

GOODWILL MESSAGE

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AT THE SOUTH AFRICAN MISSION
IN KIGALI, RWANDA**

**Honourable Ministers
Members of Parliament
Dean of the Diplomatic Corps and Heads of Missions
Heads of religious and Academic Institutions
Honourable Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen**

Thank you so much for the privilege of addressing you today and for the fact that my wife and myself may celebrate this auspicious occasion here in Kigali. We will not attempt to write a book on Rwanda after our four day visit here, but this country and its people will remain deeply engraved in our memories. We will no longer be able to think of you as strangers. Thank you for the warmth and hospitality with which you received us here.

INTRODUCTION

I grew up in a Christian home and am a committed Christian myself. At the same time I understand the command of our Lord Jesus Christ to love my neighbour as I love myself, to include my neighbour who believes different from what I believe as well as my neighbour who does not believe at all. Ever since my first visit to a mosque exactly fifty year ago, I have been deeply interested in religion in all its many facets. I have studied it and I have taught it ever since. What has fascinated and intrigued me about religion in particular, is its role in society.

As you will no doubt agree, both Rwanda and South Africa are in the process of building a future and in both societies religion has always played a major role. Today, when we as South Africans are celebrating Freedom Day, I therefore intend to look very briefly at the role of religion in South African society and try to find parallels to Rwandan society. In so doing, I would like to dwell on two issues, namely interfaith relations and religion-state relations. Lastly, I want to look at the way ahead.

A. INTERFAITH RELATIONS

Starting with relations between different religions in society, I recall listening to a fascinating case study on interfaith cooperation for peace in Rwanda at the Interfaith Peace Summit in Africa, held in Johannesburg in 2002. In this case study, whose author I unfortunately cannot remember any longer, a vivid description was given of the uncertain beginnings of inter-faith relations in Rwanda in 1996: *We remember the terrible tension which reigned at the first meetings of Christians and Muslims, at which each side wanted to prove that it had the true religion. The inter-*

faith dialogue process was almost broken up before it got started. Listening to it then, and re-reading it recently for the purpose of this paper, I thought with nostalgia of the beginnings of inter-faith cooperation in South Africa.

In 1984, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whom I regard as my mentor, asked me, in his capacity as General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, to take the lead in starting a branch of the World Conference for Religion and Peace in South Africa. During August of that year, the interfaith body was officially established. I served as its national president until 1994.

The Interfaith Movement: Aims and objectives

First and foremost, we started WCRP-SA in order to share in the dismantling of Apartheid. The silence of many religious people in SA had placed the credibility of all religions in jeopardy. By making itself available as a platform WCRP-SA attempted to form a united front of religions against an inhumane and oppressive system

Second, the interfaith movement felt it necessary to focus on the reality of religious diversity in the country. South Africa is home to adherents of African religions, adherents of the Baha'i faith, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Rastafarians, Sikhs and Zoroastrians, albeit in some cases rather small numbers. The fact of religious plurality had been hidden from many people by the notorious policy of segregation.

Thirdly, WCRP-SA from its inception, identified service in the area of religious freedom as one of its aims. It embarked on a programme of sensitising people about that which adherents of other faiths held dear for themselves. Adherents of so-called 'minority' religions saw every act of political discrimination as an attack on their religious traditions from the side of the purportedly "Christian" government.

The interfaith movement: a contextual approach

In an attempt to reach the above objectives, it was clear to us that inter-faith co-operation in SA required a particular contextual approach. In this regard the following salient points served as guidelines:

- (a) In conducting interfaith dialogue and co-operation, we as people of religion intuitively knew that we needed to share the agenda of the mainstream of our nation. Translated into practical terms, this meant that we, in our interfaith venture, had to take cognisance of and lend support to the struggle for liberation in our country.
- (b) If our interfaith movement wished to be relevant and concrete in its undertakings in a situation of conflict, we had to dispose of the myth of political neutrality. Whilst we never aligned ourselves to one particular movement or party, we had to take sides with the poor and the oppressed in their struggle for justice and freedom.
- (c) It was clear that a joint struggle against the ideology of Apartheid was necessary. We realised that there was a lot of mistrust and suspicion, to which religion unfortunately contributed. It therefore stood to reason that we should have tried to do as much as possible together if we had any hope of making a contribution from the side of organised religion.

Opposition

Reading the Rwandan case study again, I could not help smiling when I noted that the advocates of inter-faith cooperation in Rwanda were accused of *having fallen into syncretism*. We were also accused of syncretism and of aiming to establish one universal religion. Other more liberally minded people recognised the importance of interfaith dialogue, but reproached us for politicising this concept.

From the side of the Apartheid regime, the interfaith organisation was suspect virtually from its inception. Some of our members had their passports withdrawn, others were detained and some were even charged with high treason. Some of our public meetings were banned while at others armed policemen, armoured cars, police dogs and barricades were visible.

Interfaith Cooperation

It is always difficult to assess the impact which a body such as the interfaith movement had on society and one should be careful not to take credit for a single initiative when so many other political activities, were going on. And yet, I believe, the interfaith movement created an interfaith ethos which paved the way for many important developments.

Perhaps the most tangible contribution that the interfaith movement made was its participation in the process towards the adoption of a new constitution for our country. In 1992 the Declaration on Religious Rights and Responsibilities was adopted at a gathering in Pretoria where representatives of all the major religious traditions in our country were present. This document comprises three major principles, namely;

- The reality of religious diversity in South Africa.
- The desirability of separation between religion and the state.
- The necessity of equal opportunities for all religions in societal life.

Although it never found its way into the statute books, its importance as a document carrying public sanction, was underscored by a prominent professor of Public Law who stated that *the Declaration was of great assistance in drafting the provisions on religious rights in South Africa's transitional constitution*.

The interfaith movement was one of the initiating parties of the National Peace Initiatives in the early ninety nineties. At the end of these initiatives the National Peace Convention took place and the National Peace Accord was signed. What was remarkable about the Convention from a religious point of view was the fact that for the very first time in the history of our country not only Christian prayers were offered at a state function. Hindu, Muslim and Jewish religious leaders also blessed the event with their presence and prayers despite complaints from right wing side.

A further example of the presence of an interfaith ethos was to be found in the whole process leading up to the first democratic elections in 1994. The Forum of Religious Leaders for Electoral Justice was created to muster support and lend moral credibility

to a fair and just electoral process. For the first time leaders from across the religious spectrum met together and cooperated as if it had always been the case.

When the National Inauguration Committee was formed to take care of the inauguration of President Nelson Mandela, care was taken to have the largest religious communities represented. The Moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church, the Archbishop of the Anglican Church, the Chief Rabbi, the President of the Muslim Judicial Council and the Chairperson of the Hindu Maha Sabha all participated.

Later developments that featured interreligious presence, were the establishment of an Advisory Board for Religious Broadcasting and the National Religious Leaders Forum. The revision of the Policy Document on Religious Education was undertaken by a religiously mixed task force and a Standing Advisory Committee on Religion in Education was formed to oversee implementation of the policy.

B. RELIGION-STATE RELATIONS

Available options

There are mainly three **constitutional options** available for governing the Relations between religion and the state. I will merely mention the first two and then elaborate on the third option, which in my opinion applies to the South African situation. In the first model, religion dominates the state. In the second model, representing the other extreme, a totalitarian state controls religious practice.

In the third model, occupying the middle ground, religion and the state are formally separated. The extent to which these spheres are separated, vary, but in general freedom of religion is granted. There are at least four forms of separation practiced today, namely:

1. **Separate spheres of power:** Religion and state are separated into spheres with some type of legal power sharing between them. The state is officially secular, but religious communities may dictate family law.
2. **Separation with establishment:** Here, the state officially sanctions one form of religion, but generally allows freedom of practice to other religions.
3. **Strict separation:** The state is officially secular. Religious groups are free to practice their beliefs in the private sphere, but religious input is not welcome in the public spheres of law and policy.
4. **Separation with interaction:** The state is officially secular as it does not favour one religious group over another. There is no wall of separation between religious groups and the state, and interaction is encouraged as is the input of religious groups into the formation of public policy.

This type of interaction appears to prevail in South Africa currently. Religion in South Africa is not prohibited, but rather encouraged to participate in the public sphere. The broadcasting of religious services on radio and television and the exercise of religious observances in state and state-aided institutions are examples in this regard. One could therefore describe the separation as "soft", and "sympathetic".

It is in line with the idea of separation with inter-action, that I regard the call that President Paul Kagame of Rwanda made on 5 March 2008 as most important. In officially opening the congress of the Union of Muslim Councils in Kimuhurura, he urged religions, according to The New Times, to play a central role in championing

socio-economic development. Not having said so, explicitly, I nevertheless understood him as implying that a democratic state, which protects its citizens and guarantees freedom of religion and worship, certainly has the right to expect from religious institutions, besides running their own affairs smoothly, to assist in bettering the lives of fellow citizens.

President Kagama concluded that religions have limitless power to inspire mankind to sacrifice for and improve their communities. Again I concur. A very recent opinion poll in South Africa found that 82% of those interviewed, regard religious institutions as the most credible entities in society. With such a tremendous standing in the eyes of the public, religious institutions should certainly not be resting on their laurels. (By the way, the South African Broadcasting Corporation came second with 72%!)

In 1987, I was part of an interfaith delegation that went to Lusaka to have a consultation with the African National Congress. Archbishop Desmond Tutu was the leader of our delegation and the theme of our consultation was *Religion in a post-Apartheid South Africa*. At the end of our two day deliberations, the ANC greeted us as representatives of different religions with the following challenge: *We are building a new house in South Africa. Don't ask us to reserve a room for you; join us in building the house*. The question that I think can rightfully be put to people of religion in both our countries is: "Are you as people of religion helping the builders or do you merely want to rent a room?!"

C. THE WAY FORWARD

One of the important challenges which are facing our divided nation is the acceptance of people of other faiths as colleagues, neighbours, friends and fellow citizens. The culture of tolerance, which is so desperately needed in the political arena in our country, and in yours, is certainly also necessary with regard to people of other faiths. With so many examples of inter-religious conflict leading to untold misery in many parts of the world, attempts by people of different faiths to work together on matters of social concern are to be welcomed with acclamation. In this way, people of religion may also greatly assist the state.

In this regard, I cannot think of a better example than the recent provision of clean piped water to Muslims in the Gatore district of Rwanda's eastern district of Kirehe. At the opening of the scheme on 19 March 2008, Anglican Archbishop Emmanuel Kolini said, according to Ecumenical News International: *We Christians see it as one way of saying, 'We are sorry*. This is indeed a splendid example of interfaith cooperation supporting the agenda of the people! At the same occasion Sheikh Yussuf Bizuru, grand imam of the Eastern Province said: *This project signifies more than bringing water to those who lacked it before. It offers the rest of Africa and the world a model of harmonious interfaith cooperation for development*. To return to the advice we received in Lusaka to help building the house: What has been happening here in Rwanda around the supply of clean water, certainly amounts to helping the builders build the house!

It has been our experience in South Africa that in the area of cultural and religious diversity there always remain much work to be done. Currently I find myself in my association with the Desmond Tutu Diversity Trust involved in three such projects. The first is to train school teachers how to handle religious and cultural diversity in the classroom. Disturbing incidents around cultural differences have in the not too distant past occurred in our schools. The second is to provide hospitals and other

health care institutions with a manual on healthcare to people of different faiths. Our sponsors have already urged us to have this publication translated into French and Portuguese for wider consumption. Lastly, we are arranging encounters between young people of different faiths and cultures. Recently, we had a very successful event when 30 Muslim youth and 30 Jewish youth cooked a meal together.

The challenge before us as people of religion in South Africa is to shed our in-group mentality and serve the national agenda. In the final analysis the question is not whether a democratic South Africa will be kind to religion, but rather whether religion will be kind to a democratic South Africa. Would this question hold true for a democratic Rwanda, too? I thank you for your attention.

Mugire amahoro! (Peace be to you)