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Inter-Faith Summit on Africa
The Roles of Religion in Public Life
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Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great joy to be here this evening. Thank you for the invitation.

And thank you for suggesting such a thought-provoking topic:
The Role of Religion in Public Life.

Let me begin by saying something about how I approach this topic.

In the 60's, a young student of commercial law at the University of Cape Town, I found myself inspired by the leadership of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, leader of the recently formed Pan Africanist Congress of Azania.

I became passionately caught up in political activism, in the quest for justice and the struggle for liberation from apartheid. To cut a long story short, this brought me three years imprisonment on Robben Island.

What we endured there is unimaginable. But it was also the place, where, wrestling with God over how he could allow such injustice and suffering across the country, I felt his hand on my life, and the call to ordained ministry.

This reinforced the belief in freedom and justice that we shared, and which was renewed despite the inhospitable conditions. We emerged, committed to a life of service and convinced that lasting peace could only come through reconciliation and forgiveness. And I knew even then, that these would lie at the heart of whatever ministry

the Lord had in store for me. I also knew that there was no area of my life that was beyond God's touch.

Therefore, it is not surprising that I cannot understand those who argue that religion has nothing to say to politics, and should be confined to some separate, so-called 'private' sphere.

Human existence cannot be compartmentalised in this way.

Faith is not some hobby, which we pick up and put down as the fancy takes us. Either it is our whole life, or it is nothing.

As a theist, a Christian, I would put it this way – either God is God of everything, or no god at all.

William Temple, who was Archbishop of Canterbury at the time of the Second World War, was one of the great Anglican theoretical ethicists of the last century.

Archbishop Temple believed that, when it came to political life, the Church was 'bound to "interfere" because it is by vocation the agent of God's purpose, outside the scope of which no human interest or activity can fall.'

However, he was not just talking about the institutional church – Bishops and Archbishops and other leaders. We of course have our role to play.

Archbishop Temple additionally believed 'nine-tenths' of this 'Christian interference' would be done not by the Church formally, but by individual Christians in their capacity as engaged citizens.

Let me repeat his main point – there is no human interest or activity that can fall outside the scope of God's purposes. Faith addresses every aspect of our humanity. And therefore people of faith must speak out, on every aspect of humanity.

Archbishop Temple put it like this:

'The Church must announce Christian principles and point out where the existing social order at any time is in conflict with

them. It must then pass on to Christian citizens, acting in their civic capacity, the task of reshaping the existing order in close conformity to the principles.'

The fathers of Vatican II described our responsibility in these words:
'at all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time, and interpreting them in the light of the gospel, if it is to carry out its task.'

Our responsibility, therefore, is to put before the eyes of the people the vision of society as ordained by God.

Religious Pluralism and Liberal Democracy

Some academics, politicians and even theologians – and indeed, some constitutions – demand a 'separation' of state and religion.

That is the position, theoretically at least, here in the United States.

Even so, there is huge debate over what it might mean in practice for the state to be 'neutral' in respect of faiths.

There are, in essence, two interpretations of how this neutrality is to be expressed.

The first can be summed up like this:

The public sphere is a secular space, in which all players should participate on the basis of shared, normative, assumptions in which faith perspectives have no relevance apart from in narrowly circumscribed religious matters.

In other words, we must leave religion at home when we step out of our front doors, into the public arena. And while in that public space, we should act as if religion did not exist, as though we were all some sort of secular humanists.

Let us turn instead to the second interpretation.

This is that there should be neutrality between the various faiths and also other perspectives on life.

As far as possible, each should be able to flourish on their own terms, and all should be able to contribute constructively to a richly textured and diverse society.

Here I want to use the illustration of South Africa.

In the past, the faith communities worked hand in hand, in opposing apartheid. Together we undermined the attempts by the regime to provide a moral authority for apartheid. Indeed, it was declared a heresy, a crime against humanity, and an affront to the dignity of the human person, made in the image of God.

There is no doubt that the faith communities, and the principles by which we live, contributed to our remarkable transition from apartheid.

Today we are working together to promote and support the reconciliation process. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is founded on deep theological principles. Faith communities were deeply involved in its work, and it was, of course, chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Restorative justice, which is also an important tool of rebuilding society, similarly has theological roots.

Many had predicted a bloodbath, but, by the grace of God, we have passed safely into a new democratic era.

A Constitution for a Richly Pluralist Society

We now enjoy one of the most widely admired constitutions in the world.

Promulgated in 1996, after two years of extensive consultation, it explicitly states it is intended to 'heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights; and lay the foundations for a democratic and open society...'

It outlaws unfair discrimination on any grounds, 'including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.'

There is explicit commitment to a unity expressed in diversity.

This is demonstrated in the constitution's promotion of 11 official languages, three endangered indigenous languages, and sign language (for the deaf). It also safeguards all other community languages (with eight examples cited), together with Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and 'any other languages used for religious purposes.'

Likewise, there is a guaranteed role for religious, traditional, and community laws, *insofar* as they are compatible with wider provisions of the constitution.

This last point is crucial.

Through evolving case law, the Constitutional Court is addressing how apparent competing rights and incompatibilities should be addressed.

For example it has ruled that all daughters, of whatever community, faith or tradition, have equal inheritance rights. This means that the property of a man without sons should not pass automatically to the nearest male relative.

In this case, broader constitutional provisions are overriding. But in many other areas religious and traditional practices are upheld within the courts of the land. They are the starting point for the development of case law.

The Constitution's implementation is proving productive to the development of a richly pluralist society, which gives a full space for the expression of faith.

Morality and Diversity

It is noteworthy that South Africa's constitutional provision for diverse community, cultural, linguistic and religious expression does not confine these to the private realm, but ensures a full place within the public arena.

Public affirmation of diversity, including religious diversity, allows for a far broader, more textured, debate on the goals of society.

Faith communities must be at the heart of that debate.

Our contribution includes arguing for the appropriate flourishing of each individual, each fully human person – possessing body and spirit; emotions as well as intellect. Furthermore, individuals flourish not in isolation, but in relationship, as part of the wider human family, and in harmony with creation.

This sort of democracy offers possibilities of constructive dialogue around moral issues, with every faith group free to be itself, without feeling under threat or in competition.

The strengths of religious traditions offer checks against unfettered relativism, and against the blind imperatives of unbridled economics.

Those of us who believe in the revelation of a God who is absolute, can engage fully, while standing firm in our faith. We do so, acknowledging that finite human comprehension is always challenged to fuller understanding and expression, and is best explored in the dialogues of the whole human family.

It is helpful to bear in mind Reinhold Niebuhr's famous dictum:

'Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible
But man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.'

As God's stewards, we need to hold this constantly in mind, as we advocate for justice.

A Conclusion for Africa

The conclusion that I draw from what I have said so far is this:

In much of Africa multi-party democracy is still young.

In many of our countries, the precise form of that democracy is still taking shape. In some places the constitution is open for amendment and improvement. In others, the case law which sets out how the constitution is to be interpreted and implemented is still at an early stage.

It is absolutely fundamental that we work for the sort of democracies that I have described – that give freedom and encouragement to faith communities to bring the best of our traditions and beliefs into the public space.

We want to make the best contribution we can to the flourishing of our countries, and our people. Therefore we must work to obtain the best conditions for making that constructive contribution.

PART 2

For the second part of my address, I want to look in more detail at specific ways we can make a contribution.

First I will talk in general terms about the ways we can participate. Then I will conclude by commenting on 8 particular areas.

Let me begin by recalling a remark of Archbishop Temple: nine tenths of the impact and influence that the Church, that faith communities, can have, is through our lay people.

Our over-riding need is to educate our people to be able to play their part as contributing members of our society. Whether civil servants, teachers, medical staff, business-people, farmers, unemployed, retired – whoever they are, they must understand that the way they live makes a significant difference to the building up of our nations, and that their faith can help them make that difference.

Jesus talked about Christians being ‘the salt of the world.’ One thing about salt is that you do not want it all in one place. To enjoy my meal, I need a sprinkling across all my food! Religious leaders should show the way – but our people are the ones who are in every

place, bringing out the flavour of society at the level of the local community.

We must give particular support to individuals who are in positions of power and influence. They bear hugely demanding responsibilities, and are often subject to all manner of pressures and temptations. We need to help them do the best job that they can, giving them theological and ethical tools which they can apply to the work they undertake.

Now we come to the 'one tenth' which is left to the faith institutions!

My conclusion, after 10 years as an Archbishop, and 25 years working within the central structure of my own church, is that we must wisely use every opportunity open to us – tailoring our actions to the circumstances we face.

Let me give some examples from my own life.

In 1983 I was part of a delegation sent by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, to Namibia. This was a deliberate, high profile, act of presence. We spent seven days in the war zone ministering to people traumatised by the physical and emotional intimidation of South Africa's sophisticated military machinery. Both Namibia and South Africa are part of the Anglican Province for which I am now Archbishop – people on both sides of the conflict were ours to pastor.

I was later privileged to testify in Washington, at hearings on Namibia held at Capitol Hill, prior to its independence. Such testimony was a very different way of acting in the public sphere.

More recently, I travelled the first aid delegation to parts of the Somali coast hit by the December 2004 tsunami. This was a different act of presence – a demonstration of our care for those in need. Journalists asked why I, an Archbishop, should go to a Muslim area. But I responded that they are all God's children, and we must show his love in practical ways. They told me that my visit opened the way for humanitarian aid.

The South African Council of Churches also responds to the humanitarian crises in Zimbabwe. In recent years actions have ranged from visits of solidarity, again with a high public profile, to the despatching of various forms of aid.

These illustrate some of the ways we can become engaged.

Sometimes it may be possible to have a close and continuing dialogue with government leaders. In other times and places that is totally impossible.

Sometimes we need to use behind the scenes quite diplomacy.

Sometimes we need to speak out and make a big public fuss.

Sometimes we will work with the media, and broad public messages. Sometimes we will have detailed technical engagement.

Sometimes we will focus on particular issues.

Sometimes we will tackle far broader policy perspectives.

But in all of this we will be far more effective if we work together. And we will find that in many areas, especially of general principle, there is a surprising amount on which we can agree, and combine our forces.

This is what we are finding in South Africa, where, for example, the faith communities have been engaging the Minister for Social Development in conversations on how we can work together.

This led last year to a memorandum of understanding between the Government of the Republic of South Africa and the National Religious Leaders' Forum, in which we agreed to cooperate in five areas of social development programmes.

Faith communities have much that governments need – including, in many parts of Africa, the most comprehensive social networks of any organisation. We can reach people in far-flung places often more effectively than government.

This places a great responsibility upon us, especially to help those who are in greatest need.

The Vital Contribution of Faith Communities

So let me now turn to 8 specific areas where I believe faith communities have a vital contribution to make.

1. The first area addresses good governance. There is no doubt that this is the fundamental prerequisite for the economic and social development which our continent so desperately needs.

At the heart of good governance is the upholding of the rule of law.

Now, many of us live in places where we have had bad experiences of the rule of law. When authority – such as apartheid – was clearly illegitimately based, it was inevitable that the law would not command respect.

But where we now have good laws, there for the benefit of society as a whole, they should be observed, by everyone.

Within our faiths, we know what it is to live under the authority of our traditions, which we know are for our benefit. We must use this experience to teach people that authority can be good, and be worthy of respect, and should be obeyed.

2. A related issue is the combating of corruption.

I am not sure of the latest figures, but three years ago, the World Bank estimated that white collar crime, and corruption of all sorts was costing the world over \$1.5 trillion annually. That is some 5% of the world economy squandered. A mere fraction of this would solve global poverty!

We know Africa's reputation. I will say no more.

Sometimes it seems that the only immorality consists in being found out – whatever I can get away with is legitimate.

Faith communities must speak out – we must name and shame.

And we must be ready to do so as institutions, because it is not always safe for individuals to blow the whistle. We must provide a platform from which the truth can be told without fear.

It is unacceptable that those who are corrupt – at whatever level – should be allowed to bully and threaten others into silence.

3. Third is the general question of the exercise of power.

Christians often describe Jesus as ‘the Servant King.’ We have a strong tradition that those who hold positions of leadership bear responsibility for the well-being of those over whom they are appointed.

In a world driven by money, status and power, it is hard to hold onto this ethos. But we must. We must declare that elected leaders, and those working within the public service, are there for precisely that purpose – public service.

We who are leaders in our own faith communities must also model and demonstrate what it is to be servant leaders. We should show that respect is to be earned; and that we are there not for our own self-advancement, but for the good of the people we lead. Leadership means servant-hood.

4. Good governance, respect for the law, the right exercise of power – all these contribute to the strengthening of civil society, which itself a vital partner in the effective exercise of democracy, together with the private sector. Government should see us as necessary ‘critical friends’ – yes, we may criticise, but we are also friends – we too want the best for our citizens.

Faith communities are the backbone of civil society. We are the glue that holds societies together. We build communities beyond the ties of flesh and blood.

Relationship is fundamental to our human connectedness, and our ability to build stability and prosperity.

5. The other vital building block of society is the family.

Many of us live in countries where the family has come under considerable strain – because of the dislocations of apartheid, or of civil war, child soldiers, HIV/AIDS, famine, or for whatever reason.

Faith communities, at the local level, can help give families the support they need to rebuild, and hold together. We can lend the listening ear, give parenting classes, and support marriages under pressure.

At the intimate human level, we are there where people are.

6. I mentioned apartheid and civil war. Faith communities have a unique role in reconciliation.

Ours is the language of hope and new beginnings and redemptive possibilities.

We are the ones who deal in the promises of new starts, of forgiveness sought, forgiveness offered, forgiveness accepted.

We are the people who know how it is that evil can be overcome, not with greater might, and accompanying violence – but with good, with gentleness, with a healing balm.

This is why I was extremely delighted with the inauguration of the Inter Faith Action for Peace in Africa last month, with its focus on unity, peace and development on our continent.

Restorative justice is an important concept here – if you do not know about it, then I urge you to learn more.

Restorative justice is not just about bringing an absence of hostilities. It is about bringing all sides together, so that together they can forge a new peace that is far stronger, far deeper, far more just, far more stable, far more lasting, and far more full of promise for a better future than what went before.

As a Christian, I want to say it is entirely gospel shaped. It is certainly good news, for all involved.

7. Another major justice issue on the continent of Africa is the position of women.

It grieves me that often patriarchal tendencies in our own faiths have conspired with similar prejudices within culture – whether African or colonial – to reinforce the oppression of women by direct and indirect means.

We allow the myth to persist that many religions regard women as somehow inferior to men.

But when we look at our sacred texts, we find that the position accorded to women is far in advance of that of the surrounding societies.

We find a trajectory of grace which reaches to our present day and challenges us. Where much of the world now recognises the equal value and worth and dignity of women, how is it that we are now so often behind, not ahead, of contemporary society?

Whether it is economic oppression – through limited access to financial resources and the means to make a living and support their families – or violence and abuse in the home, we must call a halt.

This is a matter of holiness. It is a matter of justice.

It is also a matter of common sense and self-interest.

Wherever women have equal access to education and to finance, communities make great leaps in prosperity. For once, economics tells us clearly what we are too blind to see for ourselves.

8. There is another reason why religious leaders must insist that women are treated with equal dignity and respect – and that is because AIDS in Africa has a woman's face.

It is appalling that far too many women are denied the possibility of negotiating sex that is consensual and safe. Economic dependence, coercion and rape are far too common.

But the challenge that HIV-AIDS offers the religious communities is far more wide ranging than this.

It grieves me to say that many of us for too long have been part of the problem more than we have been part of the solution. Frankly, we need to do better.

We must bear a heavy responsibility in relation to the crippling issue of stigma, and its attendant problems of fear, denial and silence, which too often prevent treatment just as for any other disease.

We have too often espoused destructive theologies that inexorably link sex and sin and guilt and punishment. We must take the lead in overturning these distortions.

Of course we must uphold sexual morality, but we must do so in a way that gives people, especially the young, a holy, healthy and holistic view of life, not merely a list of 'don'ts.'

Earlier this year in New York I had a very interesting discussion session with young people. They were asking some very pointed questions of the churches, such as when is it right to have sex. I said 'Sex is good – provided it is with the right person, at the right time, in the right place.'

Abstinence, faithfulness and appropriate condom use must be taught to our communities as part of a comprehensive education process.

We must also teach in a way that does not allow people to be marked out, labelled, judged and ostracised – whether because of their own HIV infection, the infection of family members, or any other attendant factor.

Too often it is women who are the faithful partners of unfaithful men who are most at risk – and their children, whether infected or

affected, also suffer through no fault of their own from belonging to stigmatised families.

Yet our traditions teach us to give special care to abandoned women, widows and orphans.

Stigma has become the silent killer – it decimates families, who cannot speak to each other about the illness in their midst. Stigma brings fear of alienation and rejection. People shun testing and even exclude themselves from treatment, since this would give the game away. So, often unwittingly, they continue to spread infection.

If we are to defeat this ‘sleeping giant’ which so threatens our continent we must break the silence and end the stigma. Jesus taught that ‘the truth will set you free.’

African Monitor

I cannot conclude this presentation without mentioning the African Monitor.

African Monitor is an independent body, acting as a catalyst within Africa’s civil society, to bring a strong African voice to the development agenda – an African home-grown initiative.

With faith communities providing our most significant partners on the ground, we are pressing for the timely, efficient and effective implementation of commitments made to Africa – such as those made in 2005, the ‘Year for Africa.’ We want to ensure they are delivered in ways that bring tangible and lasting development at a grassroots level.

In particular, we are asking

- Are the policies and pledges of developing countries and institutions really delivering what they promise?
- Are recipient countries doing what is required of them in good governance and otherwise providing the right framework for effective programme implementation?
- Is a tangible difference really being made on the ground?

We aim to work for change by being in partnership with grass-roots communities. We want to ensure that the voice of Africa's people, in particular the poorest, and their priorities and perspectives, are heard in the corridors of power. As our logo puts it, 'African Voices for Africa's Development.'

This advocacy role will be supported through monitoring – both quantitative and qualitative – that builds on existing research and networks as far as possible.

We formally launched African Monitor in May this year in Cape Town, and had a further roll-out in Kigali in June, in parallel with the launch of the African Inter-faith Peace Commission. Further roll-outs will happen later this year in London and in the US (geared towards the African diaspora and to the African-American communities), and finally next year in Addis Ababa.

We are also now pressing ahead with building networks, and piloting our monitoring activities. A few weeks ago in St Petersburg, we were also mandated to coordinate the voices of civil society internationally and within the continent, to bring to the next meeting of the African Partnership Forum of the G8 and African Union / NEPAD.

Many of you here have already committed yourselves to be part of this endeavour. I thank you. And I invite everyone else to join us – this is a particular pan-African initiative in which the combined strength and depth of the faith communities and our networks can make a significant impact.

Conclusion

Let me end by saying this.

Last, but by no means least, we must pray, and pray without ceasing.

In the famous words of Archbishop Trevor Huddleston – God bless Africa, guard our children, guide our leaders, and give us peace.

Amen