

Reconciliation

A few years ago I spoke before an audience at the Museum of America in Washington DC about Lili 'uokalani and Grover Cleveland. Though it was primarily an American audience that had come to hear a discussion of Cleveland's qualities as a president—his humanity and sense of fairness—I used the occasion as an opportunity to extol our Queen.

I pointed out that in the end, Cleveland could not ignore the overwhelming political influences that prevented him from acting justly, whereas, the Queen refused to do evil despite the political consequences. I spoke to that audience about why we honor and, in fact revere this woman, while Grover Cleveland remains largely overlooked if not forgotten by his own people.

But the fact is that Lili's behavior and her principles confound me, not because I cannot understand her sacrifice or the reasoning behind her actions, but because the pure selflessness of her surrender resonates on the very edge of naivete. She and the nation were not prepared to go to war to defend our existence at the end of the nineteenth century when even those tribes and countries willing to kill and die were all swept up by the Belgians and the Dutch, French, British, Germans and finally, American colonial enterprises.

"At least they fought." One cannot tell the story of the overthrow to Americans and Europeans without at least one person voicing what, perhaps, many people think. That freedom and sovereignty, a peoples' way of life, and perhaps any virtue from decency to mercy can only thrive when good people are willing to fight and die to protect them. It is, I think, this belief, that violence done in the name of God or goodness is necessary and desirable, that will continue to bring the Church of Jesus Christ seeking reconciliation.

For when we turn to the Bible for an answer on the relationship between justice and violence, we get somewhat conflicting messages. To establish the Hebrews in Canaan, God inspired the invasion and destruction of cities, the killing of its inhabitants and even the founding of a society that vigorously excluded non-Hebrews. The Gospel, however, is ever more

unmistakable that we are to forgive our enemies, love our neighbors, and open our religion and ourselves to the world.

As human beings we comprehend the Old Testament better, that's why I say that Liliu's example confounds me. We see ourselves more realistically don't we, in the examples of warriors, than we do in the example of Christ? We understand fighting and killing and can more readily accommodate our Christian ideals with the necessity of invading another country, killing or intimidating its citizens and imposing our will on them in order to protect our way of life, in order to make ourselves more secure, than we can accommodate our fears and insecurities with a Gospel that simply calls on us to love.

I used to think that a major disconnection existed between the Old and New Testament, and it's only been over the past few years and only because of the example of people like Lili'uokalani that I have managed to reconcile these texts and the spiritual guides that they provide. The Queen chose not to kill. It was clearly a rational decision given the military power of the United States, but that choice was also framed in the finest traditions of the Gospel that she believed, "in order to avoid the loss of life that our people can ill afford" she preferred to subject herself to certain humiliation and an otherwise indefinite fate. And while I used to think that she placed her faith in the ultimate goodness of the United States, I do not believe that today. She knew Americans, and she'd had enough experience to understand how powerful people behave.

No. I think she placed her faith in God, and not necessarily to restore her throne but to give her the strength to deal with the unknown trials ahead. When I look at my own people and how we have responded, not just to the loss of our government but to every other loss—of language, history, connection to the 'āina (land), and even our reputation as a people, I marvel that we have responded with such grace and dignity. And I know that she bears much of the credit for that.

It is not easy for the political historian and nationalist that I am to stand before an audience at this time of year and speak of grace. We know so much more, now, about the role of the American church in Hawai'i, its antecedents, its intentions, and its complicity in the loss of our

country. Moreover, the Christian-reared voice in me rails against the hypocrisy of the Mission that came to help the people and helped itself to so much.

But that is the way of the world. We can recognize that when missionaries came, only a few were able to resist the temptation of taking care of themselves. Most were just human beings and they chose to live well in the world. Their justifications for that—and they are numerous—speak for themselves in history, and so they are remembered. And if we believe that they set out from Boston and Connecticut with the best of intentions, then we must simply acknowledge that life provided other choices for them and they made, for good and evil the choices they made.

God forgives us all, and so we must forgive those who trespass against us. But as we, too, live in the world, we are entitled to ask whether forgiveness is all there is to the message of grace. If that is so then why should we not rise up against the wealthy and landed here and threaten their secure and comfortable existences, justifying it in the name of retribution and justice? Why should we not consider ho'omanawanui (patience) an evil and exploitive word, that simply consigns our people to another generation of want? If our faith promises forgiveness for their excesses, will God not also forgive us ours?

There simply is no answer to this but the Gospel. The stories of the Old Testament tell us only that one must convey one's ethics to the realities of human frailty. Be as good as you can be, obey the laws, do what you can when you can. But the Gospel of Jesus calls on us to be better, and this, in her time of trial is what the Queen chose. And if the Gospel resonates among our people at all in this century it is because of what she did 111 years ago.

I do not believe that the Gospel resonates because of the glorious history of the church. We are too wise, too well informed for that. We know that there is a direct connection between Christianity and violence. It was the violence done against our Savior and against the early converts of the Roman empire that founded the church, but it was also violence that our church perpetrated that marked its growth—through crusades, inquisitions, witch burning and the conquest of the Americas and the Pacific. We, the inheritors of the Gospel cannot be permitted to forget that history.

So I end by calling on the Church of Jesus Christ to pursue reconciliation, not just with Hawaiians but with Jesus Christ. For while individuals who called themselves Christians behaved so badly, it was the silence of the Church then that requires reconciliation today. No one expects the Church to be perfect, but it should strive to be at least as good as its greatest examples. It should strive to follow the example of Lili'uokalani.

It certainly has its opportunity. Where the United States has invaded other lands, uttering justifications that we Hawaiians have heard before, the Church should not remain silent. When any nation suspends the civil rights of its people subjecting citizens and non-citizens to an uncertain judicial procedure, in violation of what international bodies have come to see as basic human rights, the Church should not remain silent. The Church should be loud and aggressive in the protection of political prisoners, but also of criminals. It should certainly risk the political incorrectness of protesting the mistreatment of women in other cultures, though not without also erasing inequities within our churches over ordaining women and homosexuals. We should be outraged at the very presence of hunger in this world, when there is so much wealth in this nation. Wherever people are oppressed, no matter who their oppressors, the Church should be there to protest, to comfort and protect.

The Church should never content itself with being a place where its members may come to feel smug and satisfied that they are forgiven and saved. It is far too difficult to follow Christ's example. We should always acknowledge that love never fails, and that only through love can we prevent ourselves from condemning the soldiers and warriors who kill while still insisting on protecting and comforting their victims.

We should not be silent. We should be like Jeremiah and Hosea, Nathan and Elijah, calling our political leaders to task at every hypocrisy, at every deceit, and certainly at every misuse of wealth and power. We should be a royal pain in the ass. Lili'uokalani could do little more than offer her people a way to live with the indignities and uncertainties of the future. Does Christ provide any less assuring an example to us than the Queen?

If we would be Christians as Christ intended, then we would be like Lili'u. Not perfect but reconciled to the outcomes of our choices; realistic about the world and its violences, but unwilling to justify them, unwilling, no matter the provocation, to do evil.

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