

The Muslim voice in South Africa – in the era of truth and reconciliation

ABSTRACT

The author who served on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) invites the reader to listen to the voices of a number of Muslim leaders who accepted an invitation to testify at the TRC's Faith Community Hearing (East London, 17-19 Nov 1997). The leaders elaborated on three distinct experiences: the experience of Muslim victims of apartheid, the experience of those who actively opposed apartheid, as well as the experience of Muslims who collaborated with the apartheid regime. The article concludes with a strong plea for understanding and dialogue between Christians and Muslims in South Africa, in the era of truth and reconciliation.

1. INTRODUCTION

It was during the second day of the special Hearing for Faith Communities (East London, 17-19 Nov 1997), called by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), that representatives of the Muslim community took the stand. The hall was packed. The audience listened with eager anticipation. What would the Muslim community say of itself? How did Muslim leaders themselves evaluate their role during the apartheid era?

After inviting thousands of victims from all sectors of society to make statements to the Commission at 140 hearings throughout the country, the TRC invited special interest groups as well as some of the revered institutions in the South African society, to inform the Commission on the past – more specifically on their role during the apartheid years (1960-1994). The very last occasion, after the lawyers, the medical fraternity, big businesses, the academic institutions, political parties, the police and security services, correctional services, the media, women groups and the youth had their say, was the Faith Community Hearing. East London, the venue of the very first TRC hearing (16-19 Apr 1996), was again chosen to host the last of the special interest group hearings.

Months before the hearing was due to start invitations were sent to the different Christian denominations, ecumenical bodies and parachurch organisations in South Africa, together with invitations to the other faith communities in the country, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Traditional African Religion, Baha'i, etcetera, to prepare submissions for the TRC. There was some discussion within the TRC on whether these communities indeed should be asked to approach the Commission. Surely the faith communities – even the Afrikaans churches that in the past supported the policy of apartheid – were not guilty of gross human rights abuses? What would they have to confess? But, went the counter argument, the churches and the other communities were so closely involved with everything that happened in South Africa – on both sides of the struggle – that it was inconceivable *not* to invite them to speak. The ministers and the priests, the moderators and the bishops, the imams and the rabbis, needed an opportunity to tell their stories: stories of guilt and shame, also of courage and conviction, of truth and reconciliation.

The Faith Community Hearing was, according to the TRC chair Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “probably the best of all the Truth Commission hearings” (Meiring 1999:265, cf Tutu 1998:177ff, Boraine 2000:179ff). Many churches responded to the call without hesitation. Others – among them the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church) that in the past supported apartheid – agonised for months before they decided to come. There was some hesitation, too, in the ranks of the Muslim community. The vexing question apparently was: who would speak for all Muslims in the country? Among conservative and progressive Muslim leaders rifts developed through the years, rifts that were often caused by pressures of the apartheid system. Eventually a number of representatives of the community from different parts of South Africa did accept the invitation to speak. As was the case with the other denominations and communities it soon became apparent that *three* stories needed to be told: of Muslims who *suffered* under apartheid, of Muslims who *fought* against apartheid, and of Muslims who overtly or covertly *supported* the racist policies of the South African government.

2. THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

The story of Muslims in South Africa that was told at the hearing went far back in history – virtually as far as that of the descendants of the Dutch settlers who came with Jan van Riebeeck to the Cape of Good Hope, three and a half centuries ago. Shortly after van Riebeeck’s arrival, Muslim slaves were offloaded in Table Bay, to be followed by Mardycckers who came from Ambonya in the Moluccas, to help secure the settlement. More significant was the arrival of Muslim exiles, freedom fighters who were arrested and deported by the Dutch in the East Indies. These included the Macassar princes and, notably, Sheik Yusuf, the hero of the Bantam freedom struggle. At the beginning of the 19th century with the British occupation of the Cape, the flow from the East Indies stopped, isolating the Muslim community at the Cape from their homeland in the East. The Cape Muslims of the Shafi’i school, though small in number, played a valuable role in the social and cultural life in the Cape. Their contribution to the development and establishment of the Afrikaans language is vast (Naudé 1996:159; Oosthuizen 1977:329ff).

In the second half of the 19th century a large number of Indians were brought to Natal by the British to work in the sugar fields of the province. Among these groups of indentured labourers who started to arrive in Durban in 1869 were a substantial number of Muslims. Many of them, in later years, established themselves in the trade and business community in many parts of the country (Oosthuizen 1977:330ff).

According to the best available statistics, based on the National Census of 1996, the Muslim community in South Africa numbers just more than half a million: 553 583 in total (246 431 Coloureds, 236 315 Indians, 43 253 Blacks, 3 741 Whites. In the census 23 843 additional Muslims are to be found in the category “others”) (Hendriks & Erasmus 2002:14ff). The Muslim community is relatively small – it comprises 1,4 percent of the population – but the influence of the community in the political, economic, academic and cultural life of the country far exceeds its numbers.

3. VICTIMS OF APARTHEID

Religion is a powerful motivational force in any society, Moulana E I Bham, speaking for the *Jamiatul Ulama Transvaal*, emphasised in his written submission to the TRC. Religion enhances a sense of spirituality in the citizens of the country. Even more importantly, religion serves as a guide to social action in the community. With reference to the dominant religion (Christianity) in the country, Bham continued, “The impact of religion in society can assume both negative and

positive forms; and, in the South African context, it is regrettable that a particular religion was vulgarised to provide a religio-ideological justification for apartheid, race domination and social suppression of the Blacks (i.e. African, Coloured and Indian)” (p 282, cf Dawood, p 249).

Discrimination and suffering took many forms over the past 350 years. Since the time of the Dutch *volksplanting* (settlement) in the Cape in the middle of the 17th century, Muslims had to live under conditions very similar to those of the apartheid years during the latter part of the 20th century. “Muslims were brought to South Africa either as captured freedom fighters against Dutch Colonialism in the Far-East, as slaves to European masters or as indentured labourers,” Imam Gassan Solomon (of the *Muslim Judicial Council*) stated in his submission. “The socio-political relations of domination at the time ensured that Islam remained a subjugated religion of a minority, enjoying neither equality nor the right to free expression. As slaves and political exiles, besides the right to worship freely, they were denied the erection of places of worship and a burial ground” (Solomon, p 287).

Bham touched on the harsh treatment Muslims shared with other racial and religious groups, the negation of their political rights, and the violence that Muslim activists who dared to speak out against racial discrimination, who fought against apartheid, had to endure. Young people were detained, imprisoned, tortured, banned, exiled, and in some cases killed. Journalists were harassed or incarcerated. Muslim leaders had their travel documents confiscated. Even worse were the more subtle forms of discrimination they suffered. Moulana Bham listed some of these areas in his submission (Bham, p 284).

- Christian National Education that indoctrinated Muslim children into a Christian national philosophy and which denigrated an Islamic perspective of life.
- The often one-sided and distorted presentations of Islam in the media, presenting Islam as “fundamentalistic”, “intolerant”, “militant” and “advocating gender inequality and women’s oppression”.
- In the legal and judicial system of the day Muslim personal and family law was not recognised. Muslim marriages were not legally valid, resulting in children being considered illegitimate or born out of wedlock.
- Under the Group Areas Act numerous mosques as well as land used for prayer were threatened.
- In some cases vehement protests carried the day, in other cases mosques had to be re-established.
- From time to time Muslim places of worship were attacked or desecrated by unknown persons, allegedly right wingers who saw Islam as a threat to Christianity.
- Muslims have received little or no government support for the development of their social, cultural and religious institutions.
- Muslim basic religious necessities of *halaal* food in hospitals, prisons, and in the defence force were not provided.

4. MUSLIM RESISTANCE AGAINST APARTHEID

Since 1694 when the Muslim community was established, creative strategies were developed to defend their religion and to challenge broader forms of social discrimination. According to Bham, this meant three things: the building and developing of religious, educational and social welfare institutions, the challenging of explicit forms of discrimination, as well as individual and collective participation in the wider struggle for freedom (Bham, p 283).

Sheik Yusuf in Maccasar and Taun Guru and Sheik Effendi played instrumental roles in challenging the colonial domination in the 18th and 19th centuries. At the turn of the 20th century

thousands of Muslims were mobilised in the Passive Resistance Campaign against racial discrimination – the Hamida Mosque in Newtown becoming one of the nerve centres of the movement. Similarly, Dr Abdullah Abdurrahman of the African Peoples' Organisation challenged race discrimination in the Cape. In the 1940s Muslim theologians such as Moulvi Cachalia and Moulvi Ismail Salojee joined hands with Dr Yusuf Dadoo and others in transforming the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congress into mass-based organisations (Mandela 1994:292ff). Since then a number of Muslim leaders, among whom Imam Haroon (associated with the Pan African Congress) and Ahmed Kathrada (associated with the African National Congress), joined the struggle to be followed by the likes of Ahmed Timol, Dr Haffeejee and Suliman Salujee who died as martyrs to the cause.

Imam Gassan Solomon, in his submission to the TRC, paid homage to the contribution of the *Muslim Judicial Council* (MJC), which was formed in 1945 to promote Muslim unity, as well as to voice protest against the oppressive laws in the country. In 1961 the MJC, together with a number of Muslim leaders and youth organisations, launched the *Call of Islam Declaration*:

For too long a time now we have been, together with our fellow-sufferers, subjugated, suffered humiliation of being regarded as inferior beings, deprived of our basic rights to earn, to learn and to worship according to the Divine Ruler of Allah. We can no longer tolerate further encroachment on these, our basic rights, and therefore we stand firm with our brothers in fighting the evil monster that is about to devour us – that is oppression, tyranny and *baasskap* (supremacy)" (p 289).

The publication of the Declaration was followed by a packed meeting in the Cape Town city hall (7 May 1961), where the MJC solemnly declared that "apartheid in any form can not be condoned by Islam". Reference was made, inter alia, to the Holy Qur'an (Sura 49:13):

O Mankind! We created you from a single male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise one another). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is one who is most righteous.

On the basis of this, the Muslim historian Achmat Davids later concluded that the MJC was the first religious body to declare apartheid a *heresy* (Solomon, p 289, cf Bham, p 285). Three years later, in 1964, the MJC convened a national conference to protest the threat that the Group Areas Act brought to their mosques in many parts of the country. In no uncertain terms the conference decided to oppose government on this issue: under no circumstances would Muslims abandon their old mosques or even deign to ask special permission to pray in mosques in so-called "white areas".

During the late sixties the growing political awareness among Muslims – especially in the Cape – intensified with the death of the popular Imam Abdulla Haron, after almost four months of detention under the infamous Terrorism Act. Haron was at the time the Imam at the Al-Jamia mosque in Cape Town and chairperson of the MJC. His death brought about a polarisation between conservative and progressive members of the Muslim community, to which will be referred below.

In 1976, after the Soweto uprising, the MJC issued a strong letter against the South African government, protesting the police brutality against children and young people across the country. The security police reacted by raiding the MJC's offices in Cape Town. When the United Democratic Front was formed in 1983 to spearhead the nations opposition against the government's Tri-cameral Parliament Proposals, the MJC again joined forces with those who battled against apartheid (cf TRC Report IV 1998:85). In August 1985 the MJC partook in a march to demand freedom for Nelson Mandela, who was at the time incarcerated at the Pollsmoor Prison,

Cape Town. Violent clashes with the police broke out and several religious leaders – among whom Sheik Abdul Gamied Gabier, chairperson of the MJC – were arrested. Later, when the infamous Trojan Horse incident (cf Meiring 1999:143ff) took place, over 7 000 people attended a mass meeting at the Masjidus-Salaam mosque in Cape Town. The mosque complex was placed under siege by government forces. A letter written by Nelson Mandela after hearing about these actions was smuggled from Pollsmoor, expressing his gratitude and his support to the MJC (Solomon, p 292).

In his statement on behalf of the *Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa*, the general secretary Nisaar Dawood drew the TRC attention to the role that young people played during the struggle. Since the 1960s many young Muslims, impatient of the conservative ‘Ulama leadership’s inactivity and inability to take a firm stand against apartheid, formed their own organisations to fight for the cause: the District Six Muslim Youth Movement, the Claremont Youth Movement, the Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa, the Muslim Students’ Association, Qibla, the Call of Islam and Al-Jihad.

Dawood also pointed to the role that the Muslim print media played during the apartheid years. The *Muslim News* and *Al Qalam* continuously highlighted the plight of the oppressed and the exploited in the community, encouraging Muslims to take up the cause for non-Muslims who were also suffering. The *Muslim News* as well as *Al Qalam* (the mouthpiece of the Muslim Youth Movement) were served with many a banning order during these years.

During the 1980s the struggle against apartheid was, according to Farid Esack, regarded by many Muslims as *jihad*, the “Islamic paradigm of the liberation struggle ... an effort, an exertion to the utmost, a striving for justice and peace” (*Qiblah* pamphlet, quoted by Esack, p 291). The struggle for freedom and justice in South Africa was seen as a sacred one, “Any Muslim who abandons the struggle in South Africa abandons Islam,” it was said.

5. MUSLIM COMPLICITY

Not all Muslims, however, suffered under apartheid. At the TRC hearing mention was also made of individuals as well as groups within the Muslim Community who collaborated with the regime. For various reasons – idealistic as well as pragmatic – a number of community and business leaders, together with political leaders, chose to work with the South African government, within the confines of the apartheid structures. This led to violent recriminations between Muslims in many parts of the country and caused rifts that to this day have not completely healed.

Moulana Bham mentioned in his submission, “It must also be recognised that a minority did collaborate with the apartheid state in the local management committees, the South African Indian Council, the Coloured Representatives Council and the Tri-cameral system. We reject the view offered by them when they say that ‘they went in to advance Muslim interests’. It was made plainly clear to them that collaboration with an oppressive regime is antithetical to Islamic principles. We call on them to come to terms with their conscience and do what is honourable – apologise to the nation at large and seek forgiveness from one’s Creator” (Bham, p 285).

The other spokespersons, Solomon, Dawood and Esack, were not as mild in their criticisms against their fellow Muslims who collaborated with the regime, or who were not vocal enough in their opposition – significantly pointing their fingers at Moulana Bham’s Jamiatul Ulama Transvaal for its conservative, sometimes even reactionary stance. “They obstinately refused to be moved from their record of silence on any political issues which would appear to be anti-state and consequently did not join the overwhelming consensus of Muslim organizations in declaring participation in the Apartheid Tri-cameral Parliament elections against the spirit of Islam” (Solomon, p 292). Pressure by, among others, the Muslim Youth Movement persuaded the Natal

Jamiat to speak out against the election, but the Transvaal Jamiat, in spite of strong pressure from the Muslim Youth, “was consistent in its silence” (Solomon, p 293, cf Dawood, p 294).

In 1986 the South African Law Commission invited leading Muslim scholars and lawyers to help draft legislation legalising Muslim marriages in the country. Initially the response was positive, but once again sustained opposition from Muslim youth organisations caused the leadership to withdraw their support. Dawood was quite candid in his assessment of the Muslim leadership during apartheid years that “must take responsibility for their inability to provide leadership against apartheid. They failed to translate the Islamic teachings into real opposition against oppression and exploitation” (Dawood, p 245).

The strongest criticism against the Muslim status quo, however, came from the charismatic Muslim academic Farid Esack, speaking on behalf of the *Call of Islam*. In no uncertain terms he castigated the Muslim leadership on numerous issues, especially on their thundering silence after the death in detention of Abdullah Haron in 1969. He did not mind roughing the feathers of his peers! Indeed, when it became known that Esack would appear before the Faith Community Hearing, Moulana Bham sent a message from Johannesburg to apologise for not attending – because of a sudden illness. “It does not surprise me at all,” was Esack’s comment. “He does not want to appear on the same podium with me!” (Meiring 1999:268). Although Bham did not submit the Jamiatul’s statement in person, it was tabled at the TRC and incorporated in the TRC’s Report.

6. MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS IN SOUTH AFRICA: NOTES ON THE PAST AND ON THE FUTURE

The submissions of the representatives of the different Muslim organisations left a huge impression on the TRC – as was the case with the submissions from the “other” faith communities: the African traditionalist, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Baha’i. It was evident that belonging to one of these communities in a South Africa that considered itself to be a “Christian country”, was not easy. “I am certain that all my fellow Christians in South Africa will agree with me if I express our deep apologies to you, the members of the other faith communities in the country, for the arrogant way in which we as Christians acted – as though ours was the only religion in South Africa, while we have been a multi-religious community from day one,” Desmond Tutu who chaired the hearing, solemnly declared (Meiring 1999:272).

Farid Esack, who has played an important role in building Muslim-Christian relations the past years in South Africa – who as student enrolled at the Christian theological faculty of the University of the Western Cape in order to get to know his partners in dialogue intimately – took his cue from what Tutu said. If we talk of the past, he explained, we should not only think of apartheid, security legislation and all those things: Christian “triumphalism” was also an issue. In an avowed “Christian state” adherents of other faiths often ran into difficulties. “If you were a Muslim – somebody who was part of the so-called ‘Muslim threat’ – you were often regarded as an enemy of the state and treated as such.” It was ironic, Esack said, that as recently as 1986, the year when the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church) has for the first time started to take leave of apartheid, the General Synod still referred to Islam as a “false religion” (Meiring 1999:272).

Imam Rashied Omar who travelled from Cape Town to attend the hearing concurred, adding that it was not only members from the Afrikaans-speaking churches who harboured negative feelings against Muslims. It applied to members from most Christian denominations. Moreover, the imam pointed out, none of us should be pointing a finger. All of us, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Jews harboured among us individuals who acted questionably towards one another, who were guilty of collaborating with the apartheid regime, often to the disadvantage of the

liberation struggle. “For the sake of rebuilding our country spiritually,” Rashied Omar said, “it is vitally important that we as religious leaders, get our people to confess their complicity in apartheid and racism. What is more, those who benefited from the past, ought to put their hands deep in their pockets” (Meiring 1999:273).

It was not only traditional relationships between Christianity and the other faiths in South Africa that were questioned. Even in the course of the Truth and Reconciliation process itself, Muslims and Hindus and Jews from time to time felt excluded and marginalised. Looking back at the TRC experience Farid Esack reflected, “There are (still) ... many Christians who do not understand that Christianity as a privileged religion and discourse must make way for a more humble one which regards all the other faiths in our country as co-equals. I believe that the problem was reflected in the Christianization of the TRC process and that it contributed significantly to Muslims remaining on the sidelines. On the day of my testimony I spoke critically of the symbolism of having Jews, Muslim and Hindus coming to testify to an all-Christian panel, headed by an archbishop sitting under a huge crucifix in a church hall” (Esack, p 296ff)

For future relationships in the country to be healthy, it is of extreme importance to take cognisance of the issues raised by the Muslim spokespersons at the TRC hearing. Christians and Muslims share South Africa with one another, as well as with adherents to the other religions. We have a common loyalty to our communities and to one another. South Africa, still trying to find its way on the new road of democracy and nation building, needs the goodwill and the effort of all its citizens in this regard. In the final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation high hopes were expressed of the contribution that the different faith communities will be able to make in terms of establishing the truth and, especially, in terms of reconciliation. Numerous challenges were made, *inter alia* (TRC Report V 1998:316ff),

- for the different religious communities to seek ways to communicate with one another as a basis for eliminating religious conflict and promoting inter-religious understanding;
- to seek ways to incorporate marginalised groups into their communities;
- to promote a culture of tolerance and peaceful co-existence;
- to inspire their members to work together in a peace corps to help communities in need;
- to organise reconciliation ceremonies, creating liturgies to heal and to celebrate the reconciliation that we do experience in the country, and
- finally, to develop theologies designed to promote reconciliation and a true sense of community in the nation.

In order to attain this, Christians and Muslims, the leadership as well as the laity, should make every effort to reach out to one another, to enter into dialogue, to try and understand each other, to respect our different traditions and to allow one another our heartfelt convictions. It will not be easy. We come from a history where we often misunderstood one another, discriminated against one another, lived with caricatures of one another, marginalised one another, even blatantly opposed the other. The fact that both Islam and Christianity are missionary religions, claiming the divine command to spread their message to all people, can lead – and sometimes does lead – to confrontation. As Christians we may never excuse ourselves from the obligation to share our faith in Jesus Christ with all people, also with our Muslim neighbours in South Africa. But it must be done in a spirit of respect and love as well as with a willingness to listen to the other and to work together, wherever and whenever possible. Esack emphasised a similar sentiment. “Our challenge,” he emphasised looking back at the TRC process, “is thus to remind the others persistently of our presence and of the value of the religious heritage which we bring with us, but to do so in a manner that they would want to embrace us as partners in the reconstruction and reconciliation of our nation” (Esack, p 297).

All over the globe Muslim-Christians relations are strained to the limit. The happenings of 11 September 2001 saw to that – as was the case with the American involvement in Afghanistan as well as the war between the US-British coalition and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Whether we agree or not, millions of Muslims in six continents experience this as a war between Christians and Muslims, a new *crusade* to be countered by a modern day *jihad*. The fall-out of this confrontation is already to be seen in Indonesia, the Philippines, India, Pakistan, in the Arab States, in some African countries, as well as in Western Europe and the United States of America.

While I was preparing this article (Apr 2003) a good friend, the Dutch missiologist Gerry Gort, e-mailed an earnest plea to his colleagues, which has to be taken very seriously, also by South Africans: "Tension and distrust between and among religious groups – caused largely by political and economic injustice, arrogance and exploitation – appears at this point in human history to be reasserting itself with a vengeance the likes of which has probably never been seen before, and seems to be turning into one of the gravest, most intractable problems humankind will be facing in the twenty-first century. Nevertheless – or better, for that reason – we must press on doing what (little) we can where we can to improve inter-religious understanding, tolerance and convivance. We may not give up."

Is it possible that we South Africans, coming from our own history of prejudice and division and discrimination, may indeed do a "little thing" by providing the world with an alternative experience in inter-religious relationships? The South African process of truth and reconciliation was far from perfect, but it did provide some useful pointers that may inform the dialogue between Muslims and Christians in years to come.

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Note: The page numbers refer to the numbers used in the *Agenda*. Extracts from other submissions quoted in the article (Esack, Omar) may be found in Meiring, *op cit*, p 265ff.
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