

S.J. Samartha
Bangalore

THE FUTURE OF INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE THREATS AND PROMISES

During the past one hundred years since the meeting of the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, 1893, many events have taken place whose consequences affect human life even to this day. The two world wars, the first use of the atom bomb, the holocaust, the increasing power of technological culture on human life and the many smaller conflicts in various countries in which religions were involved in one way or another, have raised critical questions about the role of religions in history. The recent collapse of Marxism in Eastern Europe and the rise of religious Fundamentalism in many parts of the world also raise questions to which religious people do not have easy answers. It is in this context that the future of inter-religious dialogue has to be discussed, particularly because there is a discernible ferment now at the inter-section where people of different religious commitments live and work together in society.

The role of religions in history has always been ambiguous. On the one hand religions have provided values and visions, spiritual resources, ethical principles and revolutionary urges to fight against injustice and oppression in society. On the other, religious persons and institutions have often hindered scientific advance and social progress and, on many occasions, sided with the rich and the powerful over against the poor and the weak. In addition, they have also contributed to tensions and conflicts in society. This is noted here to emphasise that while recognising the need to continue inter-religious dialogues in the coming years, it is also necessary to take a critical look at the role of religions in history during this century. The centenary celebrations of the World Parliament of Religions is an appropriate occasion to do so.

One must also note that striking changes have taken place within particular religious communities as well during this century, even though the pace of change varies in tempo and intensity. Within Christianity, for example, more significant changes have taken place in the Christian

attitude towards other religions during the past thirty years than during the centuries since Vasco Da Gama landed in Calicut in 1498. "The dialogue movement," bringing together people of various religions to consider issues of importance, has grown rapidly even though some are indifferent to it and many oppose it for various reasons. But it is generally recognised that dialogue, as a search for new relationships between people of different communities of faith, based on mutual trust and respect for the integrity of partners is necessary for the well being of human community.

In the course of these years of inter-religious relationships at least three lessons have emerged. Recognising the risk of over-simplification, it is still necessary to acknowledge them because without doing so one cannot move forward in the matter of dialogue. The first is the *enduring* power of religions in history and human life. In spite of a great deal of negative criticism and the growing influence of secularisation and the power of science and technology on all areas of life, religions have persisted in history. The recent collapse of Marxism in Eastern Europe and the failure of the secular left to provide a credible alternative to religion are indications of the hold of religion on human life. Religions, in some form or other, seem to meet the hunger for transcendence in the human heart. To believe that religions will disappear from the high roads of modern life may prove to be an illusion.

A second, equally obvious lesson, is that during all these centuries, *no single religion* has been able to overcome other religions and establish itself as the *only* true religion for all people. Exclusive claims, backed by economic affluence, military strength and, more recently, technological power, have tried to overcome other religions, but have not succeeded in doing so. In an inter-religious context, the question, then, is not how to *defend* the claims of one religion against others, but how to *relate* them to each other within a structure of plurality. This point has yet to enter the agenda of inter-religious dialogues in a serious manner.

The third lesson is the result of a combination of these two if the enduring power of religions and the limitations of exclusive claims are recognised, then the *plurality* of religions, cultures, and ideologies become not an obstacle to be overcome but an opportunity to be accepted for the good of humanity. Without accepting

the plurality of religions it is hardly likely that inter-religious dialogues would have a future. Any threat to plurality would also be a threat to inter-religious dialogue. It would be a great gain if, during this centenary year of the World Parliament of Religions, this fact of the plurality of religions is openly, even joyfully accepted and affirmed.

There seems to be a double choice here. One is between exclusivism and pluralism. Exclusivism, that is, the claim that only *one* religion among the many is true is not only a threat to inter-religious dialogue, but would make it impossible. The other is the choice between a pluralism that merely affirms diversity and, because of the lack of any norm, would lead to relativism, and a pluralism which recognises the integrity and commitment of each religion within a structure of diversified unity. The contours of this "diversified unity" which can justify and make room for inter-religious dialogue cannot, and should not be predetermined. It needs to be discovered and grow in clarity and depth in a climate of trust, loyalty and the gift of human friendship in the global community.

As one ponders over the future of inter-religious dialogue, among many forces that operate in contemporary history, two in particular seem to be threats to its continuance which, however, at the same time might also provide opportunities to purify the motives, clarify the purpose and suggest new ways of continuing inter-religious dialogues in the coming years. The first is the growing power of *secularism* and the other is the rise of *religious fundamentalism*. The former is indifferent to, and even rejects all religions as being of any importance to modern life. The other, by emphasising that only one particular religious ideology is valid, makes any inter-religious dialogue based on mutual respect and trust impossible. However, while recognising these threats and taking them seriously, people committed to the inter-religious movement, can also regard them as challenges and opportunities to justify the continuation of inter-religious dialogues emphasising its positive contribution to people in a pluralist society.

A great deal is being said and written about secularism during these days particularly in connection with combating religious Fundamentalism. Very often calls are made by public figures that people should support "the forces of secularism" against the powers of religious Fundamentalism. But is secularism the only alternative to Fundamentalism?

At the moment there seems to be a good deal of difficulty and confusion over the meaning and use of terms like secularism, secularisation and the secular state. Some clarification of these terms is necessary even at the risk of oversimplification of highly complex matters because without doing so the nature and purpose of inter-religious dialogue itself will become vague and uncertain.

Secularisation is a process which has its roots in the history of the west. It is a consequence of the longdrawn struggle of Christianity with the forces unleashed by the renaissance, the enlightenment and rationalism, particularly by the rise of modern science. It has emphasised human freedom and the power of reason, and has succeeded in removing large chunks of life from the control of religious personalities and institutions, dogmas and doctrines. In this sense it has indeed been beneficial in providing more space to the human spirit.

The process of secularisation also leads to *secularism* which may be described as an *ideology* that defines life without any reference to God or Sat or the dimension of the transcendent. Secularism closes life upon itself, and imprisons it within the coils of history. While religious people can indeed recognise the benefits of secularisation, the *ideology* of secularism which leaves no room for the transcendent would be unacceptable to them. Since secularism rejects the role of religion in human life it regards inter-religious dialogue either as useless or a hindrance to social progress. Many intellectuals, influenced by the ideology of Marxism have been indifferent or blind to the "revolutionary urges" and the "regenerative forces" within religions. Is this kind of secularism an alternative to religious fundamentalism? To put forward secularism as the only alternative to religious fundamentalism is to deny that there is a *religious* alternative to religious fundamentalism *within* the resources of religion itself.

People both in the west and the east have become uneasy with the creeping consequences of secularism on human life. With the collapse of Marxism particularly, many people are becoming more sensitive to "the simmering discontents of secularism." Over the years secularism has brought about an alienation and estrangement between the scientific temper and spiritual vision, the *paramartha* (transcendent) and the *vyavaharika* (this worldly), the moral commu-

nity and the rational society, between substantial values such as trust, loyalty, honesty and integrity and technical values such as skills, achievements and results. There is need today to recover the wholeness of all life in which nature, humanity and God or the dimension of the transcendent are held together within a diversified unity.

A great deal has been written about the *Secular State* which points out that the origin and development of the Secular State in India is very different from that in the history of the west. The secular state in India was meant to be neither hostile nor partial nor indifferent to the multi-religious and multi-cultural character of the Indian people. It was expected that the secular state would provide political space for *all* religions to make their contributions to the value basis of our nation-in-the making. Many political scientists point out that in India the secular state has *failed* to be secular. This may be one of the reasons for the rise of religious fundamentalism.

In a multi-religious and multi-cultural society a theocratic state would be more than a tragedy. It would be a disaster. A secular democratic state that would be fair to all religious communities would be the only alternative to theocracy. The present call to "delink politics from religion" should not be interpreted to mean that religious values have nothing to do with strengthening and upholding the moral basis of our political life. It should mean that political leaders should *not use* religions for narrow political ends and religious leaders should *not use* politics for narrow communal ends. Without a secular state inter-religious dialogues at present or in the future would be impossible. This is one reason why all religious communities in the country should support and safeguard the integrity of a secular democratic state in India. But the call to support the secular democratic *State* is one thing; the call to strengthen the forces of *Secularism* is another thing. To blur this distinction leads to confusion and paralysis of action.

The debate on the rise of religious fundamentalism in the world is becoming difficult and complex. In India, with the strident demand for a *Hindu Rashtra* based on the ideology of *Hindutva*, the question has become urgent for all those citizens who believe in a secular democratic state. A theocratic state in a multi-religious and multi-cultural society would hardly provide space for people of different religious

commitments and ideological convictions to make their contribution to the well being of the nation in an atmosphere of freedom and mutual respect.

Scholars and thinkers who study developments in the country have drawn attention to the mixture of various factors that have led to the rise of Hindu religious fundamentalism at this particular juncture in the history of the country. One is the failure of the secular state to be secular. If the state itself uses various religions for political ends, then, the charge of "pseudo-secularism" against the state is justified. The politicisation of religions and the communalisation of politics has been the disease of these decades.

Another is the failure of the secular left to provide "a credible alternative" to religion. The collapse of Marxism and the emergence of religions in eastern Europe may be one symptom of this. During times of confusion and uncertainty religious fundamentalism often provides a sense of certainty and direction to people bewildered by the rapid changes in society. The present talk of "delinking" religion and politics should not, however, deny that religions have a critical-prophetic function in society. Mahatma Gandhi constantly emphasised the connection between the moral values of religion and the political health of the nation.

There are others who point out that religious fundamentalism, in this instance *Hindutva*, is partly a quest for Indian identity against the invasion of alien cultural values that corrode the fabric of Indian society. In this sense, religious fundamentalism is also an attempt to defend national dignity by recovering lost values, healing past injuries, correcting what are perceived as historical wrongs and asserting the dignity and identity of the nation in the midst of threats and humiliations. Swami Vivekananda is often used, particularly at this moment, both as the defender of Indian dignity and the pioneer of Hindu renaissance.

However, if the attempt to recover the lost values of Indian culture and to affirm India's national dignity is based *only* on the resources of the majority community, and that too on the scriptures, traditions, rituals and symbols of the upper caste group, then it would lead to dangerous consequences in society. It becomes a serious challenge to the secular democratic character of the Indian state guaranteed by the Constitution. It disturbs the plurality of Indian culture to which religi-

ons other than Hinduism and communities other than the Hindu upper caste groups, have made enduring contributions over the centuries. It goes against the generally tolerant ethos of India's spirit which has accepted groups of different religious communities fleeing from persecution from their own countries and seeking shelter in India. For these and other reasons such fundamentalistic developments that seek to impose a theocratic state on a multi-religious society have to be resisted at all costs by all citizens.

But the fear of religious fundamentalism is more than the fear of political domination. Its roots are more complex and deeper, often hidden within the depths of the collective consciousness of communities shaped by long centuries of troubled experience. It is the fear of the transcendent, the return of the sacred, the entry of *Sakti* or power or energy, unpredictable, untamed and therefore uncontrollable, into the human context that becomes a threat to rational society, the moral community and the secular state. In addition to the political, these hidden fears deeply embedded in human consciousness, must be brought out and faced in the open glare of critical scrutiny. This is one of the reasons why secularism, by itself, cannot become an adequate alternative to religious fundamentalism. An authentic, critical, and prophetic *religious* alternative has to be discovered and consciously developed in order to deal with the aberrations of wild fundamentalism. At the moment, in India, the almost exclusive emphasis on *Hindu* fundamentalism and its political claims dangerously ignores the lurking or open presence of fundamentalism within Christian, Muslim, Sikh and perhaps other communities of faith as well. Merely because certain religious communities are *minorities* in a particular context does not mean that they do not harbour theocratic tendencies based on exclusive claims that are ready to emerge under favourable circumstances.

It is suggested here that interreligious dialogues could provide the living context in which these issues can be discussed openly. At the moment such questions are indeed being discussed seriously, but in the narrow context of one's own community of faith exclusive claims are often hidden or camouflaged by qualifying words and phrases which do not really hide fundamentalist attitudes. Both for the sake of fighting fundamentalism and of seeking new relationships in a pluralist society, has not the time come to discuss such issues, *openly* and

together in the climate of friendliness, trust and mutual respect which inter-religious dialogues have promoted over the years?

The seminars, conferences and celebrations held in different parts of the world in connection with the centenary of the World Parliament of Religions have drawn attention to the need to continue interreligious dialogues in the coming years. The present moment also provides an opportunity to take a critical look at the dialogue movement itself and to introduce new issues, new emphases and new ways to deepen the spirit of interreligious dialogues. A few suggestions are made here with the conviction that the rise of religious fundamentalism makes it even more important and urgent for religious people to continue these dialogues.

At the moment the response to religious fundamentalism is largely *political*, that is, to find ways to prevent the dominant religious group from capturing power to the detriment of other religious groups. The minorities have indeed reasons to be afraid of this development. The resistance to the imposition of a theocratic state must indeed go on at the political level in which all citizens have to take part. At the same time, the *religious* ideology behind political expressions of religious fundamentalism needs to be considered at the deepest level.

Behind every form of religious fundamentalism there are *exclusive* claims. These exclude each other, and therefore clash in society and in the political life of the country. Here inter-religious groups have to make a special contribution, namely, to examine the nature of exclusive claims *together*, that is, in the open context of inter-religious meetings, rather than *separately* within the confines of each religious community. Obviously each community of faith has to come to terms with its own exclusive claims in a pluralist society in so far as they are expressions of commitment *within* a particular community. If this becomes hardened it leads to "closed" communities of faith. The open context of inter-religious dialogues, by developing a climate of trust and friendship, can help to understand the nature and purpose of such claims in order to discover ways in which commitment and openness can be held together within a pluralist society.

During the past three decades the emphasis in interreligious dialogues has been largely on *ethical* issues such as peace, justice and harmony in society. The struggle against oppression and exploitation

cuts across religious or secular boundaries and brings people together for common purposes in society. It is noted that Global Ethics was a serious concern at the World Parliament of Religions held at Chicago in 1893. This is indeed urgent and necessary, and should go on. There is not the slightest hint that this should be abandoned or soft pedalled. But the matters which generally come under the term *spirituality*: prayer, meditation, contemplation, inwardness of religious life—these have not received sufficient emphasis in most interreligious meetings.

Therefore, there is a genuine need to relate the ethical, theological, philosophical and spiritual dimensions in the wholeness of life. The mood of trust and friendliness promoted by dialogue can provide the context in which such a community of discourse, even a community of shared silence, before the Mystery of Truth, might emerge and develop.

Not *all* people within a religious community can be described as fundamentalists. Among the majority community of Hindus themselves there are many people who are not fundamentalists of the type that destroyed the Babri Masjid. Therefore a spirit of *discernment* is necessary to distinguish between those who are fundamentalists and those who are liberals opposed to it *within* the same community of faith. The liberals may be described as those who believe that the spiritual resources within religions critically recovered, have a contribution to make to enhance human life and who, at the same time, are opposed to the excesses of all religious fundamentalism, including those within their own communities of faith, and so, are willing and ready to extend their hands across the border to neighbours of other faiths who also share their views in this matter. The struggle in India therefore should not be too easily described as the struggle between *Hindu* fundamentalists and *Muslim* fundamentalists but between *liberals* and *fundamentalists* *within* each community of faith. This is true of other communities of faith as well.

This observation has implications for the character and purpose of inter-religious dialogues in the coming years. It may be that the most urgent and important contribution the dialogue movement can make in this situation is to bring together the liberals within different communities of faith to discuss not only the roots and consequences of fundamentalism, but also to go deeper into the matter of exclusive claims which really are at the root of all fundamentalism, religious

or secular. Interreligious dialogues, carefully prepared and practised, can help people to respond to the dangers of religious fundamentalism not just on the political but on the religious level as well. Such dialogues can help to hold together relevance and depth, the immediate and the enduring, and the legitimate concerns of each religious community and the total well being of the global community.

Fr. John B. Chethimattam, CMI
DVK, Bangalore

WHERE DOES OUR DIALOGUE GO FROM HERE?

It is very exciting today to look ahead into the twentyfirst century, from the long way we have come in our pilgrimage of interreligious dialogue. The first interreligious seminar I attended was held at Madras in December 1955. The theme of the seminar was "India and the Fullness of Christ" and the leading question was: What can Christianity learn from the Indian religions and what can Christianity contribute to India? We were then in the exclusivist mood: A Christian could not be a Hindu, and a Hindu is totally different from the Christian. J.N. Farquhar in his classical work "The Crown of Hinduism", published in 1913, had boasted that in the climax of world civilization all religions of the world had been weighed and all but Christianity had been found wanting. At a time of crisis the other religions based in human traditions would fall apart and Christianity alone could survive. World War I which began the very next year gave that boast a crude shock with the European Christian nations at the throat of each other. In 1927 when the World Missionary conference met in Sion in Jerusalem the conclusion was that all religions including Christianity were judged by Jesus Christ, the Son of God. At the Tambaram Conference in 1938 Ernest Hocking, Chenchiah and others argued that there could be a smooth transition from other religions to Christianity; but Heinrich Kraemer who wrote a special book for the occasion won the day saying that Hindus had to die to Hinduism before they could receive the unique historical revelation in Jesus Christ. Course of events disillusioned us again when our faith in history was shattered by the World War II. In 1961 and 1962 when J.A. Cuttat organized dialogues, the meetings were held at Almorah and Raypur, at the foot of the beautiful Himalayas, with the deliberate intention of creating a setting for our meditations on doctrinally divided religions in an aesthetic continuum. Later we moved on to the inclusivist model with Raimundo Panikkar's Unknown Christ of Hinduism and Karl Rahner's characterisation of people of other faiths as "Anonymous Christians." Then came the model of "pluralism" with its flexible connotation.

Hindus with their mystical emphasis may not feel the need of dialogue beyond sharing their consciousness simply to help others attain

the same consciousness. Similarly Muslims, with their identity firmly rooted in the Qura'n, are rather reluctant to seek any justification for their faith in other religions. On the other hand, for Christians with their Good News for all human beings united in a single salvation history and moving to a common destiny, interreligious dialogue is a must in order to fulfill their God-given mission. Unfortunately our ideas about other religions have not moved much beyond the spiral stages of Hegel's dialectics and the minimalist universal religion of the Spirit of Sarvapilli Radhakrishnan. When people like Hans Kung propose to create a global ethic taking the core values of all religions as a norm of immutable and irrevocable principles to unite all religions, I feel like asking: What happens to the rest of the precious faith of religions left outside these core-ideas, and who are we to dictate this universal norm to be obediently accepted by all.

Today interreligious dialogue has come of age; the period of honeymoon is over. The believers, especially knowledgeable leaders of the different religions today are in a position to face squarely the hard realities of our multi-religious world. It will be sheer wishful thinking for any religion today to imagine that its doctrinal system is going to supplant and substitute those of others. The old comparisons among religions as error vs. truth, rudiments vs. fullness, natural vs. supernatural and the like are models which do not lead anywhere. Every major religion based in the experience of the divine in faith claims to provide comprehensive answers to all human beings regarding the ultimate existential questions of human life, man's role in the world and his final destiny. They are not partial answers to be completed or complemented by other religions. Hence the crucial question is what are the basic principles according to which these independent religions can work together for the service of the human race, not only provide individual and subjective satisfaction and salvation, but also create one world of social harmony and allround progress for all human beings? what are their immediate tasks today?

Surely we are still in a situation of religious conflicts and we have not yet seen the end of religious wars. But the resolution of a situation of conflict is not, as in games, that one side should win and others should lose. Nor is compromise, in which both sides give up something, the answer. Any element of faith, which is a total and unconditional assent to the divine reality, is too precious to be compromised simply for politeness

sake. The only answer is for both sides to move towards a point where the legitimate concerns of both are fully realized. *For this each religion has to go back to its own original sources and discover there the interface to those valid, yet neglected dimensions of faith emphasized by others.*

Today we are holding the dialogue in very exciting times, when great many new religious movements have emerged in every religious tradition, baffling the cocksure complaisance of traditional pundits. We are very much like those herpetologists who find their neat classification of worms demolished by some new four hundred unknown species thrown into their laps. We are back to the drawing boards in search of new paradigms to include the new arrivals. Here the old models of inclusivism, exclusivism, pluralism, and normative models of the past are found totally inadequate. Exclusivism that says my religion alone is true, others false, is sheer arrogance. Inclusivism, which tries to find included in one's faith all other faith-versions is rather condescending. Pluralism denies the unity of the human race and makes dialogue itself irrelevant. Looking for a normative model above all religions forgets the radically different ways in which concepts like religion, saviour, salvation and revelation are taken in different religions. The simple fact is that these paradigms are derived from Aristotelian logic which could not go beyond the theories of truth that restricted themselves to conformity of things to our concepts, or the capacity of concepts to produce a coherent system, or simply instrumentalized the ideas to produce a pragmatic theory which said that only those ideas which worked in practical everyday experience were true.

Here other epistemologies call for our attention. Thus the Indian tradition leaves aside this principle of differentiation and is historically and culturally leaning towards the principles of identity and non-contradiction: Knowledge of the other takes place by reaching out to the other as expressions of one's own authentic self, and not through negation of the other. This was clearly stated by Asoka in his rock edict XII in which he exhorted believers to consider other faiths as dimensions of one's own faith and the act of respecting and honouring other faiths improving and advancing one's own religion. The commitment to one's faith can and should co-exist with due respect for other religious traditions in their otherness. Religion itself is polyvalently described as *marga* (path), *pada* (step), *yana* (vehicle), *adhikara* (competency), *sampradaya* (tradition), *asramas* (stages of life), and *bhum-*

ikas (stages). Hence the necessary attitude in the study of different religious traditions is sarvadharmasamabhavana, tolerance. Even in Christianity this pluralism is maintained as evidenced by the different christologies of the New Testament.

This principle of tolerance is found basically in all major religions. Thus Amos the prophet tells the Jewish people, that Yahweh is the God not only of the Jews but also of the Egyptians, their archenemies, of the Cretans and of other peoples as well. Islam explicitly mentions with respect prophets of all religions along with Mohammed. Hinduism is sanatanadharma only because it is open to the presence of God in the heart of every being. Christianity recognizes the unity of the human race and the unity of the divine economy of salvation for all God's children. Even though it confesses the unique revelation in Jesus Christ, it also recognizes the diversity of the religious and cultural backgrounds of the recipients of that revelation as integral to the divine self-disclosure. We are not preaching the Gospel in a vacuum, but to recipients, who have already heard God's saving word in their hearts. Jesus Christ is not the monopoly of Christians, but common to all humanity. The mediating role assumed by religious authorities, sages, priests, mullas and medicinemen should not instrumentalize the Spirit of God, so as to claim that God acts only through them in the hearts of people. Mediation is not a one-way traffic. Mediators do indeed enrich others, but are also themselves enriched. To talk about salvation to a Buddhist inherently contains the recognition and acceptance of the fact that God works through the Buddhist main frame of reference for those who sincerely believe in it. These genuine Buddhists are co-workers with believers of all religions in the building up the kingdom of God.

We cannot, however, agree that all religions are equal in dignity. Indeed all human individuals and their voluntary associations are of equal dignity, and the fellowships they build up have to be given real freedom. But the systems of doctrines, morals and worship-forms they build up have to be critically evaluated objectively on their own merits. It will be extremely naive to imagine that the Jones town cult, the religious sect that met with tragedy at Waco, Texas, the Unification Church of Sung Yang Moon and other major religions like Buddhism and Jainism have as independent religious systems equal dignity. It will be practically impossible to bring all these diverse systems into

some common agreement. Even in cases where the word of God in scripture is taken as the norm of faith, the diversity of exegetical opinions regarding those texts shows that there are real ambiguities in the texts, gaps in our historical knowledge and problems in reconstructing the historical evolution of a particular religion. One has to retrieve scientifically the original sense and purpose through reconstructive hermeneutics and background theories.

All that can be expected of interreligious dialogue on the doctrinal level is to produce strategies by which religions can make themselves intelligible to all and open themselves to critical examination. Even the best of religions are interpretations of the experience of the divine reality, and our perception of absolute Truth is, after all, our perception, and not the Truth itself. Followers of religions have, therefore, to be constantly self-critical of their positions in order to clarify it to themselves and to others. The same service of honest criticism has to be extended to our partners in dialogue. Engaged in a worldwide community of enquirers one has to form a system of abstractions in order to articulate what is important in their experience of divine things. Fundamental comparative categories have to be designated in order to relate alternative claims and understand them without prejudice. In this respect the closing message of Vatican II is very relevant: "Happy are those who, while possessing the truth, search more earnestly for it in order to renew it, deepen it and transmit it to others", and those "not having found it are working towards it with a sincere heart. May they seek the light of tomorrow with the light of today until they reach the fullness of light".

II. Dialogue on the Level of Praxis

The more immediate and easier task of interreligious dialogue is on the level of experience, ethics and everyday practice. Religion is first and foremost experience centered in life and practice. Most religions started out as reform movements, and theoretical expositions were apologetics against the traditionalists. Only when the movement lost its momentum was recourse made to philosophical systems to justify faith and make it intelligible. In this transition from experience to rational interpretation of the same, a good deal was actually lost. Thus the Upanishadic experience of rishis became the polemical treatises of the systems. Sri Buddha refused to engage in philosophical discussions,

because they did not lead to any firm conclusions but only distracted attention from the immediate moral concerns of human liberation. But later thinkers like Nagarjuna and Asvaghosha produced elaborate philosophical systems regarding the nature of nirvana. Christianity started as a religious response of the common man against the elitism of the Qumran community and the Graeco-Roman gnosticism. The Essenes who inhabited the Qumran caves attempted a Jewish revivalism proposing as ideal the Prince of Light and Teacher of Righteousness who went back to the purity of the Law eschewing all the elements gained during the Babylonian exile, and the Greeks proposed an apotheosis of the select few. Over against these, as the Gospels testify, Jesus proclaimed in his Sermon on the Mount that the poor, the hungry and the weeping are the blessed ones. Greeks and Romans would have no difficulty in a god like Mitra or Osiris or Adonis dying and coming back to life. But people like Tacitus and Pliny could not accept this Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Roman judiciary condemned to death and crucified being acclaimed the Risen Son of God. In fact those who discovered first that Jesus is the Son of God were not the scholars and official religious leaders, but the Samaritan woman, several times married and living with a man who was not her husband, the pagan Roman centurion at the foot of the Cross, the thief hanged along with Jesus on his right. The most abject and marginalized experienced in Jesus the definitive manifestation of the self-emptying love of the divine Saviour. Later when Greek philosophy was applied to this concrete experience of divinity it became a metaphysical proposition to be fought over by scholars through centuries.

Every religion starts out as a movement flowing out of a concrete experience in faith of the ultimate meaning of human existence. This experience cannot be understood by the principle of differentiation according to which, "his experience" becomes for us "his ideas", abstract and intangible. We can approach another's religious experience only by an epistemology of identity that says that a Hindu's faith is my own faith; a Muslim's faith is my own faith. Once this fellowship of faith about the ultimate meaning that unites all human beings, believers and non-believers alike, is established, we can stop squabbling about the nature of the Deity and ask what unique contribution each religion can make, to render our world hospitable to all God's children. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel remarked, religion is not an ontology of God for man, but an anthropology of man for God. Our interreligious

dialogue in the 21st century should not be about the intrinsic nature of the God, who is any way infinite and incomprehensible to all. It should be rather concerning our common task to translate our religious faith into the different coordinates of human existence, our common history, our fragile psychology, our social togetherness, the political realities of today, and our own ultimate destiny. Here the possibilities are infinite and there is scope for the greatest diversity without hurting each other. The base religious community in any given locality is that of all the believers there, and the scope of dialogue is to bring out the best in each religion. If we want to go forward in our pilgrimage of inter-religious dialogue this is the only path we can take.

What religion needs is a retrieval of concrete experience of the death of Jesus on the Cross, of the illumination of Buddha under the bodhi tree and the like events of human history. Religion is not an esoteric doctrine or a creed to be blindly recited but an actual opening of the human heart to God. Hence the base religious community is the fellowship of all believers in a particular locality, to whatever religion they may belong. The basic factor of religion is faith, a gift of God for all his children. Further groupings of the believers of a particular religion has an added active missionary task like that of the disciples of Jesus of communicating their interpretation of faith to others.

A second task of interreligious dialogue is to build up a moral framework to guide people in their daily lives. Morality does not make a distinction among religions. What is immoral for a Christian is immoral also for a Hindu and a Muslim. Hence each religion should endeavour to bring its own resources to clarify the do's and don'ts that make or mar a good man. The basic criterion here is the nature of the action itself. Adultery and theft and murder cannot be justified by any religion. Further the circumstances have to be taken into account. But we cannot take any moral concept of a particular religion and compare it with an equivalent concept in another. Any moral concept of a religion should be taken in the context of the total world vision of that religion and the specific meaning that concept has in it. Besides no moral concept appears in isolation but only within a cluster of allied concepts which constitute a moral and religious theme. The specific input of different religions go to build up a solid moral framework for the whole society.

dialogue in the 21st century should not be about the intrinsic nature of the God, who is any way infinite and incomprehensible to all. It should be rather concerning our common task to translate our religious faith into the different coordinates of human existence, our common history, our fragile psychology, our social togetherness, the political realities of today, and our own ultimate destiny. Here the possibilities are infinite and there is scope for the greatest diversity without hurting each other. The base religious community in any given locality is that of all the believers there, and the scope of dialogue is to bring out the best in each religion. If we want to go forward in our pilgrimage of inter-religious dialogue this is the only path we can take.

What religion needs is a retrieval of concrete experience of the death of Jesus on the Cross, of the illumination of Buddha under the bodhi tree and the like events of human history. Religion is not an esoteric doctrine or a creed to be blindly recited but an actual opening of the human heart to God. Hence the base religious community is the fellowship of all believers in a particular locality, to whatever religion they may belong. The basic factor of religion is faith, a gift of God for all his children. Further groupings of the believers of a particular religion has an added active missionary task like that of the disciples of Jesus of communicating their interpretation of faith to others.

A second task of interreligious dialogue is to build up a moral framework to guide people in their daily lives. Morality does not make a distinction among religions. What is immoral for a Christian is immoral also for a Hindu and a Muslim. Hence each religion should endeavour to bring its own resources to clarify the do's and don'ts that make or mar a good man. The basic criterion here is the nature of the action itself. Adultery and theft and murder cannot be justified by any religion. Further the circumstances have to be taken into account. But we cannot take any moral concept of a particular religion and compare it with an equivalent concept in another. Any moral concept of a religion should be taken in the context of the total world vision of that religion and the specific meaning that concept has in it. Besides no moral concept appears in isolation but only within a cluster of allied concepts which constitute a moral and religious theme. The specific input of different religions go to build up a solid moral framework for the whole society.

An important lesson from the history of religious wars and conflicts is that no religion should lend itself as a tool for vested interests. Most theological heresies and religious schisms started out as political conflicts and drew in religion as a motivation to divide peoples into irreconcilable groups. Recently the meeting at Sringeri of the four Sankaracharyas of Sringeri, Dwarka, Jyotir and Puri and Kanchi mutns seems to have realized from the sad experience of Ayodhya that political parties and the sants and mahants were using them in a proxy war. Though religions have to use their influence in shaping politics, they should not unwittingly let themselves to be carried along by the political currents. This is an area which requires an ongoing dialogue of the spokesmen of all major religions of our country.

Perhaps the most important area in which interreligious dialogue has to focus attention today is the preservation of our environment. Scientific and technological progress carried along as its baneful side-effect the increasing pollution of air and water. Dumping industrial waste into our water sources, and the increasing use of pesticides and other chemicals to obtain bumper crops are rendering our planet earth more and more inhospitable to living beings. Ironically the developed industrial nations do not let up in cutting down trees and raping the earth, and at the same time call upon the poorer nations to preserve the rain forests and desist from industrialization. But it will be foolish to let our house burn to spite the mice. It is the responsibility of all religious people to restrain the greed that leads people to acquire goods beyond their legitimate needs. All have to realize that polluting the environment is a denial of the meaning of creation itself, which is to provide a hospitable home for all God's children.

What is important in this respect is the religious attitude to nature. Most of our major religions are patriarchal in structure and outlook and believe in man's freedom to do what he pleases with the rest of creation to serve his own perceived needs. But this is a denial of his relative insignificance in age and stature in our immense universe and also of his rational responsibility to provide leadership to the whole nature in its pilgrimage to the realization of the final goal. What is needed is a change of heart, a feminine and maternal heart to nourish and foster God's creation as an integral unit. Today the conflict is not among religions regarding their perception of the Deity, but within each religion concerning the outlook on

man himself, his responsibility to his fellow human beings and to the rest of creation. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel has stated, religion is not an ontology of God for man, but an anthropology of man for God. The conservative, patriarchal outlook takes religion as a way of life, keeping the rules of the game and observing the rubrics carefully to gain one's individual end, including spiritual salvation. A liberal and maternal outlook, on the other hand, calls for solidarity with one's fellow beings, concern for their all round health, and compassion for the poor and the oppressed. In the place of the abstract philosophies that once served as handmaids to our theologues, today human psychology and integral sociology have to be the language of religions. More than ever today we come face to face with the ever present reality of human suffering. If once we thought it the well deserved punishment for sin and the fruit of one's karma, today we come to the increasing realization that the poverty, hunger, social and political disabilities and cultural backwardness of large masses of people in the world today are all man-made and a sin.

Leaders of all religions, priests, mahants and Ullamas and mullas alike have a collective responsibility towards people of all faiths in their particular territory and not only to the faithful of their own religion. In the light of the common faith, which is a gift of God to all his children, all religions have to work together towards building up and deepening a spirituality, towards which each religion should make a specific contribution. They should not avoid difficult topics, but endeavour to hold an open discussion of all the aspects of matters that create contradictory reactions such as mission, jihad, fundamentalism, place and role of women, and the treatment of the Dalit people in the different religions. In dealing with conflict situations we should employ the presentday sophisticated social and political analysis methods to isolate and deal with the non-religious roots of the conflicts. They should make a collective effort to create literature that will bring out the best in each religion and make it intelligible to people of all faiths. In this way religions will appear as differing paradigms regarding the one ineffable mystery they all endeavour to communicate.