

Bahai Faith, Represented by Mr Z. Zitandele. Testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, East London, 18 November 1999. [disclaimer](#)

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We call on the representatives of the Bahai'i, Zephete? Welcome, and would you...you are Mr Zephete? And you will introduce your colleagues?

MR Z ZITANDELE: She is Mrs Vera Razavi, a member of the Bahai community here in East London.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. And will you take the oath or the affirmation? Bongani Finca will do that.

ADMINISTERS OATH.

MR Z ZITANDELE: I was just reporting to his Grace that you are Mrs Razavi, the wife of Mr Raxavi who was killed mercilessly here in East London in a massacre that is still unsolved. We wish to convey to you our deepest sympathy.

Mr Chairman, first of all, I would like to refer to the submission that we have made in September this year, however, we have got a presentation that we are making which is subsequent to that one, which might be slightly different to what we have submitted.

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of South Africa, on behalf of all the Bahais we represent, is grateful for this opportunity to share with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission an understanding of the position and activities of the Bahai community in South Africa during the apartheid years. To understand the nature of the response of the Bahais to apartheid, it is necessary to understand the character of the Bahai community, the overall aims and objectives of the Bahai faith, its modus operandi and the global context in which it operates.

The Bahai faith, which is the most recent of the independent world religions, originated in Iran in 1844. Today the Bahai faith enjoys a world-wide following in excess of 6 million people, representing more than 2100 indigenous tribes, races and ethical groups, residing in more than 120 000 localities, in more than 200 countries and independent territories around the world. In South Africa, Bahai resides in some 900 communities, although records indicates that the first Bahais to reside in South Africa arrived in 1911. There was little significant growth until the 1950's. During the mid-1950's, a number of Bahai families came to this country from the United States, Canada, Germany, New Zealand and England, to settle and to introduce the Bahai faith to South Africa. The hallmark of the Bahai community is its diversity, a characteristic which is highly prized and actively pursued. The essential teachings of the Bahai faith focus on unity of God, of religion and of humanity. The pivot around which all other Bahai teachings revolve is that of the oneness of the human race. We

believe that this is an essential reality of creation. Its acceptance and application by the generality of the peoples of the world is not only attainable in this age, but is the sole basis for sustainable peace and security of humanity. The very kingdom of God on earth as promised by all the divine revelations of the past.

Bahais firmly believe that this kingdom will take the form of a global society in which all races, creeds and classes of the world are united as a single family. The building of this global society is not a mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism, or an expression of a vague hope. It moves beyond awakening of the spirit of brotherhood and goodwill among men and the fostering of harmonious co-operation among individual peoples and cultures. This pursuit calls for an organic change in the structures of our present day society. A change such as the world has not yet experienced and it is towards this goal that the Bahai faith has been working globally since its inception over 153 years ago, and in South Africa since the 1950's.

Our actions were and remain based on an unshakeable acceptance of the spiritual nature of the individual and thereby the community and that religion is the greatest of all means for the establishment of order in the world and for the peaceful contentment of all that dwell therein. True to this teaching, our approach has been and remains to build communities which strive to put into daily practice fundamental spiritual aspirations such as love, honesty, moderation, humility, hospitality, justice, morality, trustworthiness and above all, unity, thereby influencing change from the ground up. Without the infusion of these values into society, no community however economically prosperous or intellectually empowered or technologically advanced can endure. Abhorring all forms of prejudice and rejecting any system of segregation, the Bahai faith was introduced on a one to one basis and the community quietly grew during the apartheid years, without publicity. Despite the nature of the politics of that time, we represented our teachings on unity and the oneness of humankind to prominent individuals in politics, commerce and academia, and leaders of thought, including State Presidents.

Approaches to individuals and prominent persons were pursued in order to offer to South Africa a pathway to peace and justice for all its citizens. During the apartheid years, both individual Bahais and our administrative institutions were continually watched by the Security Police. The surveillance and investigation by the police was due to the racially integrated nature of the Bahai community and its activities. However, it would appear that our numbers were too small and our activities too peaceful to be perceived as a real threat to the government of the day. Our activities did not include opposition to the previous government for involvement in partisan politics and opposition to government are explicitly prohibited by the sacred text of our faith as revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet founder of our faith, even should that government be suspicious and ill-disposed to the aims and activities of the Bahais as was the case in this country. During the time when the previous government prohibited integration with out communities, rather than divide into separate administrative structures for each population group, we opted to limit membership of the Bahai administration to black adherents who were and remain in the majority of

our membership and thereby place the entire Bahai community under the stewardship of its black membership. Happily, such policies were eased and we were able once again to have a racially integrated administrative bodies, which were and are democratically elected by and from the entire body of adult adherents of the Bahai faith.

In the nearly five decades since the Bahai faith was established in South Africa, through strict adherence to the principles of our prophet founder, we have forged ahead and made a modest beginning towards realising our vision of unity for South Africa by creating a model which can be studied and scrutinised and from which, we believe, valuable lessons can be learnt. The systematic development of our human resources was and is a result of great emphasis and spiritual, moral and ethical aspects of individual and community life. These include the sanctity of the family unit, importance of rendering service to the community in pursuit of a craft, or a profession which contributes towards prosperity and lends momentum to the elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth, and the obligation to educate one's children. The fundamental belief is the equality of men and women, stemming from our teachings on the oneness of humankind, has meant that women in Bahai community have always taken an active role in all aspects of the work of the faith, including national leadership positions. The pursuit of our objectives of unity and equality have not been without its costs. The white Bahais were often ostracised by their white neighbours for their association with non-whites. The black Bahais were subjected to scorn by their black counter patriots for their lack of political action, and their complete integration with their white Bahai brethren. The most tragic loss to our community was the brutal execution of four of our adherents at our places of worship, three in Mdantsane and one in Umtata.

As we move towards the new millennium, our objective remains unchanged and our vision remains undimmed. However, our sense of urgency to realise this vision is more acute. Whatever unfolds in the years ahead in South Africa, and the world, the Bahais will continue to endeavour to establish global and national unity throughout the infusion of spiritual value at all levels of society by developing unified communities throughout the land. We offer the model for establishing peace in our country.

Again, we thank you for giving us this opportunity, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of South Africa.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. Is there anything that you wanted to add? Mncebisi?

REV. M XUNDU: Thank you your Grace. You have made a very wonderful presentation. There are just one or two things which for clarity, one would like to hear from your, amplifying what you have said. It does seem as if in the time we are addressing, that is from 1960 to 1994, you concentrated mostly on spiritual upliftment without properly addressing environment and what was happening. Sometimes it is

said that silence could be interpreted to be collusion. What tacit example can you give of your faith protesting or witnessing in order to change the mindset of those who were oppressing, to convert them towards being good and non-discriminatory?

MR Z ZITANDELE: Mr Chairman, as indicated in the presentation, there was no visible or tangible effort that was explicit, except teaching the fellow brethren in South Africa about the significance of unity and the elimination of prejudice. That was only the message we believed could be touching the hearts of the people that believed in God, that apartheid was one of the issues that were not condoned in the eyes of God.

REV. M XUNDU: What concrete contributions do you think you could make for people outside your faith, not necessarily in ...[inaudible] but in witnessing of the values which you hold so dear, in order that they may themselves begin to see your values and begin to in solidarity with you all, that they may also change like in the period that we're talking about (1960 to 1994)?

MR Z ZITANDELE: Mr Chairman, the contribution that the Bahais believe in is the change of the mindset to each and every citizen of South Africa in believing that the economic problems of this country have got their solutions in the spiritual aspect, whereby we believe that the main focus should now be in education and training of our children towards a value, the life and the values that would lead to the prosperity of the country. And we believe that the base for that is the fear of God.

REV. M XUNDU: You have said in your submission that you were not popular with people either from the oppressed or from the side of the perpetrator for the mere fact that you were not able to witness to your objection of racial prejudice which was taking place at the time. Are you able just to amplify and explain more on that, because we are here saying that all of us have a degree of guilt for not having stood up in the name of God to oppose the forces of apartheid and therefore asking for God's grace and forgiveness. After you have heard some of the people talking, how do you feel about that? Do you feel that there is nothing that your church owes in explaining to that position?

MR Z ZITANDELE: Again, as the adherents of the teachings of Bahaula, the sense of guilt does not strike the religion because we felt that the practise of being together with the blacks and whites was supposed to draw animosity from both sides, blacks and whites, because this was no in line with the laws or the legitimated apartheid. But the Bahai faith believes that it has got to obey the laws of the ruling government, and the only way that the Bahais can help with, is to influence the consciousness of the individuals to believe and also have an insight of the injustices that need to be eliminated. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you. Bongani Finca?

REV. B FINCA: In the submissions that have come before the commission yesterday, some of them mainly submissions that came last week in the business hearing in

Johannesburg, there was a focus on the question of economic justice, or economic reconciliation, very fundamental to the process of reconciliation in this country. But there has been no spelling out of how this can be achieved and you have just mentioned something in your submission, which has not before been asked, and I'm sorry if I'm misquoting you, but one of your principles, one of your doctrines teaches avoidance of excesses of wealth and poverty. I am interested to hear more on that. How do you define excesses? For instance I don't want excesses of poverty, that I know. Excesses of wealth: when does wealth become excessive? I say so, because we are in a country where those who have find it completely impossible to share with those who do not have, because they believe that they don't have enough. And those who do not have grab, grab, grab and never stop, because I don't know about wealth...we all just want to accumulate it and have it and it never stops. How does your religion teach avoidance of excess?

MR Z ZITANDELE: Mr Chairman, our religion emphasises a reduction of gaps between the extreme poverty and excess wealth. In this case, the practical method is that those that have, need to assist in the realisation of closing the gaps between themselves and the have-nots. And how this could be done: we say training and education becomes fundamental because if the contributions from the "havens" can be directed towards creation of refined skills with those that do not have, then the economy can be boosted. We have no strict measurement that wealth becomes excessive and poverty becomes extreme, but we are saying absolute poverty needs to be discouraged and excessive wealth needs also to be discouraged where an attempt is made to bridge the gap, but the gap will remain but by trying to reduce that gap, we will have to make contributions to the well-being of those that are poor. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON: Joyce?

MS JOYCE SEROKE: In your submission you said that you presented your teachings on unity and oneness of humankind to President Botha and President De Klerk, and then later on from guidance from your World Centre in Israel, you had to now centre your teachings around blacks and coloureds.

I have two questions here. Did those teachings have any impact on those presidents? And did you feel that when there was no impact on all, then you had to concentrate on the blacks and coloureds?

MR Z ZITANDELE: Thank you Mr Chair. With regard to the submissions made to the presidents, these were meant to create awareness of other dimensions that could be considered when administering the apartheid system in the country, which we were asked to present. Then the measure of the success or the impact of the submissions to the presidents, one may say they might have been on long term, they have not been having any effect at all, but we didn't have any ways of measuring. To the question of concentrating on coloureds and blacks, these were the part of the society that were being affected negatively by the system of the country and we were meant to give a

hope that there is a measure of hope that is lying ahead through the teachings of Bahaula, that God is the ultimate answer. That's all, Mr Chairman.

CHAIRPERSON: We are very grateful to you for having come and I reiterate the expression of sympathy and condolence that my colleague has given to you. Thank you very much, you may stand down.

It's tea time now and I gather that you are re-invited to tea, all of you.

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