

Conference Session 3.3: Conflict Resolution- Post-conflict Inter-faith and its role in a free South Africa

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Although the Afrikaners justified the practice of Apartheid on the basis of their religious belief and claimed that it stemmed from the mission of the church, religious communities suffered under apartheid. Their activities were disrupted and banned and their leaders persecuted. Churches, mosques, synagogues and temples were among the strongest forces against apartheid. They were motivated by values and norms coming from their particular faith traditions. Even the anti-apartheid struggle outside South Africa and in the prisons was in no way anti-religious. It was simply disappointed that the Dutch Reformed Church supported apartheid.

Religious Leaders and individuals like Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, Imam Abdullah Haroon, Imam Hassan Solomons and before them Father Trevor Huddleston, and Beyers Naude stood in the forefront of the struggle against apartheid. Similarly Ben Turok from the Jewish community and Ela Gandhi, the daughter of Mahatma Gandhi of the Hindu community.

In the post conflict, Post-Apartheid era we are aware that religion needs to play a major part in the transition phase. South Africa is very much a faith based society. It is not just Christian but Muslims and Jews, though a minority, play a vital role. Faith based organizations have to provide guidance and help to shape what reconciliation should look like at the same time. They also have to deal with poverty, HIV and Aids and all other social issues and challenges. They have the capacity to be the bridge between communities. They are responsible to reconnect people of all faiths.

However, civil society and religious groups have become less vocal. Indeed people are happy that democracy has arrived but we need to realize that the transition is not complete. It is an on-going process and should never end.

The religious actors have not as yet fully grasped that they need to provide South Africa with a moral backbone. They must rehabilitate the family, deal with issues of urbanization and forced migration which has destroyed the black family unit. Religions are still struggling to bring people together. Religious communities are also struggling to come to terms with the global world of today.

We must appreciate that all religions are based on Universal Values and all religions accept that there can be no separation of religion and other spheres of life.

Desmond Tutu expressed the need for inter-faith very resoundingly when he startled the mostly Christian audience gathered at the New Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, USA. In the middle of a wonderful description of the faith and sacrifice of South Africans to move almost immediately from apartheid to reconciliation, he felt the need to tell his audience of faithful people appreciating what faith and religion can do: "You know" – he quietly murmured in his Anglican-African accent. "God is not a Christian." A great silence of profound contemplation resonated upon the people's hearts and minds as if they had heard those words for the very first time. No, God is not a Christian, a Muslim, a Jew, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist, a Male nor a Female, but God is Real and always Present, and answers that prayers of the sincere and fulfills the aspirations of the good and the decent.

Many centuries ago a devout Hindu man who spent his time counting the deities recorded in his notebooks hundreds, thousands, millions of names of different deities. Up until the day he died, he was still writing. After he died, his friends eagerly picked up the last book to see how

many gods and goddesses he had found. On the last page he had written two words – One God.

Both Tutu and the Hindu sage in their unique way told us of the Oneness of Humanity. The late American Imam and leader Warith Deen Mohammed captured this spirit in these words:

“The time to see each other as enemies is out. We must be pleased as Muslims to see good Christians being good Christians, good Jews being good Jews, as well as good Buddhists, good Hindus, and others. We want success for any who believe in goodness and who invest in the human life and being. We must come together and trust, respect, and appreciate our common essence and sensitivities as Human Beings.”

He often referenced the following Qur’anic verse to give support and understanding to his position:

“And hold fast altogether by the rope which God (stretches out for you) and be not divided among yourselves. And remember with gratitude God’s favour on you, for you were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His Grace you became brethren. And you were on the brink of the Pit of Fire and He saved you from it. Thus does God make His Signs clear to you that you may be guided.”

Qur’an 3:10

Where We Are Today

The Transition is not complete! The struggle needs to go on. Whites in particular still have to reach out more and blacks need to be more accommodating. For this to happen, the Inter-faith work is key.

Our government fully appreciates the role of religious communities hence the establishment of the National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF). So far it has made a small contribution but need to reach out more to communities.

Religion needs to use its pro-politics voice. Tutu has done a lot to close that gap but many religious leaders fail to inspire society. They are also lagging behind in combatting racism.

As for the Inter-faith Initiative, it has not taken a formal political stand. The Cape Town Inter-faith Initiative in particular has done much to bring people together and they are starting to build bridges.

A few practical examples show the level of progress that inter-faith activities are achieving in the post conflict period.

1. The Cape Town Inter-faith Initiative in partnership with Blackburn College in the United Kingdom selects five local schools to participate in a student exchange program. They identified schools that are located in diverse geographical areas in Cape Town where pupils have little- if any contact with their peers who live in other areas. The schools that were selected were Islamia College in Lansdowne, Manyano High in Khayalitsha, Phoenix Secondary in Manenberg, Herzlia High in Highlands and South Peninsula in Diep River. This is a pilot project and it is to be extended to other schools in the future.

Some of the aims and objectives of the exchange program are:

- To promote respect for human rights and human dignity
- To strive to combat all forms of prejudice and injustice
- To respect people from different religions, faiths, cultures and backgrounds
- To promote empathy, responsibility, peace, social cohesion, reconciliation and social activism
- To enhance self-esteem, self-development and empower young people to work towards transformation

- To be aware of contemporary issues that impact negatively on local and global issues
- To forge relationships on the basis of humanity, equity and social justice

The program extends over a two year period and comprises of five components:

- During the first six months of the first year, the selected grade 10 learners will be required to attend a monthly preparatory session after school
- The learners will have a 7 day visit to Blackburn (UK)
- On return from Blackburn, explore ways to introduce extra-mural activities in their respective schools
- In grade 11, learners will be expected to be involved in after school educational activities once a week for younger learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. This component of the program will be organized in conjunction with the Amy Biehl Foundation.
- During the second year, learners from the UK will visit Cape Town for a follow-up program.

Islamia College is in a unique position to be chosen three consecutive years to visit the UK. The caliber of learners that represent Islamia College always brings great value to the program, hence the choice to have Islamia College learners on the program every year.

Preparatory program:

During the six months prior to the Blackburn visit, learners meet on a monthly basis at each of the participating schools. Learners are coached in techniques of proper engagement with one another, various local as well as international inter-faith topics are tackled to a better insight to get to know themselves.

Visit to Blackburn:

Learners from South Africa interact with learners from Blackburn in dialogue, excursions to places of worship and sightseeing. Learners share problems that are common and unique to their country, they are encouraged to come up with solutions. Great friendships are also forged during these visits.

2. Another initiative is the collaborative project piloted by the Islamia Cares Foundation, which involves Christian and Muslim religious leaders and welfare institutions. Sixty five large pots of food were cooked on Christmas Eve at the Islamia College premises. Through this goodwill venture, the Islamia Care Foundation fed over 21 000 people on Christmas Day in over twenty areas throughout the Western Cape.

3. An extremely exciting project run by the 2 Oceans Education Foundation is the opening of free and low fee schools in the townships where the state, as a result of the huge backlog, is struggling to raise standards. These schools are open to all for education for all.

Conclusion

Because of its unique history, people of all faiths in South Africa come together quickly to assist each other.

However, there is the danger as time passes that occurrences elsewhere in the world and economic pressures within could destroy the harmonious relationships fostered and cemented during apartheid.

The inter-faith movement must do much more to avoid polarization of religions, races, rich and poor, the educated and the illiterate in the glorious and celebrated country of South Africa which gave us the global leader and world citizen like the Honorable Nelson Mandela.