"Does public policy need religion?"

By Marina Bang

THIS was the question asked at yesterday's leaders' workshop seminar held at the Two Oceans Aquarium.

Imam Rashied Omar, of the Claremont Mosque, pointed to the purpose of the Multi-Event as one of identifying the correct questions and debunking superficial answers. He said such a process was humbling for the two key stakeholders engaged in the question of religion and public policy, namely religious leaders and politicians, both of whom have a predilection and pretension for having answers to almost all of life's challenges. "No small wonder that we are living in a world beset with problems," he said.

Outlining five constitutional models ranging from a theocracy to a secular atheistic state in which religion is suppressed, Omar said that in pre-1994 consultations by church leaders and organisations, the option of a secular democratic South African state — with active interaction between state and all religious organisations which have a constitutionally-recognised sphere of autonomy and collaborate with the state on tasks of mutual concern – was considered most appropriate to the country's religious demography. The peril arising from this option was that of religious co-option or legitimation.

"The interreligious movement needed to be careful of not falling into the trap that the Dutch Reformed Church had fallen into," he said.

"Recognising their responsibility as custodians of moral values, religious organisations had a duty to exhort and challenge the government. They also had a political right to censure and criticise it. Genuine support and critical distance did not need to be opposed positions in the relationship between religion and state."

Omar described the progressive interreligious movement's struggle to make the transition from a "theology of resistance" to a "theology of reconstruction" and the resulting beleaguered leadership, which has made room for conservative religious leadership to attribute instability to so-called "ungodly and immoral" public policies adopted by the new government. "These religious leaders urge their followers to withdraw into a religious ghetto," he said.

Omar urged the progressive interreligious movement to regroup and to make its prophetic voice heard so that it can ensure that public policy at both a government and a civil society level is rendered both just and moral.

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Professor William Everett, of Andover-Newton Theological School in Massachusetts, rephrased the seminar's question to read "How does South Africa's democratic transition reshape the relation of religion to governance?"

He said democratic transition changes the relation of religion and governance from a focus on simply religion and state to a complex relation of religion(s), public life and government(s).

"In the pre-democratic situation," he said "the state and the dominant religion struggle over who controls whom, while in the democratic transition the state is subjected to a wider public consensus built up by a continually changing argument among competing and co-operating groups. Religion then is one of these citizen groups seeking to shape the public argument. It relates to public life first and government only secondarily. The stance of resistance/control is replaced by that of consensus-building, coalition and critique within the pluralistic public life."

Everett pointed to the consequences of this for government as being a limitation because of a need to work within a popularly-based constitution and a need to present pragmatic plans and verifiable claims, rather than lofty ideals. He stressed that this did not necessarily mean hostility to religion.

"Government," he said "would also be limited by internal differentiation where government itself becomes a system of publics held together by sustained arguments among its various branches and agencies".

For religion (and other publics like academia, the arts, the professions), the consequences would be the question of how they would be constrained to fulfil their function (knowledge, beauty, care).

"This cannot come merely from government and statutes but also from the settled convictions of the people, which are fed by deep religious traditions and orientations which provide a holistic framework.

"Religious groups must then become little publics, a move which carries with it a scary transition in terms of authority, structure, decision-making and participation. Yet this pressure towards an associational form," Everett said "offers religions the chance to be the free-est publics because they have resources to be open to the transcendent dimensions of life – beyond the secular pragmatism of publics concerned with immediate issues of governance.

"These religious associations, if they can hold together the transcendent claim with the reality of public persuasion, can model this life of prophetic persuasion for the wider public as it struggles for public policies that have ethical roots."

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ANNE Loades, Professor of Divinity at Durham University, responded to Rashied Omar and William Everett by asking: "Why, when people representing the religious traditions they inhabit and to which they contribute in all sorts of lively ways, why when they are asked about the contribution of religion to public life, do they start talking ethics?"

Citing Professor Cochrane's explanation of the term 'synergy' Loades pointed out that synergy has a religious 'home', as do terms like grace. She asked whether grace could not be an important element in public life or whether grace, like other terms (tolerance, forgiveness) had become so offensive because of its ineradicable connections with an oppressive religious tradition. "Yet in not using it we lose something which can't be said simply by using 'synergy'," she said.

Loades asked whether the representatives of religious traditions turn to talk of ethics because the pain of religious difference is too much to negotiate.

"The Archbishop summarised some lessons different religious communities can learn from each other, but can I really understand why a Buddhist monk might immolate himself in a public place, or why he might look in horror at the crucifix when he is used gazing on the serenity of the Buddha."

Loades urged religious representatives not to avoid the pain of understanding each other, not simply intellectually but by mustering all the resources of imagination and sympathy possible; which, where possible, could mean witnessing the other's worship.

She cautioned that even turning to the language of ethics to avoid the pain of difference could result in misunderstanding because, although the terms used would be common, their meanings would still require negotiation.

"Some public honesty and some sustained insight into our religious differences might be one of the gifts of religious traditions to political life," she said. "Apart from rehabilitating grace, we might rehabilitate tolerance – not the tolerance that says 'I don't care what people do' but true respect for the insights of

others.”

Finally, Loades emphasised that religion can be as much a vehicle of human wickedness as politics and public life and pointed to the value of religious representatives taking time to be self-critical of their texts and traditions.