

"Two frail beings in need of each other"

By Marina Bang

WHERE South African religious communities and the liberation movement had worked together before 1994, they seemed to experience a crisis of relationship after the first democratic elections.

This was according to the ANC's Ebrahim Rasool who, in his opening address at the MultiEvent 99's religious and political leaders' debate, said that the new nature of their relationship was based on two assumptions, namely that those in politics are inevitably weak and prone to corruption, and that those in religious communities are innately good and moral. "These are unhelpful stereotypes," he said.

Rasool described ME99 as providing a comfortable space for the two groups to redefine their relationship, towards a partnership based on mutual humility and courage.

Humility, he said, was needed on the part of government, in order for it to recognise its weaknesses and, on the part of the religious community in order for it to not simply assume its continued relevance in its current forms.

'We need courage on both sides to shun the temptations of populism and absolutism, which often create nothing but a surge of enthusiastic but short-lived support.

Rasool asked delegates to examine the terrain of the relationship between religious communities and the State. "Can it be anything other than hostile, competitive and judgmental? Can there be an alliance? Has there been an intellectual abdication? Have we shied away from questioning the paradigms within which we operate? Is the notion of charity, for example, sufficient for the complex challenges that face us? Are we, as the religious community, following or leading, for example, on the issue of women across all religions. Does keeping this massive resource locked up for centuries qualify or disqualify us from being watchdogs of the State?"

'We need to be more cautious of words like truth, less glib about the notion of truth. Through courage we need to find a partnership which allows us to play an important role in transformation so that, with courage, we can speak about the need for equity while still remaining critical and retaining our independence ."

Fielding a question at the end of the session he described religious communities and the state "two frail beings in need of each other".

No peace without pluralism

IN his response to Rasool, Professor Graham Ward (Cambridge and Manchester Universities) called for an examination of the terms "society" and "faith" and spoke of South Africa being inevitably influenced by globalisation and with it consumer society

'We are witnessing the demise of society 'Society' does not exist, only culture. There is no cohesiveness no stable location, no corporate identity that could be called a society or community. Instead there is fragmentation, neo-tribalism and multiple belonging but within these

microcultures there are dominant motifs. We all live in a dominant culture of fear, of paranoia, of suspicion.

"There is no ideologically-free zone, no objective truth, nowhere outside the operation of power and no-one who is innocent, though some are more guilty than others. We live in the perpetual false consciousness that we are in control, a false consciousness from which we need to be delivered. This T is does not end at my fingertips. It has been mapped upon and inscribed by many other voices. It is impinged upon by other bodies, social and national bodies, political and ecclesial bodies, the body of God. It is framed by difference and yet afraid of difference, and to act out of fear will always produce violence of some kind."

Ward said there is no pure God-talk, no unmediated revelation, no purely religious experience. There is no talk that is purely politics, purely ethics. All talk is hybrid and plural and all talk about God is also political, also gendered, also ethical, also part of the consumer marketplace. The one who talks about God has no special keys, no hold on truth that isn't also a hold on untruth.

"Secularism is collapsing, imploding into consumer decadence, a culture of the ephemeral which produces unprecedented waste. Even people, like obsolete computers, are being thrown onto the refuse tip. Some become the waste that we produce in our pursuit of the hyper, the glitter, the gloss, the accessories of consumer privilege.

"Yet theological notes are being sounded and as those who live out a religious faith we have a task to amplify to clarify, to identify those theological notes, always aware that our voice is not pure. The theological, which is never distinct from the secular and mundane, gives a certain transcendental shape to our ethos, from which our ethics arise. The theological is one of the plural voices that must be heard.

"Is religion a problem or a potential for the transformation of society? We will only become a society when the theological can be heard as inextricably bound to synergy the dynamic working together of all things in their giftedness, their differences and their interdependence. For it is only God who reconciles all things to God's self through us."

Opportunity not obstacle

DISCRIMINATION, oppression and war in Israel have been justified by references to Biblical texts and Zionism is responsible for the dispossession, dispersion and humiliation of the Arab population of Mandated Palestine over the last 50 years.

This is the experience of Jean Zaru, of Palestine's Sabeel Institute, who outlined the way in which the opposing of Zionism is equated with opposing God by mainstream political theory in the Jewish religious establishment and also much of Christian ecclesial and theological opinion.

Zaru focussed on religion as both a progressive and reactionary force which has entered into and shaped almost every major conflict and crisis in the world today, on the one hand forming part of radical alliances to champion the causes of the poor and oppressed, and on the other ferocity and chauvinism.

She described the religious diversity communities, traditions, understandings of and visions of God - not as an obstacle opportunity for our engagement and with one another. "This does not mean our commitments but rather opening commitments to the give and take of discovery, understanding and indeed tradition.

"Religious interdependence is a real world and inter-religious dialogues are sity, an instrument of our common work form the world in which we live.

"Our age of unparalleled advancement, science and technology has been enormous violence. Meanwhile the need for imaginative understanding, simple trust tive co-operation has never been more Maybe the time has come where we sho in a common affirmation of life throu pledge of honour and respect for every ture, religion, nation and individual; (2) tion of the claim of every individual resources of the earth for the necessities c survival, and the moral obligation of the tunate to share with the less fortunate need for every individual to use talents, and resources for the benefit of the con (4) a commitment to the search for univ ues, however differently expressed, that able the individual and the comm overcome greed, power and self-seekin firmation of the "Presence", a spirit of compassion available to all by which our 1 become more whole, more creative and more harmonious as we draw directly upon th around us and within all life.