

Moulana Faried Esack. Testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, East London, 18 November 1999. [disclaimer](#)

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MOULANA DR FARIED ESACK: In the name of God the gracious, the dispenser of grace. Mr Chairman, the question of representation is not an easy one. Who do I represent? I do not believe that I as a Muslim theologian can represent the Muslim community, neither do I put it to you, can any of the "representatives" here represent their communities. Which Dutch Reform Church representative can speak for Hendrik Verwoerd and for Melanie Verwoerd? Or for Willie Lubbe and for Gerrie Lubbe? Or for Eugene Terreblanche and Sampie Terreblanche? Or for Willie Breytenbach and Breyten Breytenbach? Which Jewish Rabbi can speak for Sol Kerzner and David Bruce. And I dare say, which Muslim theologian could speak for Mohammed Bham, that human rights activist and for Ibrahim Bham, the person who is supposed to have been here and who now heads Radio Islam, the radio that denies women a voice on their stations because men get turned on by the voices of women? And so, I can only speak for myself and I speak for those Muslims who felt that they had to South Africanise their Islam and by that, to develop an empathy with the people of our land and to identify with their suffering and to give their everything to alleviate the pain and the injustice that visited our land.

As the for the past, Mr Chairman, the past apartheid, the injustices are only in some ways about 1948 the Nationalist Party, the Bureau of State Security, Bantu Education, Homelands, etc, etc, but it is also about Christian triumphalism. It's also about the fact that as Muslims were subjected to Christian national education. We were forced into it. It is also about symbols like that that continue to dominate a process like this even. I'm talking about the symbol of the crucifix, it's a bit of an irony, and despite...[SIDE 2]...the denying of women to open bank accounts or accounts in shops on their own. It's also about women in Kwa Zulu Natal, who have to fold up their mattresses against the walls when their husbands go back to the cities and the mattress can only come down once their husbands come back. The past is also about the control of women's bodies. It's about the denial of the right of children to be children and of adults to be adults. Adults as beings responsible for their own bodies, for their own sexual, personal and social lives. The past is an embracing past. And I make this point because if we do not understand the all embracing nature of the injustices of the past, what will happen is that as religious people, we have this remarkable ability to shift as the winds shift, to change our theology as the wind changes. And so our confessions in front of you, our lamentations about the past, these are mere games of adjustments that we make, as the power structures in our country have changed. And all of our confessions, if we do not recognise the comprehensives of the injustices that have visited our land, if we do not recognise it, our confessions here will amount to sprinkling a little bit of perfume over a heap of cow dung in the hope that the smell will disappear.

As Muslims, Muslims were never singled out during the apartheid era, for any special kind of oppression. We formed part of four fears that the regime persistently articulated: swart gevaar, rooi gevaar, room se gevaar en die Islam se gevaar. But it was part of a combination of these four dangers that Muslims had fitted into. There was one exception in the way in which the apartheid regime treated us, and that is that our Mosques were left untouched under the Group Areas Act. And so you had the spectacle of, currently still visible in District Six for example, of a large area of vacant land and you only see the Mosques. They did leave St. Marks Church there also, but that is because they couldn't possibly leave four Mosques, and demolish one church. But in the other group areas throughout the country, they also demolished churches, and that was the only exception they made for Muslims. Under the Group Areas Act, Muslims, a minority community, were uprooted from their homes, thrown into the middle of nowhere, away from the business centres, Muslim business owners were removed into isolated other areas. And we suffered lot, but we did not suffer as Muslims. We suffered as coloured people, we suffered as Indian people and there are a handful of blacks and a handful of whites. And at the same time as coloured people and as Indian people, we were also privileged. The colour preferential job policy in the Western Cape, for example. The way in which the Muslim business community in Gauteng and Kwa Zulu Natal benefited in many ways from the system. And how, for the vast majority of blacks, for very many blacks, the first line of oppression that they met was often Muslims, the Muslim business keeper or the Muslim housewife in whose house they were employed as a servant. And that is why often people do not understand how you can talk about Islam and a struggle against apartheid in the same breath. Because in our own personal lives, in our homes and businesses, we were no different from those "white" people that we sometimes reduce to as the "oppressor".

As far as our collaboration and resistance to the system is concerned, there is the community at large. In truth, the community at large was a complacent community, feeble in its responses and going whichever way the wind was going at a particular moment. And then there was the religious leadership of the community. The essential attitude of that religious leadership, despite whatever nice words have been coming in the last few years as a part of this theology of accommodation, is essentially one of betrayal. In 1979, Imam Abdullah Harum was murdered in detention after being kept there for six months. Twenty five thousand people attended his funeral, and not a single voice in the Muslim community was raised about the nature of his death, and all the injuries on his body. Not a single voice in the Muslim community from the religious leadership of the Muslim community. And this silence, Mr Chairman, held for seven years, non-stop! At a Mosque level and in a Muslim publication level. Of course I speak with anger. By God, I've got a damn right to be angry! For seven years the silence held. He was a nice man. He was praised for being a good religious leader, but of course we don't know why, we can't say anything about the reasons for his detention. And now it has come out: he was murdered. The Muslim Judicial Council, from 1961 up to the period of 1964 issued five statements condemning different acts of apartheid. A total of five statements and held a single public meeting. The two other dominant cleric councils in Natal and the Transvaal, did not issue a single statement, and did not ever hold a single meeting. On the contrary, there was

persistent denial of space and of legitimacy to all of those Muslim activists and organisations that were a part of the struggle. I studied Islamic Theology for eight years in a seminary. Five years of it with the person who was supposed to have been here before me, and who is in perfect good health, certainly by late last night and three years in another seminary. For four years I spent doing my doctorate for ...[inaudible] and I spent another two years doing post-doctoral work in biblical ...[inaudible]. The Muslim clergy described me in their paper as an ignoramus masquerading as a theologian. I am not personalising all of this, I am only saying that this is the way the religious leadership treated those of us who were a part of the struggle. But our history, Mr Chairman, and I want to get to the end, is not only one of collaboration and betrayal. Our community has given rise to remarkable individuals, people who were deeply inspired by our faith Islam, people such as Achmad Timol, who fell down, who slipped on a bar of soap, and then he died in John Vorster Square. People like Babla Selojee, who "hanged himself". People like Jusuf ...[inaudible], a 22 year old person, nine months into his marriage being blown apart by a boobie trap hand-grenade, and people like Moegsien Jina. We have produced many, many activists, the likes of Ebrahim Rassoul, the likes of Achmad Kassiem, Jusuf Patel, Rafiek Ruhan, people who have earned their stripes on Robin Island.

And then there were the Muslim organisations. The Call of Islam which I headed, the MYM (Muslim Youth Movement) and Kibala, the latter especially added an enormous amount to the growing militancy of the eighties. They mobilised the Muslim community and they travelled the length and breadth of the country, organising thousands of people. And the Call of Islam particularly focusing on inter-religious solidarity against apartheid. And I served as the National Vice-President of the WCRP for about six years, and at the same time Mr Chairman, we gave the impression that we got our communities on board. We succeeded in shutting up and marginalising in public the leadership of our communities. We succeeded in embarrassing them and never succeeded in getting them on board. Internally in the community, in the religious circles we remained the marginalised, we remained the mavericks.

As a matter of interest, I wasn't initially intended to be the speaker here today. But as I pointed out to Dr Piet Meiring, the time that people like myself are on the margins, was yesterday, not today. Today people like myself are in the centre of South Africa and that's where we are going to remain.

A word about reconciliation to conclude with. I have been on record as criticising the Christianisation of this process. I maintain, Mr Chairman, that I have a great fear that this commission will focus on nice language at the end of the day, that your own humanity, and I am referring to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, that your own humanity, that your own unbounded grace is going to reflect far too heavily in the report of this commission and that the anger and the pain that our people have experienced, on the one hand, and on the other hand the lies and games that the State and religious figures come to you with, the accommodation tactics, the peppering over of the cracks, I fear that they will get away with it. And so truth, reconciliation is premised on truth, but

reconciliation is not only premised on truth, reconciliation is also premised on justice. And so when this process is finished, it is not truth and reconciliation that is finished. It will only be the beginning and I will want to see recommendations in your report that essentially addresses the question of truth and justice as means to reconciliation, because reconciliation is not an end by itself. I do not want to reconcile with those who want to turn over a new page, but they have given me no indication that they have actually read the page that I am putting in front of them at the moment.

Thank you very much, and God bless you all.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. Mcebisi? Piet Meiring?

PROF. P. MEIRING: I was listening very carefully to what you said to us, especially the last paragraph about reconciliation and the problems of a cheap, glossed over reconciliation, but what I'd really like to know is your advice on real reconciliation. What is the commitment of the Call of Islam and also what is the things that you can put on the table with your experience, with your expertise, that will really help us forward? Because reconciliation is not only to my mind a means to an end, it is also an end. We are the TRC and the process of reconciliation is very dear to us, but from the experience you have and from the experience of the Muslim community at large, what is the specific contribution that you think that the Muslim community and the Call of Islam in particular will be able to make?

DR FARIED ESACK: Thank you very much. Just a point of correction. I was the National Co-Ordinator of the Call of Islam during the years under discussion. I no longer retain any position in the Call of Islam.

I think that essentially words such as peace and reconciliation are vague and empty, if they are not accompanied by a very real socio-economic changes and dynamics that are effected within our society to concretise these concepts. It is all very well for me to have a Malawian (Malawian by the way is a word that is used for black Muslims inside South Africa very often because the early black Muslims had come from Malawi so we talk about our Malawian brothers), it is very easy for example to have a black Muslim with me in the Mosque and so on and then we pray together and shake hands and hug together, and that is the end of the story. But my Muslim black brother would have to go in the end to the street where he sleeps in and I go back to my palace. And so, despite the limitedness of your own mandate, there is the significant question of economic justice as a means to true reconciliation. That is the one thing. The other thing of where people come to the TRC and they come and we lament our tales and we cry and in the end there are no firm recommendations from this commission about how reparations are going to be done, and you end up with "finders keepers, losers weepers", quite literally the losers come here and weep again, and they go out and they are still the losers, and so there needs to be a recommendation on economic redistribution of the resources of our land. Certainly in Islam forgiveness is premised on returning stolen goods. There is no forgiveness without ...[inaudible] without a return of whatever ill begotten gains you have, and so

for me this return of the ill begotten gains, radical as it may sound, unfashionable as socialist ideals may be sounding today, for me that is the only avenue to any kind of authenticity to reconciliation.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. Joyce?

MS JOYCE SEROKE: You mentioned in your submission the fact that the women in your community are marginalised. I would like to know what steps are being taken to free the women and make them human beings within their own rights?

DR FARIED ESACK: Thank you very much, sister. The battle for gender equality. If you think that it was difficult to get Muslims on board the struggle against apartheid, you don't know what you've got coming to you when you talk about the battle for gender justice. Yesterday, mercifully, the High Court ruled against Radio Islam, when Radio Islam insisted that the IBA had no authority to take action against it. There are... we started from a very, very difficult situation. The Christian Church is debating whether women should be ordained. Of course, as the Reverend Father has always said, I mean, Priesthood is a calling. We have always said that the Priesthood is a calling. If it is a calling from God, why on earth can't we leave it up to God to decide whom he wants to call? But at least Christians are debating that, Muslims are still debating whether women should be allowed into the Mosque or not! And so we are in the dark ages. There are small glimmers of hope. In a Mosque like the Claremont Main Road Mosque, the only Mosque in the world where women preach, sometimes on a Friday. The only Mosque in the world and we are proud that it is in South Africa! There is gender activists, deeply committed Muslims who are fighting to retain their identities as Muslims and at the same time to be true to their own identity as oppressed gendered beings, but these are small candles in the darkness, and I don't know, certainly not in our lifetime. I always say, I mean I am also a Commissioner for gender equality, and I certainly say that if there is a job that is going to be around for a long time, then it's Commissioner for gender equality.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you. Virginia?

MS V GCABASHE: Thank you your Grace, Joyce has asked the question I was going to ask.

CHAIRPERSON: Oh, you wonderful child. Thomas?

MR T. MANTHATA: Thank you Faried. It may be by way of recapping. I may have lost in the midst of all what was being said. Can you give us, you know, a strategy or a form into which all these things can fit in for execution, or for implementation? You have spoken widely about issues that are of real concern. I would have loved to see us narrowing them to, you know, whether it is a structure or what, where these things can be fitted into, where they can be monitored, where they can be seen to be done.



DR FARIED ESACK: I don't know. Like all theologians, it's all very easy to be fuzzy wuzzy on all sorts of ideas and so on and then when anybody asks you for any concrete ideas you are completely lost. At the end of the day, I am just another budding theologian. Um, I don't know but I certainly think that there have been structures in the past that WCRP have initiated; the Forum for Religious Leaders, groups that can get together and on an...you see that the problem is that many religious leaders, we have either now serving as Commissioners or as directors in some Deputy President's office, blah, blah, blah, and so we in many ways have lost our own sense of vocation. But the challenging role for example that the South African Council of Churches played in the 70's and more particularly in the 80's, I think there is again a need for those kinds of forums to be established and again to continuously challenge society, draw up a new Kayros Document for a post-apartheid South Africa and in the tensions that we had among ourselves and the programmes that emerged from those tensions, I certainly think that we are people who claim that our inspirations comes from inside or from above, and note necessarily from socio-political dynamics around us, but in the end of the day, I can only say that a forum of religious leaders committed to this kind of truth and reconciliation that I was referring to, such a forum may be able to come up with a more concrete programme that you may want to see.

CHAIRPERSON: Khoza?

REV. K MGOJO: Thank you Sir. I feel that I need to ask this question. In your presentation, you did mention that the Muslim community benefited as far as business is concerned. And you also mentioned Natal, where I come from. What contribution do you think that your community could make in terms of reparation? Because most of the businesses of the Muslims in Natal have been supported by those people who are the victims of the system.

DR FARIED ESACK: I certainly think that religious communities in South Africa as a whole, I think that the TRC as a commission, ought to take a far firmer and challenging position on this. In a very direct way, you've got to go to not only Muslim businesses, Jewish businesses and business is business. Business has got no religious colour whatsoever. To go to these people and say that: Look, this is what you have done. As a community of Muslim businessmen or as a community of Jewish businessmen, you have complicity in the past, look at your palatial mansions and just look on the other side of the road and look at the ghettos on the other side of the road or the railway line or whatever. People, as Dr Alan Boesak has always said, people are starving, people are dying of under eating, because other people are dying from over eating. And so the point that I want to make is this, Reverend Mgojo, you need to go to those communities and confront them directly head on and irrespective of how much they claim to have suffered in the past, and say here we are, this is a fund that we are setting up. If you believe that you have benefited from ill begotten gains, put your money where your mouth lies, if not the TRC should in its own final report go for any particular community or any group of people with vested interests

who have not participated actively or aren't willing to come on board, such an initiative.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very, very much. And thank you about all those religious leaders who are Commissioners. No...thank you. You have been as provocative as always and we are always and we are enormously grateful to you Faried.

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