

documents, etc. In this endeavour, it is especially necessary to have an intimate knowledge of each people's language and thought patterns, so that a fruitful investigation will normally be limited to only one or a few linguistic groups.

Several monographs of this kind do exist, with the volume edited by P. Lawrence and M. J. Meggitt, *Gods, Ghosts and Men in Melanesia* (1965) easily being the best known of them all. Nowadays, fieldwork in the same vein continues, especially by students who analyze their own native cultures. The requirement for in-depth knowledge has, however, some drawbacks too, because it tends to omit the insertion of new material into the vast store of religious knowledge from other societies. Hence, there is also a need to come up with some synthetic, regionally limited overviews, based upon the field materials of many different students (Nadel 1956: 172-173).

This poses its own difficulties particularly in Melanesia, the "paradise" of many generations of anthropologists from several different schools or ideologies, some of which make religion their almost exclusive subject, while others tended to neglect it altogether. But a beginning has been made to produce a much needed synthetic study, e. g. with J. Parratt's study on *Papuan Belief and Ritual* (1976), and with some other essays as well. Although some of these attempts might seem too ambitious or too incomplete, and yield only provisional results, they have their legitimate place next to studies which excel through their painstaking and necessary detail.

It is our intention to be objective and non-apologetic in the study of one small segment of traditional Melanesian religion, that is the people's views of what they consider "god". Our main thesis is to show that in Melanesia, but especially in Papua New Guinea (PNG), several concepts of God were or are found: *dema-deiies*, culture heroes, and sky gods, along with a whole host of *masalai* and *tambaran*.

Awareness of the various ways these models relate to the people's cultural configurations in particular will warn us against instant identifications of a local deity with the biblical or Christian God. The same insight will also invite us to appreciate in traditional religion various elements of lasting value. The question will be asked whether, in good conscience, we can relegate the Melanesian gods to the category of the idols of bibli-

cal religion. Even though this essay touches both upon anthropological and biblical material, it will try not to confuse these two poles of interest.

## I. BETWEEN POLYTHEISM AND MONOTHEISM

### 1. Mosaic monotheism ?

The Bible's history starts with the persons of Abraham and Moses. The patriarch was called to leave his home country (Gen 12, 1) and the law-giver brought the Israelites to the border of the promised land. The so-called Priestly tradition (P) says that God revealed himself as Jahweh only to Moses, while before that time the Israelites knew him as El Shaddai (Gen 17, 1; Ex 6, 3).<sup>1</sup> This "theory" does not accommodate all the early passages in the Bible (some of which, as Gen 2, 4 ~ 3, 23; 4, 1-26, use the names "Jahweh," or "Jahweh Elohim").

According to some authors the various names for God reveal a mixture of cultures between the people from the East (Mesopotamia), who had Abram as their ancestor and were religiously bound to El, and tribes of the West (Midian), who followed the leadership of Moses, and venerated Jahweh. Both groups, then, eventually combined to form the one people of God, Israel.

Other exegetes are even more specific and separate in Israel the so-called Leah tribes from the Rachel tribes - thus called after the two wives of Jacob or Israel (cf M. Noth). They believe that the second group settled earlier in the holy land, but that the cult of Jahweh was introduced by the descendants of Joseph, Rachel's first-born. Whatever opinion one holds, it is sure that the Israelites knew that, racially, they were not a uniform people (cf Ex 12, 38; Num 11,4; Ez 16, 3). Such a duality of origin might be of assistance here.