

ME Chronicle

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What is a “Multi-Event”?

by Stephen Martin

South Africa’s democratic transition during the last decade of the millennium has been central in world news. And the role of religion — both in the past of South Africa and in its transition is well known. But challenges are mounting as transition struggles to become transformation. Religion, many have stated, seems to have become marginalised in this process — whether through its own difficulties in knowing how to move away from either resisting oppression or granting it legitimacy to acting constructively yet critically.

This year also sees South Africa’s second democratic elections, though the first elections in 1994 were for a Government of National Unity. In many ways, then, these upcoming elections are a first. The debate around policy and values is beginning in earnest as the Multi-Event convenes.

The Multi-Event, according to its director, James Cochrane, aims to bring religion into the centre of this public debate. It does this in light of the legacy of religion in the past and its potential in the present — but also in light of the broader challenges of the changing South African and global contexts. It was conceived as a series of multiple events (hence the term) held over a week (with a prior academic conference) and including wide participation from a variety of important figures, both national and international. Finally, it was conceived to disseminate its findings and discussions as widely as possible.

“Hourglass”

Cochrane uses the image of an hourglass to illustrate ME99’s processes: a wide variety of inputs from different social actors, including academics, politicians and grassroots organisations which converge in a one-week conference and then spread the results throughout various spheres and agencies. As he explained to the conference at its opening event, the image also speaks of a range of “initiatives wanting to be born”.

The ME process started with Cochrane’s coming to UCT in 1997 to head a theology, churches and public policy programme at the Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa. The process began in earnest with the establishment of a steering committee in August of that year, including academics and church leaders, and representing the Universities of Natal, Cape Town, Western Cape and Stellenbosch. Ecumenical, evangelical and interfaith organisations, and church denominations were also represented. From this group, a working committee was selected to oversee matters of preparation and organisation. In 1998 a secretariat was appointed to take charge of the hands-on administrative preparations for the conference. Many others have contributed, including staff at the Department of Religious Studies at UCT and the Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa.

In 1997 and 1998, links with international institutions and agencies were established, involving some 10 overseas universities and nearly 40 senior academic, political and religious figures. Several were involved in an academic conference in September/October, 1998, to formulate a language for discussion of religion and public policy matters. No less important has been the involvement of grassroots community groups, which held a parallel conference. The bringing together of academics, policy makers and analysts and religious leaders in one process makes the ME99 unique in its contribution. What is important to note, Cochrane pointed out in his address, is the strategic targetting of local leaders “at the coal-face” (not simply elites detached from their constituents), engaged intellectuals (not just academics) and active, community-based organisations (not just NGOs).

All this now converges, in space and time, on the Cape Town Waterfront this week — the neck of the hourglass.

“Synergy”

Having been put together with a flurry of activity and in such a short period of time, the Multi-Event has truly been an energising — and energy demanding — process. This brings to mind another of Cochrane's images for ME99 — “synergy”. “Synergy”, Cochrane told last night's gathering, speaks of the capacity of people with different experiences and perspectives to come together, to “work-together”, for transformation. In many ways, he observed, this describes the process which reached fruition in the 1994 elections. In synergy, mutual interactions generate new energy. Things take on a life of their own. The ME process has already generated a movement toward establishing a faith-health consortium in Cape Town, in co-operation with the Carter Center in Atlanta. Part of the vision of ME99 is to see coalitions built, and co-operative and collaborative activities begun, as is evidenced in a number of parallel conferences being held during the week under the umbrella of ME99.

ME99 has been structured in such a way as to allow the maximum amount of interaction, while taking advantage of the intimacy of smaller groups formed around common interests but involving a diversity of experiences, backgrounds and angles of approach. In addition to the parallel conferences, there are three other sites of interaction. The first is the traditional plenary address, with room for questions from the audience. The second and third are non-traditional. Discussion groups around special topics will take place in an open conference format. Again the operative word here is “synergy”, with participants moving from table to table, and a general “buzz” characterising the hall. Finally, an international symposium, taking place over three sessions, will involve open debate between South Africans and international people, comparing experiences and challenging interpretations.

A digest

The tracking and dissemination of the discussions and debates during ME99 is perhaps the most crucial part of the process. If the conference was to bring religion to the centre of public debate, then what happens after the conference is the spreading of its findings from the centre to the margins of society. A complete set of notes, containing discussions, debates and resolutions in smaller groups and plenaries, will be published soon after the event and distributed widely. Perhaps two of the most important sites of dissemination for the results of ME99 are the second Rustenburg Conference, to be held at the end of February, and the meeting of the Parliament of World Religions in Cape Town in November.

This news sheet has been set up to track the daily happenings at ME99. It will present its proceedings in digest form to participants, as well as providing those unable to attend the conference with a concise record. It will also highlight important and significant happenings, trying to capture some of those moments where new energies are beginning to be generated in the encounter between religion and public life.