

The Role of the Media in Peace Building

Joris de Bres, Race Relations Commissioner

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From events of the past three weeks - the controversies over the Danish cartoons and the South Park television programme - one might get the impression that the role of the media in peace building is to create unnecessary conflict through gratuitous offence, rather than to assist in the process of building peace and understanding.

I don't think that is generally the case, but if something positive is to be taken out of these events, it is that there is now a very active public debate about three important ingredients of the role of the media in a healthy democracy. These are:

- Press freedom
- Editorial responsibility, and
- Public confidence

The meeting of news media executives and religious leaders that took place with the facilitation of the Human Rights Commission after the publication of the cartoons addressed the immediate issue. It also mandated the Commission to develop an ongoing process of dialogue between cultural and religious communities and the media to address the role of the media in an increasingly diverse society.

I have been involved in the recent debate not as a practising Christian, Muslim or any other kind of religious believer, but from a human rights and race relations perspective. There have been some who have questioned my involvement on the grounds of secularism and argued that religion is not a matter of concern for the Human Rights Commission. There are a number of reasons why this is not so:

- International human rights instruments and the New Zealand Bill of Rights guarantee the freedom of religion and the rights of minorities as well as the freedom of expression
- The Human Rights Act declares discrimination on the grounds of religious belief to be unlawful in a range of contexts (although the publication of the cartoons and the screening of South Park were not in themselves unlawful under the Act)
- As well as promoting and protecting human rights, the Commission is charged by statute with encouraging the development and maintenance of harmonious relationships between the diverse groups that make up New Zealand society
- Religion and culture are very often intertwined
- Human rights are best protected in a robust and healthy democracy where people are respected for who they are and their voices are able to be heard

In addition, religion is a factor in many regional and global conflicts, and is adduced to justify both terror and counter-terror and breaches of fundamental human rights. One cannot ignore it. One cannot just let all adherents of any particular faith be stereotyped and made collectively responsible for acts of violence carried out by extremists in their name. One cannot just let a situation develop where religious groups are marginalised and alienated from society. One should not therefore offend them gratuitously, any more than one should gratuitously offend groups because of their ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or disability. One can freely *intellectually* argue, question, disagree, challenge and satirise, but is it necessary to strike at the *heart* of others' identity or religious belief.

The role of the media becomes even more important when our society is increasingly diverse in terms of both cultures and faiths. This challenge was recognised by all those present at the recent meeting of newspaper, radio and television news executives and religious leaders. They unanimously affirmed the importance of the freedom of the media. But they also stated that:

Such freedom is not absolute, and comes with responsibilities. These include sensitivity to diverse cultures and beliefs and the recognition of diversity within cultures and beliefs; the responsibility to inform the community about diverse cultures and beliefs; and the provision of dialogue and channels of communication between the media and faith communities.

We have agreed that a process of public discussion and dialogue between the media, faith communities and educators will continue, with Human Rights Commission facilitation. That process has already begun with a discussion with the Commonwealth Press Union Press Freedom Committee last week. It will include further scheduled meetings with individual as well as the collective media, work with the Journalism Training Organisation, and planned workshops and forums over the coming months.

I want to allude this morning to six issues that I think particularly warrant attention in this discussion:

- The central issue here is not censorship, but rather the standards applied by the media themselves in making editorial judgments
- While the media must accept the need for editorial responsibility, faith communities must equally accept the vital importance of press freedom and the freedom of expression
- Tolerance, respect and sensitivity are issues not just for the secular press, but also for the religious media, and both the secular and religious media should have general standards and individual codes of ethics that affirm these values of human dignity irrespective of belief
- The standards and codes should be transparent and deal adequately with respect for sacred symbols and religious belief, and both the general public and faith communities should have confidence that the standards and associated complaints procedures are fair and robust
- The media need a greater in-house capacity to inform the public on religious (as well as diverse cultural) affairs. In some respects there has been an historical antithesis between religious faith and secular journalistic enquiry, and media organisations have not had the expertise on staff to report on religious matters in the way that they do, for example on industrial relations, the economy, sport or the arts. A weekly column by a contributing cleric is not a substitute, any more than a captioned photo of an ethnic festival adequately represents cultural diversity. This lack of media knowledge was evident in relation to the Exclusive Brethren last year – few people in the media had any idea who the Exclusive Brethren were or what they believed, even though they were clearly exercising considerable influence. A lack of appreciation of Islam, and of the New Zealand Pacific Islamic community, was also an issue in the cartoon case
- There needs to be a better representation of the diversity of our cultures and faiths in both the staff and the content of our media

I welcome the fact that the media have acknowledged their responsibility to inform and be informed on cultural and religious diversity. I look forward to the ongoing dialogue and public debate, and hope that it will be conducted in a free and open manner without unnecessary aggravation, preconceived ideas or negativity on either side. I firmly believe that both within New Zealand and globally the media have a crucial role to play in peace building, and that the manner in which the cartoon issue was dealt with in New Zealand says a great deal about how this can be achieved. The actions of one television entertainment channel in the South Park case should not detract from that general news media commitment to explore these issues further. There are always bumps along the road.

Finally, what I have sought to express here is the notion that both the media and faith communities can usefully approach these issues from a common human rights perspective rather than in terms of secularity and religion. Such a framework involves:

- *Identifying* all the relevant human rights (and responsibilities) involved, and the appropriate balance between them
- *Considering* these international human rights norms in reaching decisions
- Emphasising the *participation* of affected individuals and groups in this process
- Being *accountable* for decisions and actions
- Avoiding *discrimination* (both direct and indirect); and
- Empowering individuals and groups by *giving them voice*

I hope that this framework will be useful in your workshop discussions today and in the dialogue in which both the news media and faith community leaders have agreed to participate over the coming months.