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Un-capturing Religion in South Africa

Sober suggestions at conference on abuse of religion and gullibility

(Cape Town/ Bonn, 11 March 2019):

“The South African government must regain the trust of the religious communities. Wisely choosing the next Commissioners for the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Rights (CRL) is crucial for that. The actions and attitudes of the Commission in the past five years have drastically lowered its credibility in the eyes of most religious communities.” This was the core message of Professor Dr. Christof Sauer at an academic conference conducted on 6–7 March in Pretoria on “Abuse of religion and gullibility of the public in the democratic South Africa” organized by the College of Human Sciences of Unisa.

In his keynote address on the second day, the co-director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom – which has an office in Cape Town – responded to the announcement that the postponed interviews for the new CRL Commissioners would now be held on 11 and 12 March. The five-year term of the past Commissioners had ended on 28 February.

Sauer emphasised five characteristics that could ensure a better future of the CRL. He contrasted this with his observations about the approach the CRL has adopted in the past. “It has been trying to deal with problems caused by a minority of self-appointed, self-serving individuals pretending to be pastors or prophets with miraculous powers. But the approach of the CRL has actually caused greater problems. Some of their proposed measures would actually lead to unconstitutional restrictions for bona fide religious communities”:

“Firstly, the CRL is mandated to be the best friend and defender of the rights of religious communities, so a friendly attitude must characterize the commissioners and the commission.

Second, a commitment to presenting honest facts is required, with thorough evidence and documentation being indispensable to the formulation of sober conclusions.

Third, a fully transparent and open process is required for the CRL when dealing with religious communities.

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Fourth, the CRL needs to allow diverging opinions within the CRL Commission itself as well as competing interpretations and narratives in civil society. The CRL should not be seen as dividing the religious communities because it has a mandate to foster unity in diversity.”

The scholar, who also holds professorships in Germany and Belgium added: “In light of this troubled history, it seems essential that a completely new set of CRL commissioners be appointed. Only a new commission will enable a new start, untainted from past flaws in procedure and attitude”.

He concluded: “If these new commissioners personify the characteristics presented above, I have hope for a better future of religious communities in South Africa. The CRL Rights Commission is a unique and helpful instrument to promote and protect the rights of cultural, religious and linguistic communities. However, it must be un-captured from controlling agendas.”

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