

# Creating a social spirituality

By Elizabeth Knox-Seith

**RASHIED Omar is the Imam of the Claremont Main Road Mosque and spoke on the issues of social justice and the role of civil society in the leaders workshop on Monday night. He is known for his commitment to ongoing interfaith dialogue and as a person who in a profound way seeks to facilitate reconciliation between conflicting groups within the Muslim community. He was deeply involved in the anti-apartheid struggle without formally aligning himself to any one of the political tendencies within the national liberation movement. This - in his own words - made it possible for him to move freely, being open to dialogue across boundaries.**

RO - As I mentioned in my speech, the challenge for the progressive inter-religious movement is how to influence public policy and public society to be moral and just. We need a paradigm-shift to get rid of our ill-founded obsession for seeking solutions to the problems only through the State. As Thabo Mbeki said: We need to think the unthinkable. We have to turn our attention away from the State and refocus our energies and resources towards strengthening civil society. Even if the State wants to ignore public opinion, how long can it ignore it?

*The impression one could easily get from this conference is that there is a lot of burn-out among the former activists. There is this disillusionment that things didn't really work out as they should, that many of the visions didn't come through, that there's a lot of elitism in the political circles, that the role of the churches and other religious institutions is diminishing, that corruption, even among the religious and political leaders, is growing and so forth. What can we still do to nourish hope in the midst of this depression?*

RO - The challenge for each one of us today is to secure our spiritual nourishment as part of our political struggle. For many progressives spirituality has become like an ivory tower. We shouldn't leave spirituality to the conservatives, as though it's something that belongs only to the private sphere of our lives. Often we face the risk of running away from ourselves, creating an imbalance in our lives. On the one hand, we're deeply involved in the fight for justice, on the other hand we mistreat ourselves, our spouses and our children. As religious leaders, we need to go to the grassroots and inspire our people, but we can't inspire others if we don't develop the qualities of spirituality in our own lives. Recently, as part of the sensitive situation I myself am in, I've had to spend a lot more time at home. On the one hand, this is a restraint. On the other, it helps me develop my inner spirituality, to nourish the relationship with my family.

*It is easy to judge the people who have come into political power who tend to misuse this power. What we see in others needs to be turned into a critical mirror towards ourselves. If we came into power, wouldn't we do exactly the same things? How do we embrace ourselves? How do we strengthen our inner, spiritual resources so that we can withstand such challenges? What can be referred to as the "inner struggle" to subdue the lower self, the carnal desires, is an important dimension of religion which social activists unfortunately often neglect. Social activism becomes meaningful only if it emerges from a spiritually purified and a non-avaricious heart. Without a solid spiritual foundation, social activism can unwittingly become a self-fulfilling quest for self-aggrandisement, self-enrichment, and the feeding of the base desires of the carnal self. In Islam we see this challenge expressed in the notion of Jihad, which unfortunately is a very misunderstood concept. It means to exert yourself to your utmost ability in any field, to work on*

*inner as well as outer transformation.*

*According to Islamic tradition, we have a duality in us: The ability to be like angels and to be like animals. This dual capacity is part of human nature, and we have to constantly restrain ourselves, to be critical of what we are doing, to walk this very difficult path of humility and compassion. In Islam God is the most compassionate, the most merciful. The concepts of tenderness and grace are very essential, but often they come into tension with our understanding of justice. We need to develop a social spirituality, an understanding that compassion should always supercede justice, be the actual basis for it. This gentle side of Islam is forgotten all over the world. In our own lives we tend to forget this balance as well. We need to look at our selfish ego's, to work with our own weaknesses in a compassionate way. Only if we do this will we be able to create a society that is moral and just.*