

ALLEGED BIBLE BURNING IN FIJI

COMMENTS ON THE 'REPORT' BY A
FIJIAN RESIDENT

The alleged Bible-burning in Fiji (says the Sydney 'Freeman's Journal') was so thoroughly explained at the time, and the incident was so completely relegated to the dust-bin of things forgotten, that the report of the three 'Commissioners' deputed to inquire into charges which somehow had mislaid at the proper moment came upon a public already convinced that there was no 'mala fides' on the Catholic side. All the same the report was given prominent publicity in the 'S. M. Herald' and 'Daily Telegraph' of the 5th instant. The report, which was signed by the Rev. George Brown, the Rev. George Lane, and the Hon. William Robson, M.L.C., was presented to a meeting of the Methodist Board of Missions in Sydney, and reserved for discussion at a subsequent meeting. The report, though it labors to explain away both the wholesale Namosi conversions to Catholicism, and to fix the alleged Naililili Bible-burning as an act of wanton insult to Protestant sentiment, is not by any means the formidable document one might expect as the confirmation of charges formulated for the Methodist meetings of a few months back. Moreover, it will be observed that the Catholic Governor of Fiji is quite a different sort of personage to the one painted by his detractors at the various Methodist conferences which a few months ago attempted to 'damn him to shame'.

Mr. James B. Turner, in a letter to the Sydney 'Morning Herald,' deals as follows with the 'report' of the Methodist special commission referred to in the last issue of the 'N.Z. Tablet':

'I have read the report of the Methodist special commission re the burning of Bibles by the Roman Catholics in Fiji, and would like to say a few words thereon. The report commences thus: "1. That the perversion at Namosi was in no way the result of religious conviction on the part of the people in favor of Roman Catholicism, but was caused by the political dissatisfaction and anger of the chief." This assertion is a direct acknowledgment that Wesleyanism in Fiji, or at all events in the large and important district of Namosi is a failure, for what does it disclose? that because the chief of the district was dissatisfied with the Crown colony of a severe type form of Government as at present existing, and desires that the islands should be annexed to New Zealand, the whole of his tribe abandoned the religion they had followed for many years past and embraced the Roman Catholic religion. Does not this fact prove that religion in Fiji amongst the Fijians is just

About "Skin Deep"?

The perversion at Namosi is not the only one on record. A few years ago the natives in the Viria district seceded from Wesleyanism and went back to heathenism—"kai tevero" (they were termed in English "devils"). It was during war time the seceding took place, and after they had been defeated they became Wesleyans again, because their conquerors were Wesleyans.

Paragraph No. 2 of the report may or may not be true, but I would ask the commission on what authority they base their assertions contained in this paragraph. I do not believe one word of it, and the majority of unbiased people in Fiji are of the same mind as myself.

(The following is the paragraph referred to above—Ed 'N.Z.T.'): "That the Roman Catholic priests took advantage of this political disaffection and the federation agitation with the specious promises made to the chief and his people by its advocates to pervert the people to Roman Catholicism."

'In paragraph 3 the priests are accused of taking unjustifiable possession of Methodist church premises. If these said premises belonged to the Wesleyan mission, and were illegally taken possession of by the priests, there is a law court in Fiji that would speedily have remedied the matter. The truth appears to be this: The premises belonged to the people, and when the said people embraced the Catholic faith they disposed of the premises as they thought fit to do. And the same may be said regarding the collecting of the Bibles, as referred to in clause 4.

(In clause 4 the commissioners state that 'the Bibles bought, used, and prized by the people were systematically collected and brought to the priests who publicly took them from the people, giving them rosaries in exchange as a sign of their admission into the Roman Catholic Church, and promising them Roman Catholic books instead.—Ed 'N.Z.T.')

'The Bibles belonged to the people. They individually bought and paid for them (I have one in my possession in which the owner has written that he had paid one shilling for it), and they certainly had an owner's right to give them to the priests. And what more reasonable that they should do so, to show that they were earnest in abandoning Wesleyanism and becoming Roman Catholics? They gave up the books they had purchased and paid for, and, which, in the words of the report, they prized, to be replaced with books of their new faith. Paragraph 5 deals with the tearing up of some of the Bibles on the way from Namosi to Naililili. And Mr. Swayne is said to have made an official report to the Government on the matter. Well, if the Bibles were torn up and thrown into the river, then, in addition to "Bible-burning in Fiji," there had been "Bible-drowning in Fiji." I, for one, never heard of this "Bible-drowning" till I read of it in the report of the

commissioners, as published in your issue of June 5. I would ask the commissioners did either of them read Mr. Swayne's official report, and, supposing it is true that portions of the Bibles were found floating in the Rewa River, what proof is there that the priests threw same into the river, or anywhere else? Might they not have been

Thrown into the River by their Owners?

'Paragraph 6 deals with the burning of the Bibles at Naililili, and the commission has affirmed that Mr. Burns' published report, "excepting one important particular," is correct. I have not Mr. Burns' report on hand, but if I remember correctly, it was stated therein that a large number of Bibles, about 150, had been publicly burned in a limekiln at Naililili. Father Rougier publicly denied this, and explained that it was only the dirty fragments of Bibles that were burned along with other "sacred" rubbish. He stated that it was the practice of the priests to destroy by fire all worn-out or dirty articles connected with their church, and this in preference to getting rid of same by some more unworthy way. As a proof that it was only the very dirty and damaged portions of the Bibles that were burnt, the commission produced along with the report "some samples" of the Testaments recovered from the Bible-burning at Naililili. These, as may be seen, are not tattered or fragmentary, but "are complete and in good order," etc., etc. Just so, if they had been dirty or tattered they would have been burnt, and not put on one side on the logs close to the kiln by the persons doing the burning, and, allowing that the covers had been "recently violently" torn away, who was it that did the act of tearing off the covers? Further, I have in my possession a number of the Bibles said to have been burnt. Being a curio collector in a small way I wished to obtain one of the Bibles to add to my collection, and I intimated to Father Rougier my desire. He replied by sending me a basket full, stating in a note that the books sent me were considered "too good" to be burnt and asking me to imagine what those burnt were like. Some of these books had seen eight years' service with their owners, and

They were all Horribly Dirty.

'The letter of the Rev. A. Small that appeared in the press in Fiji, the same letter being published in the Sydney press, was considered a "back down" on the part of the Wesleyan mission in Fiji, and in the Australian colonies. The Governor of Fiji had been mentioned in connection with the secession of the Namosi natives (the Governor is a Roman Catholic), the Bible-burning incident had been magnified to such an alarming extent, and amongst other exaggerations a rising of the Fijians was said to be probable, and the advisability of the removal of our Governor was being hinted at. The white residents of the colony, apprehending that harm might possibly result if these exaggerated statements were not contradicted, were taking steps to disprove the same, when the Rev. Mr. Small's letter appeared in both the papers published in Suva. That letter was at once cabled to the press in Sydney by the most influential citizens of Suva, not one of whom cared a jot whether the Fijians are Wesleyans, Jews, or Roman Catholics, or whether the Governor is a Jew, or Wesleyan, or Roman Catholic, so long as the affairs of the colony are carried on in a fair businesslike manner to its advancement.

'As regarding paragraph 9 (which reads as follows: "From the evidence before us we are compelled to conclude that at later stages in connection with the perversion of Namosi the Governor's name was improperly used for the purpose of influencing those of the people who were wavering to join the Roman Catholic Church."—Ed 'N.Z.T.'). I will ask the commission how and from where has it derived its information sufficient to warrant the assertion therein contained. I would remind the commission of the old legal maxim, that

"Assertion is not Proof"

The many assertions made in the report should be capable of being proved correct by unbiased proof, and I claim that information obtained from Wesleyan ministers and Wesleyan Fijians is not unbiased. There are hundreds of people in Fiji that could have given valuable unbiased information to the commission, but as far as I could learn from the Hon. W. Robson and the Rev. J. Lane, the persons who could have given unbiased information concerning this "storm in the teapot" burning Bibles incident were not invited to do so. In conclusion, I will say that no "Bible-burning" as cabled from Fiji to Sydney, ever took place; that the white settlers in Fiji will not allow the Wesleyan mission to dictate as to what religion their Governor shall be; that a religious paper warfare between Catholics and Wesleyans, as existing in New South Wales, will never be tolerated in Fiji; and that any assertions I have made herein I can prove to the satisfaction of any reasonable man.'

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