XX – Interviewer

FC – Firoz Cachalia

XX: First question is, what is your understanding of non-racialism? I think I would like to find out more on an institutional level, what is your understanding, post 1994, of non-racialism?

FC: You know I think that at the time that, in the 70s and 80s, when I became kind of politically active, and of course when the country went into a period of political mobilization, non-racialism was a central motivating ideal. Which was in one way a manifestation of our identification with the ANC as opposed with other streams in the democratic movement. Those who identified with the ideal of a non-racial future were identifying themselves with the politics of the congress movement and the ANC. So it had a political meaning. Going back, thinking back, I'm not sure if there was a single meaning that was clearly articulated and embraced by everyone who embraced this ideal. You know as I said as I said in that panel discussion, I think there were different meaning that were not always articulated. I think non-racialism in its most idealistic in a way meant overcoming racial identities. I think the second meaning would be to overcome racial inequalities, based on race. Inequalities in the distribution of resources, income, power, privilege, opportunity. So to my mind, the second meaning is the easiest and most unproblematic, maybe the most difficult to accomplish, but if non-racialism means anything, it must mean that – overcoming inequalities based on race. Overcoming racial identities I think is more complicated, because I think that to the extent that these identities are uncoupled over time from their, from inequality, I would imagine that people, to me race identity then lose a large part of their objectionable elements. So in situations like that, people can embrace identities of all kinds, I would hope that over time we are able to overcome based-race identities as they express themselves in the choices we make in our lives, the friends we have, our family relationships, our social circles and so forth. But you know I think that that can happen more or less spontaneously through public education, and through addressing what I think is the core issue of race in our country which is the legacy of injustice, of socio-economic inequality, and so forth. So to summarize, it has both those meanings, at the very least. For me the priority is to overcome to legacy of inequality.

XX: Now post-1994, you mentioned that you are addressing social inequality. Would you still say that in light of that being a goal, does the idea of non-racialism still appear as prominently as it did before?

FC: Yes, I think the way to achieve a non-racial society is by rigorously eliminating race-based inequalities. So I would say for instance that, it's odd, that in some ways this debate is inverted, that there are many people, particularly in sort of liberal politics in this country., who see non-racialism, their understanding is that it is overcoming all references to race in our public policy and so forth. To my mind, non-racialism is still an ideal that we pursue by addressing inequalities based on race. And that for me is a fundamental starting point. That doesn't mean that ideals of overcoming racial identities and so forth aren't important, in some ways racial categories continue to imprison us in a kind of diminished existence in a sense, because you are still imposing simple identities on people who still have more

complex experiences. But we are not going to get to a point where we can overcome racial identities, if at all, without addressing inequalities of power, and opportunity.

XX: I know you touched on a lot of key aspects I wanted to ask you, but what would you say are the key features of a non-racial society?

FC: It's, see I think you can't separate non-racialism from social justice. And those who want to build non-racialism must focus on social justice, you know, equality broadly conceived, because I think that the liberty of freedoms as individuals are dependent on some way of opportunities to express those freedoms. So we must equalize those conditions. I mean a good way to look at this would be to equalize the opportunity to acquire the capabilities of achieving a meaningful life, in thinking about what we mean by social justice. But I have a fundamental difficulty with conceptions of non-racialism which are not linked with the challenges around inequality and social justice. That is fundamental. Non-racialism without, that is abstracted from our social realities and isolated from the conversation that we should be having about social justice and inequality is really a kind of evasion of the challenges that we really face, or the political challenge that we face.

XX: Would you perhaps say that pre-1994 non-racialism was an idea of unity in order to fight a common enemy, if you want to put it like that. Post-1994, we find a situation where, some people would refer to it as the enemy or central idea to unity has been overcome that there are new challenges to non-racialism. What would you say things like, identity play in, because I mean before it was an identity united against one cause, and now the cause has shifted a little?

FC: Well in some ways, the non-racial ideal, I think that those of us who identified non-racialism as an ideal were not preoccupied with questions of identity. I would argue that even the Indian congress, although it was, it focused on organizing people, classified as Indians in the country, were not interested identity politics. What they were interested in was equality, and I think we saw the Indian congress as a tactical and strategic options under very particular conditions. Whether we were right about that or not was another debate. We were certainly not interested in claiming any specific rights on claiming anything due to racial identity. So I would say that yes, in the 70s and 80s the preoccupation was not with an identity, and the identity question if you like, and the political identity that we constructed, now non-racialism was a way of identifying with the ANC and its politics, and of course one reason why we identified with the ANC was they adopted what we understood as a non-racial policy as opposed to other movements in the liberation struggle such as the black consciousness movement. But you know nowadays when I look back on it, even the black consciousness movement was constructing a political identity, and the notion of blackness was an identity that was being constructed politically, it wasn't a racial context. So criticism of black consciousness movement on the basis that it was based on race was erroneous. Black consciousness on itself was struggling against racist apartheid ideas and it was constructing political identities that were aimed at challenging the way the state was categorizing people. Now I would say that since 1994, we do face new conditions and new questions. The new conditions relate to one, we have a democratic society now, in the sense that we have a representative constitution, and we have an elected government that has the challenge of addressing race-based inequality. So struggling for non-racial ideals, where you have an elected government, poses challenges

and questions which we didn't face before 94. And I think that those who are committed to non-racial ideals need to identify what those challenges are under these specific conditions, which is quite different to struggling for non-racialism under political oppression.

XX: I think this just ties into the idea that I wanted to question you about, about identity. I think the African national congress, says for example that the youth is pushing for an African, not African in a sense of black, colored Indian, but more African in the sense of a black identity. And I was wondering when looking at non-racialism, does it still feature, if identity, the construct behind identity was a bit different to what it is now

FC: Look, I think you're right, I mean look we're under conditions of democratic politics, there is contestation around public office, resources. Democratic politics also brings the masses into the political equation more directly, at least as voters, as participants in political parties and so forth. And that creates new conditions in which non-racial ideals have to be articulated. And maybe there's a certain complexity that develops, because first of all there is competition for office and resources, secondly the ways that people feel about identity questions were not really confronted perhaps, as we focused on a singular enemy, and overcoming repression. Under repressive conditions, individually, highly developed individuals were forced to work together under conditions of repression. Under conditions of mass democracy, I think new questions arise that have to be engaged with.

I don't think that the youth league particularly is advancing a kind of Africanist agenda, but I do think that the focus is to the extent that we have a preoccupation with the accumulation of wealth, with self-advancement, the effort that needs to be put into foreground non-racial ideals then becomes less of a focus. Less of a focus because precious generations of ANC activists and leaders were, I think, more focused and energized by the challenges around united South Africa's repressed peoples, around non-racial ideals. But it would be too simplistic to suggest that there is a sort of self-conscious assertion of identities, aimed at marginalizing other groups and so forth.

So I would say that I think that those who are committed to non-racialism have to think about how they are going to approach this question under conditions of mass democracy, competitions for resources and office, um, you know, and perhaps there is QUESTION to be asked, I think the ANC particularly, but we need to rethink some of the ANC's ideas of non-racialism for example were formulated in the 50s, under very different conditions. I think the formulations have to some extent been static, and they need to be more nuanced, more complex, more adequate for current challenges and for, you know. I Think let's not make hasty judgments and put people in pigeon holes. I think non-racialism has to be re-articulated in ways that can draw on a kind of African identity. I mean why do I want to oppose non-racialism and Africanism?

I think the two points I would like to make here are one, that non-racialism and inequality cannot be uncoupled from each other, you have to address those, and secondly I think it is wrong to counter pose non-racialism and Africanism. I mean if you look at Mbeki's speech to the constituent assembly, on the occasion of the adoption of the constitution, his I am an African speech, that was a statement of non-racialism, which addresses the question of national identity. I think that national identity in South Africa

must in the first place be based on our values and commitment to the constitution, but it has to made based on more than that. I would say that the language question is important, for instance. I speak virtually, I am almost mono-lingual. I think that an African language, should be a compulsory subject in schools. So there are some things that we need to do to build a non-racial society. Think about issues of inequalities based on race, issues on language, which are not questions we have faced up to before 94. If we focus on those sorts of questions, then the first meaning of non-racialism as an aspiration to overcome race-based identities becomes less important, and we can rely more on changes in our society over time. To create an environment in which relationships across racial boundaries can be more spontaneous, develop more naturally. You know so for instance I'm thinking of space, the way residential space, workplace space is being reorganized. In these spaces, new identities are developing, relationships among people who previously were not possible, are developing, including family relationships. Those possibilities for transcendence, in a fundamental way, depend on other things happeneing. On addressing issues of inequality and justice. People being compared to embrace the complexity of their identities over time. I think even now race-based identities are somewhat false. Even I, for instance, I don'[t see myself in a kind of, as having one identity. And you know, to some extent the way in which we looked at identity was quite simplistic, maybe before we start talking about overcoming race based identities, we should acknowledge the complexities of identity.

And I think the ANC needs to start rethinking some of its paradigms, its discourse, because even the ANC tends to have quite a narrow, linear conception of identity. Which, the idea that we are in national groups, or national minorities or so forth. If I'm a member of the ANC, then I am currently the member of a majority group. As your identity of, so all of us already are both members of majorities and minorities. But it should not be, those possibilities and those realities should not be articulated in a way that evades race-based in equalities in our society which often corresponds to class and other inequalities. So two things. Let's deal with inequality, number one. And number two, don't counter pose non-racialism to Africanism.

XX: Your first notion of inequality, some would say that policies such as broad-based economic empowerment and affirmative action were seen to address, but others have argued that we are finding that we are enriching a small minority, a new elite, a new group of, some would call it cronies. What do you think something like that would do to..

FC: look, I think in many ways our politics has become debased. I don't know if you want to conflate those issues around the misuse of public office, enrichment of individuals, the fraud and corruption, nepotism. Maybe what we can learn is that basically oppressed people are as susceptible as anyone else to these vices. Now certainly I was of the view that, ok, if at the moment all the issues, we're going to have a market based, capitalist economy, then we need to have policies that address the legacy of discrimination, because black people were not able to acquire capital, wealth on equal terms. And I would say that in some way removing those barriers and making that possible is a form of liberation. But there are deep problems with South Africa's economic model, and they have to do with poverty and inequality. And to me, those are the priorities. Now, it's true that wherever you have public policies, especially ones, there is a dilemma here, you can't target disadvantage without identifying the target group, and if you are targeting racial inequalities then you need perhaps public policies that take race

into account. But there are lots of problems that also, and I think those should be acknowledged, you reinforce racial identities, you create incentives for people to identify on the basis of race. You imprison others in a narrow racial category which they do not accept, quite rightly. And I think you create incentives for people to trade on color, ethnicity, race, because it is a source of privilege, access, opportunity. So any public policy has costs here, we should be aware of that. And maybe perverse outcomes and so forth. And I think there is a way in which groups may take advantage of policies which have broader objectives. So yes, I wouldn't, I don't exclude that those possibilities, there are all kinds of opportunistic tendencies in our country, especially if you are living in a country with high poverty and unemployment, low resources. You have groups that position themselves to cream off as much as they can. That's true for any public policy. But I come back to what I consider to be the fundamental question. You see there are people who are casting the debate about non-racialism, as a debate about whether, about affirmative action and BEE and so forth. I am disputing that also, I'm saying that if you want to fight for non-racialism, fight against inequality. And so I think we must be careful to cast the debate into those narrow terms, ya. That's not to say, I think there are people, just in the same way as people try to play white, in the old days, because that gave you a better position in the apartheid society. Now, when you have public policies that take race into account, you will have opportunism. But that opportunism flourishes in an environment of inequalities. And those inequalities are real, they're not imagined, they're not fictional, they are real. I mean it's like populism. It flourishes where the conditions are right, and I think that a sort of opportunism based on, which takes advantage of positioning in the current phase of our society is evident. You can see it happen, and there are people who lose sight of the broader objectives. Thos objectives were always not just about non-racialism, but about creating a society that was more just. So there are people who are then self-serving, who want to identify in some narrow way on the basis of race, exclude others, because it is to their advantage. That I think is evident. But to me the answer, if you want to address those issues, we've got to focus on our reality, of race-based inequality. So when you have a society, when a society that is non-racial, in a sense that race doesn't count, race doesn't count in structuring social outcomes, in structuring the opportunities people actually have in leading successful lives.

XX: Ok. Now bringing it back to a more personal level, what do you think, as an ordinary South African, what do you think we can do to foster the idea of non-racialism, to advance the cause of non-racialism.

FC: You know I think people should be encouraged to, public education is important, people should be encourage to reach beyond the racial stereotypes, seek to build their social networks, outside of their comfort zones. So what happens in families, in our social world, you know, the way we enjoy ourselves, where we interact with others, I think people should encourage, this sort of thing can't be done by the state, artificially, by imposition. But I think that is happening, people are having more and more relationships which are not limited to members of their own racial group. People should be encouraged to explore their complexity a lot more, it is something that needs conversation and active intervention, because we were forced to live truncated ,limited, partial lives, able to function only within your own racial group, under apartheid South Africa. There are now greater possibilities and I think people should be encourage to explore that, to take advantage of those opportunities. I think political leaders have a role to play, there is far too much race-baiting, stereotyping. Political leaders, when we have an election,

the DA has done it, the Fight Back campaign was an ugly attempt to rely on, a form of negative politics, relying on racial anxieties, even though the DA denies that. This last election, was really shameful, that the ANC, a liberation movement, that there were leaders in the ANC who resorted to very narrow racial baiting. So political leaders have a responsibility, I think, the way we conduct out politics, the way we articulate the issues we confront in this country, is very important. If you look at Mandela and that generation of leadership, when they exercised leadership, the society was actually much more segregated. But they found ways of reaching beyond, outward. So leadership, the content of political discourse is important. The practices of political parties is important – they can either reinforce narrow racial identities ort they can encourage a politics which allows people to grow, to change, to express themselves in new ways. And that includes the white community, I think there are too many politicians who do not appear to be aware that the importance of race, who do not appear to be aware of the possibilities of moving our country forward and beyond the narrow identities that Apartheid imposed. So there are possibilities for new politics, there are possibilities for moving our country forward, that's about leadership.

So we need to have a conversation about the language of politics, the discourse, the tactics and policies, all of these things are important, particularly because you can't address the race issue outside of politics. Politics is important, political symbolism is important, and then of course I think , outside of politics, in communities, in workplaces, in schools, we should be taking every opportunity to break down the barriers to understanding, to give people opportunities to rethink their identities, to redefine themselves, at least to create possibilities for people to understand the point of view of a wider range of people outside of their tribal identities, and I think a lot of that is already happening. People in the marketplace, interacting, contracting, that's also important, you know. So social, political discourse, markets, over time can help us achieve a society which is non-racial in the sense that we are comfortable with each other, we are working together to achieve common goals, we understand that this is not a zero sum game, that our society prospers if we all prosper. I think South Africa, we are one nation. Not in a racial sense, one nation because we have a common citizenship, we have some common aspiration, we live under the same government, embrace the same constitution.

XX: Final question, what more do you think, in terms of activities, what do you think the Foundation can do to advance its cause of non-racialism?

FC: I'm not a very practical person, you know. But um, well I think it's made a good start, its opening up a debate, let's have a broader debate. You can't think about non-racialism in isolation, and to some extent the foundation is casting the issue too narrow. Non-racialism is part of a broader debate, and a broader set of challenges. And obviously the foundation wants to brand itself, it wants to focus, but I am in a way putting that on the table, when the foundation says it wants to promote non-racialism, what does it mean? Is this a singular, isolated goal? And I think that to some extent that is what they are doing, and that is not very helpful. It's a start. You know, Kathrada has enormous credit and prestige, and I think that bridge building is important, it's creating opportunities for conversation, space for discussion. It should be a kind of bridge builder, help people, give people, create context and opportunities for dialogue at community level. I don't have any, I mean it doesn't want to turn itself into a political party, I think it should go more in the direction it is currently. It's in the public space, it's in the

area of public debate and discourse, and publications, public discussion. I think it needs a fairly sophisticated understanding of non-racialism, which would help to structure particular problems and programs, going beyond its initial narrow conception.

Maybe more specific practical projects would depend on that, it wants to keep alive the memory of the contribution, of the generation of the 40s and 50s. Now archiving publication, so the intellectual discourse stuff, recording, all of that is important. Working with, in schools, universities, those are important spaces. I don't, I mean I'm struggling with what the foundation does as opposed to political organisations, obviously there are complementary but they are not the same thing. I think the foundation should be engaging broadly in public discourse, to some extent I think it's also narrowly linked with, in its own thinking, with the ANC and its traditions, which is a very important starting point. How does it position itself in relation to a broader political domain, because all of us come from the Congress, ANC position. Can we have conversations, can we facilitate broader dialogue across political divisions?

Because another point that I would make is that I think that today the debate around non-racialism is a debate that has gone around the divisions between the ANC and the black consciousness movement and even the PAC. I don't think that non-racialism is something that belongs only to the ANC, and I think that non-racialism is something that the foundation can promote. Dialogue perhaps across the old political divides, to engage with civil society, because there are lots of movements in civil society that are raising.. You know, the debate about non-racialism must also be a contemporary debate. So this memorializing is very important, but does the foundation have views and a role to play in relation to current struggles, current issues, I mean HIV/AIDS. I think there is a little nostalgia and anxiety. Nostalgia about the past, and anxiety about how the non-racial ideas are being thwarted by new assertions based on race, and enrichments of the elite and all that sort of stuff.

OK, those are important, but you know, is the foundation just about, what is it, does it want to engage with contemporary challenges, with social movements. I mean, with other demands that are being raised, other concerns. Maybe it will be concerned that it doesn't want to dilute its focus on non-racialism and that's a real danger perhaps, but I raise this as a question. Does the Kathrada foundation, is this its focus? Does it have, but even if that's the focus, it has to be a contemporary one, a relevant one, it has to address the problems of building non-racialism today. Not this narrow focus on nostalgia and feelings of marginalization. You know in some ways I have to say it's really a very narrow, even a reactionary kind of framework. Posing the question as if, the ANC is no longer building non-racialism and other groups are now under threat. That's what I'm not comfortable with. I think the Foundation should be approaching the issue of non-racialism in the way we always have, as an issue about, not a singular issue, isolated from all other questions we face in this country. So the foundation wants to have a focus, wants to have a brand, but I think we need to think through, whether we have, how we are situated and positioned in relation to the issues that confront our society today, that are taken up by civil society. There are risks there – it doesn't want to become too controversial, it doesn't want to become too stretched, or lose focus, but I think in some ways, maybe the focus is a bit narrow. It's a bit too, ya.

XX: Alright, ok.