

# **THE DAILY DISPATCH ONLINE**

## **South Africa**

### **Opinion: The cross vs the sword**

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PEACE of the heart and mind and peace of society are intrinsically linked. Peace and justice are inseparable, as are truth and reconciliation.

Peace is for the hungry to be fed, the poor to be sustained, the sick to experience care, the oppressed to be released and the marginalised to have a voice. Peace is protection against violence, and it is experienced when warfare and armed conflicts are translated into development and nation building.

These words are from the preamble of the Lille Declaration on a Culture of Peace issued by the European Council of Religious Leaders Religions for Peace last May. The council brings together close to 30 senior religious leaders from all parts of Europe: Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Zoroastrians. In addressing the issue of a culture of peace they acknowledged the profound relationship between culture, peace and religion, and between individual wellbeing physical, mental and spiritual and cohesion and harmonious relationships on the level of society.

For almost 40 years I have had the privilege to be engaged with peace efforts and reconciliation processes around the globe: from Guatemala and Namibia to Kosovo, Sri Lanka and East Timor. The cultures, languages and traditions of these countries vary tremendously; each having its particular beauties and specific challenges. But in every conflict-ridden country I have recognised the significance of religion, both for good and for bad.

We can rarely speak of religious wars, but we often see that religion is used to give legitimacy to those who promote intolerance and violence. But as often religious communities bravely stand up for peace and non-violence, and religious leaders stretch out their hands to those on the other side, saying that their religion compels them to build bridges and tear down the walls.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina the leaders of four major faith communities meet regularly in the Interreligious Council and seek ways to deepen their co-operation. In Sri Lanka brave Buddhist monks join hands with Hindu priests, Christian bishops and Muslim leaders and address the situation of those internally displaced in the wake of the war in the north of the country.

All too often, memories individual and collective are the cause of conflict.

Much can be achieved not by forgetting, but by remembering the past in new ways. A crucial question in many conflicts is: how can we heal our memories? Religions often provide language for this: Forgiveness, reconciliation, transformation.

Historically, many parts of Europe have been dominated by the farming of land. Often farms have been the property of a family for many generations. Sons have inherited from fathers. It is often said that the measure of a successful farmer is that he (or she) passes on the property to the next generation in a little better shape than when he took it over from the former generation. Those who simply trust the farmland to be there, and leave it to look after itself, will fail. The land must be cultivated. The soil needs nurturing and weeds must be removed. Farming methods must adapt to changes in society, and new technologies must be utilised. But through changes and improvements it remains the same farm, and new generations get a better starting point than their parents.

Religious traditions work in the same way: They must be cultivated.

We must nurture that which bears good fruit, and we must weed out that which chokes the good crop. And if someone seeks to take over religious traditions and use them to promote ulterior goals; to incite hatred, intolerance and violence, we must confront them boldly and protect what has been entrusted to us.

There is always movement in religion and in culture; they are dynamic, although sometimes slow in changing. A culture of peace is therefore not a stable and harmonious situation which is to be achieved sometime in the future, but a constant process of forming and re-forming the cultures to which we belong.

Conflicts are sometimes necessary, and reconciliation always comes at a cost. Religions' role in promoting cultures of peace is not to take away conflicts, but to help us transform our conflicts so that they push us forward in our quest for peace, truth and justice, and to help us heal our memories and face the future with a hope rooted in something that goes beyond our own experience.

A culture of peace is fostered by patient dialogue characterised by sincerity about one's own faith and respectful openness to the sacred traditions of "the other". For me the words and ways of Jesus may never be obscured but always be transparent in my encounter with those whose most precious source of wisdom is expressed in a different allegiance. For a culture of peace to take root common action between faith groups on leadership and grassroots level is necessary. Dialogue must be translated into visible body language marked by shared values and a spirit of service and solidarity. Acts of mercy and justice speak more than words about our spirituality.

This is the essence of the words of Jesus: Blessed are the peacemakers.

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