

WHY WE NEED A STRONG HUMANIST ORGANISATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Being a Welcome address presented by Leo Igwe at the IHEU/FSI conference at Cape Milner Hotel in Cape Town South Africa, on August 29 2009

Dear Friends

I bring you all greetings and salutations from humanist friends in Nigeria, from other parts of Africa and from the rest of the world

I want to assure you all that your humanist and freethought colleagues around the globe wish you well. They wish the humanist movement in South Africa a success and that it grows from strength to strength. They wish that the South African humanist movement would take its rightful place and plays its rightful role in the growth and development of humanism in the region.

So I want to welcome you all to this important program. I want to thank you for creating time to be here and for agreeing to take part in this historic meeting.

For me this conference is a clear mark of change - of change that is coming to the humanist movement in South Africa and the change that humanists are set to bring to this country. So permit me to thank especially our humanist friend and colleague, Jacques Rousseau and other friends at the Free Society Institute of South Africa for agreeing to host us here in Cape Town. Free Society is necessary for humanists and human beings generally to thrive and flourish. And I can't see any goal better or higher than working and campaigning to create a society where all human beings are free.

Since last year, our friend Jacques and his colleagues have worked tirelessly to make this event happen. So on behalf of the IHEU, Jacques I thank you for keeping this date with history.

Fellow humanists, I strongly believe Humanism in South Africa needs committed persons like Jacques who are ready to sacrifice their time and energy to promote our cause. Humanism needs capable hands and courageous minds to grow and flourish in South Africa, in Africa and around the globe.

Because humanism cannot organize itself. Humanism cannot make itself happen. Only we humanists will make humanism happen. And now is the time to rise up to this great challenge and fulfill this important mission. Now is the time to work and campaign to realize a humanist breakthrough in South Africa. I hope more South African humanists will come forward to help organize, develop, grow, present, and represent humanism in this country.

Make no mistake about it, in this 21st century, humanism in Africa will be determined not only by what happens in Uganda or Nigeria, in Cameroon, Kenya or Malawi. Humanism in Africa will be determined by what goes on in Cape Town, Pretoria, Johannesburg, Bloemfontein, Durban and in other cities and communities across South Africa.

So this is the time to pull our efforts together. This is the time to put in place a strong and viable humanist group in South Africa. This is the time for all South African Humanists to leave the closets and join the community. Some days ago, I met with our humanist friend Quentin in Johannesburg. The story of Quentin is my story. It is the same story of every humanist I have met whether in Gambia or in Ghana, in Nigeria or in Cameroon, in Malawi or in Swaziland. It is the story of a humanist yearning to meet and interact with like minds.

Dear Friends, this is the time to provide every South African humanist a sense of community. Now is the time to ensure that every South African has a taste of humanist solidarity.

South Africa is a nation with a lot of humanist potentials and possibilities. South Africa is a nation with a history of struggles-struggles that led to the defeat of apartheid and the enthronement of a multiracial democracy. And I want to tell you today that IHEU is poised to help South Africa realize its humanist potentials. IHEU is

ready to partner with you all to strengthen organized humanism in this rainbow nation. And sponsoring this meeting is a demonstration by IHEU of this commitment. So I urge you all to seize this opportunity so that we can achieve a humanist breakthrough in South Africa.

Fellow humanists I would like to underscore the fact that the humanist potentials of this country will not be realized if humanism is not organized, if organised humanism remains weak and ineffective. And if humanists are inactive, invisible and closeted.

Most humanist promises will continue to elude South Africans if there are n't humanists courageous enough to lead the way. Humanist values and principles will not flourish, nourish and enrich the lives of South Africans if there are no humanist groups and activists to nurture them, to present or represent them. Personally I am aware that efforts have been made in the past years to organize humanism, skepticism and freethought in South Africa. Infact it is one of those initiatives that has brought us to Cape Town.

In 2001 I corresponded with a South African humanist Stephen Langtry who was trying to set up a humanist group in the country. And for a long time I corresponded with a South African Skeptic Leon Retief. I am aware that some formal and informal humanist, skeptic and freethought groups exist in South Africa. And I would like to salute all those who have championed or pioneered such efforts . Actually, they laid the foundation on which we stand today. At the same time I must add that the efforts on ground are few and far apart. The efforts made so far to organize humanism are not enough and cannot do the job. They do not match the humanist potentials of this nation. The way humanism is organized must change in order for humanists to meet the challenges facing them in post apartheid South Africa.

I want to outline briefly the reasons why we need a strong humanist movement in South Africa.

First of all South Africa is reputed to have one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. But as you know it is one thing to have a constitution and another thing to enforce it. Events in the past few

years have told us that there is still a lot of work to be done before those constitutional provisions could become a reality. Again history is filled with instances of countries that started with progressive ideals but later abandoned or betrayed them. So South Africa needs a strong humanist movement to guard its progressive norms and institutions. South Africa needs a viable humanist group to ensure that the progress the country is making continues.

We need a virile humanist group in South Africa to promote and defend human rights particularly the rights of humanists. Today most humanists are in the closet because they know that their full human rights are not guaranteed 'in the open'. In most countries, the rights of humanists are still not regarded as human rights. Those who do not profess any religion or belief in God are treated with indignity and are denied basic human rights like rights to life, freedom of thought, association and expression. In many countries of the world apostasy and blasphemy are still crimes punishable by death or long prison sentences. Recently Pakistan and other Islamic states took their jihad to the UN and got the world body to pass a resolution that makes the criticism of religion a crime.

Dear Friends, the criticism of religion is human right and not a crime. We need a strong humanist movement to combat this dangerous trend and the dark and destructive influence of organised religions and theocratic states. Particularly we need active humanist groups to promote those human rights that are abused, ignored or neglected because of religion or superstition like the rights of women and children, the rights of gays, the aged and the disabled. In The Star of Friday August 28 it was reported that attorney Zahir Omar of the so called Society for the Protection of the Constitution opposed the appointment of Kathy Satchwell to the Constitutional Court of South Africa on the ground that 'God –fearing South Africans will not relate to a gay judge'. According to him the 'majority of South Africans are god-fearing and follow some or other religion. There is no religion that condones homosexuality. Therefore the major portion of the South African people will not be able to identify with the learned judge.'

Of course this is not true and does not reflect the position of most South Africans. But it is a clear example of the negative effect and influence religious individuals and groups have or could have on public debate and opinion.

A strong humanist group is needed to ensure that South Africa does not cave in to pressures from religious fanatics. We need to ensure that this nation does not support or endorse the theocratic desecration of human rights by other states or non state actors. We need a strong humanist group in South Africa to tackle religious fundamentalism, homophobia, racism, xenophobia, witchcraft and other superstitions.

Lastly we need a strong humanist group in South Africa to bolster the Southern Africa Humanist Network. This sub regional project is gradually taking shape. Already we have humanist groups and activists in Malawi, Swaziland, and Zambia. We are making efforts to connect with fellow humanists in Angola, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Mozambique etc. We need a strong humanist group in South Africa to make this sub regional network active and effective.

I hope this meeting will generate the thoughts and ideas that will help us accomplish these critical tasks ahead us in South Africa and beyond

Once again I would like to welcome you all to this conference. I wish you very fruitful and intellectually stimulating deliberations.