

Some key thoughts from the listener's reports

Nontando Hadebe -- Why did the conference not start with prayer? Why were there so few church leaders? In the workshops there seemed to be a tension between theory and practical. Gender should have been central to the conference not confined to a particular group discussion. In the group on the abuse of women, there were only women with the exception of one man. Religious groups should not be triumphalistic. The inclusion of the community groups was very significant. Imam Rashied Omar's participation was powerful. Some discussions deviated from the topic and separate discussions set separate goals.

Jose Chipendo -- The event seemed to be a gathering of friends. I did not see any enemies present. There was a noticeable lack of representatives from the black and coloured communities. South Africa is seen as the Europe of Africa because of its wealth, could this have been done without donors? Is this a one-off conference or the beginning of a series?

William Everett -- This has been a valuable time to share ideas with those with similar interests. The conversations were very important. I see a slow emergence of institutional specifics and specific areas of conflict. There was difficulty in seeing the relationship between religion and the state as dualistic rather than as being close or full of enmity, and to embrace the notion of a relationship that is critical, coalition-building and involves engagement. We need to look at the constitution and its ramifications for religion. There seemed to be difficulty in bringing the small group discussions into the plenary. We need to translate the academic into the practical. Albert Nolan -There was a convergence of concern about poverty. Government, non-governmental organisations and religion. All have different agendas but can meet around the common issue of poverty. We should not wait for theoretical solutions but put our energy into practicalities TOGETHER. In religion, self-criticism is important. Religion can be both constructive and destructive. Its contribution can be ambiguous. We must be humble about what we can achieve. Religion does not have the monopoly on ethics and morals and the function of religion is not only to teach morality. It is also about providing people with meaning, hope and purpose through something transcendent. It is not just about structures but about attitudes. In short, religion is responsible for spirituality.

Peter Lodberg -- We need to define more clearly what we mean by secular state, nation state, multiculturalism and religious pluralism. It is questionable whether multiculturalism can have substantial and sustainable meaning. Our understanding seemed too broad and imprecise. We should not too quickly be satisfied with a secular state (although there are clear reasons for it because of South Africa's past). The notion of a secular state has been challenged in other countries because it may exclude appeals to anything transcendent. South Africa needs to find its own model of a secular state based on its history, the challenges at hand and the presence of all religious communities. South Africa may lead us to new insights on this.

Ann Loades -- (1) Our religious traditions are in part responsible for the devaluation of girl and women, often using scripture as a basis. Old Testament codes perpetuate this particularly. Though we can't change the text we also don't need to teach it. We need to be critical of these and see how they have contributed to the socio-economic position of women. (2) The conference has shown a pre-occupation with the horrors of HIV/Aids and rightly so, but we shouldn't lose sight of other issues like that of women and children. The number of women who die during pregnancy and birth is still as high as one in 16 in some societies. Resources are needed to fight this trend. (3) No one thrives under constant criticism. We must only criticise if we can also praise those who are the problem-solvers. The best people won't go into government if all they receive

is criticism. Praise and affirmation can precipitate good.

Robert I was impressed by the inclusive and expansive conversation which arose from the grassroots, inter-disciplinary, ecumenical, interfaith and international representation. I thought the newspaper, The ME99 Chronicle, provided a valuable record of the events. Organisations working in different areas need to get together periodically for conventions to support each other and share information. We hope the conference facilitators will act as a clearing house to keep us up to date on further developments arising from ME99. We hope for a ME 2001. I encourage those who have the resources to give gifts towards the continuation of the work started here.