. “When they admit and say they have eaten half (of the victim’s heart), then that adds to the confusion”.

All the participants were Christians, yet the Christian church comes in many forms and all in various ways reinforce belief in a magical/religious worldview, whether it be the “sacramental” rituals of mainline churches such as the Catholic church, or the discernment and delivery from evil spirits in some of the Pentecostal or revival churches. The world of the Bible is a world of miracles and spirit possession. Could it be that Christian conversion may be seen more as a change of allegiance within a similar magical-religious worldview, than as a change of worldview itself?

For many it means multiple belonging, with participation in different realities at the same time (Forsyth & Gibbs 2019b). A student commented, “Speaking of my own worldview, it is a question of which worldview? When I am living with people at home

in the village and discussing issues at home then I am there and my thoughts fit the occasion. When I am with Christians I am there. When I am with doctors I am there. So it depends on the situation where I find myself. I can agree with people at home or with Christian people or with the doctor. If I can try to impose my worldview, then I might be against the group. That slows me down to go easy and to adopt a fitting worldview.”

People today are grappling with competing interpretations which contributes to the complexity of dealing with the phenomenon of witchcraft accusation and violence. It is not simply a matter of belief because people concurrently hold beliefs based on differing worldviews, placing more emphasis on one over another depending on the circumstances. There are experiential factors such as childhood experiences, personal factors such as education level or religious upbringing, place-based factors such as the village setting, leadership factors and consequence factors such as community or family discord (Forsyth & Gibbs, 2021).

Educating people about the causes of evil and misfortune within a rational/scientific approach to causation and risk is important, but education alone using scientific knowledge is likely to be just one of a number of worldviews that may be activated in a given situation. With the relativity of different worldviews, opposition to violence may mean crowding out or providing alternatives to the views that lead to violence. Considering the various factors outlined above, education and awareness using modern scientific logic alone will often be ineffective in stopping SARV. The findings above point to the importance of employing methods that consider other factors such as childhood experiences, the influence of modern media and religious beliefs (Forsyth & Gibbs 2021).

## **6. A MISSION RESPONSE TAKING THE PLURALITY OF WORLDVIEWS INTO ACCOUNT**

Sorcery accusations and related violence have emerged as a major issue for missionaries, especially in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Some missionaries have spent considerable time and energy on countering such accusations and dealing with the victims of the ensuing violence. They have promoted and supported groups giving “awareness” to local communities. This awareness involves primarily presenting arguments based on modern science to show that sorcery is “not true” and that those who believe it are being misled by irrational and false ideas, popularly circulating. They appeal to people’s intellect, inferring that those believing in such accusations are ignorant and they should listen to the findings of modern science. The ultimate challenge in the case of suspected removal of a victim’s heart would be to subject the body to post-mortem examination by a medical doctor. Seldom has such advice been taken seriously by the intended recipients. It seems that rational arguments miss the point in the face of new and intriguing mini-narratives associated with heart-eating witches and other occult powers. A medical doctor may explain that death was caused

by cancer, but people will still ask why the deceased developed cancer in the first place, when his brother, sister or friend did not.

Sorcery and witchcraft are not the only issues affected by such dynamics. In the town of Goroka, scene of a major outbreak of the coronavirus in 2021, word circulated in nearby communities that the cause of death at Goroka hospital was not the virus but in fact *sanguma* (sorcery). Various ingenious stories surfaced in PNG during the recent Coronavirus Pandemic with a myriad of narratives (many imported from foreign media) as to the cause of the pandemic, and how and why one should or should not be vaccinated. In PNG, despite urging from the World Health Organisation, vaccine hesitancy is high and the rate for full vaccination in June 2022 remained at around 3% of the population, making it one of the lowest vaccinated populations in the world. Narratives circulating include pseudo-scientific warnings about how vaccination would alter one's DNA resulting in one becoming non-human, that those vaccinated would die within a two year period, and that there would be long-term effects as a result of the vaccine including receiving a microchip that would enable recipients to be controlled by former head of Microsoft Bill Gates through the 5G internet system.

Meetings with and talks by "modern" doctors providing scientific information has little effect. The only change at the University was when students were informed that they would not be able to get employment if they were not vaccinated and some complied for that reason. After two years 27% of the 1800 students at Divine Word University Madang campus had received at least one dose of the vaccine, the majority of students choosing not to be vaccinated. When asked why, those responding often mentioned reasons that modern scientists would likely relegate to conspiracy theories and misinformation.

Another example of varying narratives may be seen in the growth of the Seventh Day Adventist Church in PNG. Numbers of Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) followers are steadily increasing, often at the expense of mainline churches including the Catholic Church. SDA are now the second largest church group at Divine Word University in PNG. SDA followers appeal to the importance of worship on the Sabbath, food restrictions (pork), and accounts of the imminent end times and adherents frequently refer to theories about the identity of the pope (antichrist) and the errors of the Catholic Church. Proponents seem to be successful in offering alternative truths about such matters and the SDA church is becoming more influential in current PNG society. Catholic principles appear not to impress in the face of alarmist SDA interpretations of Scripture, especially the esoteric language of apocalyptic literature such as the Book of Revelation. Catholic missionary claims, based on "grand narratives" about the one true church, have only limited success in convincing a majority of the population. Missiologists might well study the comparative effectiveness of mini-narratives associated with Catholic devotional movements such as the Legion of Mary, Divine Mercy or the Charismatic movement.

Modern logic holds that something is either true or it is not, and proponents of such logic experience difficulty working with the pluralistic and fragmented world of the post-truth society. Moreover, truth claims often appear relative to the context of power as witnessed in the incredible contradictory claims about the state of the nation by political figures in the lead up to the PNG 2022 national elections. How much have we missionaries thought that we are “enlightened” and have failed to really listen to people’s experience? How are we trying to engage their emotions and intuition in our dialogue with them? We are not necessarily dealing with autonomous individuals holding enlightenment principles, but with communities dealing with globalisation and varied worldviews and interpretive frameworks, in the midst of rapid social change.

## **7. FAITH CLAIMS AS POST POSTMODERN OR PRE-SCIENTIFIC?**

Further reflection on the seeming difference between what we considered “scientific” and “magico-religious” worldviews leads to the question of whether, and how, faith issues differ from the “magical” or what is sometimes termed the “pre-scientific.” Are faith claims pre or post modern?

Consider for example the issue of death, which is the most common trigger for sorcery and witchcraft accusations in Papua New Guinea, especially when the death is sudden and unexpected. As can be seen from the six scenarios in section 3 above, questions arise about causality, not only what caused the death, but more importantly “who” caused it. South African researcher Adam Ashforth interprets such questions as coming from a widespread “spiritual insecurity” derived from “a proliferation of interpretive authorities claiming to speak the truth about fundamental forces shaping existence” (Ashforth 1998). The cases from the students in an earlier section of this paper illustrate such spiritual insecurity and varying forms of causal thinking in the way they referred to a number of causes of misfortune other than sorcery or witchcraft. These included life-style disease, worms, jealousy, bad driving, and angry spirits of deceased parents.

Ashworth notes how in a state of spiritual insecurity, for every scheme of interpretation “there is another, equally plausible and diametrically opposed way of making sense of the world.” In the post-modern setting today, Christians are challenged to respond to such ambiguity and insecurity.

The magical worldview sees a direct connection between the natural and the supernatural orders and attributes blame and responsibility to supernatural causes, one of which could be witchcraft or sorcery. Religious causal thinking is similar to the magical or pre-modern explanations in that it refers to the action of invisible forces and beings upon the world and human lives. The Catholic Church acknowledges the reality of the spirit of evil, sometimes conceived in terms of “evil spirits” and holds that the sacrament of Baptism allows those baptised to participate in Christ’s victory over spirits and powers not of God (Forsyth & Gibbs 2021). For the Christian, the first and ultimate cause is God.

I propose that religious causality can be considered in dealing with post-postmodern concerns if it goes beyond the scientific and responds to the varied narratives, logics, worldviews, and interpretive frameworks circulating today. In other words, explanations based on faith in the supernatural are not discounted as irrational or illogical, but rather valued as legitimate ways to understand reality and justify behavioural responses. In that light I suggest four possible ways forward: further reflection on a theology of death, relevant Biblical studies based on the ministry of Jesus, consideration about the magical mindset compared with the Christian mind-set in assigning cause to an event, and a realistic Christian response to current-day social concerns.

1. What does it mean to talk about a loving God when a close relative dies? Is death evil? The response to such questions depends very much on how one thinks of life. Human life is temporal and imperfect. The intentional causing of death may be evil, but physical death in itself is ultimately surrender to God, the source and promise of life. The promise of eternal life, such as found in John 10.10 is not about some heavenly ideal. It may well have direct and radical relevance to one's experience here and now in the way people live out the purpose of their lives. Faith gives a new quality to the existence of a believer in whom eternity has already begun. "Eternity touches history when it refers to the quality of a person's existence" (Gibbs 2018). Dealing sensitively and effectively with strong personal and emotional issues at the time of death is crucial for avoiding sorcery and witchcraft accusations and countering them if and when they do arise. Science can do little at the point of death, so in such a post-scientific moment Church members require support, advice and training on how best to communicate compassion together with new meaning through Christian belief in human life as a gift from God.
2. We need also to be engaged in relevant Biblical studies. The Biblical worldview appears to be pre-scientific (for example, 6 days of creation and interpretation of mental illness as what must be the very rare incidence of demon possession (Mk 5: 4-5, 15)). Despite such an apparent pre-scientific worldview, scripture can also be very relevant to the truth of Jesus Christ in a post-modern world. Albert Nolan's book *Jesus before Christianity* portrays Jesus as a man deeply involved with the real problems of His time. Even in the book's 25th anniversary edition, Nolan in the Preface writes, "The reign of Satan seems more entrenched than ever." By Satan he is referring to whatever is opposed to the kingdom of God (Mt 12, 25, Mk 3, 23-25) such as merciless avarice and oppression by the ruling classes. The point is that the Gospels present us with a picture of Jesus, still very relevant to the evils of today. Scripturally based faith responses can lead to human choices that provide vital replies to life and death issues, particularly for the poor and marginalised.

Does such a view of Satan necessarily nullify claims of the demonic? I think not, because that would be like denying the existence of evil. "Bad" things happen.

People die suddenly and accidents occur. Many people are not satisfied with the explanation that it is because of “fate” or simply an “accident.” It is natural to ask why, and witchcraft is a culturally sanctioned response to such questions. It could be that in a place like Papua New Guinea, those normally operating in the Western rational mindset need to suspend disbelief long enough to be able consider questions raised by village people, and to comprehend a different truth from what they are accustomed to.

3. We are challenged to bring theological, scriptural, cultural and psychological insights into the debate on SARV in order to aim for an optimal solution. We also need to better understand the processes through which particular types of causal reasoning are activated, and to take into account the relevant contextual circumstances for their activation.

Causal stories work to position understandings of events within the realm of the natural and/or the realm of the supernatural, and as a consequence assign blame for an event. Examples may be seen in the responses from the students earlier in this paper. In scenario 1 where a young boy was found unconscious, those taking a modern scientific (natural) interpretation recommended taking the boy to the hospital, whereas those taking a magical view called for a *glassman* (diviner) who would use customary methods of assigning the hidden cause of the problem. In scenario 4, where a businessman had died, those taking a natural interpretation considered the case as coming from the deceased’s unhealthy lifestyle, whereas those looking for a supernatural or hidden cause focused on the causal consequences of “bad thoughts” and jealousy.

It follows that causal stories can powerfully influence behavioural responses to particular events: whether a person is taken to hospital, or whether a diviner is called to identify an agent causing the issue through some form of sorcery or witchcraft. Both are common responses in PNG, with any particular causal story becoming the behavioural driving force. In reality often it is a matter of diverse worldviews co-existing with a chance for different behavioural responses in any one case.

The question arises as to what action a magical mindset suggests that a Christian mind-set does not. Assigning the cause to a distant “God” may appear as a weak argument compared to the very real accusation of another human being the agent or cause of the event. It comes down to assigning cause to misfortune, which is the issue of the “problem of evil” and how to reconcile the existence of evil and suffering with a loving God. This is an issue faced through the ages everywhere, and sorcery and witchcraft are part of the current PNG response to this perennial epistemological and theological issue.

4. The Christian community has a responsibility to respond with the love and compassion that has its origin in God. However that can be problematic with “God”

often seeming so distant and Christians needing to respond in meaningful ways. In most modern Western countries, the Church has lost significant amounts of respect as a result of revelations of sexual abuse, yet to a large extent the Church and the Christian message is still believed and relevant today in a place like Papua New Guinea. How then can Christian faith inspire people to seek alternatives to responses based on magical worldview such as witchcraft and discover constructive and peaceful solutions to life's tragedies?

In times of peace, some communities in Papua New Guinea have created their own community laws in which they agree not to accuse others of sorcery. These often draw upon the authority of the State and sources from the Christian Bible — two different worldviews. Community laws can be important sources of local authority to follow at times of stress, such as at funerals. Research suggests they are often highly effective.

Ultimately the life-giving Christian message is one of salvation. The post-postmodern image of salvation cannot be based on some meta-narrative, but on the human experience of liberation. As I noted in my earlier paper on the modern missionary challenge, "Christians have a mission to proclaim the reign of God seen in love, joy and right relations (Rom 14:17). However, in reality, Christian teaching sometimes instills fear, with accusations of depravity and threats of hellfire. Catholics might do well to heed the call of Pope Francis and actively seek out the poor and powerless, who are often the first ones to be accused of witchcraft, having few means to defend themselves" (Gibbs 2018).

## **8. CONCLUSION**

Christian faith as an interpretive framework can provide either an alternative to or a helpful accompaniment to views based on scientific logic and causality. A pre-scientific "magical" view is one possibility, but there are more appropriate alternatives in a post-modern world whereby the Church can inspire and motivate people to pursue alternative causal thinking leading to peaceful solutions to life's misfortunes. I propose that a faith response can be relevant, not as a master-narrative from a position of dominance, but in responding respectfully to the "multiple belonging" of narratives, logics, worldviews and interpretive frameworks typical of a post-modern approach to reality. I have suggested four possible ways of taking this forward so that people can experience life-giving truths: further reflection on a theology of death, relevant Biblical studies focusing on Jesus' ministry, the behavioural driving force of causal stories, and a realistic Christian response to current-day social concerns.

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