

# Reflections on the World Conference against Racism<sup>1</sup>

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Was the World Conference on Racism, held in Durban at the end of August at the enormous cost of nearly a R100 million of any value in the present chaotic era? Did it change the perceptions and attitudes of the various races in the world? Will it bring about racial harmony? These are some of the questions that have to be asked. That the world consists of various races and national states that have attained various levels of civilisation, determined by geographical location and climate, genetic characteristics, history, interaction and communication with other races and states, specific attainments in cultural fields, is incontestable.

## *20<sup>th</sup> Century History*

Twentieth century history has been one of terrible wars, eclipsing conflicts in the past. There has also been imperialistic domination and revolts. The relentless materialistic ethos spreading from the West to overwhelm the rest of the world is another dimension. There is the super-power grip on the United Nations Organisation.

Then there are factors such as chauvinism, gender inequality, poverty, patriotism, cultural and religious pride, scientific advancement and the manufacture of weapons, national habits and tribal divisions, and a whole host of others. Besides these there is a colour factor. Some people are white and some are black, and some of various shades between. Those who are white – the West – have always seen black as a colour to be despised and feared as it is associated with night, evil, ugliness, primitivism and superstition. In fact this view was confirmed by the representation of Christ, in the imagery of art and literature as a white, blue-eyed, blond European.

## *Colour Division*

The colour division has had a great influence on human relations throughout the ages. Even in the plays of the greatest English dramatist, Shakespeare, there is reference to Moors as blackamoors. There is the evil Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*, and the Moor who murders Desdemona in *Othello*. There are also references to infidel Turks. In the Western world personal beauty has always

been characterized by flawless white skin and such a conception gets deeply rooted in the psyche and is extremely difficult to eradicate.

To complicate human existence there is religious stratification. In India there is the untouchable class and even after many years of non-discriminatory legislation, there are those who feel superior. Orthodox Jews consider themselves as the elect of God and how is one to change that belief? Christian ideology considers outsiders as infidels or pagans.

### *Confucius' View*

When the sage Confucius was questioned why he did not venerate the gods, he replied that if he could not know human beings how could he ever know the gods. He also stated that human nature is the same throughout the world, but that the habits of human beings divided them, that is, their different ways of living. To compound the religious division there is the response of some nations to consider any criticism of an individual or a group as a general condemnation.

### *Anti-Semitism & Racism*

There is the tendency among Jews to reject any criticism, however particular and trivial, as being *Anti-Semitic*, and Africans to repel criticism with the term *Racist*. This automatic reaction is regularly heard in the chambers of parliament whenever the Opposition (which is mainly white) makes allegations of corruption or mismanagement. This sort of response is very serious in that it inspires aggression against whites in society and confirms prejudice. Even black writers – journalists, novelists – have become sensitive to criticism. Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian writer, has accused Joseph Conrad as being a ‘racist’ on the basis of his novel *Heart of Darkness*. And we had the recent travesty of a provincial education department declaring Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* as ‘racist’.

### *‘Superior’ Cultures*

Dominant cultures tend to see their own cultures as superior to others and diminish them. There was a time when “Red Indians” in America were classified as barbarians; during the Vietnam War the Vietcong were godless communists. At the present time Muslims are ‘fundamentalists’, ‘terrorists’, ‘oppressors of women’.

Even the tragedy of what is happening in Palestine, the murder of stone-throwing youth does not stop America and Britain from supplying arms to Israel. A few years back we had the Serb invasion of Bosnia and Albania and the world witnessed the carnage. In the case of Bosnia the UNO's peacekeeping troops absconded. Is not the current act of killing children in Iraq – thousands have perished – by the imposition of medical sanctions deliberate premeditated murder? Then there is the routine bombing of Baghdad.

#### *Local Evils*

In South Africa over five hundred farmers, who provide daily sustenance to vast metropolitan populations – have been murdered since transition. And is not the issue of manufacturing weapons of death and destruction and their purchase at the expense of human welfare just as important as the issue of racism?

#### *Facets of Racism*

Racism of one kind or another is an ugly facet of human existence. But what about the states that have brought death, starvation and ruin to millions on the African continent? Why should the question of racism be isolated from the actions of brutal dictators? Because of the enormous complexity of the human condition and the manifold problems and difficulties that the people of the country are experiencing, a conference on racism is not likely to bring about many changes.

#### *Moral Education Can Destroy Racism*

Moral education is the way to destroy racial prejudice and bring the various races and nations of the world to realise their common humanity. As long as the world States do not firmly commit themselves to eradicate racism by a definite programme of action, the conference will have been in vain. Race as a criterion for human superiority can only disappear when the level of civilisation is augmented throughout the world and politicians are guided by rational, moral and spiritual values.

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