

CTC BULLETIN

A Gracious God or a Powerful God?

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In May 2000, a group of civilians took hostage the Prime Minister and his cabinet ministers and declared that the government was no longer in power, and that they were acting on behalf of the indigenous Fijian population. The leaders of the take-over claimed that the government of Mahendra Chaudry was against their interests, and that it was even prepared to alienate their lands from them for the sake of progress and development for the benefit of the majority of the people of the republic of the Fiji Islands. Taking advantage of the confusion, the leaders of that group invited the people and the military to join their so-called civilian take-over of the government. Through the media they added to their list of reasons that the government of Mr. Chaudry was oppressive to the indigenous Fijians, and a puppet of a foreign government. The coup leaders told the people that senior military officers and the soldiers directly under their charge have joined them and were now their advisors and personal security. A significant number of indigenous Fijians, many from the Naitasiri area, heeded the invitation and joined the coup. Because a number of the coup leaders were Christians, they wanted to establish a Christian government and to declare the country a Christian state.

As the days went by, much of what the coup leaders wanted for Fiji reminded many people of the military coup that took place in 1987, whose leader had also wanted Fiji to be a Christian state, who promised that the interests and concern of the indigenous people would be advanced and protected, and that the political leadership of the country would remain always in the hands of the indigenous Fijians. A number of people were hurt and some were killed in the days that followed, and many families suffered as a result. Some families had their properties damaged and destroyed by vandals claiming to be part of the new regime, and some were made homeless and had to take refuge in schools and community halls, while some left the country for fear for their lives. The rouge regime was in power for only a few months. It was removed by the military, which, fortunately, was still loyal to the Constitution, and it set up a new interim administration to keep the economy going and to make sure that important and vital services are maintained and protected.

What was interesting to note in this so-called civilian take over of the labour government of Mr. Chaudry and the military coupe of 1987 was that both mentioned some of the things people hear a lot about in the preaching of the churches and in Christian consultations and conferences. Things like emancipation for or power to the people, rights of indigenous people, the value of people over economic and development programmes, and the extension of the knowledge of Christ in the world. And so it was not at all surprising that a significant number of influential Christians were found in the company of the leaders of the two coups that toppled the two labour governments of the day. In the 1987 coup Rev. Tomasi Raikivi, an ordained minister of the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma was sworn in as Minister of Information in the military government of Sitiveni Rabuka. In the coup of 2000, Methodist ministers were invited by the coup leaders to conduct services and prayer

meetings in the Parliament, which the regime had converted into their headquarters, and a haven to troublemakers. Many people questioned the wisdom of a number of Methodist ministers in the two coups.

I was fortunate to know some of the ordained church ministers that were involved in the military coup of 1987 and those supporting, though not directly involved, with the actual take-over of the government in 2000. What they shared with me formed the basis for the thesis of this paper, and that is, any theology or theological reflection that ends in disclosing God as powerful is bound to create a volatile environment, an environment which though may look beautiful and calm on the outside, is ready to explode any time. Putting it another way: every Christian theology or theological reflection should begin and end with a loving, gracious God.

God in the Religions of the World

While having different roles, names, and character, the god and gods in the religions and cultic beliefs of people all over the world have powers to do what they want and be anywhere they want to be. With such powers they are believed to know everything and change anything. Some gods are deemed to be very powerful, some less powerful, and still some have insignificant powers. With their powers they believed to be stronger than humans. It is the degree of their powers in relation to the everyday life of the people that determine their worth and position in the pantheon of the gods. The most powerful god is either the parent or creator of the lesser gods, or the most successful of the gods in the stories of the people, or because such is the only god in that religion.

People want a powerful god to protect them from their enemies and rivals and to perform what they want. Very often, occasional helplessness of a people at the hands of other people, rivals or enemies determines the power of gods; this is a very good reason for giving up one's god as weak, insignificant, and perhaps not existing at all. Victory by a powerful people is seen as an indication that their god is true; their defeat an indication that they have offended their god or gods. Many people follow a powerful god who is able to perform great deeds, destroy enemies, perform miracles, and offer favours and advantages to those who worship and obey them. This is the god or gods of most, if not all, of the religious and cultic beliefs of people in the world in the past as well as in the present. For many of these people, a powerful god is a true god, whereas people are weak and limited. A powerful god is strong and eternal. Power is truth, power is existence and being, power is right. A powerful god is a true and real god, who is always right.

Might is Right

When the missionaries came to the Pacific in the 19th century, many of the people in the Islands were converted to Christianity not because they understood clearly the intricate details of the Christian faith, but because of the courage of missionaries in their effort to preach the message. Many of the missionaries went through many hardships and difficulties, yet there was always a way out, and though some did not succeed and died in their work, there was still an element of victory and power in the

story of their lives and work.

Christianity in the Pacific is a story of the powerful God, and courageous men and women vs. the story of the weak and false gods of the Pacific Islanders. By the end of the 19th century, when most of the Pacific Islands had been visited by the missionaries, many islanders have told the story of their Church as the story of the victory of Yahweh, the true God over the false gods of their ancestors. Christianity became a true and right religion because it has a real and powerful God. Stories of conversion in the islands were stories of miraculous feats performed by the missionaries, and told from generation to generation as testimonies to a true and living God. No one in his or her right mind can afford to reject the message of the Christian missionaries. These missionaries, believed to be messengers of a true, living, and powerful god, were seen as people who cannot err but must always be right. Thus, people in villages came to regard the missionaries and ordained ministers of the Church as important. In fact, many became counselors and advisors to kings, rulers, and community leaders. To go against the words and counsel of the missionaries was to go against the advice of a powerful God, and that means a curse or a problem to the person, family or village. For many people, the missionaries represented power and truth. Though many islanders also see in Christianity compassion and love, it is really the power of God that people associate with the Christian message and the Church. Christianity and the Church are about conflict and the victory of the power of God over the false gods of the Islands.

From the time of the missionaries, theological thinking and discussions about Christian faith, God, the church have been about power, truth, victory, defeat, identity, and glory. After the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the 2nd half of the 20th century, the power of God was still very much the message of the Island churches. In the activities and programmes of the churches, the power of the invisible God is expected to be conveyed and to be made obvious to non-believers and backsliders.

The ecumenical centre of theological education in the Islands, the Pacific Theological College, established by the Protestant Churches in the Pacific including the Anglican Church in 1965, did very little or nothing to change the content of theological reflection and dialogue in the Pacific. But why should it change the emphasis and role of theology? What is wrong with theology as a discourse in disclosing the power of the hidden God? Is not theology a discourse about God, God's power and God's providence?

The Gospel of a Gracious God

The two coups that happened in Fiji in 1987 and 2000, and the many issues and problems confronting Pacific Islanders – e.g. the French nuclear testing in the Pacific; claims and activities of Indonesia in Irian Jaya; French presence in New Caledonia and the French Territories in Polynesia; exploitation of Kiribati water by the major fishing countries of the world at a very low price; discrepancies in salaries between those at the upper end of the salary scale with those at the bottom; sinking of the island of Tuvalu because of global warming; collapse of the Nauru economy and the lack of cash on the Island because of bad and corrupt politicians – all have a lot to do with power and the way power is understood and used. Until power is understood

differently, many people will continue to suffer and experience hardship, directly or indirectly. But with the majority of the people in the Islands who see power or force as the only necessary means of achieving peace and ending suffering, there is more likelihood for conflicts to happen.

When the ordained ministers of the Methodist Church in Fiji joined the leaders of the two coups, they believed that what they were fighting for was right, for who could say that fighting for the rights of indigenous people is wrong? Who would say that forceful alienation of land from the landowners and giving it to others to develop is right? Indeed there was a genuine concern for justice, freedom and prosperity of all people in Fiji. Many of them wanted to see that happen in Fiji, with the understanding that God would punish the wicked, and that God would separate the bad from good. There was very little or nothing to say to these ministers of the church that what they and the coup leaders were doing was wrong. For them, confronting and destroying the wicked was right and proper. This was for them the story of God's activity and providence. Their theology was a testimony to and a disclosure of that story.

But what do we see in the life and teachings of Jesus? For Jesus, to talk about God is to speak about God's grace to everyone, particularly to the weak, the poor, and the suffering (Luke 4:16-19). It is about the responsibility of those in positions of power to care for these people. The story of God should be a story of compassion, responsibility to the weak, the poor, and those who suffer. If this is the story of God the way God wants it to be told, why do most theological reflections talk about the glory, power and freedom of God and the people? One of the reasons I believe is that very often the story of God's grace to people who are poor, weak, and are suffering is always a message of judgement upon the rich, powerful, and everyone else who is not poor, weak, and suffering. For many people, it is easier to engage in conflict and destroying one another rather than to serve the needs of the poor and the weak, for in serving the poor and the weak, one is reduced to that of the lowest of the lowest. For many people there is pride and honour in being powerful; there is no pride and honour but only humiliation in serving the lowest of the lowest.

If theology is about God, Jesus, and the Church, then it should be concerned less with glory, power, and majesty, but more with God's grace and service. Who wants a powerful God? I think it will be those who are out of reach of God's grace and compassion. In the story of Jesus, we see God as God not because God is powerful, but because God is gracious. Theology is important as a tool, a means to help us disclose the hiddenness of God in our midst. Like most tools it works best when it is used for the purpose it was intended for, i.e. to disclose to the world the true and living God who is God, our Parent, not because God is powerful but because God is gracious. Whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, many of our Christian theological reflections had been and still are responsible for many conflicts and power struggles in the world.

NOTES:

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