RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND A SOUTH AFRICAN CHARTER
OF RELIGIOUS RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS

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This article is dedicated to Bram van de Beek in gratitude for his contribution to the realisation of freedom of religion.


Because Christians are called to seek justice, one can argue that they are also called to political involvement, as well as to involvement in society. The belief that God’s redemption is at work in this present world is one of the reasons why Christians ought to engage in political activity. According to reformed theology, Christians must bring Christ’s renewing influence to bear on public life, furthering the cause of God’s Kingdom in this world in obedience to Scripture. In a country like South Africa this will of necessity entail both dialogue and co-operation with other religions and cultures. As a matter of fact, the make-up of the pluralistic South African society offers a unique opportunity for dialogue and co-operation between the religions in our country for the sake of the good of all the citizens of the land and as a witness to the common grace of God. As to the nature of Christian involvement the following characteristics can be mentioned.

1.1 Modesty

Christians must always be cautious to claim that they speak for the Lord. Smidt quotes Skillen “We must constantly act with an attitude of true humility. We should undertake every civic duty, every political action—we can add every dialogue and co-operation—with the avowed understanding that they are not God’s will but only our response to God’s will. The attitude of humility will lead us to be modest and self-critical in our claims.

1 Amos 5:15, 24.
and stated intentions.” A true understanding of freedom of religion ought to keep Christians from an uncompromising claim that they alone have the answers to the problems of the land and that nobody else can make any meaningful contribution. At the same time, Christians must witness to the fact that they have a very important contribution to make.

1.2 Toleration

Toleration is a second important characteristic of a Christian contribution to dialogue and co-operation. Tolerance does not mean indifference or relativism. Genuine toleration calls for peaceful co-existence despite the fact that there are areas where real disagreement exists. Forbearance/toleration means permitting the other with whom we disagree to exist and, when appropriate, to persuade and engage others by words. In the present age, prior to the full establishment of the kingdom of God that will be fully inaugurated with the second coming of Christ, we must exercise genuine tolerance and action that defends both truth and co-existence. In Article 8 of the Preamble to the SA Charter of Religious Rights and Liberties it is clearly stated that the recognition and effective protection of the rights of religious communities and institutions will contribute to a spirit of toleration among the people of South Africa.

1.3 Mutual Respect

A third contribution that Christians can make to the dialogue between religions in South Africa is one of respect for the other. To differ with a person—even to differ in a very fundamental way—does not mean that one need not respect that person. For Christians it is very important to always remember that every human being is created in the image of God. As such, every person deserves our respect and we are under the obligation to show them respect as well as to treat them with respect. Article 6, 5(b) of the Constitution of South Africa states that it is the task of the Pan South African Language Board to promote respect for all languages used by communities in South Africa, including German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil Telegu and Urdu; and Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit

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3 Smidt, *The Principled Pluralist Perspective*, 147–149.