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### Abstract
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Reconciliation as Public Theology: Christian Thought in Comparative Indigenous Politics

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Abstract
Christian public theology extends reconciliation beyond its principal sacramental concern for relationships between God and penitent to the construction of ‘socially just’ public relationships for the settlement of intra-national conflict. In theological terms, reconciliation brings public relationships into what Hally calls ‘the Christ narrative of passion, death and resurrection’ in which the perpetrators of injustice repent and seek forgiveness. This article introduces the conflicts that these discourses aim to resolve in Australia, Fiji and New Zealand and explains and contrasts reconciliation’s relative importance in each of these jurisdictions. Moreover, the article’s cross-jurisdictional comparison shows reconciliation’s limits and possibilities as public theology, and argues that in Australia and New Zealand it has helped to create political environments willing to admit indigenous perspectives on a range of policy issues. On the contrary, however, the article also shows that the Fijian churches have distorted the concept of reconciliation to support political imperatives that are difficult to rationalize theologically, even though they are presented by the churches as being concerned with religious goals.

Keywords
reconciliation and indigeneity, reconciliation as public theology
Introduction

Christian public theology extends reconciliation beyond its principal sacramental concern for relationships between God and penitent to the construction of ‘socially just’ public relationships for the settlement of intra-national conflict. Theologically, reconciliation brings public relationships into ‘the Christ narrative of passion, death and resurrection’ in which the perpetrators of injustice repent and seek forgiveness.

A cross-jurisdictional comparison among Australia, Fiji and New Zealand shows reconciliation’s limits and possibilities as a theological precept in secular political discourses. This article introduces the conflicts that these discourses aim to resolve, in sections that also explain and contrast reconciliation’s relative importance in each jurisdiction.

New Zealand and Fiji are former British colonies, while Australia is a political federation comprising six former British colonies. British colonial authority was established in New Zealand by the signing of a Treaty at Waitangi in 1840. The British interpreted the Treaty of Waitangi as a cession of sovereignty, while Maori perspectives tend to privilege the agreement as one that allowed British immigration on the basis that shared political authority would prevail. Contemporary New Zealand reconciliation responds to Crown breaches of the Treaty and the determination of just terms of association in relation to land and a range of other social, cultural and economic considerations.

British colonial authority was established in Fiji by a Deed of Cession in 1874. By 1970, political independence had been restored. However, in the intervening period, the British importation of Indian indentured labour had changed the country’s demographic

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characteristics and the now majority Indo-Fijian population retained significant political authority under the constitutional arrangements established for Fijian self-government. Serious political instability has distinguished subsequent governments, with three coups and a putsch highlighting the extent of political division. The most recent coup was in 2006 and was precipitated by, among other considerations, the Reconciliation Tolerance and Unity Bill 2005, which included provisions to set aside the convictions of Fijian nationalists imprisoned for involvement in a putsch in 2000. The army actively involved itself in the 2006 election campaign to establish that national sovereignty belonged not with the people, but with the military leadership. As the future self-appointed military Prime Minister told the Fiji Sun: ‘This government continuously brings in racist policies and programs to justify its existence to the indigenous community’.

Consequently, since 2006, Fiji has been governed by a self-appointed military government, with attitudes to inter-ethnic relations remaining a defining characteristic of contemporary Fijian politics, and providing the context for reconciliation’s relevance to contemporary public affairs. However, Fijian politics is more complex than a binary conflict between indigenous and Indian Fijians and the country’s principal political problem is ‘not really about having a Fijian head of government, but rather which Fijian leader would be acceptable to a particular group of Fijians at any given time’. Indeed, Lal continues:

Dr Timoci Bavadra was a Fijian, and Fijians ousted him in a military coup. Rabuka was a Fijian, and he was defeated by indigenous Fijian voters, first in 1994 and then again in 1999. Ratu Mara was a high chief – paramount chief of the province of Lau – and he was turfed from office after the 2000 coup by a

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5 See Brij V. Lal, Islands of Turmoil: Elections and Politics in Fiji (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2006).
7 Fiji Sun, 9 January 2006.
group of Fijians. Commodore Frank Bainimarama is a Fijian, but his leadership of the armed forces was challenged by Fijian members of the military in a bloody mutiny in 2000.9

Australia’s historical experience is somewhat different. The six colonies that presently constitute the Australian federation were claimed by the British Government as its sovereign territory based on the contention, proclaimed in 1778, that the continent was ‘terra nullius’, or unoccupied land. The High Court of Australia’s subsequent setting aside of the notion of Australia as having been ‘terra nullius’10 has become important to an overt reconciliation movement that was formally sanctioned by the Hawke Government’s (1983–1996) establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1991.11 Reconciliation is also important in contemporary Australian politics because, for much of the twentieth century, the public policy objective of indigenous assimilation was implemented through the forced removal of indigenous children from their families. In 1997, a public inquiry into the practice recommended reconciliation as one of a number of contemporary policy responses. The public inquiry understood reconciliation as comprising ‘acknowledgment and apology, guarantees against repetition, measures of restitution, measures of rehabilitation, and monetary compensation’.12 The notion of public apology was deeply polarizing, yet inevitably positioned reconciliation, as both a theological and political construct, at the centre of national public policy debate.

9 Ibid.
In Australia, as in New Zealand, reconciliation has helped to create political environments more conducive than they have been in the past to admitting indigenous perspectives on matters such as land rights, health and well-being and public apology. In the Australian context, apology relates especially to children forcibly removed from their families under assimilation policies, while in New Zealand, the issue centres on Crown settlements to iwi (Maori tribes) for breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi. This article shows that the significant contributions Christian churches have made to indigenous policy debates positions reconciliation as a political/theological nexus in contemporary public policy, whereas Fijian experiences show the limits of that nexus.

The Fijian churches’ inability to articulate reconciliation as a deeply religious precept with consequent political implications has left them unable to present the particular theological vision for social cohesion and civil political relationships that has been possible for the Australasian churches. The Methodist Church, which counts approximately eighty per cent of the Fijian indigenous population among its membership (about a third of the national population), has co-opted reconciliation into a fervent indigenous and religious nationalism. Conversely, the Roman Catholic Church, which is the second largest Christian church, with thirteen per cent of the indigenous population among its adherents, curiously expressed its claimed interest in multi-racial democracy through an alliance with the military government. The result is that both churches, with their overwhelmingly indigenous congregations, chose to interpret reconciliation in isolation from internationally developed public theologies that are helping other jurisdictions to establish a ‘discursive, democratic space’ in which historical difference can be worked out and the terms of future political relationships established.

Reconciliation responds to the past to create a foundation for harmonious and socially cohesive future relationships. Hence, reconciliation is ‘an indispensable condition for internal peace and real progress’,\textsuperscript{15} requiring what Budden’s book title calls ‘Following Jesus in Invaded Space’\textsuperscript{16} or, in other words, the recognition that ‘those who have been on the underside of history must see that there is a qualitative difference between repression and freedom’.\textsuperscript{17}

Reconciliation conceptualizes unjust secular political decisions as the product of social sin, which occurs because political decisions, ‘whether they are good or bad, are the result of [hu]man’s actions’.\textsuperscript{18} From this view stems a Christian duty to contribute to the construction of a just social order as an expression of human solidarity. Reconciliation is, then, a matter of Christian ethics because ‘God in Christ is present in suffering people’.\textsuperscript{19} Questions are thus raised about ‘how we understand the incarnate God’\textsuperscript{20} because ‘in as much as you did it unto one of these the least of thy brethren you did it unto me’ (NJB, Matt. 25:40).

The examples that follow help to illuminate reconciliation as a matter of Christian ethics and account for its relationship to secular politics. Moreover, the examples support the argument that in Australia and New Zealand reconciliation provides a theoretically coherent set of principles to engage with a stable political order to contest and influence public


\textsuperscript{16} Chris Budden, Following Jesus in Invaded Space: Doing Theology on Aboriginal Land (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2009).

\textsuperscript{17} Desmond Tutu, speaking on NewsHour with Jim Lehrer (October 1999), as cited by William Gumede, ed., Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2005), p. 67.


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 4.
conceptions of justice. However, in the Fijian environment of deep political instability and government by an authoritarian military regime, one finds visions of nationhood deeply polarized along ethnic and intra-ethnic class lines, and Christian churches have set aside the political independence that allows them, in other jurisdictions, to speak with religious certainty and authority on the political implications of their theological convictions.

The Politics and Public Theology of Apology: Australia

Reconciliation is a theological response to historically grounded political differences. However, it remains that prior to the 1990s Australian Christian responses to public policy affronts to the dignity of the indigenous person are best described as ‘general apathy, with intermittent stirrings of a troubled conscience’.\textsuperscript{21} Australian church history demonstrates the entrenched significance of prevailing secular values over established theological teachings in the church’s engagement in public affairs. This article later shows that the same observation distinguishes the contrasting Methodist and Roman Catholic approaches to contemporary Fijian politics, where the ability to speak prophetically in the interests of justice is compromised by the pursuit of secular political objectives.

For most of the twentieth century, Australian Christian churches were complicit in the state removal of indigenous children from their families, reflecting an unwillingness to admit an intellectual incongruence between the disruption of families and culture and their professed commitments to universal human dignity, as well as to the integrity of the family itself.\textsuperscript{22} This failure, in their own terms, created the contemporary moral imperative for the appeals that Australian churches now make for reconciliation as an important secular political


concern, as well as a religious one: ‘Reconciliation between indigenous peoples and the descendants of colonizing settlers is required in many countries and the Church has the right and the will to contribute to this process. National reconciliation is an indispensable condition for internal peace and real progress’.23 Further, ‘In the past, some Christians in Oceania have … shared responsibility for political and social injustices. Not only individual Christians but also church leaders have committed errors, approved un-Christian actions or been passive before injustices’.24

There were exceptions to this general rule and there are instances of clergy and others being guided by Christianity towards ‘solidarity’ with indigenous people. For some, solidarity was essential to the Christian purpose which was not to assist in the colonial project, but ‘to preach a Gospel of counter-colonial significance, summarised in the inherent dignity that common creation in the image and likeness of God ascribes to all people’.25 Reconciliation is concerned with the ways in which Christianity creates a responsive public and contextual theology, grounded in social justice and inevitably establishing a degree of common purpose with secular indigenous political aspirations.

In contrast with earlier periods in Australian colonial history, late twentieth century secular Australian politics became increasingly distinguished by a plurality of views, creating political space for the church, an institution conceiving itself as ‘in, but not of this world’, to begin a sustained religious activism aimed at recognizing a connection between Christian mission and indigenous political aspirations.26 Political developments such as the recognition of land rights and the passage of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 confronted public theology with ideas about racial equality as a mainstream rather than fringe political idea. The referendum amending the Commonwealth Constitution, in 1967, to allow the

23 Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Oceania, ‘Jesus Christ and the Peoples of Oceania’, 17.
24 Ibid., 4.
26 See O’Sullivan, Faith Politics and Reconciliation.
Commonwealth to make laws for indigenous peoples and count them among the national population was similarly influential.27

By the late twentieth century Australian churches were taking a more forthright interest in the religious implications of affronts to the rights of indigenous peoples. Their public advocacy for reconciliation was internationally supported by the World Council of Churches and the Holy See. Pope John Paul II’s address to Indigenous Australians in Alice Springs in 1986 set the tone for subsequent Christian intellectual engagement, with secular perspectives on indigenous land rights and apologies to the stolen generations becoming the two most significant policy considerations for reconciliation over the next twenty years.

The Pope argued that land rights were a matter of religious concern that showed the relationship between religious objectives and their realization through the secular political process. His intervention reflected what he had observed elsewhere: that a bishop’s teaching office ‘constitutes an important factor in the formation of public opinion’ and that ‘[i]t is an act of justice towards society to speak the Church’s teaching with sureness and clarity’.28 Indeed, John Paul’s pontificate was distinguished by the conviction that where concrete political circumstances had religious implications, especially in relation to human dignity, it became a requirement of religious mission to influence secular policy choices; political developments during the 1990s provided the context for this to occur.

The High Court’s Mabo judgement in 1992 contributed to an evolving public narrative of reconciliation by dismissing the legal validity of *terra nullius* (the idea that Australia was unoccupied land discovered by Britain) as the legal basis on which government


could proceed. Reconciliation gained further political momentum through the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, established in recognition of prior indigenous occupancy, ‘dispossession and dispersal’ and the absence of any earlier formal attempt at reconciliation. The 1991 ‘National Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody’ and the 1997 ‘Bringing them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families’ also strengthened reconciliation’s place in secular political discourse.

Many of these developments towards reconciliation were contested by the Howard Government (1996–2007). Its Native Title Amendment Bill 2007, which generated the longest Senate debate on any one piece of legislation in Australian history, affronted religious precepts in a number of ways. The principle moral and ethical concerns to the church, arising from this policy, related to the right of indigenous persons to access land for spiritual purposes, which is preliminary to their religious freedom, and the proposition that resolving conflict presumes recognizing the inherent dignity of all persons.

Reconciliation was significant to the churches’ assessments of how they ought to respond to the ‘Bringing them Home’ report’s recommendation that:

churches and other non-government agencies which played a role in the administration of the laws and policies under which Indigenous children were forcibly removed acknowledge that role and in consultation with the Aboriginal

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and Torres Strait Islander Commission make such formal apologies and participate in such commemorations as may be determined.\textsuperscript{33}

It was through policy advocacy, among other considerations, that the churches accepted this recommendation. They did so as the Australian community struggled philosophically to discern a response to the Report’s further recommendations that:

all Australian Parliaments
1. officially acknowledge the responsibility of their predecessors for the laws, policies and practices of forcible removal,
2. negotiate with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission a form of words for official apologies to Indigenous individuals, families and communities and extend those apologies with wide and culturally appropriate publicity, and
3. make appropriate reparation as detailed in following recommendations.\textsuperscript{34}

The state parliaments quickly accepted the recommendation to offer apologies. However, it was not for eleven years that the Commonwealth Parliament offered its own apology to recognize the relationship between apology and substantive policy measures to improve indigenous people’s living conditions, material opportunities and equal deliberative capacity in public affairs. These aspirations were implicit in the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s motion of apology in the House of Representatives in February 2008:

Let us resolve over the next five years to have every Indigenous four-year-old in a remote Aboriginal community enrolled and attending a proper early childhood

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., recommendation 6.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., recommendation 5a.
education centre … and engaged in proper preliteracy and prenumeracy programs. … Let us resolve [also] to use this systemic approach ... to provide proper primary and preventive health care for the same children, to begin the task of rolling back the obscenity that we find today in infant mortality rates in remote Indigenous communities — up to four times higher than in other communities.35

Pope Benedict XVI described the apology as ‘courageous’ and acknowledged the significance of its ‘concrete steps’ towards reconciliation. His remarks did not attract the secular derision that followed John Paul’s attention to land rights in 1986, reflecting a change in people’s expectations of justice with time and context.36

Like reconciliation, justice is the subject of philosophical debate: it is not an absolute and objectively fair condition, as state and indigenous aspirations compete from different conceptions of justice that have to be constantly re-balanced through the political process. However, from an indigenous perspective, it is generally held that justice is possible only through the genuine reconciliation of indigenous claims with those of the state, with justice, in turn, preliminary to the state’s presumption of moral legitimacy.37 In this context, it is significant that the Uniting Church, among others, endorsed in 2012, proposals to amend the Commonwealth Constitution to recognize indigenous first occupancy and remove powers of racial discrimination, as ‘concrete steps’ towards reconciliation.38 These are measures that recognize the inherent dignity of the human person and legitimize human equality as a just and important founding principle in law and politics.

36 See O’Sullivan, Faith Politics and Reconciliation.
Apologies meet the symbolic requirements of sorrow, while reparation involves the perpetrator correcting, as far as possible, the ongoing impact of the initial transgression. As Dance notes: ‘Saying sorry ... commits us to working in a creative partnership with the indigenous people of Australia in overcoming the tragic aftermath of this pain and loss’. Sorrow, then, makes reparation and restitution inescapable pre-conditions for future political relationships of trust, and for providing members of the stolen generations with the financial capacity to address the psychological and economic consequences of their experiences. Although the National Inquiry recommended reparation, including financial compensation, this has not been provided in any substantive way, meaning that the full conditions of reconciliation remain elusive.

Reconciliation is diminished and the depths of the affront to human dignity understated when apologies are not accompanied by reparative and restitutive measures. Indeed, a disregard for the gravity of the Separation policy’s impact on indigenous families was the obvious implication of the Prime Minister John Howard’s refusal to say ‘sorry’. Howard took a view that, if genuine, was also a politically expedient appeal to those with little empathy for the people removed from their families. His position was that saying ‘sorry’ was an admission of personal culpability for past events over which he and his government had no influence. His view misinterpreted the theological basis to sorrow: ‘I don’t believe that current generations of Australians should be seen as responsible for deeds over which they had no control and in which they had no involvement’. Theologically, sorrow does not imply personal guilt, but a ‘grave moral responsibility’, ‘to dispel the ideologies, ignorance and biases in which racist attitudes may still fester and largely be hidden from conscious

39 Kevin Dance, “‘We Are Sorry” Words which Aren’t Enough, but a Vital Beginning’, Media Release, 22 May 1998, 1.
awareness’. However, contrition is among reconciliation’s essential elements; this is expressed in New Zealand public policy, but its absence from secular and Methodist accounts of reconciliation contributes to its incoherent and, therefore, ineffective contribution to Fijian public life, as discussed in this article’s final section.

In short, reconciliation has had significant influence over the ways in which Australian public policy responds to indigenous political claims. Reconciliation has provided a theoretical context for the articulation of those claims and for Christian expressions of ‘human solidarity’ with indigenous people as they negotiate the terms of their ‘belonging’ to the neocolonial state. The contemporary Australian state is one that has accepted the propriety of saying ‘sorry’ for its historic affronts to the human rights and dignity of its indigenous peoples. However, it remains uncertain and perhaps even indifferent towards reconciliation’s presumption that ‘sorrow’ requires contrition, as a meaningful policy attempt to correct the consequences of the injustice for which sorrow has been expressed, and to resolve not to repeat those transgressions in public policy.

**Contrition as ‘Practical Reconciliation’: New Zealand**

Contrition is integral to reconciliation as it is played out through the Treaty of Waitangi in contemporary New Zealand politics. The Treaty enables the church ‘to contextualise its place in the “earthly city”’ and has provided the historical, legal and political contexts for government expressions of sorrow under procedures established in 1985 for the investigation and settlement of Maori grievances against the Crown. The Treaty provides much of the framework for contemporary relationships between the Crown and iwi (Maori tribes) and is,

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therefore, central to contemporary Maori politics; this centrality remains, in spite of the Treaty’s persistent breaches by the Crown, and populist resistance to correcting a long history of broken promises. The Treaty provides the context for reconciliation as public theology; it does so in recognition of missionary encouragement to the Chiefs to sign the document in 1840, and in recognition of its contemporary potential to provide a framework for just political relationships. The Treaty is not, however, a panacea for such relationships; it has neither provided recognition to Maori claims in full, nor gained uncontested public acceptance as a legitimate influence over contemporary public policy. Nevertheless, the Treaty does allow policy to proceed on the assumption that to varying degrees, the Crown ought to offer measures of contrition for transgressions against Maori rights and that different peoples ought to be able to live within the one polity with as much freedom and autonomy as possible. In addition, the Treaty presumes that Maori ought to be able to participate in shared public affairs with reference to cultural preferences and priorities.

The Treaty is co-opted as an instrument of reconciliation because it provides a concrete political framework around which the church expresses its social mission. Indeed, as Orange reports, it was Anglican missionaries who translated the Treaty from English to Maori and presented it to the Maori Chiefs in the biblical language of covenant. This missionary intervention was instrumental in convincing the Chiefs to believe that the Crown’s intentions were honourable in seeking their acquiescence to an agreement that would quickly be taken as a secession of absolute political authority.

Land alienation and the consequent economic, social and cultural deprivation are the subject of most settlements for breaches of the Treaty under the Treaty of Waitangi.

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45 Orange, The Treaty of Waitangi.
46 See ibid.
Amendment Act 1985. The Waikato and Ngai Tahu tribal settlements are the two largest examples, providing both symbolic and substantive expressions of reconciliation, and are important examples of the incorporation of religious precepts into public policy. These tribal settlements make apologies for specific ‘unconscionable’ acts of wrong-doing and acts of omission, make reparation and lay the foundations for improved relationships between the Crown and the tribes. In contrast with Australia, these and subsequent apologies to the Maori have been made without the level of controversy over the propriety of expressions of ‘sorrow’ that have marked indigenous policy debates in that country. In contrast with Fiji, contrition is implicit in the apologies to the Maori and its implications are given public policy consideration.

The Treaty brings clarity to the question of who ought to apologize to whom and for what, and even in religious discourse, the term reconciliation is not as widely used in New Zealand as it is in Australia, which perhaps reflects its implicit acceptance at the highest levels of government. The Minister for Treaty Negotiations puts it thus: ‘All components of a settlement are valuable — the historical, cultural, financial and commercial parts of a comprehensive settlement all represent different ways of addressing grievances and breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi and its principles. Comprehensive settlements are the most effective way of repairing relationships’.

The Treaty is an important instrument in Maori politics. As McHugh notes, instances of political disagreement between Maori and Crown can usually be traced to Maori perceptions of the Crown acting without regard for its terms, and in response to political

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pressure from public resistance to reparation and restitution.\textsuperscript{50} Indeed, in 2004, the Leader of the Opposition National Party, Don Brash, attracted widespread support for his claim that Maori policy was distinguished by measures giving Maori a ‘birthright to the upper hand’ over other citizens.\textsuperscript{51} The Roman Catholic Bishop of Palmerston North responded by distinguishing rights of first occupancy, affirmed by the Treaty, from racial privilege.\textsuperscript{52}

In the same year, a Court of Appeal decision upholding customary title to the foreshore and seabed intensified public suspicion, since the government encouraged a popular belief that the decision jeopardized public access to the national coastline for recreational purposes. The litigants in the case confirmed that restricting access was not their intention and there was authoritative legal advice that such was not the decision’s effect.\textsuperscript{53} The ensuing public debate was deeply polarizing. In response, the Anglican and Roman Catholic Bishops jointly intervened to emphasize the point in procedural justice that the Treaty requires the Crown ‘to act in good faith towards Maori, which must mean honest dialogue with Maori when their rights to property are at stake’.\textsuperscript{54} Indeed, honest dialogue is essential to a society in which peoples are able to ‘live together differently’,\textsuperscript{55} reconciled in the ways that they address historic disagreements and in contemporary agreement on the terms of different peoples’ participation in national public life. ‘Living together differently’ requires agreement on the principle that different peoples are free to live as autonomously as possible within their own communities, both as the object of the politics of indigeneity and as a mark of reconciliation.

\textsuperscript{51} Brash, ‘Nationhood’.
\textsuperscript{53} See O’Sullivan, \textit{Beyond Biculturalism}.
\textsuperscript{55} Roger Maaka, and Augie Fleras, \textit{The Politics of Indigeneity: Challenging the State in Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand} (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2005).
The Limits to Reconciliation: Fiji

Reconciliation requires indigenous people to think about the political limits as well as the possibilities of first occupancy. Yet this tension is not considered by an openly nationalist and exclusive politics that does not position its objective of political self-determination in relation to the rights of others or as an outcome of interethnic relationships of common purpose. Indeed, the self-serving politicization of reconciliation in Fiji has undermined peoples’ capacity to ‘live together differently’ in mutually advantageous, peaceful interdependence. The Reconciliation Tolerance and Unity Bill 2005, which was one of the factors contributing to the Qarase Government’s (2000–2006) removal by military coup, co-opted reconciliation in support of a fervently nationalist indigenous politics.

The Bill proposed the establishment of a Reconciliation and Unity Commission to make reparations to Members of Parliament and others unjustly treated during the putsch that removed the Chaudry Government (1999–2000). More controversially, the Bill proposed granting amnesty to the putsch’s perpetrators, some of whom had subsequently been elected to Parliament and were members of the government at the time of their convictions and imprisonment. The appeal to forgiveness resonated with the predominantly Methodist indigenous population, but the weak emphasis on the parallel requirement for contrition distorted reconciliation as a theological concept. Contrition acquires substantive political effect when its implicit resolve to desist from wrong-doing is admitted in secular terms, as was illustrated in the case of New Zealand.

The Methodist Church’s overt and unapologetically nationalist involvement in the 2006 election campaign, preceding the coup, confirmed that it did not have the political independence necessary to preach a convincing religious message capable of transcending ethnic and denominational differences. Indeed, the Methodist Church’s injunction to its
members, through a secular newspaper advertisement, to vote for the United Fiji Party (SDL), superficially co-opted religious precept to direct peoples’ voting, but was not accompanied by a coherent theological or political account of reconciliation, and its contribution to the Christian nation, that the SDL would apparently assure:

PARLIAMENT IS THE SUPREME LAW MAKING BODY OF THIS NATION.
It is God’s Will that the Laws of this Land are based on the Laws of God!
IT IS THEREFORE THE DUTY OF ALL CITIZENS OF THIS NATION TO ELECT A GOD-FEARING AND PROVEN PRIME MINISTER whose party will make righteous laws

... Healthy Nation Building should be founded on God’s Law which reflects the higher eternal values of the Kingdom of God

LOVE  JUSTICE  PEACE
RECONCILIATION  UNITY.56

The proposed ‘righteous laws’ to which the advertisement referred and which the church had actively supported were the Reconciliation Tolerance and Unity Bill 2005 and the Qoliqoli Bill 2006, which potentially limited non-indigenous people’s commercial access to the foreshore and coastal waterways. These proposed laws were widely understood as ‘attempts to marginalize the Indian community’57 and assert indigenous paramountcy: the general idea that non-indigenous rights must necessarily be subservient to the indigenous.

The advertisement showed that while Australasian indigenous politics draws on reconciliation to present its argument for a political order based on ‘living together differently’, the Fijian political tension between indigenous paramountcy and universal political equality persists because there is no theoretical or practical account, in public life, that rationalizes or sets out the terms for ‘living together differently’. The strong international

body of Christian public theology on the subject of reconciliation is not drawn upon by the churches in their engagement with the public realm.

The Roman Catholic Church’s closeness to the political order compromises its independence and therefore its capacity to preach with religious authenticity on questions of human rights. At the same time, the Methodist construction of indigeneity occurs within the context of an exclusive Christian state, where the non-indigenous, non-Christian, Indian guests do not enjoy the same rights to land ownership and political participation that are the paramount rights of native Fijians. The consequent political imperative was to reconcile the state to this discriminatory view, which affronted military sensitivities and prompted the removal of the government.\(^5\) Christianity’s mission, then, was not to influence the state’s attention to justice, but to control it towards a particular construction of indigenous political rights.

Just as the Methodist Church was unwilling to adopt reconciliation as a metaphor for peaceful coexistence, the Roman Catholic Church in Fiji departed from its universally established teaching on the public theology of reconciliation in its response to the coup. Kevin Barr, a priest and prominent social justice advocate acknowledged the coup’s illegality, but also claimed that it was carried out ‘in the name of multiculturalism’ and that its ‘violation of democracy’ was balanced by its ‘anti-racist’, ‘pro-people’, social justice focus. While the coup was concerned with multiculturalism, the military regime’s well-documented disregard for political freedom positions it well outside a normative Catholic social justice framework.\(^5\)

Multiculturalism can be constructed to support reconciliation; it reflects, much better than nationalistic monoculturalism, the Catholic concern for a political order able to realize

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\(^5\) Ibid.

the inherent dignity that belongs to all people by virtue of their creation in the image and likeness of God. However, the ways in which the Roman Catholic Church expressed its support, arguably, transgressed the line it had set between proper and improper engagement in political affairs. In 2007, the military regime established a Council for the People’s Charter for Change and Progress to set out the terms for a return to democratic political arrangements. The regime invited Petreo Mataca, Archbishop of Suva, to co-chair the Council with the self-appointed military Prime Minister, Frank Bainimarama. Many Fijian Catholics interpreted this invitation as tacit endorsement of the regime and appealed to the Holy See to enforce the canonical ban on prelates holding political office. The Papal Nuncio, Charles Balvo, defended the appointment with reference to a German precedent distinguishing appointed from elected public office, but Balvo’s was a narrowly legalistic interpretation that failed to take account of public perception. More telling, perhaps, is the disapproval implicit in contrasting the Holy See’s silence with successive Popes - Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI - intervening publicly to support the Australasian churches’ pronouncements in favour of indigenous rights to land, culture, political participation and economic development.

Mataca’s view is that:

some people in Fiji who courageously upheld the rule of law and democracy since 1987 have a different view of the latest coup in the belief that democracy was abused and circumvented long before the military ousted the Qarase government ... the Church believes in a democratic framework that upholds

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human dignity and equality, rights and responsibilities, the common good and the protection of the minorities and the vulnerable must be absolute.62

However, in accepting the appointment, Mataca aligns his church to a regime whose affronts to human rights were well known and whose very existence was a denial of political freedom. His justification was put by the Archdiocesan Vicar-General, who suggests that the Charter ‘was formulated by civil societies, not by the interim administration [military regime]’ and that the Archbishop accepted the appointment ‘out of fear that the 1997 Constitution would be abrogated’, which would, the Vicar-General states, ‘take the country back to the dark ages’.63 Mataca describes the Charter as a Covenant, which, as Newland points out, suggests ‘a more intense relationship between the state and the Roman Catholic Church’,64 which in the current political context, must diminish the Archbishop’s authority to support the obligation upon every person to claim their human rights as ‘marks’ of their dignity and to recognize those rights in others on the grounds that:

If God is the transcendent (beyond it) common good of society, the immanent (within it) common good of society must, therefore, be a social order which empowers or facilitates every individual in it to attain his or her own perfection (de Torre).65

In other words, the church cannot abandon humanity, since human ‘destiny ... is so closely and unbreakably linked with Christ’.66 Yet, simultaneously, the church’s stated

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64 Ibid., at p. 206 n. 74.
concern for multicultural democracy becomes hypocritical when set alongside its failure to
distance itself from the regime’s well-documented and sustained disregard for human dignity
and political freedoms, as Kevin Barr was to find out when, in 2013, after thirty-two years’
misionary work in Fiji, he became the subject of a removal order from the country. Although
the order was subsequently rescinded after representations to Bainimarama, the incident
brought into question the priest’s earlier confidence in the military regime; it showed how his
decision to privilege secular politics over his church’s theology failed as a strategy to advance
human rights. In 2012 Barr had written a facetious letter to the editor of the Fiji Sun in which
he commented on the country’s increasingly close relationship with China, by proposing that
the Union Jack be replaced with the Chinese flag on the Fijian national flag. The self-
appointed military Prime Minister’s response indicated the level of volatility in the regime
that might reasonably caution a church against too close a political association with it. In a
leaked letter to the Australian High Commission in Suva, Barr alleges receiving a phone call
from Bainimarama in which an apology for the letter in the Fiji Sun was demanded. The
demand allegedly included the comment that Barr was anti-government and a ‘fucked up
priest’.67 Barr’s later response to a Prime Ministerial text message of the same vein was
allegedly to say that he was not anti-government, but simply not in agreement with some
government decisions. The response, according to Barr’s communication with the High
Commission, was a text message reading ‘Fuck U arsehole. Stay well away from me’.68 It is
only through independence from secular politics of this sort that space is created for the
expression of independent visions of national reconciliation, where religious ideals of human
dignity, rights and freedoms can be promoted.

66 Pope John Paul II, ‘Ecclesia in Oceania’ (13 December 2001),
<http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-
pacific/8227392/Military-ruler-lets-old-priest-stay> [accessed 31 January 2013].
68 Ibid.
Conclusion

Reconciliation is a theologically grounded concept that has entered secular indigenous policy debate in Australia, New Zealand and Fiji in significant but markedly different ways. In Australia and New Zealand, where secular politics is becoming incrementally more sympathetic to indigenous claims, reconciliation envisions a political order distinguished by conciliatory relationships, perhaps of ‘non-dominance involving interdependent people who work through differences in a non-coercive spirit of relative yet relational autonomy’.69 The influence of these philosophical presumptions is evident in measures such as increased attention to land rights, indigenous health and well-being, the stolen generations (in Australia) and Crown settlements to iwi (Maori tribes) for breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi (in New Zealand).

By contrast, in the Fijian context, what is lacking is a coherent political or theological account of reconciliation of the sort that has assisted New Zealand Maori especially, but also Indigenous Australians, to reconfigure, incrementally, the terms of their belonging to the nation state. Their ability to use and develop theories of reconciliation has influenced these indigenous people’s political engagement with their respective states, and has strengthened indigeneity as a theoretical construct capable of framing and articulating indigenous claims.