

Human Rights and Religious Diversity

Joris de Bres

Some people have, over the past two years, asked why the secular New Zealand Human Rights Commission facilitates a national interfaith network, produces a monthly electronic interfaith newsletter, and has facilitated the development of a Statement on Religious Diversity.

The answer is simple. The primary functions of the Commission under the Human Rights Act are to promote respect for human rights, and to encourage the maintenance and development of harmonious relationships between the diverse groups that make up New Zealand society. No other public agency has such a clear statutory mandate to promote the right to religion (including the right not to hold a religious belief), and to promote understanding between faith communities.

The Commission has been able to provide a human rights framework for the public debate that has proved a useful way of advancing the dialogue. It has provided spaces in which central and local government agencies can engage with faith communities, faith communities can engage with each other, and faith communities can engage with the community generally.

This does not in any way compromise the secular nature of the Commission or the separation of church and state: the state has as much of a responsibility to engage with citizens who share a community of belief as they do with those who share a community of culture, ethnicity or geography. This is particularly so when globally there are tensions and conflicts associated with different religions, and when these have their consequences within New Zealand in

terms, for example, of prejudice against visible religious minorities.

The interfaith network, Te Korowai Whakapono, is one of a number of networks facilitated by the Commission as part of the New Zealand Diversity Action Programme. It is a response to an identified need just as other networks in the Programme are – Te Waka Reo for those with an interest in a national language policy, Nga Reo Tangata on the media and diversity, and Te Punanga on refugee issues. In each case the Commission provides a monthly electronic newsletter, promotes action projects that enhance respect for diversity and improve relationships, and through the New Zealand Diversity Forum and other means, provides spaces to discuss some of the key issues of concern.

Last year's Diversity Forum was a launching pad for the draft Statement on Religious Diversity. The subsequent public debate, including strong differences within the Christian community and equally strong views expressed by rationalists and humanists, has done much to raise public awareness of the issues, and particularly of the human rights and responsibilities that apply in the context of religious diversity.

Following the process of public consultation, a revised Statement was discussed and endorsed by the national interfaith forum in Hamilton in February. It was published as a small booklet in May, with additional commentary, a preface by the Prime Minister, and a foreword by Dame Sylvia Cartwright, former Governor General and presently Chair of the New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO. The publication of the booklet, in an initial edition of 10,000 copies, was funded by UNESCO. The Statement has since been translated into ten other languages commonly used in New Zealand.

The Statement itself is very brief: it consists of a preamble setting out both the historical and contemporary context of religious diversity in New Zealand, and the basis for freedom of religion in international treaties and domestic human rights legislation. There are then eight simple statements, largely setting out human rights and responsibilities, which had the most resonance in public consultation and which also, in some cases, sparked the most debate. These statements, mostly comprising a single sentence, cover the state and religion, the right to religion, the right to safety, the right of freedom of expression, recognition and accommodation, education, religious differences and cooperation and understanding. Together they are proving to be a robust framework for ongoing discussion about religious diversity.

Faith communities and other organisations are now being invited to endorse the Statement, and to provide suggestions for improvement. A review of the Statement is scheduled for 2009.

Initial endorsements include not only the National Interfaith Forum, but also the Buddhist organisation Sokai Gakkai International, the Anglican and Catholic Bishops of New Zealand and the New Zealand Federation of Islamic Associations.

Seeking endorsement rather than just comment means that organisations really have to engage with the content, and the content itself covers the key principles that will provide for religious tolerance and interfaith cooperation. The strength of the Statement is that it is a community based initiative, rather than a government edict.

The Human Rights Commission will continue to encourage discussion on the Statement, and record feedback for the review in 2009 – this provides a two year period for people to continue to discuss religious diversity in a human rights context.

In the meantime, the 2007 New Zealand Diversity Forum will focus on one of the hot topics in the Statement and in public debate: Religion in Schools, covering both education about religion and the human rights questions raised by religious instruction in schools.

Details of the New Zealand Diversity Action Programme can be found at www.hrc.co.nz/diversity and information about the Statement on Religious Diversity can be found at www.hrc.co.nz/religiousdiversity. New Zealand interfaith news is also available at www.interfaith.org.nz.

Building Bridges: The Third Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue, Waitangi, Bay of Islands, New Zealand, 29-31 May 2007.

Report of the New Zealand Delegation

Introduction

Faith community representatives from 15 South East Asian and Pacific nations met in

Waitangi from 29-31 May 2007 for the third Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue. The two previous dialogues took place in Cebu, Philippines in March 2006 and Yogyakarta, Indonesia in December 2004.

The regional dialogue process is sponsored by the governments of Australia, Indonesia, New Zealand and the Philippines. The sponsoring governments were represented at the opening of the Waitangi dialogue by New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark, Philippines President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters, and Andri Hadi, representing the Indonesian Foreign Minister. New Zealand Minister for the Community and Voluntary Sector, Luamanuvao Winnie Laban, acted as Host Minister throughout the Dialogue and gave the closing address.

The New Zealand Delegation

The New Zealand delegation was led by Dr Manuka Henare (Auckland University, Catholic) and comprised Rehanna Ali (Muslim), Dr Ashraf Choudhary (Muslim), Archbishop John Dew (Catholic), Joris de Bres (Human Rights Commission), Javed Khan (Muslim), Professor Paul Morris (Victoria University, Jewish), Bishop Richard Randerson (Anglican), Rev Feiloaiga Taule'ale'ausumai (Presbyterian), Dr Pushpa Wood (Hindu), and Ven Amala Wrightson (Buddhist). Because the conference was being held in New Zealand, it was also possible to include an observer group which worked closely with the official delegation. They were Glyn Carpenter (Vision Network, Christian), Mustafa Farouk (Muslim), Rabbi Johanna Hershensen (Jewish), Dr Upala Manukulasuriya (Buddhist), Rohit Sharma (Hindu), Prithipal Singh (Sikh), and Keith Thompson (Mormon). Rev Bob Scott was the liaison officer for all delegations, and the New Zealand Government was represented by Minister Laban, Ambassador Dell Higgin

and Cathie McGregor from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

New Zealand Country Report and Statement on Religious Diversity

New Zealand submitted a country report which included a brief religious and constitutional profile of New Zealand and actions that had been taken to follow up on the previous Dialogue in Cebu. Delegates were provided with a copy of the recently published booklet on the Statement on Religious Diversity, which received considerable positive comment. The Statement was also the focus of a demonstration outside the conference grounds by members of the Destiny Church, who presented their own statement seeking to have New Zealand declared a Christian nation. Representatives of the New Zealand delegation met with the leaders of the demonstration and received a statement from them.

Auckland Alliance of Civilisations Symposium

The dialogue was preceded by a high-level international symposium chaired by the New Zealand Prime Minister the previous week (23-24 May) in Auckland on the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations report. The outcomes of this symposium were reported to the Dialogue. These formed the basis for one of the workshop sessions. The recommendations of the Alliance of Civilisations report focused on education, the media, youth, and migration, and these themes (particularly the first three) were reflected in the final declaration from the Dialogue. Concern was expressed that the language of the Alliance of Civilisations initiative (particularly in relation to "Muslim and Western" countries) needed to be modified to reflect the particular characteristics of the Asia Pacific region.

New Zealand Discussion Paper

The New Zealand delegation was also responsible for a discussion paper for the plenary session and workshops on Building Bridges: Faith Communities and Governments Working Together for the Common Good). The paper put forward three recommendations for discussion:

- That governments commit to extending their support for regional interfaith dialogue to fostering positive relationships between faith communities at the local and national regional levels and that faith communities take initiatives to work together at the local, national and regional levels with each other and governments.
- That governments take the responsibility to designate faith and interfaith points of contact with government at the local, national and regional levels.
- That a regional digital database be established with web page access mapping the range of religious activities in our region, including the faith and interfaith groups, faith-based organizations, charities and NGOs.

All three recommendations found their way in some form into the Waitangi Declaration and Action Plan.

The Waitangi Declaration

The Dialogue concluded with the adoption of the Waitangi Declaration and Action Plan. The Action Plan focused on three areas - Building Bridges, Education and Media - as well as welcoming the Alliance of Civilisations report. The New Zealand delegation commends all the recommendations for action to central and local government, faith communities, education providers, media and others, but

suggests that follow-up action in the first instance focus on the following:

- Identifying clear points of contact within government for relations with faith communities and interfaith cooperation. We note the Auckland City Council's initiative in allocating this responsibility to a particular community development officer, and commend this to other councils. We note that the Human Rights Commission has established a national interfaith network and newsletter as part of the New Zealand Diversity Action Programme following the previous Interfaith Dialogues, and consider this an important means of communication between faith communities and government. We believe it would be appropriate now to establish a responsibility for relations with faith communities and interfaith cooperation within central government, either at the Ministerial or departmental level, and consider this might be appropriately supported within the Ministry of Social Development. Equally, we encourage faith communities to participate in or establish interfaith networks or councils at the local level to liaise with local government, and to participate in the national network under the umbrella of the New Zealand Diversity Action Programme
- Strengthening interfaith dialogue and addressing concerns within religious communities. We note that the Statement on Religious Diversity has now been published in the form of a booklet with additional information and commentary, with an invitation

for organisations to endorse the statement and suggest improvements, with a view to a review of the statement in two years time. We consider that this provides an appropriate framework for strengthening interfaith dialogue and addressing concerns, and urge central and local government, faith communities and the wider community to engage in the continuing discussion on the Statement.

- Establishing an Asia Pacific regional interfaith network and database. We believe that the New Zealand Interfaith Network facilitated by the Human Rights Commission provides a useful low-cost model for a regional network. The expectation from the Dialogue is that New Zealand will facilitate the regional network, and an appropriate home for such a network will need to be determined. It will involve resourcing the development of a website and equally importantly its maintenance as a reliable and up to date source of information, as well as the compilation of a regular electronic newsletter.
- Education about religions. We note that the new school curriculum is currently being finalised. We express the hope that this will include provision for education about diverse religions as well as diverse cultures, and that this will be followed by a more detailed curriculum statement and supporting educational resources. We note further that there will be a forum on Religion and Schools at the New Zealand Diversity Forum on

27 August, and encourage the Government, Ministry of Education, teachers and Boards of Trustees to participate in this forum to advance the discussion.

- Tertiary education institutions and religious diversity. We commend to government and tertiary education providers the concept of student and staff exchanges to promote understanding of religious diversity, the establishment of an Islamic Studies Centre in a New Zealand tertiary institution, research such as exploring any nexus between religion and conflict and perceptions of security in different faith communities, and the inclusion of education about other religions in the training of faith community leaders.
- The media and religious diversity. We note the work that has been done by the Journalists Training Organisation and the Human Rights Commission with the media on this issue since the cartoon controversy last year, including the recent JTO forum on reporting diversity which recommended scoping a media supported multicultural news agency. We encourage the Commission and the JTO to continue to address the issue of religious as well as cultural diversity and the media. We also note that the New Zealand Press Council has recently initiated an independent review of its role, and urge them to adopt a more proactive stance in promoting high standards in media representation of diverse religions and cultures.

Joris de Bres is the Race Relations Commissioner in the New Zealand Human Rights Commission. The Commission facilitates the New Zealand Diversity Action Programme. Joris is also Deputy Chairperson of Oxfam New Zealand , a trustee of Project Crimson (a trust for the conservation of New Zealand's native pohutukawa and rata trees), and on the Advisory Board of Victoria University's Centre for Applied Cross-Cultural Studies.

