

CHURCH-STATE RELATION IN FIJI

A Reflection

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PREAMBLE

The thoughts expressed in this paper are almost entirely theological, written from the author's independent inquiry into the subject under discussion namely the relation between Church and State. It should be taken from that perspective and not treated as an official view of the President of the Methodist Church in Fiji.

However, like any other paper written on an important subject such as this, this paper is written from a particular point of view. Readers wouldn't expect me to do otherwise. It is written from the point of view of an indigenous Fijian or **itaukei** who is trying to make sense of the Christian faith in the present multi-cultural and multi-religious context of Fiji.

As a Christian theologian, I stand firmly on the basis of my faith in God who "in Jesus Christ assumed and sanctified our full humanity, offered it to God without spot or wrinkle and gave it back to us"¹.

I stand and speak from that common humanity. And I prefer to use the word 'humanity' rather than right as the best language to use in the present discussion. **Right** is for ruling, **humanity** is for sharing in community. Right is a language for combat and therefore carries heavy military tone. It is a fitting word in situations where unfettered injustice reign supreme.

But in an already hostile world we now live in, we need an embracing word such as humanity that invites us to life in community. Such community must include not only human beings but non-human beings as well. This embracing community is badly needed to day. It is already given to us by God through his Son Jesus Christ. This belief and conviction form the central motif of this paper.

¹Professor J. Torrance, Unpublished paper

1. The Present Situation

The present discussion and conflict on the issue of Church and State relation is both unsatisfactory and in some respects disappointing. Quite apart from the unexamined assumptions, there are very important questions that are left unanswered and unaddressed at all. And I can only list the following as crucial and need to be addressed. They are closely related:-

- a) What constitutes a Christian State?
- b) What is meant by the term 'Christian'?
- c) Am I reading other people's minds rightly that the term Christian is synonymous with whatever is "Fijian"?
- d) Have Christian churches who want to make Fiji a Christian state agreed on a common statement? Is this a collective idea or an idea by just one group of Christians?
- e) What is the Christian teaching about the nature and role of the state and how should the Church relate itself to it?
- f) If Fiji is to become a Christian state, what would be the role of the Church?
- g) If Christian faith is to be made a public fact, as many supporters of the Christian state would like to do, how can this be best achieved in a multi-cultural and multi-religious situation such as Fiji?
- h) The issue of a Christian state raises the question of authority. What is the Christian teaching about authority and how can this be applied in Fiji in the light of the wish of some Christians to make it a Christian state?

The situation in Fiji is not a simple one. In one respect it is complicated by the fact that the Christian Church is predominantly Fijian. Indian Christians make up a very small minority.

Because of this, the natural tendency is for one side to "lord it over the other" in the present discussion. The deep-seated beliefs, values, etc, of one is imposed on the other. This inevitably raises the question of right and wrong. What is Christian is right and what is not Christian is wrong.

The concomitant assumption follows: What is Fijian is right, what is not Fijian is wrong. If we follow this line of assumption held by some supporters of the Christian state, it appears that this is its finishing line. It is obviously unsatisfactory and can be quite misleading.

2. Fijian Identity

From another side, an important element that is wrapped up in the whole discussion is the matter concerning Fijian identity. This paper would be ill-advised if it does not address it.

Fijian collective consciousness is made up of the inseparable union between the three strands of **Vanua** (Land), **Lotu** (Church) and **Matanitu** (State). Their union is so complete that if one is affected, the whole is affected.

It is not surprising that the protagonists of the Christian state are predominantly Fijian and Methodist. The Methodist Church is the largest Christian denomination in the land and still commands the respect and loyalty of the largest number of indigenous Fijians in both urban and especially rural villages.

In a circular sent out by the Methodist Church to congregations and local churches throughout Fiji to solicit support from its members for their joint submission to the committee now reviewing Fiji's constitution, the letter explicitly states among other things the following:-

- a) That Fiji be declared a permanent Christian state until the end of time.
- b) That the sanctity of Sunday as a day of rest be observed.
- c) That Christian teachings be taught and safeguarded in the Government of Fiji.
- d) That no member of any other ethnic group be allowed residency in Fiji.
- e) That provision should be made for the safekeeping of the indigenous race, in terms of what they hold dearly such as their values, religion, culture, their land and sea.

i) Vanua and Lotu²

The views expressed above seek to air some deep seated aspects of Fijian identity although not in the best articulation. As already stated, the union between vanua, lotu and matanitu is identical with Fijian identity. They all appear either directly or by implication in the above statements.

The close relation between vanua and lotu during the last one and a half century in Fiji has always been greatly appreciated and valued for it brought about much needed unity among the Fijian people in the early days. This remains true today. Their link and relative harmony helped promote civilization and well being in villages and islands and continues to do so. The fact that the lotu is essentially part of the vanua supports the notion that their union will remain a force to be reckoned with in the foreseeable future. It continues to exhibit this force today in a growing polarized political situation.

It should be said at this point though that their relative harmony they now enjoy can become a new form of escape from reality if the poor, the powerless and the marginalized are not justly treated. In the changed situation brought about by the political coups in 1987, splitting the society open, the country and especially Fijian leaders are now called to move beyond the so called point of harmony of vanua and lotu and address the plight of the growing number of poor and powerless Fijians.

²For a fuller treatment, see Tuwere 1992:94ff

In some way the lotu was absorbed by the vanua from the beginning. It is probably because of this union which has been taken for granted for so long that the necessary element of discerning their essential difference has been somehow lost. The capacity to see the distinction between the two is not there. Their oneness is complete. This is implicated and affirmed by dictums such as **Na vanua na lotu, na lotu na vanua** (The church is the land, the land the church). Statements with nationalistic flavour such as, **Noqu Kalou, noqu Vanua** (my God, my land), find expression in popular folk songs and they unconsciously help to support a ruling ideological structure namely, the lotu is identical with the vanua and they are one.

The importance of their union cannot be over-emphasized. Their cleavage from the beginning would have been disastrous and there would not be a Fijian race. The problem now it seems lies more on the level of differentiation. By this I mean the need to distinguish between *what is and what ought to be*. Absence of such distinction poses a problem; it loses a true sense of direction that must lead on to community.

ii) **Vanua, Lotu and Matanitu**

The union between Vanua and Lotu and all that it involves is now being pushed to engage the state or matanitu in the current Christian state talk. This is clearly expressed in the first article of the statement made by the Methodist Church “that Fiji be declared a permanent Christian state until the end of time”.

The Methodist Church in Fiji is not a state Church in the same way the Church of England is in England or what civil religion is for Americans. Nevertheless it behaves at times as if it is. This is not accidental. As pointed out already, this is related to the long established union between vanua and lotu. The fact that Methodists established themselves fairly widely in a significant way all over Fiji in the first place, together with the church’s membership, claiming about 215000 out of Fiji’s total population of more than 700,000, are regarded by many whether consciously or by implication as the norm. What it says or does not say must be taken as important, even binding. It is claimed that it was this type of Christianity which moved “high chiefs” to cede Fiji to England in 1874 in order to secure the “promotion of civilization and Christianity”.

In the submissions made to the Fiji Constitution Advisory Committee in 1989 in the nation’s search for a new constitution, the majority of Fijian submissions pointed out that due recognition should be given to the “profound impact that Christianity has made in their way of life and culture”. Because of this, “Christianity should be made a religion of the state”. This “observance of Christianity should be supported by total restrictions on Sunday activities other than religious worship”. Although this did not succeed, the spirit of these submissions remains alive and strong today.

There exists a strong desire to see that the union of vanua and lotu remains. Opening up Sunday which has always been a day for worship since Christianity arrived, to become a day for trade, recreation and the like would inevitably lead to churches becoming empty and young people loitering around the streets of towns and cities. More seriously it would inexorably lead to the gradual erosion of village life, the structural basis of the Fijian way of life.

On the economic front, Sunday trading would mean those who are already economically strong (mainly non-Fijians) will become stronger; weaker ones (mainly Fijians) will continue to lag behind. At the end of the day, it is claimed, mainly non-Fijians will become stronger, weaker ones (mainly Fijians) will continue to lag behind. Fijians will lose out on almost everything – land, lotu and with an uncertain future. The fear is

definitely there and cannot be treated lightly. Expressions of this fear can be found in sermons preached, in songs and even church anthems and hymns.

Fear-laden thoughts are often surfaced such as **Sa qai vo ga vei keda na noda lotu (se vakabauta. Ni kau tani ga vei keda qo, sa oti vei keda.** (The lotu (or faith in God) is the one thing that remains with us. If this is also taken away from us, we are finished). This is not a simple statement of uncertainty. It is a cry of 'ownership'. An issue of anxiety. How does one face such anxiety? What response can be made to that voice of the human spirit that implicitly seeks to belong? Belong especially to the dominant theory that governs different forms of modernism. To belong not simply in the sense of being there but to be actively part of this historical process by having a say in it.

I have tried to state as clearly as i can some aspects of the deep yearning of the human spirit from the perspective of a **itaukei**. The quest for human identity is a universal fact. All people not only Fijians want to be recognized and to be identified with their roots. This universal yearning must not be taken lightly.

The past is definitely important in the search for identity in the present. But the great open future also lies before us as a people to whom we are called to look for a land, a city and a community in which to build ourselves home s and to raise our young ones. God who spoke to Abraham long ago is also speaking to us now in Fiji : "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1)

I can only end this section on identity with the note that all the important elements that have been stated can best be taken care of through legislation and need not necessarily go into the Constitution. The state or matanitu should be allowed to govern and look after the welfare of all its people.

3. Church-State Relation in Theological Perspective

i) Nature of the state?

The state according to the New Testament is one of the created "powers" (exousiai in Greek) which is always in danger of making itself absolute or become an end in itself. The same New Testament claims that it is created through Jesus Christ and subsists in Him (Colossians1:16f).

It is not a pre-established authority to which people owe unquestioning respect. Its legitimacy is derived from the way in which it represents the community and the wish and will of the same community.

Human society is always changing and the state is regarded primarily not as the authority which has to uphold order but rather as the agent on which the responsibility for "making and keeping human life human" chiefly rests. This means that the nature of the state from a theological perspective is so designed to serve a historical goal. The test of its legitimacy is whether and to what degree it fulfils this goal.

In the view of the NT, a state becomes demonic when it falls to temptation of making itself absolute by refusing to listen to the people. There is no way by which such demonic state can achieve what it desires,

“till it serves where it wants to dominate,
It will have to build where it wishes to destroy,
It will have to testify to God’s justice where it
Wishes to display the injustice of men”⁵.

ii) **The Modern State**

The impact of technology has brought about a new character of the states in the present world. As M.M. Thomas⁶ points out, technology has produced a new consciousness of the world. It brings about a new sense of the oneness of the world.

First, it was used by Europe “to explore and exploit other countries?”⁷ Now third world countries have freed themselves from colonialism and taken control of their own political future. Their use of the same technology to serve their national goals sets a common historical process of technological advancement. A new form of universalism is now taking shape.

This technological advancement as pointed out by Thomas⁸ also results in what he calls “mass democracy”. The “mass” is made up of those who are passive participants in the decision making processes. They are often manipulated and have no active role in decision making. The ongoing task is to transform “mass” into “people” who are conscious of their duty to the state and society and are being provided with the environment and equipped with the tools for this to happen.

One of the responsibilities of the Church is to see that “mass” democracy is transformed into “people” democracy.

iii) **The Role of the State**

The role to be played by the state in society is derived from a new understanding of its authority. This authority is not so much conformity to an order of things already established in creation but a “project” to be carried out in history. If it is to fulfil its role, it needs the approval, the participation and co-operation of the whole community⁹.

⁵Barth 1960:118

⁶Thomas in Lukas Vischer (Ed.) 1978:19ff

⁷Thomas in Vischer 1978:19ff

⁸Thomas in Vischer 1978:19ff

⁹Thomas in Vischer 1978:19ff

With the advent of technology, the state will inevitably go through an unhindered process of secularisation. Its role therefore has to be worked out in the context of cultural, religious and ideological pluralism which come together with technological advancement. Given this developing pluralism, the state is called upon “to become the embodiment of a national community and a national ethos in which the different religious and ideological convictions are free to enter into dialogue with each other for the good of the whole community”. Such give and take encounter is the seedbed for a healthy society.

The state must make provision for this to take place for without it, there is bound to be confrontations at different levels of society that give rise to social problems and would be difficult to handle.

Structures of society have become more and more complex in the course of history. New fields have been opened up for us and new structures of relationship come into being. They are not merely accidents of history but the work of the ever living God who is both Lord and maker of human history. “The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few. Therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into a harvest” (Matthew 9:37-38). The role of the state is to unite and deploy the resources at work in society. It has to become the instrument and expression of the national community that exhibits modern diversity.

iv) The Church and its Role

The Church is not the state and must not behave as if it is. It cannot ignore or neglect the state, for God who is both Lord of History and a suffering servant within history is also at work within the state. Yes, the Church must have a critical solidarity with the state but it cannot claim whether consciously or by implication to control God or bottle Him up, as it were, within the institutions of the Church. If it does, it is not serving the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“The Church’s first question” says Lukas Vischer, “should not be about its due rights in the political system. It should primarily be concerned with the question of how, as a Christian community it can best serve the wider community”¹⁰. It should learn to live and work creatively with the whole range of different “powers” in society.

As a Christian community, the Church lives under the shadow of the Lordship of Christ. This Lordship is not dependent on whether or not the whole human community accept him as Lord, for he is lord already of everything and everybody. This implies that the Church’s existence is a political existence. The Lord of the Church and the Lord of the world is the same person.

Under this lordship, the church is called to build up the human community. This entails making life more human for everyone or helping people to behave as human beings and bring humanness into being.

It must be borne in mind that all this is not the work of the church. It is Christ’s work. He is always at work creating a human community. All those who call themselves Christians are asked to work with Him in this mission.

¹⁰Vischer (Ed.) Introduction

Christ does not promise that Christians are the only people he will use in his work. He may use anybody he wants to produce a human community. God throughout history has clearly demonstrated this by using people such as Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar and others to carry out his will and purpose for mankind. This task in which Christians participate is a task they do not control, for God will use anyone in this process.

v) **Church-State Co-operation**

The Church's stand in relation to the state is first and foremost to allow the state to be the state so that it can play its role as such. The church can and must never wish that the state should cease to be the state. If this happens, such church can never become a true church.¹¹

From another angle the church would be denying its own existence if it wished to become the state and to establish law when it should be preaching the Word of God.

The service which the church owes to the state is primarily intercession (I Timothy 2). This involves holding the state daily before God through prayer and supplication. This intercession is based on the divine justification of sinful man, that is to say, the state, its structures and manpower are still in the unredeemed sinful condition of mankind but are simultaneously saved from the guilt of sin and restored to the favour of God. This unmerited grace of God is the ground upon which the church's service to the state, namely intercession is built.

The state on the other hand would be denying its own existence if it wished to become a church. As a created power, it is so designed in the economy of the creator-God to have a separate and independent but related entity. It is not God and must not think of itself as such. At the same time it is not separated from Him.

The state is called to establish human law and has the capacity to do so. In its relation to the church, the state should see that the church maintains its freedom to proclaim divine justification. This justification must not be constructed as something out of this world. Its aim is the production of justice, the transformation of society as a whole or the reconstruction of holiness. Holiness can never become an element of escape from the world but a form of life within this world that constantly seeks change and renewal in the structures of society.

As already stated, the church as Christian community is keenly aware of the need for the existence of the civil community under the state. It knows that the final arrangement of this order is the eternal Kingdom of God and final rule of his righteous grace. It is this memory that forms the basis of the church's preaching. In this preaching, the church takes seriously the realities of our common life in the "here and now" but at the same time it is constantly being reminded to run its business under the shadow of the Kingdom that is "yet to come".

¹¹Barth 1960:132

It is for this reason that a Christian state from a theological perspective is problematic and cannot be entertained. Karl Barth has reminded us that the Christian community “has no exclusive theory of its own to advocate in face of the various forms and realities of political life. It is not in a position to establish one particular doctrine as the Christian doctrine of the just state..... There is but one Body of Christ, born of the Word of God, which is heard in faith. There is therefore no such thing as a Christian State corresponding to the Christian church. There is no duplicate of the church in the political sphere”.¹²

The church must not blindly embrace a political concept as a Christian concept against all others whether it is democratic, Fijian, Indian or Chinese. It proclaims the Kingdom that is yet to come. For this reason, “it has to maintain its own hopes and questions in the face of all purely political concepts.”¹³

¹²Barth 1960:160

¹³Barth 1960:161

4. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion I want to make these passing observations as a form of repeating what I have tried to say in this paper to make my position clearer.

1. I do not think turning Fiji to become a Christian state is the answer to making it a better place for everyone to live in. Neither will it further the cause of Christianity nor adequately meet the present wish to safeguard Fijian interests and identity.
2. Acknowledgement of what Christianity had done to our people and culture is sufficient to go into the Constitution as this is found in the preambles of the two Constitutions of 1970 and 1990. The same can be found in the Constitutions of other Pacific Islands.¹⁴ Nothing more than this is really needed.
3. It would be irresponsible to reduce the meaning of Christian state by locating it around the observance of Sunday as a day of rest, a code of ethics for politicians and state leaders to follow or allowing Christian worship to be held on public and state functions. The term "Christian" is much broader than this.
4. One issue of national importance that churches have not taken up at all is the meaning of the Sabbath and its significance for the present ecological crisis the world is now experiencing. The world-wide global warming for example, related as it is to man's careless disregard of the environment is crucial indeed and is more urgent than Sunday observance.
5. Fiji is now a nation that urgently needs national unity and development at all levels. Because of this, it is necessary to involve and engage all the "powers" at work in our community. It is for this reason that a secular state that allows religious freedom may not be a bad idea.
6. On the theoretical level, I find the principle of Christian Realism represented by Reinhold Niebuhr¹⁵ as attractive and useful as a way ahead. It operates within the context of religious freedom and pluralism and seeks to find the meaning of justice and love for social life. It assumes that the age when the church was at the centre is now gone. But it knows that these churches are not powerless and they can make a difference.

¹⁴see Nacanitaba S. Pp 15f

¹⁵see Shinn, R. In Vischer 1978:36ff

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