

## Chapter I

### The Problem of the Cargo Cults

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#### Introduction To The Problem

The phenomenon of cargo cult movements in the region of the South Pacific known as Melanesia has captured the attention of scholars, journalists, anthropologists, missionaries and the general public since it was first observed and recorded in the mid 1800's. Many bizarre stories have surfaced from Westerners living in the region about the seemingly incoherent activity and ritualistic ceremonies performed by the native inhabitants of Melanesia. An early Western observation of a cargo cult recorded such unusual behavior that it was named "The Vailala Madness". One observer wrote, "On entering the main village of Arihava, I observed at one end, on a particularly clear space, a number of natives, approximately twenty, gesticulating and carrying out many antics which could only be likened to those of a lunatic" (F. E. Williams 1923, 11). The purpose of this behavior, it was later discovered, was to hasten the coming of a ship bringing back the spirits of the dead and large quantities of Western goods.

Essentially, cargo movements are; 1) millenary,

in the sense that they anticipate the coming of a *golden age* where sin, suffering and death have been removed and replaced with a utopian society on this earth, 2) messianic, in that the anticipated millennium will be brought about by the coming of a messiah-like figure, usually an ancestor, who is able to supernaturally rescue the people from whatever political-economic crisis in which they happen to be. These elements of a cargo cult utopian society are coupled with nativistic and culturally specific beliefs. If certain rituals are performed or certain edicts are followed, the ancestors of that particular tribe or people group will return from the realm of the dead and usher in this *golden age*.

Although the term *cargo cult* is unique to Melanesia, the phenomenon of this type of movement spans the globe. As Kenelm Burridge observed, "Cargo cults compare most directly with the Ghost Dance cults of North America and the prophetist movements among African peoples" (Burridge 1960, xv). It appears that the term *messianism* is most frequently used in America; *prophetism* is the current word in Africa, along with Melanesia by certain Roman Catholic writers (Kamma 1972, 232). Brian Schwarz, a Lutheran pastor and member of the Melanesian Institute, has estimated that

about 100 movements have occurred in South America with a similar number in North America. Around 500 movements have been noted in the Philippines, 200 in Korea, and isolated examples have been reported from India, Burma and South East Asia. By far the greatest numbers have occurred in Africa, with estimates which go as high as 10,000 movements (Schwarz 1982, 232).

A distinctive of the several hundred movements which have been known to occur in Melanesia is seen in the expectation of the participants to receive material goods. This is why these movements have been described as being cargo cults. The term *cargo* as used in cargo cults comes from the Pidgin English word *kago* and means material wealth from a Western origin (Oosterwal 1967, 469). A more application-oriented definition of the word as practiced by the cultists themselves would more accurately define material wealth to include; food, clothing, valuable goods, economic development, money, technological advancements, political freedom, knowledge, peace, social justice or any and everything which is viewed as needful to live a happy and harmonious life. All of these items the Western, developed nations possess in abundance but are perceived to be lacking in Melanesia.

Although material goods are involved with most of these movements, cargo is by no means the only objective of the movement. Freerk Kamma, having done extensive research among the cargo cults of the Biak-Numfoor people explained:

Quite apart from the derogatory meaning it (cargo cult) has acquired the term is incorrect. There is no cult of Western goods. The cargo the ships are to bring is no more than part of the expectation, it is not the cargo but the ancestors that are worshipped (Kamma, 238).

The key factor of the movements observed in Melanesia is the return of a messiah-like ancestor who will bring with him what the people desire. The desires of one tribe may differ with those of another, which would include either one, all or any combination of; material goods, political freedom, economic freedom, moral renewal, tribal status and security. The objective of the tribe to attain one or more of these virtues is played upon by members of the society who claim to have received, by some supernatural means, the way to achieve or attain their millennial rewards. This emerging prophet conveys the requirements which must be followed or performed for attaining what is desired to the people who then must act upon them. If what the prophet promised does not occur, then the movement dies out and the people wait for the next prophet to emerge.

Since Christianity has been introduced to the region of the Pacific Islands, many of the cargo cults have absorbed the messianic and millennial themes found in the Bible. Bob Lenz wrote, " In most movements, the native culture has admitted elements from two or more outside cultures or bodies of belief which have had sufficient influence to change the people's way of life" (Lenz 1988, 4). The results of this outside influence has produced a unique form of cargo cults adopting the trappings of the Christian faith. Some of the manifestations of this belief seem rather bizarre or unusual from the perspective of a foreign cultural observer. One movement, recorded by John Strelan, which illustrates these tendencies occurred in February of 1984 in Mamberamo Tengah, Irian Jaya. A young man in the village of Papasena was told by some spirits that Jesus was ready to come back and bring independence and freedom to Irian Jaya along with great wealth for all the people. He was further instructed by Jesus himself that everyone, without exception, was to: 1) publicly confess all sins, 2) do no hunting in the morning hours, 3) keep all grave sights immaculately clean, 4) drink a specially prepared "holy water" and 5) be baptized by a Western missionary. If all these injunctions were followed, then in just a few

days unspeakable wealth, which is now only enjoyed by their ancestors and Westerners, would pour out of the graves. A mock radio transmitter was built at the graves to receive further word from the spirits about the coming of this great wealth. The church became alive with activity as hundreds stepped forward to confess their sins and be baptized (Strelan 1989, 42-44). Although to this day the people have received no wealth, the hope remains that if they confess their sins and are baptized as well as keeping the other stipulations, one day it will come.

These types of beliefs are easily spurned by the Westerner who has learned to separate the empirical world from the spiritual one. Separation of the natural, physical world and the spiritual world does not exist, however, for the majority of Melanesians. In approaching a problem of this kind it must first be understood that no amount of empirical evidence will persuade a cargo cultist to adopt a more orthodox faith. Peter Worsley observed that all events are held to constitute fractional symbolic confirmations of the wider cosmic belief (Worsley 1968, xix). Any unusual happening, war or local tragedy is interpreted to be a confirmation of the syncretistic belief. The cultists in Mamberamo Tengah later received confirmation of

their belief when a missionary conducted a funeral for a child who had recently died. In his closing remarks he asked the people to make sure to keep the grave yard neat and clean. This was interpreted as a confirmation of the original account and that the missionary already knew about it (Strelan, 41).

The beliefs seen in the cargo cult movements are based on generalized and sketchy information which neither can be proven nor denied but can be clarified and confirmed. It is this facet of the cargoist's belief system that has allowed for the contextualization of the gospel message to proceed beyond the initial stages. In so far as the gospel of Christ relates to and confirms a cargoist's beliefs, it is accepted and contextualized into his overall belief system. The cargoist, like all of mankind, is searching for something that can provide meaning and purpose in life. The issues involve bringing order to the experiences of life. Metaphysical and epistemological questions dealing with such issues as, how things came into being and what causes death need rational answers from this particular societies world view. The search for meaning is not a new one; it is the common theme of religion. The questions that must be answered by the searcher are: 1) Who or what do you

turn to in order to find answers to these foundational questions? and 2) What method or ritual best assures positive results? The answers to these questions are unclear and made up of myths combined with actual current events as well as dreams and visions for the cargo cultist. It is the responsibility of the Church of Jesus Christ to provide clear answers to the questions that effect the search for salvation among the cargo cult societies found in Melanesia.

#### **Statement Of The Problem**

The *who* and *what* questions stated above have been answered by Western missionaries who have proclaimed the gospel of Christ in Irian Jaya. The cargo cults, like other religions, are centered around man's attempts to attain his own salvation through his efforts which satisfy either ancestors or the Sacred/God. The difference in the message as proclaimed by evangelical Western missionaries is that it is not man nor his efforts that determine salvation but God and grace. However, there is reason to question if the understanding of the Church in Irian Jaya is the same as the perception of the Western missionaries. The question arises and deserves

investigation because of the prevalence and practice of cargo cults along with Christianity in this region.

The problem that is observed in the Christian Church in Irian Jaya is the contextualization of two belief systems. One side of the context is the socio-economic and religious system of the cargo cultist which stem from an animistic world view. The other context has been brought by Western society with its distinctive dualistic world view encased in the Christian message (Figure 1).

The contextualization itself is not the problem here; this is an expected process. The problem is determining which stage of the contextualization process the Church is presently in. This research will attempt to identify areas in which the Church in Irian Jaya is involved in the contextualization process. It is hoped that with a definition and understanding of the contextualization process that is occurring, evaluations can be made as to the validity and acceptability of these emerging beliefs.

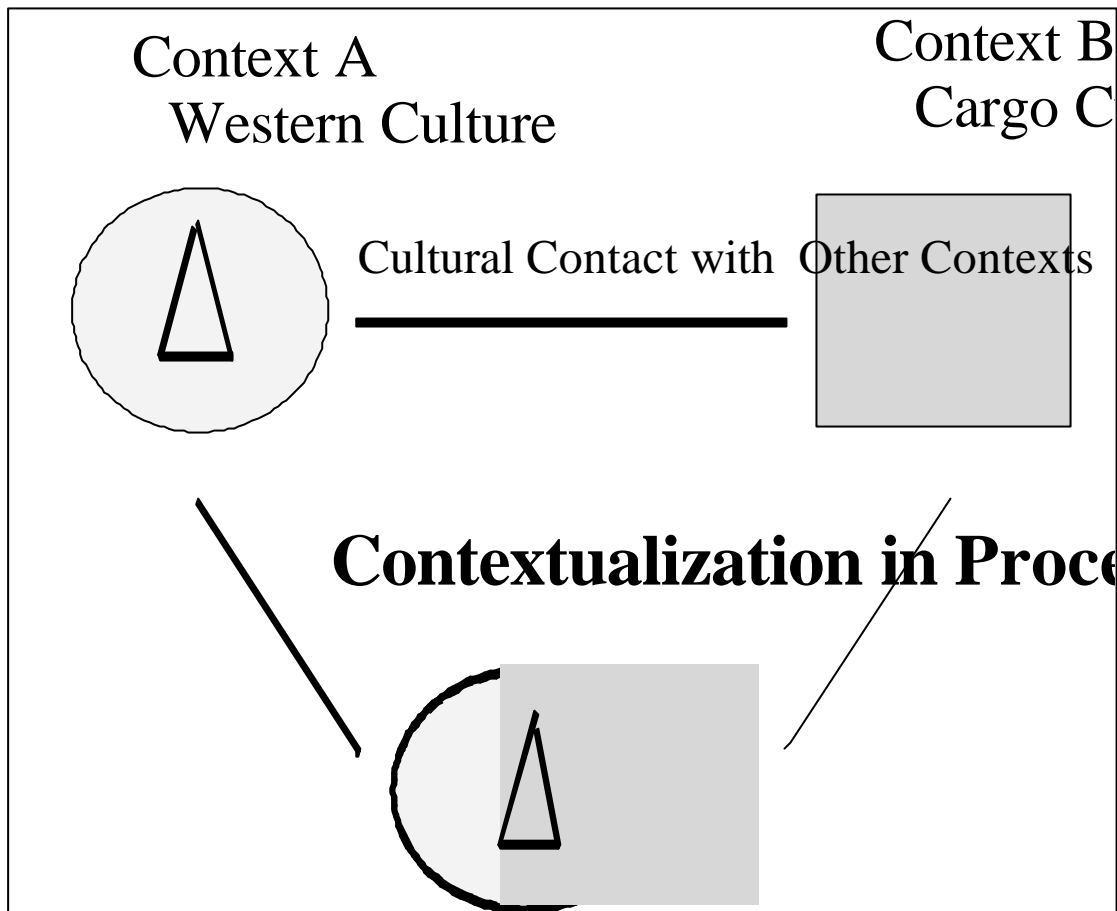


Figure 1

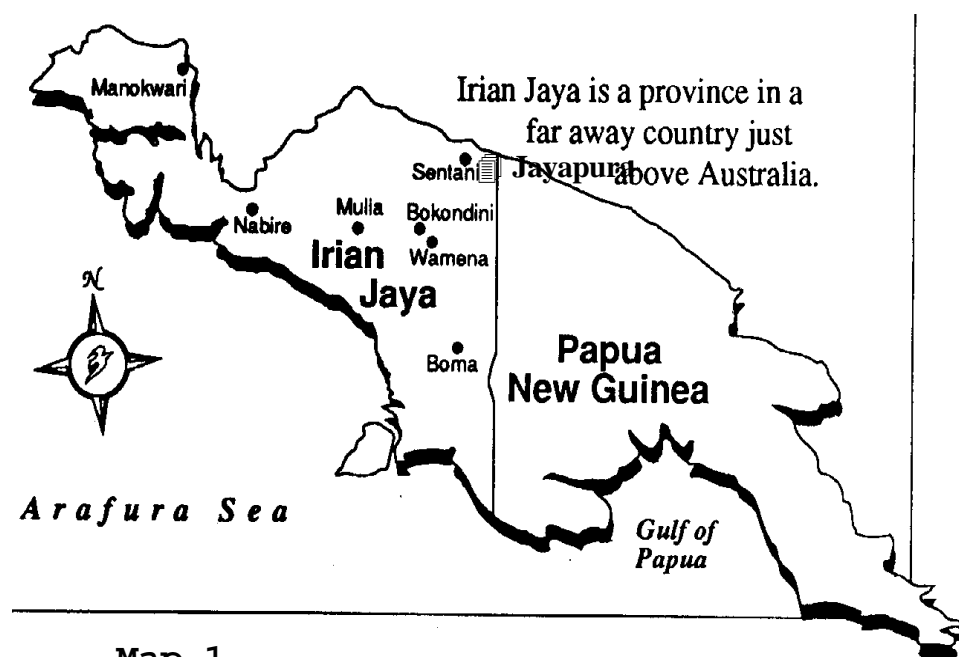
### Background To The Problem

#### Area and Geography

The Republic of Indonesia is an archipelago nation of more than 13,500 islands extending for 3,000 miles along the equator from Southeast Asia to Australia. This nation covers approximately 788,425 square miles. New Guinea (the island of which Irian Jaya constitutes the entire western half) is part of this system. Irian Jaya, formerly called West Irian, is one of the largest

islands of the Indonesian archipelago measuring 264,000 square miles. The entire island of New Guinea is approximately 1500 miles long and five hundred miles wide.

Capitol of Province: Jayapura



### People

The people of Irian Jaya are largely Papuan, predominately Malay stock, including many related but distinct cultural and linguistic groups. It is estimated that there are about 250 tribes with about the same number of distinct languages, many of which have never been reduced to writing. Many of these tribal people are living in a stone age culture;

primitive, illiterate and superstitious. The population of the island is approximately 2,000,000.

Living conditions vary greatly from region to region with the greatest difference seen between coastal people and interior people. A typical coastal home is made from cement block with a dirt or cement floor and covered with corrugated zinc roofing. Living arrangements for coastal dwellers vary but the norm is a single family home. The single family usually includes children and their spouses with children.

Interior living conditions reflect the natural environment more since most homes are built from materials available in the jungle. A typical home in the interior Bird's Head of Irian Jaya is raised off the ground by poles. The floor and walls are built from split bamboo, the walls sometimes are covered with tree bark. The roofing material of choice is corrugated zinc, but when not available tree bark or thatch is used. Communal living is more the norm than single family dwelling. It is common to have women and children sleep separately from the men of the village.

### **Government**

Irian Jaya is the far eastern province of Indonesia. The country's capitol is in Jakarta, West

Java. Elections for a president are held every five years. Citizens choose a party for which to vote and the elected party then appoints a president. The military is quite powerful which makes for more of a "guided" democracy.

### **Religion**

Harmony and ecumenicalism are the key words in understanding religion in Indonesia. The government ideology of "pancasila" or the five principles strongly encourages cooperation among religious groups. After the attempted communist coup in 1965 the government declared that all citizens need to have a religion. The acceptable choices were; Islam 87%, Hinduism 1.9%, Buddhist 1% and Christianity 9.6%.

The island of Irian Jaya, however, is mainly animist and Christian. Statistics for animists are sketchy and include those who would also classify themselves as Christians but 83% of the populace claim to be adherents to Christianity, 60% Protestant and 23% Catholic. The recent influx of transmigrants from Java and other islands has increased the number of Islamic followers on the island to about 16%. Irian Jaya is one of only two provinces in Indonesia with a majority Christian population.

**Language**

The official language is Indonesian. This is the language of commerce and education. However, in the villages and homes, each tribe continues to speak its own dialect. There are about 250 mutually unintelligible languages or dialects in Irian Jaya.

**Brief History of Indonesia**

From the 7th to the 12th centuries Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam were introduced to the people of this archipelago. Islam was the last introduced and has had the strongest hold up until the present.

The Portuguese established a basis of trade in these islands but were soon conquered by the Dutch in 1602. It did not take long for the Dutch to establish themselves as rulers over these islands, a position they held for more than 300 years. Through the development of the Dutch, the Netherlands East Indies, as they were called, proved to be one of the world's richest colonial possessions.

Indonesians themselves began to move toward independence from Dutch control between the two World Wars. At the close of World War II, a Japanese occupation of Indonesia for three years triggered the

Nationalist Movement. Indonesians revolted; three days after the Japanese surrendered, a small group of Indonesians led by Sukarno established the Republic of Indonesia. The date was August 17, 1945. The Dutch tried to regain control but failed, and in 1949, the Republic of Indonesia became the 60th member of the United Nations.

Irian Jaya, however, was still ruled by the Dutch government. West Irian continued under their rule until 1961. After years of negotiation, talks broke down and fighting began. The Dutch were eventually defeated and on May 1, 1963 an agreement of transfer was reached. "Included in the agreement was the promise of a plebiscite in 1969 to determine the wishes of the people of New Guinea" (Gregory, 1976, p. 58) This had a significant effect on the church in Irian Jaya in that growth was generally stifled from 1965 to 1969. The primary cause for the setback was this "Act of Free Choice" which caused rebellion by several people groups. Don Gregory wrote concerning this, saying, "Beginning in 1965 and lasting approximately five years, mountain people living in the outskirts of Manokwari rose up in armed rebellion against the Indonesian rule" (Gregory, 1976, p. 58). Under United Nations supervision, the Act of Free Choice was

confirmed and Irian Jaya became a recognized part of Indonesia that same year, 1969.

Not only was 1965 an unstable time for Irian Jaya, but also for the rest of the nation of Indonesia. On October first of that year, Indonesia underwent a radical change in its history. On this date, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) attempted a coup d'etat which resulted in a bloody civil war. The rebellion was finally put down but not without the deaths of hundreds of thousands of PKI activists. In March of 1967 the People's Consultative Assembly voted Sukarno out of power (whose political alliances kindled the coup) and named General Suharto as president of Indonesia. The emotions created by this coup still persist today.

The people of Indonesia and specifically in this study Irian Jaya can never be divorced from their history. To consider social order and structure in an ethnographic report, it is imperative that a foundation of history be laid down. We will understand much clearer the implications of the changes occurring in this corner of the world and of the cargo cults which have emerged having been exposed to this brief history.

## **History of Cargoism in Irian Jaya**

The cargo cults of Melanesia date back before the first arrival of Europeans to the region. Although no documented accounts of these movements existed until the mid 1800's, there is evidence that great value was placed on items of foreign origin before there was any contact with the West, and that there existed the belief that shiploads of these valuables would be brought by a messianic type figure in the culture (Kamma 1972 , 9; Oosterwal 1973, 473).

The Island of New Guinea, whose western half is Irian Jaya, was first seen by Europeans in 1512 when it was sighted by Portuguese explorers Antonio d' Abreu and Francisco Serrano. The Portuguese were followed by the Spanish explorer Inigo di Retes, who named the island *Nueva Guinea* in June of 1545.

Next on the scene were the Dutch. Captain Willem Schouten, along with Jacob le Maire, sailed along the north coast of Irian Jaya in 1616. They reported finding Chinese porcelain and amber colored beads made from Indian corals (Kamma 1972, 9). Although it is not known the exact date that the indigenous people of Irian Jaya first obtained these valuable foreign possessions, these objects began to play an important role in the economy of the people. Kamma explained

that, "In the course of time the number and variety of these valuables of foreign origin multiplied. Gongs and copper ware, china, earthenware, beads, lengths of red and blue cotton, hatchets and iron bars were the most important" (Kamma 1972, 9). In Irian Jaya today ancient porcelain and other artifacts including cannons from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries are kept as priceless heirlooms and used in the negotiation of the bride price. It is not unusual that the indigenous people of Irian Jaya would place a high value on ancient artifacts. Westerners, likewise, place great value on items from the past. The difference may be found in the expectation of the Irianese, for instance, that more of these possessions will come from their ancestors in supernatural ways.

The oldest recorded occurrence of a cargo cult movement took place among the Biak people in Irian Jaya. A publication dated January 1854 referring to the Biak figure Manseren Manggundi read, "He is expected to return someday to found an earthly kingdom of plenty" (Kamma 1972, 105). This obscure mention of the expectation of the return of a messianic figure was simply the first recorded occurrence. Kamma documented 45 such movements which occurred among the Biak people from 1855 to 1967 (Kamma 1972).

The response of missionaries to these cargo cult movements has varied greatly. The traditional response to the mythical-magic religions and practices of the indigenous people of Irian Jaya has been negative. The practices were considered erroneous and the participants heathen, who were condemned to hell unless they professed Christ and joined the Church. The goal of the missionary was to convert the lost using any means available at his or her disposal. In those early days of missions, missionaries who tried to understand the culture were met with disdain and rebuke by governing boards since they were not relying on the Holy Spirit for the conversion of the lost (Whiteman 1984, vii; Pentecost 1982, 9). Christianity became shrouded in Western idioms and culture which made it virtually impossible to distinguish between it and the colonialist's mentality of that era. In fact, colonialists and missionaries often went together. When the colonialists left, the missionary stayed on, but the imperialistic method of conversion remained the same.

### **Cargo and Conversion**

Early missionaries were known to use the cargoistic tendencies of the people they encountered to

entice them into the church. R. P. Gilson recorded one such enticement made in a Samoan village by John Williams from the London Missionary Society in the July of 1830. Upon arrival in Sapapali'i, "...He proceeded to tell the people that the ship was a *va'a lotu*, a ship of religion and prayer. If the Samoans would accept Christianity, he said, it would ensure peace among them and in its wake would come vessels carrying an abundance of goods, which would prove that Jehovah was indeed the most powerful of the gods" (Gilson 1970, 69). It is not surprising, then, that there was great success on the part of the London Missionary Society in the Samoan Islands as they used the millenary and messianic beliefs of the people to bring them into the church.

Christianity held the monopoly on religious truth and experience which was so closely related to the missionary's own culture that it was indistinguishable from the message he proclaimed. As Erik Cohen has put it, "Conversion of the natives was expected to involve a total religious and cosmological reorientation" (Cohen 1990, 4). Whether planned or not, becoming Christian meant becoming Western and adopting a Western form of Christianity.

Critics of missionaries both past and present fail to realize that change is inevitable when two contexts meet-- whether the contexts be religious or cultural or both. Conversion, which is meant to initiate a change of belief about who Jesus Christ is, is a significant part of the Christian message. This is not said in defense of inappropriate tactics and strategies used in the name of Christ for the propagation of Christianity throughout the centuries. Conversion, however, by its very nature does require change. It would be naive to think that the introduction of new ideas would not bring change of some kind to a culture and society. Whenever two people come together there is an exchange--and change--that occurs. The gospel of Jesus Christ does bring change. Jesus' message of repentance was the basic requirement that followed the reality of an eschatological kingdom found in His person (Mark 1:15; Matthew 4:17). His message began the most radical transformation in human history and it should not be surprising that His followers also are conveyors of change.

The concept which Jesus presented to the religious leader Nicodemus of being *born again* implies a complete and fundamental revamping of religious beliefs and practices (John 3). Jesus presents Himself as the

Messiah, the light of the world, the way, the truth and the life. The usual meaning of repentance (*metanoeo* and *metanoia*) as found in the writings of the New Testament is *change of mind* (Kittel, Friedrich, Bromiley 1985, 637). Conversion or repentance imply changing your mind about who Jesus is (Acts 3:19; 20:21) and it involves a break with and remorse over behavior which God views as unacceptable (II Corinthians 7:9-10; 12:21; Ephesians 4:22-24). These are the simple truths of the gospel message which require a change in thinking, because without the change there is no other means by which a person can enter into God's eschatological kingdom. Jesus commissioned His followers to proclaim this message which He preached to the whole world (Mt. 28:19-20).

Missionaries should not be faulted for carrying out the edict given to them by Jesus, nor should they apologize for the changes that occur in a culture and society because of that message. What missionaries should reckon with is an attitude which refuses to accept and learn from religious beliefs and practices of the indigenous people among whom they work. There are beliefs and practices in every culture which are acceptable to God and the missionary runs the risk of

being misunderstood and his message distorted if these beliefs and practices are indiscriminately abandoned.

#### **Purpose Of Research On The Problem**

Anyone who has lived in Melanesia or has read extensively about the region could not fail to come in contact with the cargo cults. Likewise, it is hard to ignore some of the striking similarities of the cargoist beliefs and the Christian message. Both are messianic and millenary in that they anticipate a coming king who will usher in an age of great prosperity on the earth where there is no sickness, suffering or death. It is these similarities which has led to charges of syncretism between cargo cultist's beliefs and Christianity. It has further been charged that the Christian message has not only inspired cargoistic beliefs but has also been the perpetuating stimuli behind the movements (Kamma, 1972, 208; Lawrence 1964, 82,89-90; Oosterwal 1967 472). It is true that early missionaries did use the people's attraction to *cargo* as a means of conversion, but it seems to be equally true that they did not understand the significance of the message they preached to the peoples of Melanesia in terms of the similarity that existed between the gospel and the cargoist's belief.

To the cargoist, the great wealth that the missionary brought with him was evidence enough that his message was true. One native chief responded this way:

Only look at the English people, they have strong beautiful clothes of various colors while we have only leaves, they have noble ships while we only have canoes... I therefore think that the God who gave them all these things must be good and that his religion must be superior to ours. If we receive this God and worship Him, He will in time give us these things as well...(Holmes 1980,478).

Missionaries and other Westerners have inspired the people of Melanesia and specifically Irian Jaya to change not only their religion but also their way of life. The purpose of this research is to gain some understanding as to how the change has occurred specifically with regards to what it means to be a Christian living in Irian Jaya, Indonesia.

#### **Significance Of Research On The Problem**

A significant question which all missionaries have to deal with relates to why people have responded to the Christian message as presented in a particular culture. This is especially true in the tribalistic, cargo cultist societies found in Irian Jaya. This is not to suggest that God is not capable of using His Word to make clear the message of salvation even

through inferior messengers but rather to point to the fact it is a concern when large numbers of people simultaneously convert to Christianity.

This has been the overwhelming norm in Melanesia. In the 1960's, for example, large people movements occurred in Irian Jaya, resulting in thousands of people converting to Christianity at the same time. Henry Block, one of the missionaries involved with a mass conversion among the Sougb tribe in Irian Jaya wrote, "Our overriding concern was that we dare not give them a false security in the thought that throwing away a fetish just automatically made them Christians" (Gregory 1976, 55). The burning of fetishes was symbolic of a particular tribe's break with old beliefs and practices. It was a common means used by missionaries to illustrate a commitment to Christ. The problem is when this or any symbolic gesture is made, is it a true indication of repentance and conversion as offered and explained by Jesus and subsequently offered through His apostles and ministers of the gospel? Are there any indications in a person's life that he has experienced a conversion in terms of what Jesus was offering? This issue has been wrestled with from the First Century on and is identified by the Apostles Paul, James and John as an issue of faith and works

(Romans 10:9; Ephesians 2:8-9; James 2:14-20; I John 2:3-11).

In Western Christianity, an acceptable way to define a person as a Christian is by his behavior and/or his belief. This, to be sure, is not the only way to define a Christian. However, it is a widely condoned practice which identifies certain behaviors and beliefs as being acceptable for Christians while other behaviors and beliefs would mark a person as a non-Christian. Examples of these behaviors and beliefs readily recognized by Christians in North America would be smoking and drinking, and the belief in the doctrine of the deity of Jesus Christ. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of behaviors and beliefs but these do represent an activity (smoking and drinking) and a belief (the deity of Jesus Christ) which have been used to identify those who are Christians. Acceptance or rejection of these behaviors and beliefs could identify you as a Christian or non-Christian.

My purpose here is not to examine what the norms are in North America, but rather to examine and research what the significant factors are which not only identify a person as a Christian in Irian Jaya but

also identify commonly held beliefs and practices which have been contextualized into Christianity.