

ON RECONCILIATION

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Tonight, I am haunted by an image from the evening news. In a theological college, surrounded by garden, with a circular chapel as its centrepiece, military men and armed terrorists meet to decide the fate of a nation and probably to tear up its constitution. The press swarm around, and on the roadside youths with stones taunt passing cars. The staff and student houses on the campus are empty, vulnerable; among them are the homes of my friends. Fifteen years ago I taught English here to the students' wives, and it is a place of happy memories.

I had been forewarned. Internet and phone calls had informed me that the Fiji Council of Churches had been asked to provide a neutral meeting place for negotiations between the newly declared military government and Speight's men who have been holding the Fiji Cabinet hostage for 12 days. They offered the Pacific Theological College premises, just next door to the parliamentary compound. It is an old and honourable role for the church to provide a safe place, where people may attempt to be reconciled. The Lutheran church in East Germany provided such a place for meetings between civil rights activists and the Communist Party for years before the fall of the Berlin Wall. The offer of the Fiji churches falls within that tradition, yet I am still shocked by the image. It seems sacrilegious.

The chapel at PTC, its focal point, is dedicated to the memory of the islander missionaries, the covenant makers, those who travelled from their island homes across the Pacific to bring the Christian gospel to other islanders. It is dedicated to, amongst others, Tongan Joeli Bulu, who fought his mythic shark in the Rewa River, to Aminio Baledrokadroka, who pleaded with the colonial governor of Fiji to be allowed to evangelise in

New Britain, to Semesi Nau and Pologa, who sat for three months in a boat in the lagoon at Ontong Java before consent was given for their landing. It is a memorial to thousands of men and women who were prepared to give their lives — and many did just that. Some would say that they were the dupes of colonialism, forced to work for a pittance in areas deemed too dangerous for a white missionary. There is some truth in the charge. I have read the arguments over pay, the scathing comments made by white missionaries about the perceived shortcomings of their islander colleagues. Yet they were not forced, nor are they seen as duped. Rather they are seen by their descendants and by others as epitomising that which is best and noblest among Pacific people. It is here that the armed men come.

The image remains with me as I attend an ecumenical reconciliation service for Corroboree 2000. Tonight, for most of the congregation, reconciliation is exclusively about black/white relations in Australia, about indigenous rights here. For me, it has become more complicated. Can there be any equivalence between the struggle for the rights of the minority, the genuinely dispossessed in a settler society, and the manipulation of 'indigenous rights' by a majority to justify the dispossession of others? There are strident voices on the internet which would seek to persuade me that the two are the same. But I cannot agree. What links my walk on Sunday across Commonwealth Bridge in the sleet and wind, and the walk I will do tomorrow with the Fiji community is a belief that it is possible for different communities to live together in harmony, but only if the past is acknowledged, if there is mutual respect, if there is justice and equity. Three years ago I thought I had seen that belief in Fiji. Visiting for the first time in 12 years, I had watched services and ceremonies of reconciliation as the new, fair constitution was accepted. Now all that was blown to the winds. Had it been a chimera?

After the Corroboree service I describe the scene at PTC to a theologically inclined friend, and ask him whether he thinks the use of such sacred space for the negotiations is part of the church's role of reconciliation, or a sacrilege. 'Perhaps,' he replies, 'that depends on what they decide.'