17. Religion

Religion has always been a powerful force in the lives of Fiji people.

The early missionaries converted Fijians from cannibalism and for many years the dominant religions were Methodist, Catholic, Church of England and Presbyterian. Then came the Seventh Day Adventists, Assemblies of God and many others. The indentured Indians brought with them the religions of the subcontinent, Hinduism and Islam. During the 20th century, most of the world’s other religions found their way to Fiji and won converts.

While all these religious teachings have been of great benefit to the people, undoubtedly the churches’ greatest contribution to the development of the nation has been the establishment of schools throughout the islands. They filled a void that could not have been met by any government. Devoted teachers came from many parts of the world to impart their knowledge, and many of the country’s leaders openly admit that they owe their success to their church mentors and teachers. Many Catholic brothers, priests and nuns have been elevated to almost sainthood status by their former students. Methodist church leaders have been revered, and to be ordained is to gain a special place in Fijian society.

While there has been little change in the influences and interpretation of Hinduism and Islam by its devotees, other religions have changed. With the waning of European influence, the Church of England and Presbyterian Church membership shrank before they adopted an evangelistic policy and brought Indians and Fijians into the fold. The Catholics and Methodists retained their strength and there was little racial or political bias. Many of the early Methodist Church Presidents came from Australia or New Zealand. Despite the fact that the Church was predominantly Fijian, there was a time when an Indian was appointed President of the Church. But the myth of a racially harmonious church exploded in 1987 when Methodist Church leaders blatantly sided with the Fijian Taukei movement and drew it into the maelstrom of politics. Many Fijians who abhorred the new direction left the church and joined other new denominations, such as the Assembly of God, Latter Day Saints and the Pentecostals.

The physical presence of a church in Fiji was usually marked by its impressive churches. The Catholic Church built some striking edifices in many parts of Fiji during the 19th and 20th centuries and these remain as evidence of the strength of the church. The Methodists built humble wooden churches in villages and towns throughout the islands and these served a more practical purpose as hurricane shelters and communal meeting places. The Muslims and Hindus
built traditional mosques and temples. In the latter part of the 20th century the Church of Latter Day Saints constructed the grandest temple of them all, a massive marble structure costing many millions of dollars that is used only on rare ceremonial occasions. Its opulence, in a poor country like Fiji, is a rather obscene extravagance. As if not to be outdone, another new religion, the World Harvest, constructed the largest indoor auditorium in Fiji.

The men and women who preached the word of God have been as diverse as the religions they represent. Jacque and I were married in Suva in 1957 by Bishop Kempthorne. He was a grand old man who had been in office for so long that many thought the church belonged to him. We had to drag him out of semi-retirement to marry us, and halfway through the ceremony we began to think that it wasn’t such a good idea. Standing in front of us in the fine regalia of a bishop, the old man looked magnificent, except that he trembled so violently from Parkinson’s disease that I was sure that it was only God who prevented the Holy Book from falling from his hands.

Another bishop I saw a great deal of was the Catholic Bishop Mataca. A man from very humble circumstances, he became the first Fijian Bishop of the Catholic Church. I have no doubt that he was a very devout man who was much respected by his flock. But I think he loved golf as much as God. Whenever time permitted he was out on the course with a group of friends, and he played to a low handicap, winning many tournaments. On a Saturday after the competition he could often be seen in a corner of the club enjoying a beer and playing cards. He personified the attitude of so many priests who, rather than only appearing at church on Sundays, threw themselves into the life of the community; men like Father Kevin Barr, who set up a haven for homeless street boys and a farm where they could learn a trade, and who wrote constantly to the newspapers condemning corruption and waste, and appealing for understanding of the underprivileged. Few people had the courage to take on the establishment like Father Barr.

One of the most charismatic clerics Fiji has known was George Hemming. He came to Fiji as a school teacher, but this did not offer sufficient challenge, so he became a doctor. Even this wasn’t enough, so he took his vows as an Anglican priest. He coerced a number of men to help him build one of the most beautiful little churches at Suva Point. (You did not say no to George Hemming.) He conducted services on Sundays in a most refreshing way. There was neither pomp nor ceremony, and his sermons, which he delivered as he walked around the church, focused on sensible practical matters but were always linked to God in some indisputable way. As a doctor, he conducted a practice at a clinic that was set up by a local philanthropist to help the poor. He was so busy that he couldn’t afford to have two consulting rooms. There was just one room with a partition halfway down the centre, with his desk at the end of the partition.
Patients sat on each side of the partition and he dealt with them two at a time. His advice was swift and sure and you didn’t argue with him. He was tough and often callous, but people loved him.

Of course the church produced many ‘saints.’ Just outside Suva city is St Christopher’s Anglican Orphanage. For many years this has been the home for children of all races and all walks of life. Even when they matured and left to fend for themselves, the orphans always looked back on this place as home and mother to all of them was Sister Clare Messina. A fat, cheery, Tongan lady who never complained and never seemed to get angry, Sister Clare was the epitome of all that is good in people. The home always got what it wanted from the community because people trusted her and knew she would use their donations wisely. She was always so grateful for what people gave that she made them feel good.

The churches generally kept their distance from the affairs of state, until the coup of 1987, when the Methodist Church began to project itself as the church of the indigenous people. Its ministers became very vocal on Fijian interests and some became ministers in an interim government. Reverend Manasa Lasaro was one of these church leaders who became a household name as he vigorously championed the cause of Fijians. While he was severely criticised in some quarters, he ironically played a significant role in helping to get the beleaguered sugar industry started after the coup of 1987. Indian farmers were refusing to cut their cane, so Lasaro brought in gangs of Methodist Fijians from all over Fiji and it was a result of this action that harvesting commenced.

During the first part of the 21st century, Methodist church leaders were so closely involved with politics that the church seemed like an extension of the Qarase Government. Their ministers served in parliament and on various government committees. When Bainimarama came to power, he clamped down hard on any church involvement in politics.

One impact of the 1987 coup was the way grace became a compulsory first item on the agenda of any meeting or gathering of people. In the past, a few words were uttered at the start of a meal, but after the coup, offence could be caused if a person with some church connections was not invited by a presiding person to say a prayer. No matter that it was a Sugar Commission meeting, a sporting function, or a donation by a foreign government to a charitable organisation. A feature of the grace was also its length. It seemed that God’s blessing had to be sought for every aspect of life in Fiji. Grace could go on for five to ten minutes.

People have their own rationale for their faith and each individual gains benefit in a personal way. For many, it’s a case of going to church because other people do; it’s the right thing. For others, there is a deep and abiding belief in God.
The church often brings hope of a better life and for salvation. The Fijian lady who worked for us as a housemaid was once a Methodist. She had few interests outside her work and life in her village just outside Suva. She and her husband had no children. They seemed content, but had no real focus in life until they discovered one of the new churches set up in Fiji. Life was suddenly transformed as they became totally involved in church activities. They went to meetings nearly every evening and all day on Sunday. She organised women’s groups and he purchased a keyboard and learned to play it at the services. He gave up drinking and they never read anything but the Bible.

They conscientiously gave ten per cent of their meager earnings to the church each week. They blossomed in many ways and became better, more mature people. Their life took on a real meaning where previously there was a vacuum. I watched this transformation with interest and gained a better appreciation of how the church can improve the quality of lives.

It caused me to re-examine my own attitude to the church of which I professed to be a member, and to the mystery of God. At boarding school in Melbourne, religion had been drummed into me. There was no room to question the validity of a God. But as I grew older, I became more confused. The harsh reality of life made it hard for me to accept the somewhat unnatural teachings of the Bible and the form of church service. Nevertheless, I had to accept the view of the vast majority of humankind that there must be a God of some kind, and the church was part of the structures of God. So while I stopped going to church, I did accept an invitation from the Bishop to help the church by serving as a trustee of the Anglican Diocese of Polynesia. I supposed it was my way of hedging my bets.

The trustees were responsible for protecting and enhancing the value of church assets throughout Fiji. There were many and some were under-utilised. One of our first tasks was to develop a piece of church property by building a block of home units. When completed the units were the most prestigious in Suva and were eagerly sought after by the growing expatriate community.

Another of the church assets was a large tract of unused land on the island of Vanua Levu. The trustees decided to sell this to the people of Kiribati, whose islands were being inundated by rising sea levels. Perhaps, in times to come, many of the people of Kiribati will be living on this land in Fiji.

Throughout every community and district of Fiji where Hindus and Muslims have settled, there are schools that they have established and funded. Their contribution to the education structure is enormous. The same must be said of Catholics and other denominations. Without these religious schools it is difficult to imagine how the children of Fiji could have been educated.
Both my son and daughter won scholarships to top schools in Australia which resulted from their excellent education at Stella Maris.

While it is significant that the motto in the Fiji coat of arms is 'Fear God and Honour the King,' perhaps it would be more appropriate in an educational context if it was 'Thank God and Honour the King.'