

# The relationship between Religion, Culture and Handicap

Dear mediators and co-workers,

At the end of November 2002 the Liliane Foundation organised a seminar on the theme Religion - Culture - Handicap. The central question was: to what extent do culture and religion affect the rehabilitation chances of children and youngsters with disabilities? Some of you have helped us prepare this day by sending your stories. These were often impressive, showing the importance of the cultural and religious influences in every-day life. Thank you very much.

Major differences in culture and religion prevail all over the world. These determine the vision that people develop regarding vital questions. Religion may have an oppressive impact and isolate people with limitations. However, religion has also an aspect of liberation: it stimulates solidarity with people who may have difficulties in forming part of the community.

In order to take these aspects of the work even better into account, it is important for the Liliane Foundation to know the general opinion on handicaps in different countries.



*Nkisese and his mother and sister belong to the Maasai in Kenya.*

We would like to share the results of the Seminar, attended by Dutch organisations, with you:

As point of departure we mention awareness. Awareness is essential for mediators as well as for correspondents, because it is a fact that cultural and religious views of people help determine their opinion about the way to handle disabilities. This means for instance that we should deliberately ask ourselves in contacts with the parents of a disabled child, how they feel about their child's disability. It is not something that parents are likely to discuss easily. The subject may be too delicate. Therefore there is a task for you as a mediator to have the courage to ask questions, to start a dialogue with the parents: what is, in your opinion, the cause of the child's disability? Perhaps you could add this question on a standard basis to those on the white plastic card that all of you have received from the Liliane Foundation earlier, these are the same questions that you find on the application form.

If the replies from the parents show that they fail to understand the cause of their child's disability, then it is important for you to give the right information, thereby including - if possible - examples based on practice. This may mean that if you have sufficient knowledge of a certain disability, you are able to give that information yourself. If you do not have sufficient knowledge, then it is important to involve other persons.

When you assemble groups of parents, then there is a double effect: on the one side you can give information and on the other side parents are enabled to share each other's experiences. In this way the understanding of the cause of their child's disability will grow. In view of the response we have received so far we dare say, albeit with a certain reserve, that information is also essential for the parents themselves, and not only in the relationship with their child. Also parents themselves may suffer due to ignorance.

Often they spend a lifetime overwhelmed by feelings of guilt, fate, punishment and the role of deities or spirits in their lives. The parents cannot be blamed for not daring or being able to overcome these barriers by themselves. This is something they need help and examples for. Therefore the dialogue with the parents is of utmost importance.

When parents come to other insights and grasp the real cause of the disability, they will sooner understand that rehabilitation will be good for their child. That their child even deserves a chance of rehabilitation, that the child has the right to be him/herself.

For us as Liliane Foundation, this seminar has been a first step to achieve better understanding of this fascinating issue. However, we don't want to leave it at this. We intend to go on with this during the coming years, so your information, your stories, the dialogues with parents will be very welcome.

It is with much interest that we look forward to hearing from you.

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Project Co-ordinator