

GOD'S COVENANTAL FAITHFULNESS

A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON MALAYSIAN REALITES

Introduction

Malaysia is a developing nation that enjoys a social contract which ensures the multi-layered racial, cultural and religious society to grow in harmony with God's universal dream for all humankind. The sense of harmony comes through a sense of fidelity to the sacredness of this social contract which enjoins the leaders and citizens alike to live a life of integrity where there is mutual accountability and transparency. These are characters which qualifies this nation as being faithful in the eyes of God.

Covenantal Faithfulness

Faithfulness to the "social contract" as originally intended by the founding fathers finds its kindred semblance in the covenantal fidelity between God and humankind: 'I shall be their God and they will be my people.' (Jeremiah 31:31; Ezekiel 11:20) This covenantal fidelity reciprocates God's binding fidelity with humankind: "I shall maintain my covenant between myself and you, and your descendants after you, generation after generation, as a covenant in perpetuity, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you... And I will be their God." (Genesis 17:7-8) "Within them I shall plant my Law, writing it on their hearts. "Then they will be my people, and I shall be their God. I shall give them singleness of heart and singleness of conduct so that they will always fear me, for their own good and that of their children after them. I shall make them an everlasting covenant with them, never to cease in my efforts for their welfare, and I shall put respect for me in their hearts, so that they will never turn away from me again." (Jeremiah 32:39-41)

Given the covenantal basis, upholding the spirit of the original "social contract" now enshrined in the Federal Constitution is vital so as to promote the human dignity of all Malaysians, whatever the differences, be it race, culture, ideology or religion. On equal access to opportunities, the story of the unscrupulously judge and the importunate widow (Luke 18:1-8) is a wake-up call to all those in power and who abuse their authority for self-gain. They are the bureaucrats, technocrats and other professionals who staffed the Executive to the Legislative and Judicial branches of government and all other service and related sectors. The importunate widow is a symbol of all those deprived of justice and equal access in Malaysia, especially the rural natives of Sabah and Sarawak, the Orang Asli and migrants of Peninsular Malaysia, especially the women and children in these marginal communities. The widow's demand: "I want justice from you against my enemy" (Luke 18:3) further represents the cries of the marginal peoples against the enemies of corruption, discrimination and depravation at all levels of the Malaysian society.

The Law implanted in human hearts or written in the heart of flesh forms the covenantal ethos or moral way of life that is more explicitly spelt out as moral guidelines. For instance: "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him/her wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him/her as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God" (Lev 19:33-34) [Compendium of the Social Doctrines of the Catholic

Church/CSDC, no. 23:14-5]. The covenantal moral behavior is listed in the Decalogue or the Commandments revealed by God (*cf. Ex 19-24*; see EX 34:28; Deut 4:13; 10:4)

In faithfully living out the Ten commandments, humankind realizes “the true humanity of humankind” since “they bring to light the essential duties, and therefore, indirectly, the fundamental rights inherent in the nature of the human person.” (CSDC, no. 22:14) This nature is rooted not only in the covenantal relationship, but goes further back, created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) according to Genesis 1: 27. This image is the core of all humankind and our inalienable and inviolable dignity that is worthy of every respect and defense when violated by any form of unjust practices.

The denial of such respect of the fundamental dignity of the marginal peoples in Malaysia is a form of legalized violence against the hapless and powerless represented by the story of the double-bent woman (Luke 13:10-17). This woman is doubly bent over or twice burdened by the violence meted out to her by heavy taxation and patriarchal oppression of the Temple-State and the Roman Empire.¹ With the economic exploitation and patriarchal oppression, Schussler Fiorenza further specifies that the “vast majority of the poor, the sick and the starving were women, especially those women who had no male agencies that might have labeled them to share in the wealth of the patriarchal system.”² Due to the grinding poverty of the vast majority, Luise Schottroff observes that women only earned about half of the male daily-wage of twenty-five *dinarii* (Matt.20:1-6) which was barely enough to subsist at the poverty level³. With the escalating poverty, Schottroff continues, the small plot of land which women, children, aged women and men worked on to fetch an additional source of income (Acts 4:34, 37; cf Acts 2:45) often had to be sold.⁴ The poor of early Palestine “are poor right down to the marrow of their bones; even their *pneuma*, their capacity for the dignity and power God bestows, is threatened.”⁵

Both narratives of the gospel of Luke alert us to the individual and collective rights of the marginalized in this nation, especially their rights *to justice and integrity, and of course, the right to good governance*. In Malaysia as in early Palestine, “poverty poses a dramatic problem of justice; ... it is characterized by an unequal growth that does not recognize the “equal right of all people to take their seat ‘at the table of the common banquet.’” Such poverty makes it impossible to bring about *full humanism* which the Church hopes for and pursues so that persons and peoples may “be more” and live in conditions that are more human.” (CSDC, no.449, p.253) As economics is hand in glove with politics, the political system in Malaysia has to fulfill the citizens’ right to good governance, for “no better way exists...than by fostering an inner sense of justice, benevolence and service for the common good, and by strengthening basic beliefs about the true nature of the political community and about the proper exercise and limits of public authority.” (CSDC, no.392, p.221)

¹ For more information, see Richard A. Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement* (New York, N.Y.: Crossroad Company, 1989); John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York, N.Y.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); Peter Garney & Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society and Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987); Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *A Feminist Theological Construction of Christian Origins: In Memory Of Her* (New York, N.Y.: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994); Luise Schottroff, *Lydia’s Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Sociat History of Early Christianity*. Trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

² See Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory Of Her*, 141.

³ See Luise Schottroff, *Lydia’s Impatient Sisters*, 94-95.

⁴ *Ibid.* 92-93, 97.

⁵ *Ibid.* 137.

Only on the basis of our covenant faithfulness to God or total submission to God will all persons be equal before the law and guaranteed constitutional freedom of religion, of assembly, of speech and expression. Such freedom before the law is necessary for the full human flourishing of all citizens in Malaysia.

This covenantal faithfulness enjoins all Christians to reach out to those who are treated as “unequal” before the powers that be, the marginalized and the excluded, of the Malaysian society. Our physical presence embodies this God who is covenanted to the Malaysian people, created in God’s likeness and image, be they of different religions and cultures. This presence should be empowering, not enslaving, especially when I reflect on my experiences amongst the Orang Asli. I realize how important it is to regard them as agents of change and therefore, emphasize on conscious-raising, skills-imparting and capacity-building as primarily goals of our friendship with them. In this way, they do not remain the objects of Christian charity and human goodwill.

Conclusion

Malaysia, as a young fledging nation, lives under the watchful love of God. In understanding the “social contract” in relation to the covenant, this nation has entered into a binding covenant with God, for the founding fathers intended the “social contract” to give equality of opportunities and protection for all races before the law. Utmost fidelity to the spirit of this “social contract” enshrined in the Federal Constitution is necessary to guarantee the freedom that brings about a healthy climate that respects the rights to justice and integrity and the right to good governance. These are rights cherished by all citizens, especially the marginal peoples so that all become rightful citizens with equal opportunities in this nation.

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