

**BEYOND THE MUNDANE
FIJI'S RELIGIONS AND WORLDVIEWS**

A paper for the Institute of Pacific Studies



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1. Introduction: What do we mean by religion?

Religion, according to Robertson (1977: 386), is a system of communally held beliefs (creed) and practices (moral code and rituals) that are oriented towards some sacred supernatural dimension in terms of which life is made meaningful and intelligible. In the tradition of Durkheim, Marshall (1994) states that: “Religion is a set of beliefs, symbols, and practices (for example rituals), which is based on the idea of the sacred and which unites believers into a socio-religious community.”

If we accept that culture is a learned pattern of existence which provides a particular way of viewing the world and our place within it, then we can see the important place held by religion in a culture; for it is religious beliefs which provide the ultimate framework for our understanding of ourselves and the world - of the underlying order and nature of the universe. In view of this understanding we accept certain goals and values for living. While culture covers the whole of a people’s scheme of life, religion gives direction and completion to the scheme.

Peter Berger (1974:75) explains in greater detail how this is so:

“Through most of empirically available human history, religion has played a vital role in providing the overarching canopy of symbols for the meaningful integration of society. The various meanings, values and beliefs operative in a society were ultimately held together in a comprehensive interpretation of reality that related human life to the cosmos as a whole. Indeed from a sociological and socio-psychological point of view, religion can be defined as a cognitive and normative structure that makes it possible for man to feel at home in the universe”.

Because it provides a comprehensive scheme of meaning, religion is an essential and basic aspect of culture. And yet, while religion may, in fact, help to consolidate a particular social order by providing a comprehensive world-view and norms for living, its primary intent is “to lead beyond itself and mediate a transcendent experience”. For, as Davis (1973:49) explains:

“Religion is the drive towards transcendence, the thrust of man out of and beyond himself, out of and beyond the limited order under which he lives, in an attempt to open himself to the totality of existence and reach unlimited reality and ultimate value”.

While Religion may often have played a conservative role in maintaining the status quo in society, it can also be a force for social change.

PART I THE TRADITIONAL RELIGION OF FIJI

Reports on religion in traditional Fijian society come mostly from early missionaries, anthropologists, colonial officials and early European settlers. As far as I know, little has been written by Fijians themselves apart from the works of Asesela Ravuvu in recent years. The influence of some early Christian missionaries has unfortunately instilled in Fijians a negative attitude to traditional religion. Instead of recognizing and appreciating the search for God in traditional beliefs, the gods and spirits of the early Fijians were branded as “tevoru” or devils.

Looking back from today’s vantage point, the early writings on the traditional religion of Fiji may often seem rather negative and pessimistic, speaking of “superstition” and “the heathen practices of the natives”. Perhaps it was like that or perhaps the negativity arose from the patronizing attitudes of “enlightened” scholars and moralistic Christian missionaries. Nevertheless, a lot of useful and interesting information was collected even though it might, at times, be inaccurate, oversimplified or confused by the anthropological theory of the day. Sometimes the information was completely wrong as was the Kaunitoni myth recorded by Basil Thomson in 1892 (France:1966).

A good summary of the pre-Christian religious beliefs and practices of the Fijian Islanders is provided by R.A. Derrick in his book *A History of Fiji* (1957). The appropriate section on religion has been included in the book of readings produced for this lecture series.

It is important to point out from the outset that the account of religion in traditional Fiji is not just a thing of the past and an item of purely academic interest. Asesela Ravuvu (1983:85ff) shows that, while Christianity has virtually replaced traditional religion, many aspects of tradition remain in the religious thinking, expectations and practice of present day Fijians:

“Fijians have always been deeply religious people. Though Christians for more than a hundred years, important elements of the traditional system of supernatural belief survive, and still influence the lives of most Fijians today. Any real understanding of Fijian society ... must include an understanding of these supernatural beliefs.”

Fijian Traditional Religion

Speaking of Traditional religion in Fiji Basil Thomson (1908:111) writes:

“The religion of the Fijians was so closely interwoven with their social polity that it was impossible to tear away the one without lacerating the other. ... Religion was a hard taskmaster to the heathen Fijian; it governed his every action from the cradle-mat to the grave. In the tabu it prescribed what he should eat and drink, how he should address his betters, whom he should marry, and where his body should be laid. It limited his choice

of the fruits of the earth and of the sea; it controlled his very bodily attitude in his own house. All his life he walked warily for fear of angering the deities that went in and out with him, ever watchful to catch him tripping, and death but cast him naked into their midst to be the sport of their vindictive ingenuity.”

The traditional Religion of Fiji would be classified by anthropologists as a form of animism ie. it is based on belief in a world of spirits and supernatural powers.

But traditional Fijian religion also had a hierarchy of gods called Kalou or sometimes nanitu (Western dialect). Rev. Joseph Waterhouse, an early Methodist missionary writing in 1854, stated:

“It is impossible to ascertain even the probable number of the gods of Fiji; for disembodied spirits are called gods, and are regarded as such. But the natives make a distinction between those who were gods originally, and those who are only deified spirits. The former they call Kalou-vu, the latter Kalou-yalo. Of the former class the number is great; but the latter are without number.”

Thus Kalou-vu were “root-gods” or authentic original deities while Kalou-yalo are deified mortals or the spirits of important ancestors who, over time, were elevated to the status of deities. This helps to explain the great number of Kalou-yalo (1).

Waterhouse goes on to say that there were various ranks amongst the Kalou-vu according to the extent of their territory and the number of their worshippers. Thus, some gods were universally known throughout Fiji, others were local gods of large or small territories, while some were simply gods of particular families. Basil Thomson (1908:113) suggests that groups in Fiji who are tauvu or kalou-vata ie worshippers of the same god, have a common origin.

Peter France (1966:109 and 113) notes:

“Local gods were plentiful, but were celebrated in legend and song more for the wild obscenities of their sylvan antics than for their influence in human affairs. ... The old tales (told) of gymnastic encounters in bathing places, which celebrated, with hilarious ribaldry, the sexual prowess of ancestor-gods.”

First among the Kalou-vu was Degei, primarily a god of Rakiraki but known throughout Fiji (except in the eastern islands of the Lau group). He was the most powerful in a hierarchy of ancestral gods because he was the original founder of the present Fijian race. Tippett (1953b:281) reports the tradition “which shows Degei as a snake, or as half a snake and half stone, the stone being symbolic of eternal duration”. Summing up the myths and stories about him, Derrick (1957:11) says:

“In these traditions Degei figures not only as the origin of the people, but also as a huge snake, living in a cave near the summit of the mountain Uluda - the northernmost peak of the Kauvadra Range. Earth tremors and thunder were ascribed as his uneasy turnings within the cave. He took no interest in his people’s affairs; his existence was no more

than a round of eating and sleeping. By association with him, snakes were honoured as 'the Offspring of the origin'. The snake cult was generally throughout the group."

Groves of sacred trees, cave burial places and other sacred sites were all guarded by snakes.

Other gods who were widely recognized throughout Fiji were Dakuwaqa, Ravuyalo, Rakola and Ratumaibulu. Dakuwaqa took the form of a great shark and lived on Benau Island, opposite Somosomo Straight. He was highly respected by the people of Cakaudrove and Natewa and was acknowledged as the god of seafaring and fishing communities - but also the patron of adulterers and philanderers. (In Levuka and Kadavu he was known as Daucina due to the phosphorescence he caused in the sea as he passed). Ravuyalo was posted on the path followed by departed spirits to club them and obstruct their journey to the afterlife (Bulu). Rokola, (son of Degei) was the patron of carpenters and canoe-builders while Ratumaibulu assured the success of garden crops - "he pours sap into the fruit trees and pushes the young yam shoots through the soil" (Basil Thomson, 1908:114). The ceremonial time to honour him was in December.

Tippett,(1953b:112) says that the more one studies the origin and migration myths of the Pacific, "the more we come face to face with recurring basic concepts; eg. the antagonism between fire and water deities, as if two great Pacific peoples are so symbolized, and again there is the strife between the Snake and the Shark - or is it the Snake and Shark people." He goes on to suggest that: " If we identify the Snake and Fire People on the one hand and the Shark and Water people on the other, the whole drama of the myths becomes meaningful." Again the idea of different migrations of peoples is suggested.

The main gods were honoured in the bure kalou or temple (2). Each village had its bure kalou and its priest (bete). Important villages had several. The bure kalou was constructed on a high foundation and stood out from other bures because of its high roof. Inside a strip of masi cloth extended from the high ceiling to the floor to provide a pathway for the god. More permanent offerings hung around the wall of the bure kalou. Outside, sweet smelling plants were grown which facilitated spiritual contact and meditation. Derrick (1957:10 and 12) notes:

"The gods were propitiated to ensure favourable winds for sailing, fruitful seasons, success in war, deliverance from sickness. ...In times of peace and prosperity, the bure kalou might fall into disrepair; but when drought and scarcity came, or war threatened, the god was remembered, his dwelling repaired, its priest overwhelmed with gifts and attention."

Waterhouse (1854:404) reports on the types of worship offered to the gods:

"The temple-worship of the gods consists of the lovi, an act of propitiation; the musukau, an act of covenant or solemn vow; the soro, and act of atonement for sin; and the madrali, an act of thanksgiving. The first-fruits of the earth are invariably presented to the gods."

The traditional priest (bete) in Fiji would be classified in anthropological literature more as a type of shaman than a priest (3). "Shamans are essentially mediums, for they are

mouthpieces of spirit beings. Priests are intermediaries between people and spirits to whom they wish to address themselves” (Lessa and Vogt, 1972:381). Through the shaman god speaks to man; through the priest man speaks to god. Perhaps it might be best to suggest there were elements of both in the Fijian bete. He acted as an intermediary between the god and the people. As a medium of the god he relied on dreams and, when inspired, fell into trances. His body trembled as he was possessed and in a strange voice he announced the message of the god.

Laura Thompson (1940:112) speaking of the situation in Southern Lau states:
“The priest had charge of the worship of the clan’s ancestor gods (kalou vu). He was the intermediary for the people and the god. Since he was influential in securing mana from the god, he was feared and respected. He controlled the activities of the people in warfare, in times of famine, and in sickness, receiving offerings from the people and presenting them to the god according to the sevusevu ceremonial pattern. ... The principal offerings were first fruits, kava, and cooked feasts, including human sacrifices. As a small offering wreaths were presented. The priest prayed to the god, who presently took possession of him and spoke through him or revealed his will by means of a sign or omen. ... When a priest was possessed his whole body shook in convulsions and his flesh twitched.”

The people gave a loud cry as the god took possession of the priest. When the god finally left him he was served with yaqona. After the ceremony the priest and his clan consumed the sacred offerings.

The priests directed the spiritual affairs of the people, while the chiefs were the war leaders. According to Waterhouse (1854:405):
“The influence of the priest over the common people is immense, although he is generally the tool of the chief. Indeed, these two personages most usually act in concert.”

Tippett (1958b:151) notes that war and the priestly system were inter-related and interdependent. “War gods demanded human sacrifices. If there were no wars there were no offerings and the priests went hungry. Priestly wealth was measured by the fighting his tribe did.” Without priests the tribe would have perished, with war the priest would go hungry.

Apart from the gods there were numerous lesser spirits - some helpful and some harmful. They lived in special places such as bamboo clumps, giant trees such as baka or ivi trees, caves, isolated sections of the forest, on dangerous paths and passages through the reef. Some could cause sickness or death or punish disobedience; others would provide protection.

In the presence of gods, spirits or other forms of supernatural power, Fijian people experienced a sense of awe or “a kind of fear-related feeling” known as rere. This is very much what Rudolf Otto (1923) refers to as the feeling of the creature in the presence of the *mysterium tremendum* or the numinous which is at the root of all religion. Something of this may actually be conveyed in the Fijian word kalou which, according to Thomson

(1908) is possibly a root word implying wonder and astonishment as well as anything superlatively good or bad.

Another aspect of traditional religion was sorcery or witchcraft. As Derrick (1957:10 and 15) writes:

“The Fijians ... attributed all unexplained phenomena to gods, spirits or to witchcraft. ... Sickness and insanity were the work of malignant spirits, and food gardens wilted under their spells. In such cases sorcery was assumed and steps were taken to find the sorcerer and counter his spell with another, more potent.”

Hocart (1929:172) claims that Ba was considered to be the home of witchcraft and that Moala, Mualevu and Matuku also have a bad reputation for witchcraft.

Messages from the gods or spirits often came through dreams (Derrick, 1957:15-16). Special knowledge could be gained through dreams and, while dreaming, people could be told to do certain things - even murder.

Another concept associated with traditional religion, not only in Fiji, but throughout the Pacific is that of mana. On Mana Thompson (1940:109) writes:

“The concept of mana associated with the ancestor cult is strong in the native pattern of thought. According to this concept mana is the vital force or potency which gives supernatural significance to persons or things ... Its presence in a person or thing is not attributed to power inherent in the thing itself but to some spiritual force lodging in it. ... The first-born of each noble clan was the temporary repository of the mana of the clan's ancestral forefathers. The chiefs had the strongest forefathers and the high chief was the most sacred because theoretically they received mana from the most powerful ancestor gods.”

Writings about early Fiji show that Fijians used a system of totems. Derrick (1957:13) states:

“Many yavusa still venerate a bird (e.g. kingfisher, pigeon, heron), an animal (eg dog, rat, or even man), a fish or reptile (e.g. shark, eel, snake), a tree (especially the ironwood or nokonoko), or a vegetable, claiming one or more of these as peculiarly their own and refusing to injure or eat them. The relationship is evidently totemic, and it is probable that each totemic group originally recognized a complete series of three totems: manumanu (living creature, whether animal, bird or insect), fish or vegetable, and tree.”

In Anthropology, totemism is a system of associating human groups with specific plants or animals. It is often associated with rituals and eating observances. In the past it was usually seen as an aspect of animistic religious beliefs. Thus, Thompson (1940:109-110) says that totems in Southern Lau were seen as incarnations of ancestral gods. However, Claude Levi-Strauss denied that it was an essentially religious phenomenon and showed that it was really a method of classification in society. The differences between animals or plants were used by human groups to affirm differences between themselves. He

suggested that animals and plants were “good to think with” and indicated the human need to classify groups in society for particular purposes eg inter-marriage. Nevertheless, people were usually emotionally attached to their totems and refused to injure or eat them. (There is a parallel with the names associated with rugby teams today eg the sharks, the bulls, the cats.) However, Basil Thomson (1908:115) seems to think that “Totemism in Fiji does not affect the social system in any way”.

Fijians traditionally believed that, at death, the spirits of the dead set off on a journey to bulu - the home of the dead sometimes described as a paradise. After death the spirit may stay around the house for four days and then went to a jumping-off point (a cliff, a tree, or a rock on the beach) from which its journey to the land of spirits (vanua ni yalo) began. Interestingly, the path the spirit followed retraced the western migratory path from which the ancestors had come to Fiji. The spirit would have to face a perilous journey because it was waylaid by the god Ravuyalo who tried to hinder its path. Speaking of Southern Lau, Thompson (1940:115) writes:

“The dominant belief ... is that when a man dies his soul goes to Nai Thibathiba, a ‘jumping-off’ place found on or near each island, usually facing the west or northwest. From here the soul goes to Nai Thombothombo, the land of souls located on the Mbua coast, Vanua Levu.”

In concluding this section, I would like to mention that the religious activities of traditional religion in Fiji seem to have been directed mostly at receiving benefits in this life. It was very pragmatically oriented. Waterhouse (1854:404) notes:

“All the offerings (to the gods) refer to the present life. The Fijians propitiate the gods for success in war, offspring, deliverance from danger and sickness, fruitful seasons, fine weather, rain, favourable winds, etc., etc.; but their religious ideas do neither extend to the soul, nor to another world.”

There is no time here to comment at length on the above account of traditional religion in Fiji from the viewpoint of the sociology of religion. But the reports on traditional religion seem to bring together a combination of elements indicative of various environments, different migrations and various stages of social development. I say this because religious beliefs often reflect the environment in which they develop, as well as the basic characteristics of the social order of their societies. Their contradictions are often the result of peoples thrown together from various migrations.

As Streng (1969) shows, belief in ancestral spirits is characteristic of communities politically organized around the extended family; animism is associated with less complex societies such as hunters and gatherers; egalitarian societies have egalitarian religious concepts; highly stratified societies have stratified conceptions of the supernatural - a hierarchy of gods; while monotheism is characteristic of societies with complex political structures. In this connection, Evans-Pritchard (1965:77) writes:

“It is, of course, true that religious conceptions can only be derived from experience, and the experience of social relations must furnish a model for such conceptions. Such a theory may, at least sometimes, account for the conceptual forms taken by religion, but not for its origin, its function, or its meaning.”

In other words, the expression (and imagery) of religion may be conditioned by environmental and social factors, but this does not affect the basic validity of religion as a response to the mystery of life, and the place that religion plays in the life of society.

PART II THE ENTRY OF NEW RELIGIONS

- The Impact of World Religions on Fiji

European contact and the colonial era brought Fiji in touch not only with sailors, traders, planters and administrators but also with Christian missionaries of various denominations bringing the Christian religion. Shortly afterwards, through the system of indenture, labourers came from India bringing Hinduism and Islam. Thus, in a relatively short period of time, Fijians were exposed to most of the great World religions. All these religious traditions were to remain and have their influence on the history of Fiji.

Christianity

However, it was Christianity, the religion of the colonizers, which was to have the greatest impact on Fijians. Under the influence of the Christian missionaries, they were being invited to leave behind their local gods and traditional religious practices and adopt a religion which was universal in its scope.

Basil Thomson writing in 1908:112 makes the following statement:

“The Fijians admitted from the first that the Jehovah of the missionaries was a great, though not the only God, and ... when converted to Christianity, they only added him to their own Pantheon. So, in giving their allegiance to the chiefs who conquered them, it was natural that they should admit the supremacy of the god of their conquerors, who, by giving the victory to their worshippers, had proved themselves to be more powerful than their own gods.”

Writing nearly eighty years later, Ravuvu (1983:85 and 91) says:

“Fijians have always been deeply religious people. Though Christians for more than a hundred years, important elements of the traditional system of supernatural belief survive, and still influence the lives of most Fijians today.

... Although today no Fijian will publicly profess to be a follower of the traditional Fijian religion, there are still clear traces of belief in the supernatural beings once held to wholly influence the affairs of the Fijian people. Traditional beliefs in the power of the ancestral gods and other supernatural spirits to affect things are still used in private and in public. They are used as an alternative mode of explanation and a tool for achieving one’s

aspirations. This is particularly so where modern theological and scientific reasonings and measures have failed to satisfy the curiosity or aspirations.”

This is not altogether surprising. Turner (1976:245) explains that after a person has made a decision to re-orient his/her religious faith, he/she still has to bring the whole of his/her existence around that decision. This is a synthesizing and usually syncretistic process. Syncretism is the intermingling and mixing of diverse religious practices and beliefs, rather than the co-existence of elements foreign to each other within a particular religion. From a Christian point of view, syncretism is only healthy if the movement is towards a more Christo-centric position. He notes that: “Many Melanesian Christians may tolerate a slower movement in this direction than may be acceptable to other nationals and expatriates. The crucial issue is whether such a movement is taking place.”

When Christianity came to Fiji, it came with all the divisions and denominations which had historically grown up in Europe. The first Christian missionaries, to arrive were five Tahitians of the London Missionary Society in 1830. They were followed by the Methodists William Cross and David Cargill who came from England in 1835. Both groups worked together in Lakeba, Lau. They were followed by the Catholics who came from France in 1844. The Anglican Church followed in 1874, and the Presbyterians sometime later. These were the main churches in Fiji until the Seventh Day Adventists came in 1891 and the Assemblies of God in 1926.

In 1854, the most powerful chief in Fiji, Ratu Seru Cakobau embraced Christianity as a Methodist. From that time the Methodist Church spread rapidly to all parts of Fiji with the result that the majority of Fijians became Methodists. As Ratu Sukuna expressed it, Lotu together with Matanitu and the Vanua formed a three-legged stool on which the stability of Fijian society depended. Christianity became a very important element in the life of Fijian society. As Ravuvu (1983:94) remarks:

“The obvious and prominent physical landmark of Christianity in Fijian villages is the church building. A village community without a church feels guilty and shameful. They have no physical manifestation of their commitment to the church to display to others. ... Thus many Fijian communities give high priority to the construction of a church building if they had none, or construct a larger and better structure if they had a small and dilapidated one.”

He goes on to say that Churchgoing and church related activities take up a large proportion of the time of Fijians in villages or towns - not only on Sunday, but on two or three weekday evenings as well. For good historical material on the Methodist Church see Thornley and Vulaono Mai Kea Ki Vei - *Stories of Methodism in Fiji and Rotuma* (1996).

The second largest Christian denomination was the Catholic Church. Like the Methodist Church it is spread through Fiji - in both rural and urban areas. It's first missionaries were the Marists from France. The first hundred years of its history is told by Margaret Knox in her book *Voyage of Faith* (1997).

Hinduism and Islam

We cannot go into the sad story of indenture (or girmity) here except to say that between 1879 and 1920, as a result of an agreement between the colonial regimes in India and Fiji, some 60,553 Indians made their journey across the dark ocean (kala pani) to work on the sugar cane plantations mostly for the Colonial Sugar Refinery. Of those who embarked from Calcutta, most were Hindu (85.3%) with a small number of Muslims (14.6%) and a tiny number of Christians (0.1%). Between 1903 and 1916, others came from Madras (Ali, 1976:3-4). Indenture was a traumatic experience - brutal and dehumanising. It was often referred to as narak or hell by those who had to endure it. Ahmed Ali (1975:5) writes:

“(The Indian labourer) lost his caste even before boarding the ship to journey across the kala pani; in the depot of recruits in Calcutta and Madras, commensality taboos were disregarded, and a shortage of women led to liaisons and marriages both across caste and religion. The non-recognition of marriages solemnized by religious ritual in Fiji added to disorientation and instability.”

Being so far from home there was a deep sense of being uprooted and being strangers in a foreign land. Subramani in describing some of the hardship and degradation of indenture writes:

“Life in the barracks all but destroyed the notions of caste and family life. Gradually other religious and cultural practices also disintegrated. After indenture began a frantic attempt to recreate from memory, and with the help of itinerant pundits, a way of life the Indians had once known. But now the needs were different. It was more important to fight poverty and illiteracy, and generally survive in the new environment. Henceforth they pursued some of the worst aspects of the colonialist’s monetary culture which resulted in further disintegration of spiritual values.”

Despite occasional squabbles between Hindus and Muslims, there seemed to be a high level of tolerance between them and a willingness to celebrate together the religious feasts associated with each group’s religion. Because of the scarcity of women there was also a degree of intermarriage. However, after indenture the coming of the mullas and holy men from India tended to create divisions once again and call for reconversions.

During the hardships of indenture the Indians did not give up their religion. It was one way of retaining a sense of identity. To lose their religion was to lose their whole scheme of meaning and their attachment to their traditions. As Bouquet remarks: “anyone who is inside a working scheme of religion is well aware that to deprive him of that scheme is to a large extent, so to speak, to disembowel his life.”

Of the post-indenture period Ahmed Ali (1976:21-23) writes:

“The experience of the indenture system tended to equalize all irrespective of caste or creed. ... Yet the Indians retained their religion. Hinduism and Islam attended every detail of their adherent’s lives. In Fiji, as in India, they provided the essence for the preservation and perpetuation of the cultures they had inspired. Without Hinduism or

Islam, Indians in Fiji would have been less distinguishable from the other communities, except for their physical racial characteristics. Their religions ensured their distinct entities, they were thus separated from others, and divided among themselves. And these two religions sustained their followers whose practices of them varied in zeal, intensity and orthodoxy according to individuals and occasions.”

He goes on to remark:

“ Deviations were discreet, and outward appearances important, in order to escape social disapprobrium. The strength of religion was evident in the rarity of Hindu-Muslim marriages; these when they occurred caused conflict, sometimes physically expressed. During indenture days such unions were certainly more frequent than later.”

As well as the building of shrines and temples, the formation of small local mandalis for Hindu communities was a strategy peculiar to Fiji, which was effective in preserving the traditions of Hinduism. Muslims tended to look to the Mosque as the centre for instruction and worship.

Two other groups migrated to Fiji as fare-paying immigrants - not indentured labourers. These were the Gujeratis and the Punjabis who arrived in the early 1900s. The Punjabis were adherents of the Sikh religion, which they brought with them. Thus, a third religion from India entered Fiji.

The policy followed by the colonial administration was one of separate ethnic development for Fijians and Indians. This policy had repercussions for religion. Fijians were Christians while Indians were Hindu or Muslim. Ethnic differences tended to be accentuated by religious differences. Only a small percentage of Indians became Christians despite efforts to convert them - especially by the Methodist Church (4).

PART III THE RELIGIOUS SCENE TODAY

Little remains externally of traditional Fijian religion today. The bure kalou has gone and may be seen only as an exhibit at a cultural centre. The bete or priest is no longer seen. The gods or vu of the past are now referred to as tevoro or devils. Although some traditional religious expectations and some remnants of the past may remain in the hearts and minds of people, Fijians have been converted to Christianity in its many denominations.

Manfred Ernst in his recent book *Winds of Change* (1994) distinguishes three “waves” in the coming of Christianity to Fiji. The first wave was made up of the early Churches - the Methodist, Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, and somewhat later the Seventh Day Adventists and the Assemblies of God. The Second wave came in the early years following the Second World War and brought the Salvation Army, the Mormons or LDS

(1953), Jehovah's Witnesses (1958) and the Baptist Convention. The third and most recent wave has been that of the many small fundamentalist evangelical and pentecostal groups coming directly or indirectly from the US I have written about this latter group of "born again" groups promoting an Americanized version of Christianity in my recent booklet *Blessed Are the Rich* (1998). They have a certain appeal but their right wing social and economic agenda deserves careful attention. Also, their attitude to non-Christian religions is usually very negative. After the collapse of communism, some of them target Islam as the enemy (Gifford in Ernst, 1994). On the dangers of their socio-economic agenda Sara Diamond (1989:205) provides a good summary statement:

"The contemporary mission field is a battleground where those who would use the gospel message to empower Third World believers confront rival missionaries eagerly bolstering dependence on the world leadership and economic aid of the U.S."

In recent years, Fiji has formed a new church of its own (Church of the Poor) and given rise to some breakaway groups from existing Churches (Every Home or Christian Mission Fellowship and the Apostles Gospel Outreach Fellowship).

According to Manfred Ernst (1994:222):

"At present the fastest growing religious groups are the Assemblies of God, Seventh-day Adventists and Latter-day Saints. ... Among the newcomers the fastest growing groups are those of pentecostal-charismatic orientation ... The growth of the remaining religious groups (including the mainline Churches) is slow (Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, Brethren), more or less static (Roman Catholics) or regressive (Methodist Church and Anglicans)."

However the 1996 census does not support all these conclusions.

The 1996 statistics indicate that there are five divisions within Hinduism (most being Sanatan), and three within the Muslim tradition (most being Sunni Muslim). Apart from the Sikhs there are also a small number of Bahais and Confucians. The only major world religions not represented are Buddhism, Shintoism and Judaism.

The statistics also indicate that 58% of Fiji's population is Christian. Of this only about 2% is from the Indo-Fijian community and "there are no signs that this picture will change in the near future" (Ernst, 1994:205). (5)

One important post-war development for the mainline Churches has been Ecumenism and the resultant formation of the Fiji Council of Churches in 1964. This coming together of the churches has helped break down hostility and suspicion between the mainline Churches. The Council now embraces the Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian, Catholic, and Samoan Congregational Churches, as well as the Salvation Army and the Fiji Baptist Convention.

Another grouping of Churches which provides an umbrella for the fundamentalist evangelical born again Christians is the Evangelical Fellowship of Fiji established in 1989.

As our world in Fiji becomes more urbanized, modernized, or educated in western ways it also tends to become more secularized in the sense that religion is not as dominant force in society as it was in the past (Verhalen). However, religion still remains important in the lives of individuals - more so in Fiji than in the industrialized nations of the Western world.

Religion and the Coups

As was mentioned above, ethnic differences between the two major groups in Fiji have been compounded by religious differences. By and large Fijians are Christians while Indo-Fijians are Hindu or Muslim. It is not surprising then that, at the time of the military coups in 1987, religion became an important issue. The leader of the coups claimed that he had been inspired by God to do so. A majority in the Methodist Church supported the nationalism inspired by the coups.(6) In fact, it was claimed by Rev. Akuila Yabaki in the Review magazine that many Methodist ministers were ministers of nationalism rather than ministers of the Christian faith. The Sunday ban became a contentious issue and strong claims were made that Fiji must be declared a Christian State. There were roadblocks and public marches.

Rev. Paula Niukula, a former President of the Methodist Church who opposed these developments, claimed that the issues of the Sunday ban and the Christian State were more about Fijian supremacy than about Christianity. Likewise, Rev. Josateki Koroi, the President of the Methodist Church at the time of the coups, condemned extreme Fijian nationalism or "Taukei-ism" as a philosophy of domination and discrimination: "It is the domination of men over women, adults over children, husbands over wives, and chiefs over their subjects. In the field of religion 'Taukei-ism' is the domination of Christianity against non-Christian religion or Fijian domination over the others" (Quoted in Ernst, 1994:208)

It was in the time following the coups that we saw the burning and desecration of Temples and Mosques, the insulting of Hindu priests, and the burning of holy books. It was also suggested in the Cabinet of the interim government that Diwali and Prophet Mohammed's birthday should be eliminated from the list of public holidays in Fiji. All these strategies were, unfortunately, aimed at domination and intimidation of those who followed the non-Christian religions.

We must remember too that the new fundamentalist pentecostal churches tend to be intolerant of non-Christian religions. In fact, the issue of a Christian State was not only an issue of the Methodist Church, it was also an issue for the heads of a number of new fundamentalist pentecostal Churches who presented a petition to government at the time of the constitutional review in favour of Fiji being declared a Christian State.

Positive Developments

Around this same time an important positive development took place for religion in Fiji. Under the influence of Rev. Paula Nuikula and Rev. Bruce Deverel, people of the different religious traditions in Fiji came together to form Interfaith - a group that sought to build bridges of understanding and co-operation between people of different faiths. It is still a small but influential group which meets monthly and holds occasional joint services. It needs to gain wider grassroots support.

In this connection of interfaith understanding, I might mention that, up until recently, USP (University of the South Pacific) offered a course called World Religions, which helped students better understand and appreciate the major religious traditions of the world. It was particularly useful for students in Fiji. Unfortunately, it was discontinued and nothing comparable exists today - except in the theological colleges of Pacific Theological College (PTC) and Pacific Regional Seminary (PRS).

Another group which was formed after the coups under the guidance of Rev. Paula Niukula was the Research Group of the Fiji Council of Churches. This group aims to assist the mainline Churches understand and respond to the issues of the day through Christian eyes. Accepting that the Church should be “the conscience of society”, the group seeks to alert the Churches to developments and policies which are in opposition to Christian social teaching - especially if these developments and policies have unjust consequences or are detrimental to the poor. (Incidentally the Research group was instrumental in starting the Citizens Constitutional Forum.)

Types of Christianity

This may be the appropriate time to draw attention to what Manfred Ernst (1994:285) refers to as “two types of Christianity”. The first recognizes that the Kingdom of God, as preached by Jesus, is meant to challenge and change this world so that it becomes the place God want’s it to be. This world is to be the locus of Christian activity as they work against the problems of the world for greater justice, compassion and inclusiveness. They are supported in this struggle by prayer and worship and the reading of the Scriptures. The second is quite opposed to this view. It is very passive regarding the present world which it sees as evil. It looks forward to happiness only in a future world following an apocalyptic catastrophe. Meanwhile, Christians must live good lives, pray, read the Bible and praise the Lord.

Ernst remarks:

“While the first approach reveals the limitations of the existing social order, questions the dominant values of society, and seeks to improve the current social order, the second makes legitimate the existing social order, defends and enhances the values of the dominant group an is calculated to preserve the existing society. Interestingly, the

Mainline Churches of the Pacific and the New Religious Groups feature characteristics of both views which makes it difficult to draw a clear dividing line between them.”

A current example from Fiji might help to clarify this distinction. With the coming of the new millennium most of the fundamentalist pentecostal Churches are planning a great festival to praise the Lord and many are looking forward to a great catastrophe which will bring about the end of this world and bring the faithful to eternal happiness. The Churches of Fiji Council of Churches (FCC) however are saying that Christians should be inspired by the biblical tradition of the Jubilee Year and seek to fight injustice, poverty, and debt and seek for greater reconciliation and understanding.

Conclusion

Despite a certain degree of secularization, religion in Fiji is still a strong force in the life of society and in the individual lives of those who profess the various faiths. Religion in Fiji has become not simply a matter of faith but a part of ethnic identity.

The various religions in Fiji also contribute a great deal to national development through their systems of schools, their medical work and their charitable groups which seek to assist the poor and disadvantaged groups in society.

Christianity is the dominant religion in Fiji and has grown over the last three decades. However, as Ernst (1994:223) remarks: "It is a growth in increasing diversity and a growth of conservative-fundamentalist theology and influences". This implies support for the status quo and can be of concern to those Christians who understand that the message of Jesus about the Kingdom of God calls for social change.

The religious diversity of Fiji is unique in the Pacific. In a sense, because of the presence of most of the major world religions (except Buddhism, Judaism and Shintoism), Fiji is like the world in miniature. Temples, Mosques and Churches exist side by side, but forces for tolerance and intolerance also exist side by side. Recent racial tensions have now been worked out through a new Constitution, which at least on paper, recognizes the multi-racial and multi-religion nature of Fiji. There is now hope that the religions in Fiji can co-exist peacefully and, as the years pass, there will be greater understanding and co-operation.

We know that religion can be a cause of division in society. It can often be a conservative force - upholding the existing systems and hierarchy. But it can also be a force for social change - challenging poverty and inequality and inspiring a more compassionate and inclusive society. In Fiji in the past, it has been used to justify wars, coups and the oppression of one group by another, yet it has also fought poverty and racism and sought reconciliation, empowerment and peace. We know too that religion harbours both good and bad, both saints and charlatans. It has led people to seek and find God but it has also been used by others for their own material gain. Down through the years of Fiji's history, religion could, at various times, be characterized by one or the other of almost all these elements.

I would like to tell you differently but, unfortunately, there is no guarantee that the future will be any different.

Footnotes:

(1) Waterhouse gives the following as the characteristics of the gods of Fiji: almighty (kalou gata), omniscient (kalou rai-vakayawa), cannibal (kalou kana), lustful (kalou dauyalewa), warlike (kalou ni valu), metamorphoser (kalou dauliaka). Says Derrick, 1957:11:

“They were subject to all human passions and practised all human vices with divine impunity. ... They were as whimsical as men, and the gifts by which their favour was to be won were the same as those offered to the chiefs, and were presented in the same way.”

On the possible origins of the gods of Fiji cf. Thomson 1908:112

(2) Thompson (1940:108) mentions that before the advent of chiefs, people worshipped at sacred places such as sacred caves, sacred stones or sacred trees.

(3) Lessa and Vogt, 1972:381 make the following distinctions between a shaman and a priest: “A ‘shaman’ is a ceremonial practitioner whose powers come from direct contact with the supernatural, by divine stroke, rather than from inheritance or memorized ritual; a ‘priest’ is a ceremonial practitioner who often inherits his position and who learns a body of codified and standardized ritual knowledge from older priests and later transmits it to successors.” Again, “Shamans are essentially mediums, for they are mouthpieces of spirit beings. Priests are intermediaries between people and spirits to whom they wish to address themselves.”

(4) An account of the Indian Christian Church in Fiji is provided by Rev Daniel Mastapha in Thornley and Vulaono (1996:129-153). In a recent book review, John Garrett (1999:33) makes mention of the Australian Methodist missionary John W. Burton who lived alongside the sugar fields and the mill in Nausori. His book *The Fiji of Today* published in 1910 was, says Garrett, “influential in drawing attention in India and Britain to the misery and injustice of indenture. He became a stinging opponent of the system and a force behind its eventual abolition.”

(5) For the percentage of Indo-Fijians in the various Christian Churches cf. Ernst, 1994:205.

(6) Many of the details of the situation are recorded in Ernst, 1994:207-211.

(7) Rev Paula Niukula wrote a book at this time entitled *The Three Pillars* to assist members of his Church to be better informed about the connection between the gospel of Christ, the Church and the State.

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