

EDITORIAL

The content of this issue of the Journal of Dharma is mainly papers presented at the international seminar organized by the Centre for the Study of the World Religions of Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore, August 17 and 18, 1993, to mark the centenary of the World Parliament of Religions (Chicago, 1893). The theme of the seminar was "The Future of Interreligious Dialogue: Threats and Promises." The topic is particularly relevant today in India, which is undergoing a serious crisis owing to the use and abuse of religion by politicians and political parties. Today there is an upsurge of religious fundamentalism. Each religion is claiming a sort of superiority over others, and proclaiming its Scriptures, tradition and religious culture itself as the one absolute norm to be imposed on all. Since religious faith is a divine gift shared by all believers, what sets up one religion against another is mostly the absolutization of the trivial, which is the heart of the fundamentalist attitude.

The First World Parliament of Religions that met in Chicago, U.S.A. in 1893, on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, created a break in the exclusivist attitude religions traditionally maintained towards each other. On that occasion America presented to the world its achievements of 400 years by organizing a World Fair, as well as several international congresses. One of the most exciting and significant congresses was the First World Parliament of Religions which went on for 17 days. India made a very significant impact on that world body of participants by two outstanding delegates, Pratap Chandra Mazoomdar and Swami Vivekananda. Particularly the latter with his orange robe and saffron turban, shapely handsome face, large dark subtle penetrating eyes created a lasting impression on the Western World by his appeal that all should learn in a spirit of honest search for truth and harmony of human beings, what God is doing through the various religions and their prophets. More than ever India needs today to revive this spirit of harmony of religions and interreligious collaboration to face the threat of communalism and fundamentalism.

Naturally each believer honestly believes not only that his religion is the best for him, but also that his faith has meaning and validity for all human beings. Otherwise he would not affirm his wholehearted allegiance to his faith. So nobody can be asked to bracket his commitment to his own faith in the name of dialogue with others, or even to forego his right to freely communicate his religious message to others. Hence

the Jain approach to religious pluralism, which Mahatma Gandhi seems to have expounded, is not really acceptable to the majority of believers today. The Jain *anekantavada* and *syadvada* state that the different religions are just blind men's quest for the transcendental elephant, all of them partially wrong and yet partially true, contributing towards a composite picture of the ineffable divine reality. First of all it has to be noted that the blind men would need the help of one with eyes even to be sure that they are all actually approaching the same one thing which they call elephant! It is easy to convince someone of the irrationality of superstition, which places supreme importance on the trivial. Similarly to show that placating malevolent deities through sacrifices and offerings is an expression of irrational fear is not difficult. But, to say that one's religious faith in the one meaning and goal of one's existence has no ultimacy, but is only tentative and fallible, will shatter any one's confidence and true hope of salvation. Faith is, after all, defined as the substance of things we hope for.

On the other hand, no religion can honestly believe that it is going to replace all other faiths in the world in the near future or ever. Hence religious pluralism is a fact of life that has to be taken into account by all religions and all believers. Today the exclusivist attitude is ruled out as a viable option for any religion in facing other religions. It is sheer arrogance to claim that we alone have the truth and that everyone else is wrong. Even the inclusivist approach is considered too presumptuous to be appealing to others. On the other hand, to consider the different religions as merely a plurality of parallel lines is too inadequate to explain their common concern with the ultimate meaning of human life. Perhaps, the greatest obstacle to interreligious dialogue is the method born from comparative religion, which considers different religions as purely objective phenomena, from the point of view of an outside spectator. This would deprive religions of their deepest dimension of faith experience, which each religion endeavours to interpret. Without this experience which unites all believers, religions will be perceived as purely independent socio-cultural and political systems, appealing to the same universal community of human beings for acceptance. This naturally leads to tensions and conflicts and even religious wars, especially when religion is reinforced by racial and communal interests. So the question is how we can reduce such tensions and move towards mutual understanding and appreciation and active cooperation among the different religions for the real good of the people they serve. The papers published in this number of the Journal of Dharma approach this issue from different angles.

Kurshid Alam Khan, the Governor of Bangalore, who inaugurated the seminar emphasizes that religions, which have very much helped in the past to humanise human relations have a new task in the modern society, in which hatred, violence and evil still persist. In a pluralistic society like that of India with a multiplicity of religions, creeds and cultures, what is needed is a humanistic approach. Archbishop Alphonsus Mathias of Bangalore explains that the main threats to interreligious dialogue are communalism, religious fundamentalism, culture of hatred and culture of violence. To meet these, religions have to work towards greater credibility by rejecting radicalism, and showing greater concern for the human person. Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer drawing from the wealth of his personal experience presents a vigorous protest against religious fundamentalism of all kinds. Dr. M.M. Thomas traces the development and present condition of fundamentalism and secularism in India. His point is that there are clear political and cultural implications for all religious attitudes. Asghar Ali Engineer presents the Islamic outlook on interreligious dialogue and focuses on the question of social justice as the goal of dialogue.

V.F. Vineeth CMI explains the various phases through which interreligious dialogue has passed in recent years. He argues that since interreligious dialogue is a meeting in depth of the divine Spirit abiding in all hearts, we are better placed in the dialectics of dialogue when all submit to the guidance of the Spirit. The presentday European approach to interreligious dialogue is briefly explained by Professor Otto Koenig of Vienna. Bishop Michael L. Fitzgerald discusses the obstacles to dialogue as well the opportunities for it. Defensiveness springing from a lack of knowledge of one's own faith and ignorance of the beliefs and practices of others are the main obstacles, while theological advance made in recent times opens out great possibilities. Dr. S.J. Samartha in his paper explores the future of inter-religious dialogue. It provides opportunities for discussing not only purely religious issues but also to move on to wider human interests in the socio-cultural and political fields. John Chethimattam looks into the nature and scope of interreligious dialogue as we enter the twentyfirst century.

These papers are not at all exhaustive in dealing with the issues. They provide, however, the possibility to fix the priorities when followers of different religions meet together to discuss their common concerns.

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