

The Christian View of Religious Freedom

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The missionary wave of the 19th century brought great changes to the Pacific nations. The impact of Christianity transformed spirit worshippers, cannibals, and warring chiefs into followers of Christ, lovers of people, and peace negotiators, within their societies. The message of Jesus Christ, contained in the Bible, has given the Pacific Islands freedom to worship, and practice their faith, to live out their lives, in the company of others of other persuasions.

THE COMING OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

Christianity is, today, the most-widespread and pervasive religion in the region, and the original peoples of the South Pacific are steadily making it their own. National churches, under indigenous leadership, have replaced most of the older missions. Churches, with long histories in the islands, proudly perpetuate distinct traditions of worship, combining indigenous and imported themes; politicians, some of them prominent clergymen, draw upon Christian values, to promote social development and self-reliance; villagers gather in local churches, to celebrate Christmas and Easter festivals, in which they competitively raise funds to further Christian expansion . . . isolated peoples listen raptly to sermons and gospel hymns, beamed to them in their language from evangelical radio stations in the islands, and beyond. The emerging religion is pervasive, diverse, and vibrant.¹

The above quote speaks about the way in which Christianity has become a strong influence in the South Pacific. This means that most Pacific Islanders will approach questions of religious freedom from a Christian point of view. Even if it is only in name, Christianity is regarded as the religion of the Pacific nations. The missionaries, who brought the gospel to the people, came with the conviction that true freedom can be found in Jesus Christ alone. This is the way the Lord Jesus viewed His mission in the world. "The Spirit of the Lord is one Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight

for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19).

As a Pacific Islander, I am grateful for the commitment and sacrifice made by the many missionaries, for bringing the gospel to us. As a Papua New Guinean, I pay tribute to the many Pacific Islanders, who freely gave their lives, together with others from other countries, to bring the gospel to our island. Many, who came to us, never returned to their homeland. Their graves speak of the price they paid for our freedom. They brought the gospel to us because, "it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. . . . For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith' " (Rom 1:15, 16). Salvation is about freedom, now, and in the future. The gospel of Jesus Christ has set Pacific Islanders free from slavery to spirit powers, has opened their eyes to see that God created them to belong to Him, and live in fellowship with Him. They have entered into this relationship with God, through faith, and are declared righteous. Righteousness, through faith in Christ, speaks about new freedom in Christ, freedom to live in the right relationship with God, and other human beings. For Christians, any thinking about religious freedom begins with this good news about experiencing a new kind of freedom in Jesus Christ.

This Christian view of religious freedom is centred deeply in God's great desire for all the people of the world. God sent His Son into the world for the salvation of everyone who will accept Him as his or her Saviour and Lord. "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but, whoever does not believe, stands condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:15-18). God's offer of salvation is available to every person on equal terms. We must act, in freedom, to accept what God offers, or to reject it.

The Bible passages quoted above from the gospels of Luke and John, while allowing us the freedom to choose, also make sure that we clearly understand the consequence of our decision. According to Luke, real freedom can only be found in Jesus Christ. Pacific Islanders were imprisoned by spirit powers,

magic, sorcery, and witchcraft. Jesus came to set us free from this life-long bondage. John says that, to reject the offer God makes, is to place ourselves under the judgment of God. There is no force being applied on anyone here. What these two writers' are doing is simply clarifying to us their understanding of true freedom. Having understood the alternatives set before us, we are asked to exercise our basic human right: the freedom of choice. They also show the way Christianity fully respects the dignity of each human being's choice and responsibility in the religious realm.

Let me illustrate what I have said. Prior to the coming of Christianity, Pacific Islanders had a system of belief of their own. They were "believers" before they heard about believing in Jesus Christ. Their whole animistic background made them believe in the existence, and power, of the spirits. The early missionaries presented the gospel, and offered the people the freedom to choose between the new God, the missionaries represented, and the gods of their ancestors.

In many places, after a long time of thinking, and heart searching, the people made their decision to embrace the Christian faith. What we learn about Pomare II of Tahiti is true of other kings and chiefs of the Pacific Nations.

For the first decade of the mission (in Tahiti), and well into the second, there had been virtually no interest in Christianity. Those of the missionaries, who had acquired the language, itinerated, and did some preaching, but got no hearing. They had learned the language, and improved their vocabulary, having checked and crosschecked their list, which contained 2,700 words by 1806. Pomare II had learned to read and write, and so had a number of his people.²

Three incidents, in his experience, led Pomare II to decide what to do about Christianity. One was the war of 1809 onward that swept through the whole island. By this time, most of the missionaries had left the island. The first missionaries arrived in Tahiti in 1797; by 1798 – one year after their arrival – 11 had already gone to Sydney, and by 1807 only four of the original 29 were left. In turn, Pomare II was back in control of one of the five districts he had lost. The defeat he suffered in the war made him think whether he was under the displeasure of the Christian God. He made no real change at this point. "It was still to his heathen gods he appealed, with feasting and dissipation,

and the same old sacrifices. Many priests were employed in this service, many prayers, and great offerings, were made. The missionaries were not with the time, or nearby.”³

The second experience, he went through, was the death of “one child, in whom they had high hopes.”⁴ This incident made Pomare II turn from his gods to the God of the missionaries. His decision to change his religious allegiance was debated. There was no agreement on the matter, but Pomare II would not change his mind. Dr Alan R. Tippett believes Pomare II experienced a genuine change of heart.

Pomare II, like his father before him, was a careful man in matters of religion. As a pagan, he was sincere in his dealings with his gods, until, in these years immediately prior to his conversion, he had clearly lost his faith in them. His behaviour followed a normal Oceanic pattern. He disclosed his intention of changing faith to the social group, to which he was responsible. In the deliberations, there were differences of opinion – in terms of religion, not politics. . . . When he finally took the eventful plunge, he did so alone, inviting others, but not drawing back, when none followed him. When not under missionary observation, he could have relaxed, but he preferred to continue with the Christian prescriptions, and, when he finally regained his lost position, he chose to maintain his new faith, in a worthy manner. I see no reason for doubting his sincerity.⁵

The climax of his experience came when he chose to eat the sacred turtle under forbidden circumstances.

Pomare had, for some time past, shown his contempt for the idols of his ancestors, and his desire to be taught a more excellent way. . . . The natives had watched the change in his mind, with the most fearful apprehension. . . . They were powerfully affected on one occasion, when a present was brought to him of a turtle, which was always held sacred, and dressed with sacred fire within the precincts of the temple, part of it being invariably offered to the idol. The attendants were proceeding with the turtle to the *marae*, when Pomare called them back, and told them to prepare an oven, to bake it in his own kitchen, and serve it up, without offering it to the idol. The people around . . . could

hardly believe the king was in a state of sanity. . . . The king repeated his direction: a fire was made, the turtle baked, and served up at the next repast. The people of the king's household stood, in mute expectation . . . of the god's anger. . . . The king cut the turtle, and began to eat it, inviting some that sat at meat with him to do the same; but no-one could be induced to touch it.⁶

Out of his own choice, Pomare II embraced the God of the missionaries as his God. One of the early Pacific Islanders to join the missionaries in spreading the gospel from island to island was Papeiha of Tahiti. At Rarotonga, Papeiha encouraged Tinomana, the politically oppressed Ariki of the Arorangi district, to become a Christian. When Tinomana hesitated to renounce his traditional gods, Papeiha patiently taught him a simple prayer for food, and parted with Tinomana provision: "to think seriously upon the subject; for, as it was a matter of great importance, it was not well to be in haste".⁷

Papeiha, like the two gospel writers, Luke and John, out of personal commitment to Christ, saw that true religious freedom is to be found in Christ alone. In his missionary service, he "showed that, for him, the central issue was a choice between the Living God and the traditional gods".⁸ Papeiha knew both the spiritual bondage the Pacific Islanders lived under and the liberating power He had experienced in Christ. Instead of forcing the people to decide for Jesus Christ, he advocated freedom of choice. Many people readily responded to the message they heard. Acceptance of Christianity, in many cases, was sealed by free public acts, such as the burning of all items associated with former worship, and the construction of church buildings, as centres of the new religion.⁹

Papeiha's motive of allowing the people to decide freely about their relationship to Christ was followed very closely by James Chalmers, the veteran LMS missionary, in his service in Papua. He confronted sorcerers with the claims of Christ, and allowed them to decide for themselves what to do about it. Even when the people did not understand the full meaning of conversion and discipleship, he accepted them as they were, and ministered to them.¹⁰

One of the greatest proofs of the power of the gospel is that it makes the fierce, excitable savage an earnest lover of peace.¹¹

Since the gospel of Christ has the power to transform human lives, be they civilised or savage, Chalmers, and his South Sea Island colleagues, were determined to preach the gospel, trusting in the Holy Spirit to bring them into full freedom in Christ.

Thus, the history of Christian expansion across the Pacific reflects a heritage of religious freedom for Pacific Islanders, both to change from their old religion, and actively to pass on the new religion.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND THE BIBLE

The Bible has become an important book for Pacific Islanders. Just as the Southern Cross guided our forefathers safely across the vast Pacific ocean at night, and continues to play that role for us today, so the Pacific Islanders regard the Bible as their guiding star, through the journey of life.¹² What Jesus said to the Jews is meaningful also to us in the South Pacific. “If you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31, 32). Jesus linked Christian discipleship and freedom with His teaching, and Himself. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to experience true freedom. The teaching of Jesus reminds us that religious freedom is not an end in itself, but flows out of the discovery of truth. Therefore, the government must provide a climate, where people can search for truth, as the foundation for ensuring freedom.

For us, who have never seen Jesus, our understanding of Him and His teaching is dependent on the Bible. Jesus and the Bible are inseparable. The Bible testifies to Jesus, Christ affirms the authority of the Bible. “You diligently study the scriptures, because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the scriptures that testify about Me” (John 5:39). Obedience to the Word of God brings prosperity and success. “Do not let this book of the Law depart from your mouth, meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (Josh 1:8). For the Christian, the Bible equips his or her life for effective ministry, “All scripture is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:17).

The Bible has the enormous capacity to significantly influence our decision-making. It provides images of what it means to live

responsively with God and with our fellow men. The Bible confronts us with images, and pictures, of a life of caring, of loving one another, and of a world that recognises the image of God in us.¹³

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND JESUS CHRIST

Jesus Christ came into the world, died, and rose from death, to deliver all mankind from the power of sin and death. “So, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). Not only did Christ set mankind free from the power of sin and death, He also sets us free from our lifelong enemy, Satan, who holds the power of death. “Since the children have flesh and blood, He, too, shared in their humanity, so that, by His death, He might destroy him, who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who, all their lives, were held in slavery, by their fear of death” (Heb 2:14, 15). Jesus sets all who trust in Him free from sin (Rom 6:18; 8:2), so that they may live in the freedom He offers them (Gal 5:1), and walk in freedom (Ps 119:45). The freedom Christ offers is a costly freedom, which He bought by His blood (Rev 1:5).

The Christian view of religious freedom has a strong relationship to Christ and His death for us. Christ gave up His life, in exchange for our lives. He took the place of all sinners on the cross. By His bodily resurrection, He opened the way into fellowship with God, here, and in the hereafter. The life, death, and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ determine the destiny for all humanity. Those He redeems are His representatives on earth to tell others about the freedom He offers. This witness is to be borne with love and understanding, free of all kinds of kinds of compulsion.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS CONTROLLED FREEDOM

The authority of the Bible, and the centrality of Christ, make religious freedom a controlled freedom. The Christian view of religious freedom is a freedom to believe, and act, according to the teachings, given in the scriptures, the teachings about Jesus Christ, and the biblical directives related to moral behaviour, individual dignity and destiny, the problem of evil, the person and activities of Satan and his many agents, universal brotherhood, and many more. To be a Christian, is to live by the truth of the scriptures. The teachings of the scriptures control human freedom, not to indulge the sinful nature, but, rather, to serve one another in love. “Live as free men, but do not

use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God” (Gal 5:13; 1 Peter 2:16). Love for one another, and freedom to live, cannot be separated. True love for our fellow human beings will cause us to allow them to live the full freedom God wants them to enjoy. To love our fellow human beings is to treat them with respect and dignity. “Show proper respect to everyone: love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king” (1 Peter 2:17).

What we need to be careful about is that we do not let love and freedom become a licence to live, and do things, as we please. Individually, we are our brother’s, or sister’s, keeper. We are free to care and protect, we not free to destroy and kill. For the Christian, true love and true freedom are controlled, and directed, by Christ, through the Holy Spirit, and the Bible. The words, Jesus spoke, are applicable here. “Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate, and narrow the road, that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matt 7:13, 14). Jesus Christ gives us power and freedom to follow His footsteps, to offer our lives, as He offered His for the freedom of others.

The idea of controlled freedom is not only a biblically-determined principle, it is also a practical reality. As citizens of our respective countries, we are expected to live by the laws of our countries. The traffic laws of our countries determine the side of the road, on which we drive, and the speed limits we are to follow. To disobey these laws, is to destroy ourselves and others. These laws are made by our governments, and we are to obey them.

According to the Bible, all government authorities have been instituted by God, they are God’s servants, to do what is good for their people (Rom 13:1-5). The Bible admonishes Christians to pray, intercede, and give thanks to God, “For everyone: for kings, and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives, in all godliness and holiness” (1 Tim 2:1-2). These teachings from the Bible tell us that government authorities do not have absolute power. Their power is controlled by the purposes of God, for all the people. Governments are there to create good and wholesome laws, and administer them with justice, for the good of all the people. In the matter of religious freedom, no government has the right to stop the people from believing, and practising, what their conscience tells them. All human beings must be given the freedom to believe as they choose.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND HUMAN DIGNITY

According to Genesis, the first book of the Bible, God created mankind in His own image (Gen 1:27), so that He can enjoy fellowship with them. Human beings are very special to God. God was very pleased with all that He created, but human beings brought much greater delight to Him. The creation of mankind touched the very core of the Father-heart of God. With mankind, the creator found Himself drawn intimately to them – the created beings, He picked them up, drew them closer to Himself, and in a very tender, loving, and personal way, God bent over, kissed them, and gave Himself to them. “And the Lord God formed mankind from the dust of the ground, and breathed into His nostrils the breath of life, and mankind became a living being” (Gen 2:7). What Genesis seeks to tell us is that human beings are very special to God. They are the crown of His creation, the joy of His heart, the apple of His eye. His greatest desire for them is that, like Him, they should have the total freedom to be creative, to rule over the rest of creation responsibly, to realise their full potential, to relate intimately to Him.

But God’s deep desire for mankind was interrupted by the subtlety of the serpent, and the free-will God accorded to mankind. Satan tempted, mankind made their choice, sin entered the world, and God and mankind separated. Gen 3 is the record and witness of this fact. It speaks to us of the reality of sin, the abuse of religious freedom, and the lust for power over others in the religious sphere.

Sin spoiled the beautiful relationship between God and the rest of His creation. What sin destroyed, Jesus, by His death on the cross, redeemed. By His sacrificial death, Jesus, once again, brought God and mankind into fellowship with each other. All who enter into fellowship with God through Christ become children of God, freely justified by His grace (Rom 3:24). They are set aside to worship Him, and enjoy His grace in freedom. This is their true dignity, and the goal, for which God created and redeemed them. God’s children must not be deprived of their freedom, their birthright, by force, or by law.

FREEDOM TO HEAR AND CHOOSE

Freedom is a basic human right. Christians have no right to force people against their free will. The decision to accept, or not to accept, the offer God

makes, rightly belongs to every individual, regardless of colour, culture, age, or gender. No individual has the right to force, or forbid, others from exercising their basic human right. To control people, by coercion of any kind, is to deprive them of their dignity as human beings. As human beings, we belong to each other as brothers and sisters, and are responsible to allow each other the freedom to practice our belief, to live as free men and women.

Religious freedom, in this respect, means every person must have the freedom to hear the message, and make the necessary decision. This is important, because the idea of human beings, created in the image of God, and redeemed by the death of Jesus Christ, reinforces human free will to hear and to choose. Therefore, as we have seen, Christians reject religious coercion, because Christ respects the right of people NOT to accept the gospel. Since Christ also respects the choices people make, Christians should work to ensure freedom of religion for all: freedom to worship, freedom to propagate their faith, and freedom to change their religion.

FREEDOM TO LIVE TOGETHER

Today's world is one of diversity and pluralism. We cannot ignore each other, or fight against each other. We must learn to live together, share our convictions, our fears, and frustrations, openly with each other, listen to each other, make our decisions in freedom, on the basis of the understanding we receive. In the area of religious freedom, we must allow each other freedom to believe, and practise, our faith. As we propagate our faith, we need to be careful that we do not lead people away from personal relationship with God their creator.

At last year's gathering in Manila, evangelical leaders around the world discussed "The Uniqueness of Christ in Pluralistic Society". Part of the declaration, coming out from the gathering, reads:

We affirm that God desires diversity in His creation. We must learn to accept, and even celebrate, that diversity. We, therefore, affirm freedom of conscience, practice, propagation, and witness, in the areas of culture, worldview, scientific investigation, and religion. We affirm that God has acted decisively, supremely, and normatively, in the historical Jesus of Nazareth. In His person and work, Jesus is unique, such that no one comes to the Father, except through Him. All

salvation, in the biblical sense, of eternal life, life in the kingdom, reconciliation with God, and forgiveness of sins, comes solely from the person and work of Jesus Christ.¹⁴

Pacific Islanders are community-oriented people. The community solidarity we know is the solidarity of totality. Our communities consist of the living, and the living-dead, the visible, and the invisible, human beings, and God, or spirits, the pigs, and the dogs, the trees, and the mountains, the land, the rivers, and the sky above us. Freedom to live together means freedom to believe and live, within this solidarity of totality.

CONCLUSION

We in the South Pacific are grateful for the freedom we have to live out our faith, without fear or hindrance. We are grateful to our respective governments for fostering this freedom. We thank God for the missionaries, who brought the message of freedom to us. Instead of being locked away in our little tribes, mountains, and islands, out of fear of each other, and the spirits, which held us captive to their power and control, the message of the gospel has given us new freedom, and bound us to each other, as brothers and sisters.

The Christian view of religious freedom, as I have outlined in this paper, encourages us to practise and propagate our convictions, with freedom and care. As we have seen, the Christian view of religious freedom is controlled by what the Bible teaches, and what Jesus Christ did on the cross, to restore to us our true dignity, as people created in the image of God. There is religious freedom all over the South Pacific. We must strive to maintain it that way.

ENDNOTES

¹ John Barker, "Ethnographic Perspectives on Christianity in Oceanic Societies", in John Barker, ed., *Christianity in Oceania: Ethnographic Perspectives*, (ASAO Monograph n. 12), New York NY: University Press of America, 190, p. 1.

² Alan R. Tippett, *People Movement in Southern Polynesia: A Study in Church Growth*, Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1971, p. 13.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 16.

⁶ William Ellis, *Polynesian Researches During a Residence of Nearly Six Years in the South Sea Islands*, London UK: Fisher & Jackson, 1829, vol 1, pp. 191-192, cited in Tippet (1971), p. 16. See also Richard Lovett, *The History of the London Missionary Society: 1795-1895*, London UK: Oxford University Press, 1899, vol 1, p. 197.

⁷ John Williams, *A Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Sea Islands (1873)*, cited in John M. Hitchen, *Training "Tamate": Formation of the 19th-century Missionary Worldview*, PhD Thesis, Aberdeen UK: University of Aberdeen, 1984, p. 672.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 673.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 673.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 717-718.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 719.

¹² Sir Paulias Matane, Former PNG Ambassador to the United States of America, in the paper he delivered at the seminar on "Bible, Culture, and Communication", held in Goroka, organised by the Melanesian Institute, titled his contribution "Our Guiding Star", as he sought to relate the importance of the message of the Bible to our daily living, *Catalyst* 18-4 (1988), pp. 12-15.

¹³ Pedi Anis and Esikiel Waisale, "The Bible in Decision-making", in *Catalyst* 18-4 (1988), p. 19. The authors were respectively Premier and Minister of Finance of the New Ireland Province (PNG).

¹⁴ *WEF Theological News* 23-4 (1992), p. 1.