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Inter-religious relations in South Africa with reference to Christians and Muslims

ABSTRACT

This article is in the realm of religious pluralism and ecumenism. It is about the relation between Christianity and Islam as it unfolded in the Cape since 1652 and in the entire country to date. Christianity, as embodied in the Dutch Reformed Church, was the religion of the ruler whilst other religions and even other churches were not allowed to operate freely and publicly in the Cape colony. Freedom of religion was eventually granted in 1804. As we celebrated in 2004, ten years of freedom and democracy, and thus of two-hundred years of religious freedom, this article looks at what has accrued to South Africa's religious heritage in terms of inter-religious dialogue and praxis as well as ecumenical relations.

1. INTRODUCTION

South Africa is a home to several religions among which are the following: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and African religion. The interaction among these religions or lack of it cannot be understood and appreciated apart from the socio-political developments in the country since the seventeenth century. In other words, political developments in South Africa have dictated, to a large extent, the manner and the degree to which different religious communities interacted or did not interact with one another. However, our task in this essay is limited to Christian-Muslim relations.

2. ARRIVAL OF CHRISTIANITY

Christianity and colonialism arrived together in South Africa in 1652. That is, Jan van Riebeeck brought his Christianity as embodied in the Dutch Reformed Church (Coertzen 2001:133-153). For the first 150 years the Cape had an official religion, Christianity. African religion was ignored and Islam was expressly banned. As Pillay (1995:71) correctly puts it,

In the years between the first Dutch settlement at the
Cape(1652) and the British occupation of the Cape
(1795-1803), church/state relations were determined by
the widely accepted principle in European nationalism
at the time, the principle of cuius regio eius religio

The position of the DRC as an official church was so entrenched that other churches were not permitted to hold public services (Hofmeyr 1994:8-30). For example, George Schmidt who had

been sent by Count von Zinzendorf as a Moravian missionary to the Cape in 1737 was refused permission to baptise converts and the honours were done by the DRC (Coertzen 2001:133-153; Pillay 1995:71-86; Gerstner 1997:16-30). Even under the British, the DRC retained its official status. The Anglican Church never quite achieved the status of the DRC during the hundred years of British colonial rule. Catholics were not tolerated and their children and converts were baptised and instructed in the DRC. The situation changed under the Batavian Republic (1803-1806) when in 1804 the Church Order of de Mist gave religious freedom to all religions. Lutherans, Anglicans, Catholics as well as Muslims, for example, benefited from this proclamation (Pillay 1995:71-86; Coertzen 2001:133-153; Donaldson 1994:36-88)

Only then did missionary work among the indigenous peoples and Muslims began in earnest, with the London Missionary Society arriving first in 1799. The Reformed faith had by that time split into three churches namely, the DRC itself, and two Reformed churches established by the trek boers (Elbourne & Ross 1997:31-50; Davenport 1997:51-67). The free burgers moved further and further away from the Cape in quest for independence from the Dutch East India Company and the Cape colonial government. This group would become the present-day Afrikaners comprising the Dutch, French Huguenots, Germans and other Europeans (Strauss 1994:93-121).

Although religious freedom was granted to all religions, Christianity was given predominance over other religions throughout all the centuries until early 1990. And with the ascension of the Nationalist Party to power in 1948, the DRC was again regarded as the state church so much so that it was dubbed, "the Nationalist Party at prayer". The apartheid constitution of the Nationalist Party regarded the state as not only religious in general but as specifically Christian. By the way, many of the architects of apartheid ideology and the drafters of the constitution and implementers were theologians such as prime minister DF Malan and cabinet minister Andries Treurnicht; and the DRC lent credence to the ideology by making theological rationale for and justification of apartheid (Kinghorn 1997:135-154; Lubbe 1984, 1987)

3. ARRIVAL OF ISLAM

According to Lubbe (1984,1987), Islam was brought into the country in two major distinct phases. Malay, the majority of whom were Muslims, arrived in the Cape between 1667 and 1834. The most notable political exile in this group was Sheikh Yusuf who arrived in 1694, and organised the Muslim community in the Cape. They were slaves and political prisoners who would offer cheap labour. The task was not easy for Yusuf and other leaders since Islam had been banned both in private and public arenas until 1804, when Islam was unbanned by the British authorities through the Church Order of de Mist (Coertzen 2000:136; Pillay 1995:77). This group constitutes the first phase. Statistically the Muslim population in the Cape was as follows: 922 in 1688; 61 947 in 1788 and 150 000 in 1839 according to Pillay (1995:73) quoting B Shaw in " Memorials of South Africa"(1860). The second phase was constituted by Indian labourers who arrived in Durban in 1860 although only a minority were Muslims. However, a larger number of Muslims arrived after 1860 and most of them were traders and businesspeople. This group was not denied religious freedom, but was prohibited by legislation to own property such as land.

Although many Muslims were labourers when they arrived in South Africa, some of them did improve themselves economically in the last three hundred years and have become the envy of many blacks. In terms of expansion, Islam has not been appropriated by many blacks and less so by whites. Its greatest gains have been among so-called Coloureds and Asians numbering about 60% and 55% of the respective population groups. Four factors could have contributed to the Muslims` slow progress in their proselytising endeavours: Firstly, many of them retained their

Arabic culture and led sheltered lives; secondly, some wanted to maintain purity of their religion; thirdly, since South Africa was a pariah state under apartheid, they were unable to access funds from the Middle East and elsewhere; fourthly, there has been a growing perception among black people that as Muslims and Asians in general became wealthier, they also became as ruthless against them as the white people were.

Although all Muslims in South Africa accept the absolute authority of the Qur'an and the Hadith, they are not a homogeneous community. Firstly, there are Indian (and Sri Lankan) and Malay Muslims who are by necessity culturally different. Secondly, they are theologically not on the same wave length because Indians are trained and educated in India and Pakistan whereas the Malay receive their theology from Egypt and Saudi Arabia and thirdly, the political outlook between the Ulama (the custodians of canon law and theology), and the Muslim Youth Movement and the Muslim Students Association is not the same. The Ulama are regarded as theologically conservative and politically passive as opposed to the youth who are more theologically progressive and politically militant and activist.

In terms of race classification, the majority of Muslims are either Coloured or Asian. As indicated above, black Muslims are very few in spite of the fact that some Zanzibarian Muslims are living at the Bluff in Durban. Black Christians, who are about 70% of South Africa's population, formed the bulk of the oppressed and exploited people under colonialism and apartheid and the abovementioned ethnic groupings were regarded before the advent of democracy as second-class citizens of South Africa.

4. WORLD CONFERENCE ON RELIGION AND PEACE: THE SOUTH AFRICAN CHAPTER (WCRP-SA)

Since ethnic groups in South Africa were separated through the Group Areas Act under apartheid, it had not been easy to organise inter-religious encounters. Asians and Muslims who were and are predominantly Muslims lived in their respective designated areas and blacks who were and are overwhelmingly Christian, lived in theirs on the one hand, and on the other, black and white Christians were discouraged from worshiping together.

In spite of those political obstacles, some religious persons inclusive of major religions came together to form the South African Chapter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace in 1984 (Lubbe 1994). For the first time in the inter-religious encounter in South Africa, about thirty Hindus, Muslims and Christians met from 27-29 May, 1988 to explore possibilities of cooperation in the struggle against apartheid and the theme was, Believers in the struggle for justice and peace. It was discovered that they shared a common revulsion against apartheid from their faith perspectives and they agreed on common strategies to fight for national liberation (Kritzinger 1988).

Another important milestone in the life of the WCRP-SA was the national conference held in December 1990 (Kritzinger 1990). More than two hundred representatives of all the major religious communities in South Africa attended. Among the most important decisions taken at the conference was the mandate given to the WCRP-SA to initiate a process to evolve a charter of religious rights and responsibilities, a challenge to religious communities to be self-critical on their teachings and praxis concerning women and to interrogate the government's policy of religious education in schools. No longer should Christianity be the only religion taught in public schools, but also other religions as well. The teaching should be done in the spirit of active appreciation of all the religious traditions and belief systems in South Africa. In 1992, the Charter on Religious Rights and Responsibilities was adopted. The proposed clause on religious freedom reads in part

1. All persons are entitled :
to freedom of conscience,
to profess, practice, and propagate any religion or no religion,
to change their religious allegiance;

2. Every religious community and/or member thereof shall enjoy the right;
2.1 to establish, maintain, and manage religious institutions;
2.2 to have their particular system of family law recognised by the state;
2.3 to criticise and challenge all social and political structures and policies in terms of the teachings of their religion.

5. SOUTH AFRICA'S RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE SINCE 1994

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996) is regarded as one of the best in the world and the chapter on the bill of rights reflects almost all what the WCRP-SA has proposed in its religious charter. Although no major inter-religious conferences have been held in South Africa in the last ten years, with the exception of the world parliament of religions` conference which was held in Cape Town in 1999, the ethos of the inter-religious movement had been expressed and concretised in activities such as the Religious Leaders for Electoral Justice which monitored and observed South Africa's first democratically conducted elections in 1994, and the National Forum for Religious Leaders which meets with the state president about twice a year. This Forum has been responsible for organising inter-religious prayers at national functions such as those of the inauguration of presidents Mandela and Mbeki respectively. I am rather sceptical about these post-apartheid inter-religious endeavours because their prophetic thrust has been lost and some even regard these committees as government praise singers. The fact that these endeavours have been initiated by the religious desk of the African National Congress led by people such as Rev Cedric Mayson, an ANC stalwart, does not make a good case for the inter-religious ethos since 1994.

As a result of the pressure from religious leaders, two important public institutions have radically changed their policies namely, the public schools and the South African Broadcasting Corporation(SABC).Before the introduction of democracy in South Africa, this national broadcaster aired predominantly Christian programmes and religious devotions in government schools were Christian. But through the Religion and Education policy document adopted in September 2003, Christian school assemblies have either been stopped or replaced by inter-religious assemblies and religion education is offered as a non-examinable subject. Religion education is no longer aimed at converting "heathens or pagans" to Christianity, but to expose learners to all religious traditions and their ethical systems. Through the SABC's policy document on broadcasting adopted in September 2003, all religions have been given equal airtime on a proportional basis. Religious devotions and cultural documentaries on radio and television today reflect South Africa's religious and cultural diversity. For example, religious time for devotions on television has been proportionally divided among Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and African Religion. In that way South Africans have begun to engender a culture of religious and cultural tolerance, and most importantly, a culture of appreciation of one another's value and religious systems.

There is one other important recent development in the inter-religious sphere that needs to be mentioned (Challenge, October 2005:8). About seventy religious people, consisting of Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Bahai's were convened by the South African Council of Churches. Some of the topics that were discussed included the following namely, biodiversity,

nuclear energy, climate change, economics, genetically modified organisms and theology of earth-keeping. At the end of the conference an institute was launched called, the "South African Faith Communities Environment Institute"

The Institute's mission reads, "We are an institute of people of many faiths, united in our diversity through our common commitment to earthkeeping. Our aim is to support the faith communities in fulfilling their environmental and socio-economic responsibility (Challenge, 2005:8).The Institute would also cooperate with existing organisations that work in the area of the stewardship of creation.

6. CONCLUSION

Many of the people who were active during the struggle for liberation have either passed on, retired, or have occupied themselves with some projects nationally and internationally. Some of them, including prominent religious leaders are serving in government in various capacities. Although they are contributing significantly to the reconstruction of the country and reconciliation of the citizens to one another. Nonetheless, the inter-religious movement has lost focus and its prophetic role as a result. The plight of the poor and the government's neo-liberal socio-economic policies are challenges facing the inter-religious ethos in South Africa. Patriarchy that characterises all religious praxis and culture needs to be interrogated if women for example were to be liberated and empowered. Health related matters such as the scourge of HIV and Aids cannot be adequately and effectively addressed by religions acting separately. Child abuse is inherent in all cultures and it is religions working together that will help eradicate this shameful practice. Peace-building in the world today is an enormous challenge to the global inter-religious movement especially that most conflicts seem to be religiously motivated. During our struggle against apartheid, matters environmental and ecological were strategically neglected. But as South Africa becomes more and more industrialised and urbanised, we should join the rest of the world community in the stewardship of creation.

We do not doctrinally know one another as religious communities in South Africa. Why do Muslims believe that the Qur'an is God's infallible Word ? Why do Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the son of God and is worshipped as the second person of the Godhead? What exactly is the Jihad? Can Muslims and Christians interact with one another without one group compromising its identity? What are the fundamentals in each religion that cannot be negotiated and for which religions have waged wars over the centuries? The questions are endless. But one thing is certain; Christians and Muslims believe in the God of justice and righteousness. One hopes that ten years into our democracy men and women believers would reconstitute the inter-religious movement with a socio-economic mission embedded in our religious traditions and ethos.

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