

EDITORIAL

Are Religions, as they function in history, forces of unity or division? In the history of the humankind almost all religions led battles between peoples and nations. Much blood was shed in the name of God and religion. More and more people say today that religion is a divisive force. But on the other hand, there is absolutely no doubt that the central message of all religions is universal harmony, peace and fellowship of the whole humankind. What then are the real sources for the conflict and confrontations among the various religions?

Power struggle, be it economic, social or political, is at the root of the several historical conflicts between the various religious groups in the different parts of the world. When in Punjab, the traditional homeland of the Sikhs, the Hindu population began to emerge as a sizeable group and the economic, social and political power of the Sikh community was apparently threatened, the Sikhs began to react with militancy. It shall not be seen as a conflict between Sikhism and Hinduism. The Bharatiya Janata Party in India aspired for political power and they realized that by inflating the religious passions of the Hindu population they could achieve their goal. So they made a religious issue of constructing a Ram Temple at Ayodhya by demolishing a Masjid which was said to be built over a temple by the Muslim invaders of the Middle Ages. The most unfortunate thing happened on December 6, 1992, when I am writing this editorial. Several lakhs of Hindu "Kar Sevaks" (Volunteers) gathered at Ayodhya, led by the Hindu fundamentalist and communalistic parties and organizations forcefully entered the Babri Masjid and demolished it completely to the dismay and shock of the entire population of India and that of the whole world. In the annals of history it will be recorded as a "Black Sunday" which plunged the Indian Nation into a deep crisis and turmoil. It is a clear instance of exploiting religious sentiments for political purposes, and cannot be seen as a conflict between Hinduism and Islam, The Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle-East and the Catholic-Protestant fightings in the Northern Ireland too have the same dynamics of power struggle at work. They are not really confrontations between Islam and Judaism or between Catholicism and Protestantism.

In the opening article of this number Paul F. Knitter speaks about today's "new kairos" of interreligious understanding and cooperation. All religions have to grow out of their past self-centredness, self-absolutization and fanaticism, and enter into a new age of pluralism and unity accepting one another in mutual openness and dialogue, and promoting thus a new "we-culture". Religions contain immense potential and resources in their core-experience and symbolic systems that could inspire and instil the values of hope and self-sacrificing love, and thus they should set an example to the nations, peoples and cultures of today.

Paradoxically, however, some of today's bitter conflicts and confrontations are in the name of religion. Some of these apparently religious conflicts are examined and analysed in the other articles of this number. Victor Narivelil summarises the history of the Mandir-Masjid conflict in Ayodhya, India, and shows that what lies behind is the Bharatiya Janata Party's ambition for political power. In fact, all the political parties in India today play the communal cards for their own political advantage. S.P. Vageeshwari makes a historical analysis of the Arab-Israeli wars and concludes that it is the confrontation of two peoples who desperately search for their identity and survival, both groups, however, exploited by the Colonial powers and their policy of "divide and rule". Martin Cushnan exposes the historical roots of the present Catholic-Protestant conflict in the North of Ireland. The problem was made by Britain who sided with the British planters in Ireland for its own political and economic interest and thus kept Ireland divided.

The Bahais are a new sect in Islam, and they are discriminated and repressed in Iran by its Shite regime. Leland W. Robinson exposes the factors behind this anti-Bahai attitude in Iran. In another article George V. Lobo examines the moral and political issues involved in the recent Gulf war. When Saddam Hussein appealed to the religious sentiments of the whole Muslim world during the Gulf war, he was indeed misusing religion for his own political ambitions. On the other side, everybody knows that the Americans were more keen on maintaining their dominance in the Gulf area for their own economic and political interest than liberating the Kuwaiti people.

Swami Vivekananda, the great prophet of religious harmony, made a clarion call at the first World's Parliament of religions held at Chicago in 1893, for the unity and harmony of all Religions which he saw as different paths leading to the same goal as different rivers leading to the

same ocean. B.P. Siddhashrama and Kiran Ramachandran Nair discuss here Swami Vivekananda's perspective on religions. This year, in 1993, the International Celebrations of the Centenary of the First Parliament of Religions will be held in India, and the Sarva Dharma Sammelana will take place in Bangalore in August 1993. Could it inaugurate a new age of religious pluralism, a new relationship among the World Religions, by discovering their potential and resources for the unity and harmony of the whole humankind? Religions shall no more function as walls dividing peoples from one another, but as bridges linking peoples to one another creating universal fellowship and harmony.

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