

EDITORIAL

Agnim ile purōhitam, "I venerate fire, the high priest," so begins the first line of the first poem of the first book of the *Rg. Veda*. Fire is sacred, the High Priest. "Listen ye O! People, Yahweh, the Lord of Israel says," so says the prophet. Fire is the priest, oracle is the prophet. Fire and oracle, priest and prophet, are two important dimensions of religious life of every human being. Fire took his oblation to God, through oracle came down the word of God to him. This number of the *Journal of Dharma* focusses its attention on these two dimensions of humankind, the priest and the prophet.

Prophets are those who listen to the Word of God ahead of others (*śrutī*), or those who see the inner nature of Reality in a particular context (*ṛṣī*), and they proclaim it to the people without fear of being questioned or persecuted. They are thus revolutionaries, religious, social and even political. Priests on the contrary are the leaders, teachers, and ministers who take the believers to the sphere of the Spirit. Prophets and priests complement each other and constitute an essential section of the religious tradition of the world.

Traditionally, the prophets are known for the proclamation of a message as drawn from the Divine, applying it to the living context and, consequently, making demands for political and religious changes. Therefore prophets were very critical of religious practices and the society of their time. A spokesman of a particular time, a prophet, is the mouth-piece of the spirit of change. The Old Testament prophets like Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel were the revolutionaries of a particular age but with a message for everyone. They were thus prophets of their time and for all times. A real prophet is a prophet of his own time with concrete proposals of programmes, yet transcends his age with the universality of his message. He is not a neutral person preaching in the abstract. He is always on the side of the oppressed, fighting for justice and truth.

Prophets, as persons who utter the will of God which is made manifest through visions and dreams, were bearers of the good news, warners of the prevailing situations, and leaders of religious and social changes. As persons who had exceptional spiritual insights, and as those who had brought to light certain inner truths, the prophets with their foresight were impelled to help apply these revelations for the shaping of a new society based on a new world-vision. Their involvement in determining the destiny of the people is the same today as it was in the past.

Questioning certain systems and demanding liberation from certain oppressive structures, are part of the prophetic mandate. Their critical approach, their reading, re-reading and interpreting of events enable them to go to the heart of any problem and to lay bare the truth of the situation. Prophets do not waste time elaborating doctrinal propositions but they fight at any cost for the translation of doctrines and ideologies into real action. It is in this sense that the prophets are called religious revolutionaries, political leaders and social reformers. The creation of a new society, a new political system, and renewal in religious approaches and attitudes are as much the need of today as they were in the past. In this sense we can regard some leaders as modern prophets. These modern prophets, like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, had spoken aloud and were actively involved in the shaping of the destiny of the people of India and the Black community of the United States of America. Their examples have shown that in each one of us there lies hidden a prophet of God who needs to be awakened.

If the prophets speak to the people acting as the mouthpiece of God, the priests speak to God on behalf of the believing people. As *Presbyter* (the leader) in Greek, and a *Purōhita* (one who is placed in front of the people) in Sanskrit, the priest is one who is specially commissioned to perform the sacrifices. To those who acknowledge the role of a priest in religious practices, he is the high dignitary called upon to officiate at the prescribed religious ceremonies to offer the sacrifices and instruct the people. In the exercise of religion therefore priests are indispensable mediators, meant to lead the people and to help them enter into the sphere of the divine.

The articles in this issue of the *Journal of Dharma* discuss the prophets as revolutionary thinkers in matters pertaining to religion and the problems of society, and priests as ministers and as leaders who guide the believers into the mysteries of the sacred.

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