

A call to participation

By Marina Bang

UNDOING the consequences of 350 years of colonialism and racial domination is the task facing South Africans. In his keynote address at ME99 Deputy President Thabo Mbeki pointed to problem of deculturation, where people were told that the only right thing for them to do was to emulate their masters as closely as possible.

He said that, in addition to having their social-economic needs addressed, people need to be helped to recover the sense of themselves, to recover their personality, individuality and richness.

Mbeki said that the question that faces the country is how it can meet its internal needs yet still be a global player. "There are many contending ideas on what is best for the country"

"I can recite all those things needed for a good society - democracy, human rights, the rule of law, transparency, free trade, fiscal discipline, predictability of policy and so on. Yet, for example, if we reduce tariffs, factories close, jobs are lost and yet we are told this is the way things must be done, that these are modern ideas."

"There is a battle of ideas about ourselves and the world. Powerful people have ideas which they share and they make it clear that if you disagree there is a price that will be exacted. This modern society says that people who provide the best examples of success are the profit-makers. In a capitalist system, profit is the measure of success. "The honour is not accorded to those who give up their weekends to look after the elderly or street children, for example. These are the unsung heroes and heroines on the peripheries. Let us do something to honour people in community organisations as heroes so that the young can hear stories that encourage them to aspire to more than just a BMW or Mercedes."

Mbeki said that religious communities have to be part of the battle of ideas for South Africa. He urged them not to stand aside or absent themselves from the debate on a set of values to guide policy.

"There cannot be policies which are ends in themselves. They must produce something. The Church has focussed recently on the issue of national debt. Why doesn't the Church suggest that in order to address poverty we need not only to have out national debt cancelled but also major capital transfers from countries in the north. People would be uplifted, but of course this is against the 'rules'."

"In South Africa we also have a 'north' and 'south'. Do we not need to say as religious leaders that our faith is offended by poverty and that we need to see a transfer from the 'north' to the 'south'?"

Mbeki pointed to the importance of ME99 and said that he was sure that after the conference many would want to hear the message that religious leaders were willing and ready to engage with social issues to make sure that noone goes hungry and that all are inspired to and enabled to read. "Yet we need all-round development of the human being. Intervention is needed and the first intervention should be in the area of ideas for the country."

Using the example of Thomas Beckett, Mbeki said that religious communities can be both Beckett the archbishop and Beckett the chancellor."