

Dialogue in
Confrontation

t 30, Maulana Faried Esack is one of South Africa,s most prominent Muslim leader. An engaging orator, he speaks with conviction - and an eloquence that leaves both friend and foe struck with admiration. His 19-minute address at last months ANC conference in Arusha was simply electrifying. It got the longest standing ovation and woke up the drowsing press. Journalists prohibited from recording the session using electronic gadgets and unable to keep pace with his rapid oratory, scrambled after him to get ttjuicy quotes? In the next 30 hours following his address Maulana Faried gave 32 interviews as the world attempted to find out what he said.

,And pray, what did he say?

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In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious,
Most Merciful. I greet you with the
salutation of Islam - Assala'mu alaikum
warahmatullahi wa barakdtuh. May peace be
upon you and the Mercy and Blessings of
Allah!

I do regard it as a personal honour to be
here today, but more important than that, I
regard it as an acknowledgement - a
welcoming acknowledgement - that my com-
munity, the community of Islam, has come
home. It has come home to take its rightful
place alongside other communities in the
struggle against dehumanization and for jus-
tice and peace.

I deliberately avoid saying the struggle
against oppression or against economic ex-
ploitation or against apartheid. I do so not
because these terms are cliché or because I
don't believe that our struggle is against
V, a... oppression or racist capitalism but because
MOUIODO Wed ESOCK these words do not adequately convey a
comprehensive sense of what our struggle is
all about.

People do not only trap words. Words also
trap people. And so we find ourselves limited
by the continuous use of certain words in a
very definite sense. Oppression has then
come to mean whites denying blacks fun-
damental human rights, but has nothing to do
with the unwed pregnant mother who carries
the burden of shame whilst the father walks
around untainted by society.

Apartheid talks about the dilemma of
parents in a mixed marriage not knowing who
of their children to send to which school but
says nothing about how I, as a Muslim is
paralysed by the fear of my Christian neigh-
bours.

One of the many painful aspects of the
South African reality is the forced politiciza-
tion of our struggle. The challenge to people
of faith is a commitment to justice and peace
based on the comprehensiveness of our
humanity. Albert Camus in his book The
Rebel talks about the contamination of re-
volutions when human beings are reduced to
statistics. We talk of tthe people or tthe
' masses and become indifferent to the whole-
' ltl lness of our or their humanity. I am not
suggesting that people of faith should set
themselves up as the guardians of revolution-
ary language. I am merely pointing to a duty
n. that we have in terms of our own commit-
? ment to the comprehensiveness of our
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Yes, when internationally people of good-
will are striving for the elimination of nuclear
arms and all its frightening consequences,
here in South Africa we are still struggling for
tpeople's control' over it. We cannot deny the
right of our people to struggle for complete
control over all aspects of our lives but we
can lament the limitations which three hun-
dred years of apartheid and economic ex-

exploitation had placed on what our humanness is all about and the consequently narrow defined vision of the future. .

The inevitable preponderance of the 'black-white' theme in the struggle for justice and peace in South Africa has impoverished all of us. I am impoverished when the right of a white hobo lying on the pavements of Mayfair does not disturb me. I am impoverished by my instinctively wanting to call my black person "comrade". I am impoverished because apartheid goes beyond the simplistic blacks vs whites game. Apartheid is also the complete ignorance of and indifference to that white hobo by the white businesswoman passing by in her Mercedes. Apartheid is also the tyres burning as barricades in the one part of Soweto whilst the wealthier part complains of the bullet shots disturbing the quiet of their Sunday afternoon nap.

We must stubbornly oppose the ghettoisation of our perceptions and begin to reflect on and draw the attention of our people to the fundamental oneness of humankind and to universal concerns. We must do so without willy nilly using universalistic jargon to detract us from our essential responsibility in South Africa today. The struggle of our people is for a non-racial democratic South Africa free from economic exploitation. We cannot have a separate agenda but we can universalise that agenda. We must for example talk to our people about how the oneness of humankind is being destroyed by the conflict between the few consumer nations and many nations being consumed. Those who are obsessed with the creation of wealth, the power of capital, nuclear armaments and star wars have long since discarded narrow parochialism. People who are committed to a peace based on justice and humility have a duty to proclaim the oneness of mankind and to focus on universal concerns.

The Quran says:

O Prophets! Consume of the good things and do right

for I am aware of what you do.

And indeed these peoples of yours are one people

And I am your Lord, So keep your duty unto Me.

I would like to focus on three such universal concerns. I focus on these three

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because ignoring them is going to cost us very
dearly in the long run, and because they are
three concerns that I personally feel deeply
committed to:

oThe oppression of women;

0 The relationship of humankind with its
abode, the earth, and

oThe Challenge of Inter-faith Dialogue.

I want to talk about these issues in the
context of our struggle for justice and peace
in South Africa. Indeed I sometimes wonder
if anyone committed to living with integrity
can discuss anything without the necessary
all-pervasive backdrop of the struggle for
justice and peace in our land. All else will be
escapism and digression. Now I acknowledge
that none of these three issues may come
across as of immediate importance to us. In
fact to our male comrades in detention or to
starving children in the homelands these
concerns may even come across as a luxury.

Women

The fact that the oppression of women does
not make the headlines or that their suffering
is condoned by our indigenous cultures and
religious institutions does not make it any less
real or less painful. Lamenting the constraints
that racist capitalism had placed on our
perception of justice and peace is one thing.
Allowing these constraints to persist is quite
another thing and will only lead to the further
diminishing of our own humanness.

All people genuinely committed to the
establishment of a non-racial and democratic
South Africa must face the issue of women's
oppression squarely in the face. The shackles
around our wrists will never be completely
dismantled for as long as women are tied to
their apron strings. How many a male
political activist is there who still refuses to
share domestic chores? How often does a
politically aware couple get married and then
the woman submerges her identity under-
neath that of the man's and Bernadette
Menezes becomes Bernadette Dean because
she married Derrick Dean? Our political,
cultural and religious organizations establish
women's wings to cater for them as if they
are semi-human. We never hear of a male's
wing! The symbol of our people's struggle
and hopes, the African National Congress,
has only one woman on a national executive
council of thirty people.

The church speaks of the priesthood as
being a 'calling'. God calls you into the

ministry. When it comes to women then we don't allow God to call those whom He wants to call. Then we play God and decide whom He ought to be calling. Muslims are forever speaking about the honour that Islam gave women as if it is some favour. Women, like all human beings, are born with dignity and honour. We speak about the rights of women confirmed by the Prophet of Islam (Peace and Blessings be upon him) and refuse to speak about the rights that they are being denied today.

There are theological assumptions common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam which are unjust towards women and must be challenged. We must challenge the apologetic myth that our theology does not discriminate against women even though sociologically, culturally and historically there is discrimination. Dr Diffat Hassan, an orthodox feminist theologian lists some of these theological assumptions:

The first assumption is that God's primary creation is man, not woman, since woman is believed to have been created from man's rib. She is therefore derivative and secondary. The second assumption is that woman and not man is the primary agent for what is described as man's fall or his expulsion from the garden of Eden. Hence all daughters of Eve are to be regarded with hatred, suspicion and contempt.

The third assumption is that woman was not only created from man but also for man - which makes her existence merely instrumental and not of fundamental importance."

Confessional Theology must embrace justice to women. The church must confess its complicity in the crimes against women. Islamic Theology must repent of subverting the revolutionary spirit of the Qur'an. Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam must forever turn their backs on unjust social norms that it so willingly adopted from its cultural milieu and sealed it with theological stamps of approval.

Our comrades in political organizations must be confronted with the injustices in our own alternative political structures. The question of the liberation of women as a condition for justice and peace is not merely academic because the discrimination that they suffer from is far from being merely academic. The freedom of women is not a pre-condition for the liberation of our people from oppression and neither is the political freedom of our people a pre-condition for the liberation of women. They are intrinsically linked.

And What of the Earth

The story of our world is like that of a small village.

All the houses are interlinked and we live in one unit. Its original inhabitants were ousted and others have taken over. The original inhabitants are agitating for the return of the house but are presently only invited in for an occasional chat over a cup of

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tea. The Coloureds and Indians have been invited to occupy two small rooms at the back and plans are being made for a third little room for Blacks. It is obvious though that they want nothing less than the whole house - or at least control or power over it. This, however, does not mean that those who are occupying it illegally are going to be evicted. The miracle is that the displaced original inhabitants have enough humanness left to want the illegal occupants to stay. As the Freedom Charter says, itSouth Africa belongs to all those who live in it?

However, whilst this struggle for the people to govern their own house continues, strange creatures are eating away at the foundation of the whole complex and are threatening all the houses. If those displaced original inhabitants are not going to give any attention to fighting those creatures because we are only concerned about our right to govern our house, then they could end up not having any house to govern. Nuclear armaments, uncontrolled industrialization, an economy that depends on expansionism and high productivity, that depends on the limitless consumption of energy and creating obsessive waste from built-in-obsolescence, the reduction in the earth's raw materials and its inevitable depletion, the increasing industrial waste and the pollution of our seas and the atmosphere - these are some of the creatures eating away at our universal village.

These are not European issues or liberal concerns. Chernobyl is not only in the Soviet Union, Chernobyl is Koeberg in the Cape. Lead poisoning is not limited to the USA. It is on the streets of Johannesburg. We can't fight for people's power over these creatures. We fight to eliminate them.

I know that there are few issues that can really be as safe and cushy as these issues but I also know that there are few issues that have the potential to bind people as these issues, though it may be for the very selfish reason that we all risk receiving eviction notices from these creatures.

Our struggle for justice then must enhance justice to our home and all the other species that inhabit it. People's power must specifically exclude our right to rape and plunder the natural resources as if there is no tomorrow. Our struggle for humanization must also be a struggle against the world of artificial environment, of the sophisticated manipulation of machines and techniques where the human element is being gradually eliminated. Phillip Sherrard talks about the loss to our humanness that our obsession with materialism has led to.

There is, however, a price to be paid for fabricating around us a society which is as artificial and as mechanized as our own, and this is that we can exist in it only on condition that we adapt ourselves to it. This is our

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punishment. The social form which we have adopted cuts our consciousness to fit its needs, its imperatives tailor our experience. The inorganic technological world that we

have invented lays hold on to our interior being and seeks to reduce it to a blind inorganic mechanical thing. It seeks to eliminate whole emotional areas of our life, demanding that we be a new type of being, a type that is not human as this has been understood in both the religious and humanist ages - one that has no heart, no affections, no spontaneity and is as impersonal as the metals and processes of calculation in which it is involved. And it is not only our emotional world that is deadened. The world of our creative imagination and intelligence is also impoverished.

(Science and the Dehumanization of Man)

We must place ecological issues on the agenda of the liberation movement. We can't let the African National Congress get away with it. We haven't paid much attention to it". Yes, that's the type of answer that the NUSAS delegation got when they questioned members of the National Executive Council on ecological issues.

We need what Syed Hoosein Nasr refers to as an I-Thou attitude towards the earth. This is why the phenomena of peoples parks in the black townships is such a powerful sign of hope. (I must confess though that I feel terribly confused when I still see trees being pulled on to the streets as barricades)

I now come to the third and last of my universal (local) concerns.

The Challenge of Inter-faith Dialogue

And how often, Mr President, has our own humanity not been mutilated by our own fear of each other? How often have I, as a Muslim, not feared that you as a representative of Christianity are not going to con me as you have conned our forefathers on the sandy wastelands of the Cape of Good Hope three hundred and thirty-four years ago, or in Palestine thirty-eight years ago or in India a hundred and twenty years ago? How often have I, as a Muslim, not been impoverished by conspiracy theories - theories historically well founded - that there is an alliance between the church and the power of capital? How often have we, as Muslims, in our obsession with ourselves not believed that those conspiracies were directed at us as Muslims? How many a time have I not been warned by my Muslim brothers and sisters that all this talk about dialogue is nothing but one being co-opted for the strengthening of their influence? How many times have Muslims, Hindus and Christians from Fietas and District Six not been evicted together and yet

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continued to live in fear of each other - even
as we now queue up together for buses from
5.30am in Lenasia and in Mitchell's Plain?
How many an ordinary congregant has not
walked up to Dr Allan Boesak to warn him
against the devilish designs of Islam even as
Muslim and Christian children were shot
together on the streets of Cape Town? And
so when we speak of a struggle for humaniza-
tion or about a confessional theology then we
must also repent of the distrust and suspicion
that our people feel for each other's faiths.
For many of us the apartheid of religions
may not be of importance because it is a
silent one. We rave about the designs of the
Tutus and the Bosaks in the quiet of our
homes and Christians echo their disquiet
about the Hassan Solomons and the Esacks in
the corridors of UNISA. However, we must
never underestimate the potency of religion
as a secondary source of conflict. Look at
India and Pakistan, Muslims and Christians in
Lebanon - communities who have lived with
each other in harmony for centuries have
turned on each other with unparalleled
inhumanity.

Gerrie Lubbe talks about the need for us to
prepare our people for the day when the era
of apartheid comes to an end.
"When this separation is ended, people will
be faced with the reality of religious pluralism
in South Africa and will be forced to
acknowledge the existence and the presence
of people of other faiths in daily life. To
prepare our people for this day, to do away
with suspicion and mistrust and to remove
ignorance about the different faiths are
certainly great challenges, the enormity of
which we can only guess."

The Inhuman Drama

How often have we not conveniently laid
the blame for the inexplicable perversities of
another group at the door of their faith and
regarded ourselves as the sole repositories of
truth and virtue? Let me relate to you a story
with the theme of untouchability in India to
illustrate this point.

The curse of the untouchability of the
Hajans has always been a blot on the
conscience of one of the largest nations of the
world. Its Hinduism, we say. It may well be
- but how do you explain the following?:
In the Punjab Province of Undivided India
lots of lower caste Hindus, in order to escape

social oppression and perhaps to win favour from the ruling colonialists, converted to Christianity. However, they remain sweepers - the personification of dirt on the sub-continent - since vertical social mobility is nearly non-existent. Undivided India became the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The Muslims of Pakistan continue treating all those Punjabi Christians as untouchables - forcing them to walk miles for water in the more remote villages. When you ask them why they do this, they explain that these people are Christians whilst we are Muslims. (You can of course substitute Christian for 'inferior' and Muslim for 'superior').

Now the Punjabi Christians, who are nearly all sweepers, are dark skinned and only speak Punjabi and good bit of Urdu. There is, however, another Christian community - the Goan community. They are the Coloured people of Indo-Pak, being of Portuguese-Indian descent. They are fair skinned, speak English fluently and a smattering of Urdu. These Christians are welcome guest at any Muslim function and are highly sought-after secretaries, air stewards and business partners. When you ask the Muslims about this contradiction they stare at you with the horror that one receives at the suggestion that God Almighty may be a woman.

And then one fine day, in the village of Padre Jo Goth, good Christians from Germany decided to finance the digging and construction of a waterpump for the local Christians who had been deprived for decades by Muslims. And you know what those Christians did? They loved their waterpump so much that they denied the use of it to all the local Hindus who were of course inferior to them!

The essential truth in all this course is that all the actors in this very inhuman drama are people - just ordinary people.

And so we too in South Africa cling to our little waterpumps totally oblivious to the all-embracing Grace of the Almighty Bringer of rain. In our religious arrogance we hold on to our 'unique Islamic solutions', our little Kairos documents addressed to Christians only, our exhortations of Christian love.

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To the Christians who are here today I say that we are tired. We are tired of our arrogance and indifference to us who are adherents of other faiths. We are tired of the way you came to South Africa and with your guns you took the land. We are tired of you who today through your powerful church structures and access to money have acquired enormous influence in the struggle to regain the land. We are tired because your sacrifice in terms of sweat and blood does not commensurate with this influence. We are tired of the way you want to christianize solutions to the problems of our country. We are tired of being ignored when the people of our country are being called to pray for the destruction and the unjust government of our land. You may hold on to your little waterpump if you want to, but know that even as your physical thirst is quenched by it, that the water of life shall pass you by. A new South Africa is being born today. That new South Africa is also going to come about also because you respect our integrity and indeed realize that for you to define your existence in a meaningful manner, that you need me. To quote Gerrie Lubbe:

itThe reconciliation that we hope for will have to be born from a joint struggle in which people of religion will be forced to face each other, to acknowledge each other's right to this country and its future and to respect the inherent patriotism which each one has for this country and its people. Only in struggling together will we also be able to discover in our neighbours of other religions virtues like peace, justice, love, forgiveness and hope." It is not going to be an easy walk with each other in dialogue and in hope. To find all that I hold dear and have regarded all my life as the exclusive prerogative of my religion, also being held by people of other faiths is not without pain.

This dialogue is going to require extraordinary courage because it must - if it is going to be meaningful - be rooted in the struggle of our people. It cannot be reduced to theological discourses or polemics although it may embrace it.

In South Africa we have no alternative but to have a dialogue in confrontation. Trust between us and between us as people of faith and our people is only going to materialize if we are seen to be where they suffer, where they struggle. If these struggles are on the streets, in halls, at gravesides, in prisons, then that is where our experience in dialogue is going to be. Our inter-faith witness has to occur within the context of the broader struggle for justice and peace.

The Prophet of Islam engaged in dialogue with Christians and Jews. This dialogue was not only for purposes of understanding each other or societal harmony. It was also a

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new 9. memn. wk i'rszwimmmummmim H , - i ; dialogue in confrontation with the oppressors who were still in control of the city of Makkah.

The tremendous thing about people of faith is their hope. Hope, indeed, is central to all

faiths and to proclaim this today is perhaps
our first task. iiDo not despair of the Mercy
of Allah for indeed He is the Most Merciful".
However, as Sol Jacobs in his critique on
Kairos reminds us:

nIn the minds of black people in South
Africa the concepts of hope and revolution
are fused concepts which cannot be separated
in a complex social and political structure in
which they live... Black have lost faith in a
hope that is unrelated to extreme social
pressure. If Prophetic Theology as a theology
of hope seeks to speak meaningfully to the
average black person in South Africa it must
speak in some way to the actions that are
going to help blacks realize immediate
changes in the condition of their experience.n

Mr President, Pd like to conclude with an
excerpt from iGitanjalii by a famous Hindu
poet of Bengal. With all love and respect to
that historical and profoundly relevant docu-
ment of our peopleis hope and aspirations -
The Freedom Charter - I truly feel that
Rabindranath Tagore has said it better.

iiWhere the mind is without fear,
And the head is held high,
Where knowledge is free
Where the world had not been broken down
by the fragments of narrow domestic walls
Where tireless hands stretch forth toward
perfection
Where the clear stream of reason had not lost
its fear in the dreary desert sand of dead
habit
Where the mind is led forward by Thee into
ever widening thought,
Into action

And into this heaven of freedom,'
My Father, let my country awake! o
Wassalamu alaikum warahmatullahi wa bara-
kdtuh - And May the Peace, Mercy and
Grace of Allah be with you.

Maulana Faried Esack was born in 1957 and
completed his school career a! Bonteheuwel
High School, Cape Town. From 1973 to 1981
he furthered his studies in Theology at Jaamia
Arabia Isldmia, Jaamia Alima and Jaamia
Abu Ruhr in Karachi, Pakistan. At present
Maulana Faried is the national organiser for
The Call of Islam.

The above talk - The Second Desmond Tutu
Peace Lecture - was delivered on September
13, 1986, at the Central Methodist Church,
Johannesburg. This is the first time to be
published outside South Africa.

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