THE FIJIAN RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL

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Introduction

I have tried to put together in this paper some glimpses of Wesleyan Christianity in Fiji, how it first arrived and how it gradually developed into the 1964 Conference. As a historical account it suffers severe limitations. It does not follow a proper sequence of events and the reader is more or less forced to jump from one event to the other in an unrelated manner. I do not apologise for this because to do this will require a professional historian and I am not an historian. What I have tried to do is simply to tell the story of how Wesleyan Christianity came to Fiji as I see it and the way it came to be a force in the spiritual enlightenment of the people and the building of the nation.

When the government came in 1874, the Governor and his civil servants knew fully well the impact of the lotu on the people and that they cannot properly rule the land without the support and advice of the missionaries and Fijian Christians. Today, the Methodist Church remains a respected voice in society and still has a lot to contribute to the building up of Fiji's multi-racial community.

I must confess that I have been under extreme pressure while writing this paper and it was only after writing the last word that I wanted to start all over again.

Laying the Foundation

It was in God's own good time and way that he sent His men and women to Fiji to evangelise the people and the land. Wesleyan Christianity arrived in Fiji through its first two missionaries, William Cross and David Cargill and their families. They set foot on the island of Lakeba on 12 October 1835. They were not the first missionaries to arrive. Three Pacific island missionaries had arrived five years earlier sent by the London Missionary Society from Tahiti. Cross who was English and Cargill who was Scottish were followed by Reverends John Hunt, Thomas Jaggar, James Calvert, Richard Lyth and six Tongan teachers between 1838 and 1839. These men went through profound religious revival experiences which was common in England, Scotland and other places during this period. Tonga went through a similar experience in 1834. The spiritual outpouring of this revival spilled over to Fiji. Among the converts in the 1834 revival in Tonga was Joeli Bulu, one of the six teachers to arrive in 1838 who was one of God's great gifts to Fiji. They came with a clear vision of heaven, as it were, and a strong sense of call from God. The revival they had experienced was organised according to the Wesleyan pattern. There was always a preliminary period of intense prayer and the study of the Word with special direction towards the saving and sanctifying of the soul. The doctrine of Entire Sanctification was Hunt's special theme. Perfect love of God and neighbour is a gift to be prayed and striven for in this life. Both in Tonga and Fiji this theme is continually mentioned in the records. So these first missionaries arrived in Fiji with that Christ-filled spirit best
summarised in the words of James Calvert when in a response to a question he said, 'We died before we went' (Tippett: 1954 p.20).

Fiji was part of the Tonga District until 1838 when it was constituted a separate Mission District with Cargill as its first Chairman. Mission work began to reach out to other parts of Fiji. Hunt and Lyth were appointed to Somosomo, a mission station that was abandoned in 1847 because of the difficult situation there created mainly by the paramount Chiefs of the area. Cargill went to Rewa. Bau, the island of Cakobau, was in constant warfare with Rewa. So in 1844 the Rewa mission station was abandoned because of war. Cross who tried to enter Bau in 1837 was refused by Ratu Cakobau. He went to Rewa instead. This greatly angered Ratu Cakobau. There could have been a better way of approaching Cakobau but time was running out for the missionaries and they had to use open doors. Travelling by either sea, land or river was not easy. They had to face all sorts of weather conditions as well as shifting battle scenes. Wives and families had to go through every imaginable hardship. In 1840, Margret Cargill and her new born baby died and were buried in Lomanikoro, Rewa. David Cargill had to leave, and the Chairmanship was assumed by Cross.

For a century, Tonga and Fiji have had contacts. Captain Cook met some Fijians in Tongatapu when he visited Tonga in 1777 (Wood: 1978 p. 13). Among the converts of the 1834 revival in Tonga was a Fijian, Josua Mateinaniu from the island of Fulaga in Lau. He came on board the boat with Cross and Cargill, and was to become a trusted adviser and spokesman for the missionaries, especially during those first difficult days. For the Tongans on Lakeba and other parts of Fiji, and for the white missionaries, Mateinaniu was an important link man and a bridgebuilder to Fiji, the people and their customs.

The missionaries were well aware from the start that their resources were limited and the task immense. They looked around for openings, and placed their limited resources there. And they placed great emphasis on evangelism as a primary responsibility. It would have been futile to civilise first and evangelise later as had been the case in other parts of the world. The kind of Western civilization brought about by earlier Europeans like sandalwood traders, whalers, escaped convicts and others was not something to be proud of.

Some of them were 'uproarious and dangerous drunkards' according to a visiting American wife of a beche-de-mer trader (Wood: 1978 p. 165). So the choice between 'to evangelise or to civilise' first was not difficult to make. They threw themselves into their work to win men for Christ. Fiji mission believed that the gospel would win its way into unconverted regions most effectively by direct encounter. They did not begin on a basis of schools and hospitals although some of these were used but always within limits. But missionaries and their Tongan and Fijian helpers were first and foremost itinerant evangelists. They looked for openings. Joeli Bulu who came with John Hunt to Rewa in 1838 was later sent to Nadi in Bua and then to Ono i Lau, back to Nadi, to Waikava in Cakaudrove and then to Viwa. In Cakaudrove, he was in charge of a training institute of pastors and catechists at Fawn Harbour (Waikava) from 1863-1866. His other Tongan countrymen, Semesa Havea, Seremaia Latu,
Sulaisi Naulivou, Sailosi Faone and Wesele Lagi were put to great use by the mission in this early period. Joeli Bulu died in 1877 and has rightly claimed a noble place on the island of Viwa as his burial place, beside John Hunt. Round about this time, many Tongan teachers and ministers returned to Tonga leaving the work to Fijians.

Fiji had some very fine linguists from the beginning as well as later years. They included David Cargill who gave the Fijian language its written form. Hunt, Watsford and Hazlewood. They were later joined by Lorimer, Fison and Langham, and still later, Heighway, Small, Bennett, Leiean, Chambers and Deane. They revised Scripture translation, provided a hymnology, catechisms, biblical handbooks and other types of books. This greatly raised the standard of preaching. William Cross in the pioneering days wrote simple paraphrases of gospel narratives arranged in short story style and these were useful for the building up of new converts. The power of the printed word greatly helped the work. By 1847 the whole of the New Testament was in the vernacular only 12 years after the commencement of the mission. The work was done by John Hunt. And after 20 years, David Hazlewood completed the translation of the Old Testament. A fully developed liturgy, a worship pattern and a gospel catechism were used from the start. The young Church developed its own forms of praise and testimony. The first hymn book comprised 48 selected hymns modelled on the Wesleyan hymnal but set to indigenous lyrics sectionalised to devotional purposes — confession, repentance, forgiveness, intercession, sanctification, praise and adoration. John Hunt more than any other person was instrumental in the laying of this foundation of faith and practice. Apart from the translation of the New Testament he also worked on the liturgy and doctrinal framework within which to explore the unsearchable riches of His grace in Scripture and experience.

A young and fast-growing church can be seen during the years 1847-1850. Statistics show growth in membership, that is, full-member, member-on-trial and nominal. Fast-growing areas were Lakeba, Viwa and Bua (Thornley: 1979 Table I pp.8-9). The popular opinion held about the history of the Church in Fiji that when a chief ‘bent the knee’ to Jehovah the people followed, cannot be accepted as the whole truth. Before Tui Nayau accepted the lotu many of his subjects in Lakeba and in Ono had already accepted the lotu. And Viwa, a small island near the chiefly island of Bau, became the centre of a strong people-movement for the lotu in the forties. Very early in the period a strong team was placed on Viwa and they laid the groundwork for the eventual winning of Bau itself for Christ. The blessing of the Viwa revival spread like wild-fire from Viwa in all directions to Nakorotuba to Vanualevu in Bua and Nadi and to Kadavu and even Rotuma. These manifestations of vitality and power commenced a decade before the conversion of Ratu Cakobau and the battle of Kaba. On Bau itself, Ratu Cakobau's principal wife was a Christian long before 1854 the year of Cakobau's conversion. Similar revival and conversion happened in Ono-i-Lau and much later in Kadavu. Fiji became Christian to a large extent because of the sacrifice, dedication and faith of its early evangelicals, most of whom are not mentioned at all. The kind of mission history that is to be written in future should allow these Fijian evangelicals to have a prominent place. The reception of Christianity in Fiji was not one that was characterised by mass movement but people movement. The people knew what they
were doing and the implications. They had to go through persecution. It was not easy to renounce the ancestral gods and embrace the *lotu*. The story of the early church in Fiji going through persecution requires a book of its own. Christian villages were destroyed and their gardens and properties plundered. They had to face the fact that in order to become a Christian, a would-be convert had to reject the gods he had feared all his life and disbelieve them absolutely. A choice had to be made between the power of the previous gods or the power of the *lotu*. A very real soul searching had to be undertaken. It was people-movement from that point of view. The relation between the individual and the community in this encounter is best summarised by John Garrett when he said:

'Although they allowed their chiefs the people seemed to understand that a fundamental personal decision was also involved in renouncing focal and ancestral spirits in favour of Christ. When they did follow, the feeling of the Church so formed was overwhelmingly communal'.

*(Garrett: 1982 p. 114)*

**A Growing Young Church**

From the beginning congregations were established to provide a fellowship meeting for prayer and worship. And small congregations of this nature were fast springing up all over Fiji. Missionaries did not hesitate to bring their new converts into full fellowship, sharing with them every means of grace. Before 1855 when the Wesleyan Missions in the South Seas, including Fiji, came under the direct management of the Australasian Conference, the young Church in Fiji was fast growing. The New Testament was available in the vernacular, as well as other writings like the *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Hunt's *Short Sermons* and *The Confession of Faith*. These small congregations helped enrich the development of the religious experience of the new converts. It provided that fellowship where they could find joy and comfort during those difficult days. It gave the young Church the unity of Christian converts; a unity so important for the organisation of their practical Christian activity. When the congregation came into being it was expected to build a home for worship, to meet for prayer and class regularly, to encourage adherents to become full members, and to establish Bible Studies. A congregation was expected to produce some local preachers who would be ready to evangelise nearby or distant villages. And every convert was expected to give an account of his faith to non Christians. There are stories of these accounts that cannot all be mentioned in this paper. A.R. Tippett mentions some of them in his little book *The Christian* *(Tippett: 1954 pp. 19-22)*. If a village aspired to the services of a full time, resident Christian teacher, a house had to be built for him and physical protection promised. The teacher himself had to show that he was hardworking, his house and surroundings clean, and that he was diligent in all communal responsibilities. Cakobau himself admitted before his conversion that the Christian groups were more diligent than the heathen in their obligations to the kingdom. Villages who sought for the services of a resident Christian teacher were usually villages with some social status. As this gradually developed, the Church was also slowly fitting into the social pattern. The forties and early fifties was a period of
growth, statistical, spiritual as well as in self support. Teachers in each village were to be paid in the property that was the usual offering of that particular village like salt, oil, mats or yams.

The young Church in Fiji provided indigenous school teachers from the ranks of its own converts at a very early period. They worked on the principle that a village just coming out of heathenism should be served by one close to themselves, that is one of their own type who would be a personal embodiment of what he was teaching about the Gospel. An academic person would not best serve a situation like this. The establishment of a central training institution for pastor-teachers at Viwa in the forties concentrated mainly on the training of evangelists. They were equipped with basic aids in Bible Study, sermon outlines, and sent back to their areas to win others for Christ. Evangelism was their primary responsibility.

Rotuma, the small island about 500 kilometres north and west of Fiji was brought into the Church. The London Missionary Society's great pioneer, John Williams left Samoans on Rotuma in 1839. But the true apostle of Rotuma was Serupapeli (Zerubbabel), a Rotuman and a Methodist. He was a good organiser, a preacher and teacher. In 1859, Serupapeli began winning his people for Christ. As a race, Rotumans are Polynesians. Their language, customs and appearance are distinct but they had always been with the Fijian Synod from the very beginning, taking up ministerial appointments with Fijian speaking congregations. Likewise, Fijian ministers have taken up appointments in Rotuma and this continues on up until today on both sides. The most notable missionary of the 20th century in Rotuma was Dr C. Maxwell Churchward, a gifted linguist from Australia. He helped the Methodists in Rotuma to make their special contribution to the Fiji Methodist Church. The Methodist Church in Fiji has always been known in the villages and towns as the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma.

**Clash of Cultures**

From 1850 onward the need for education was felt more strongly by the mission. A school for local ministers was opened at Richmond on Kadavu island. Later it was moved to Navuloa beside the Rewa river before it was eventually shifted to Davuilevu its present site in 1908. The seventies and eighties were a period of great conflict in Fiji. Commercial interests increased greatly in strength. European population increased, for example in Levuka. And the plantations they owned scattered widely in the group. Before 1874 when Fiji was ceded to Great Britain, there were 648 European plantations scattered over the group (*Tippett: 1964 p.24*). The cotton boom had come and passed. Sugar was quickly taking its place and was passing on from private planters to vested interests. The Australian Colonial Sugar Refining Company came in and became the most powerful business force in the life of the country. The second half of the 19th century saw the introduction of the British type of government, the arrival of the indentured labourers from India in 1879, as well as the coming of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company from Australia. They had come to settle with the
Church and to mould and shape Fiji. So it can rightly be said that the Fiji of today was being born then.

John Garrett observes that the second half of the 19th century also saw heavy emphasis placed on moral teaching by the mission.

‘Faith in sovereign grace and free forgiveness shaded over into a religion of morality:
'Don't drink yaqona (kava); don't smoke; don't swear'. The catchy choruses of Moody and Sankey became more popular than the great hymns of Charles Wesley.' (Garrett: 1985 p.8).

This propensity towards a religion of morality has since then become a permanent character in the life of Wesleyan Christianity in Fiji. There were many moral issues to be faced by the young Church and many Christians were unable to adjust themselves to the changing age. The 1874 Cession introduced new factors into the situation. There were now three loyalties that every Fijian had to consider:

a. to the Land (Vanua)
b. to the Church (Lotu)
c. to the Government (Matanitu)
This triple loyalty pattern makes the Fijian situation different from that of other races in Fiji. Each one is part of the other. Space does not allow me to elaborate on this but these three factors form what can be called the Fijian way of life. And this 'trinitarian solemnity' explains why a Fijian finds it difficult to understand, let alone accept, all the logic of democracy in our present multi-racial political situation. This is a fresh missionary situation for the Methodist Church in Fiji today.

When the first Indians arrived, there were still 8,500 Melanesians at work in the plantations. They were part of the kidnapped labour system of that time. They came from the Solomon Islands and New Britain. Their descendants now live in Fiji. The arrival of Indians posed new problems for the work of mission. The first real missionary to work among the indentured labourers was a Methodist catechist from Lucknow, to work among the indentured labourers was a Methodist catechist from Lucknow, India, called John Williams. He worked for three years and left in 1888. John Williams' work was carried on by a number of dedicated workers including Miss Hannah Dudley who previously worked in India before coming to Fiji in 1897. The first ministerial missionary, Rev. J.W. Burton, arrived in 1902. There was a space of 15 years when no ministerial missionary appointment was made to work among Indians, that is from 1885 when this was first mooted by William E. Bromilow.

The first half of the 20th century saw decades of institution building in Fiji. This was in terms of education, hospital, rescue and other forms. Not much intake of converts was made. The Church was in a static state. Missionaries and pastors were required in institutions and there was not much evangelism of the type seen in the 1840's. Statistical growth in the Indian work was at a standstill and this is still true today. The new Constitution of 1945 worked tremendously in loosening the bonds of paternalism. It was an attempt to prepare the way for the 1964 Conference. Paternalism was found not only in the way things were controlled from New South Wales but also how things were being controlled within Fiji. A good number of missionaries, strong believers in the British Empire, were ready to listen more to the Governor and his Civil Servants than to the ministers and leading chiefs. In December 1935 a group of independent cane farmers from Toko, Tavua led by a chief of the area, Ratu Nacanieli Rawaidranu announced proposals for an independent Fijian Methodist Church. Their avowed aim was to collect 500 and 100 tabua (whales teeth) as initial funds for the new independent Church. They started collecting this in 1936 and planned to reach the desired amount by June 1941, when this would be presented at the Annual Meeting of the Ba-Ra Circuit. This was planned to be finally presented to the 1942 Great Council of Chiefs (Wood: 1978 pp.343-4). This desire however, did not come to reality until 1964.

Another issue related to paternalism was about the inclusion of lay representatives in the Synod, previously called the District Committee. This reform was inspired by George Brown, Missionary Secretary in the NSW Conference. It agitated the minds of Fiji missionaries for many years. Some had strong feeling against it. They feared what would happen to important financial questions if laymen had a hand in decision making. They felt that laymen were not yet ready to handle this kind of important
matter (Wood: 1978 pp.343-4). The appearance of lay representatives in 1907 was a victory over the growing paternalism. Something new was brought in and has stood the test of time.

In the same year, 1907, a request was made by the missionaries serving the Fijian people for the establishment of a separate Indian Synod. The Board directed the District to reconsider this. In 1909 the District rejected it. In 1912 the Board sent a draft Constitution for consideration. The agreement on this continued on for some years. The problem here was not only that the two branches of the work were dealing with vastly different cultural situations but also they belonged to two different stages of constitutional development.

The Indian Committee all this time was responsible to the European Synod which mainly consisted of missionaries engaged in the Fijian work. These rival and somewhat paternalistic debates resulted in a new structure. The European synod ultimately held the power of autonomy. The Fijian synod comprised both Fijians and missionaries, ministerial and lay and their discussions were held in the Fijian language. The synod had to send resolutions to the higher court which was the European synod. As can be noticed, there were serious dangers in this tripartite system as long as the highest court was purely European. The greatest step was made in 1945 when the European synod was discarded in the new Constitution. Fijian matters were given to the Fijian synod and Indian matters were given to the Indian synod. A United synod was created with representatives from both synods. This was designed to do away with paternalistic attitude and also to bring the two races together into the one fellowship of the Church. There were two different folds but one flock. Thus 1945 paved the way for the full independent Conference in 1964.
THE TASK BEFORE US

To promote the faith and practice of Christianity in a new and complex situation like Fiji is not an easy task. It was Sir John Thurston, Governor of Fiji who said these words almost 100 years ago:

*The dangers of Christian Missions in these islands are now past, their difficulties are yet to come.*

(Wood: 1978 p.361)

The Fiji of today is not only exciting but also a truly complex nation.

**Political Challenges**

The present population is slightly more than 700,000 people. They are made up of Fijians, Indians, Europeans, Part Europeans, Rotumans, Chinese and other Pacific Islanders. The voting system is designed to ensure a balanced representation and fairness for the future harmony among the different sections of the population. It is true that politics in Fiji still run along racial lines. The present Coalition Government is predominantly Indian and the Alliance Party predominantly Fijian. The downfall of the Alliance came as a surprise to many Fijians, most of whom are Methodists. Little did they realise that one day an Indian dominated party would rule the land and the Chiefs would have to give way to democracy.

This unexpected turn of events in the last election is the reason behind marches protesting against the new Government. The average Fijian has not really come to terms with the fact that a political party other than the Alliance will one day run the country. This is a new missionary situation for the Churches in Fiji, particularly the Methodist Church. What sort of political involvement should the church engage itself here? What strategies for the political education of the people should be used? What sort of society should the Church help build in Fiji now? *(Note: By the time this paper was presented the coup had taken place. —Ed.)*

**The Weight of Maintaining Institutions**

There is no question about the difficulties the Church now faces in financially maintaining its schools, departments, a hospital, its ordained ministry and other newly formed agencies of social services and training centres. Some of them are in deep trouble both financially and structurally. Secondary Schools now face the fact that more and more non-Christian teachers are coming to join their teaching staff. What distinctive Christian element can these mission schools hope to maintain in the coming future? A future that will become more and more pluralistic. The question here is not how many institutions should the Church keep and how many should be destroyed but how should the Church position itself in its missionary outreach in an increasingly pluralistic society?

**Gospel and Culture**

Theological reflection is needed on the relation between the Fijian Way of Life with its three related components of Land (Vanua), Church (Lotu), and Government
(Matanitu) to the Gospel. The Vanua, which is essentially about people, the place and role of Chiefs and the whole world of thought of the indigenous Fijian, has to be studied and examined in the light of the Gospel. It has always been taken for granted, and the present political shake-up in Fiji in recent weeks cannot go unnoticed by the Church.

Towards a Renewed Community

Fiji has come a long way as a people, as a nation. And the Methodist Church has contributed greatly to the building up of this nation in terms of education, economic development, racial harmony, and spiritual life. At this time when fresh questions present themselves, the Church must retrieve its role of a watchdog in society. This is particularly important when dealing with matters that are related to peace and justice. As a watchdog, it must speak out on issues that affect the lives of people at all times. As it looks for a renewed Community of all races, the Church should see itself as a place where this renewal is constantly taking place in its liturgical life and other areas of work. The role of the laity has always been important to the Methodist Church. The pressing task to be addressed now is how can the laity be equipped to become instruments of mission and renewal in their day to day engagements in the world.

Fiji is the only country in the region where some great religions of the world are found like Hinduism, Islam and others. The relation between these religions and the mainline Churches like the Methodist Church is an issue to be addressed. How can these religions and Churches help in the overall development of the nation? The same can be said of the mainline Churches with Christian sects like the Assemblies of God. The number of these sects and other groups calling themselves Christian is on the increase in practically all the islands in the Pacific including Fiji.

The field is wide open for a fresh missionary outreach. Fresh questions are before us. The spirit of the forties and early fifties of the pioneering period need to be reclaimed in Fiji today, the same spirit which took the missionaries and the Fijian and Tongan evangelicals from one station to another, having to cross dangerous seas, land and rivers, not counting the costs. They were ready and were prepared to die for Christ. That is the spirit that we need to recapture in the Church today. Apathy is humanity's most dangerous enemy. It is generally true today in many situations that we have become accustomed to death, death in all its forms and in all sorts of places. When we become used to it, withdraw from it and become indifferent to it, that is apathy and it is dangerous. The Church can never, and should never, succumb to this. It should remain open, open to God, open to the neighbour and open to the future.

The Church in Fiji, like a house, remains incomplete. Different stones make up this house, the corner stone of which is Christ Himself. It is our intention and our prayer that it will remain an open house where:

'From east and west people will come, from north and south, for the feast in the Kingdom of God.' (Luke 13:29)
Bibliography


