

EDITORIAL

As a sign of unity and commitment to peace the leaders of world Religions met at the small Italian town of Assisi on October 27, 1986, for a 'World Day of Prayer for Peace' at the invitation of Pope John Paul II. Referring to the significant role religion and prayer could play in achieving peace the Pope said that "in the great battle for peace humanity, in its very diversity, must draw from its deepest and most vivifying sources where its conscience is formed and upon which is founded the moral action of all people." Peace is another name for unity. Is this claim made by religion to be the source of peace and unity credible today? Is religion a unifying force or a divisive force in the world? All the religions, indeed, theoretically and doctrinally teach universal love, peace, harmony human solidarity and unity. But, paradoxically, some of the fiercest battle in the history of the world were waged in the name of religion. The religions have, in fact, divided humankind into different camps erecting walls of separation between them and fostering mutual suspicion, distrust, rivalry, fanaticism, suppression and persecution. Moreover, each religion though one and united at the time of its origin became divided in due course into different denominations and sects, plagued by mutual condemnation and excommunication.

This ambivalence or paradoxical character of religion with regard to the unity of human kind is the general topic of this Number. How does and how should a religion promote unity and solidarity within itself among its various denominations and with the other religions? The prophetic religions, like Judaism, Christianity and Islam generally claim to be the final revelation of God and, therefore, the only true, absolute and universal religion. The model of unity frequently envisaged by each one was centred in itself to the exclusion of the other religions which were considered false or incomplete and therefore to be dispensed with. Islam is a typical example of this attitude, where the believers of the other faiths are often considered to be 'atheists'. The contribution relating to Islam in this Number discusses the plurality of denominations in Islam, such as the Shias and the Sunnis, and brings out their underlying common Islamic vision. What these rival traditions need today is mutual acceptance based on the notion of complementarity and this attitude has to be extended in their relationship to the other religions too.

Compared to Islam, Christianity has today become much more open, secular and diversified and more willing to accept the other religions as equals. The article on Christianity included here studies the Christian model of unity. The original Christian model of 'unity in diversity' was lost to a great extent in course of time leading to tragic divisions in Christianity. The diversifications represented, by various denominations in Christianity are accepted today as enriching, complementary and necessary for the Catholicity of the Church. The contemporary Christian Ecumenical Movement has rediscovered the original Christian vision of 'unity in diversity' which requires the mutual recognition of the different Christian Churches, and equally important, the mutual recognition of all the living faiths. Thus the principle of 'unity in diversity' could provide a solid basis for the unity of humankind.

Sikhism provided a different answer to the question of unity. It was an attempt at a new religious synthesis, "born out of a wed-lock between Hinduism and Islam". As our contributor on Sikhism explains, it was an attempt to purify both Hinduism and Islam to free them from their historical corruptions and evil elements. Sikhism has to be understood also as a reconciliation between Hinduism and Islam as well as a cultural synthesis born out of the meeting of two cultures – Arabic and Indian.

The article dealing with Buddhism shows that Buddhism was, in fact, a call to the unity of all humankind based on the universal and transcendental values of love, equality and freedom, and it attacked Hinduism wherever it violated these values. The unifying power of Buddhism showed itself in its capacity to adapt and incarnate itself in other cultures and peoples, and the result was its branching out into different forms like Tēravāda, Hinayāna, Mahayāna, and their different forms such as the Chinese, Japanese and Tibetan. The Buddhist model of unity includes also a wonderful vision of co-existence of all religions with scope for mutual criticism and fecundation.

If religion is to play an effective role in promoting unity and harmony in the world, as one of the contributions emphasizes, a new self-understanding of religion is absolutely necessary in today's context of religious pluralism. Every religion has to relate itself to every other faith, redefine itself in relation to other faiths, and create a spiritual climate for dialogue, reconciliation and unity. The article on contemporary 'Cults' argues that the new Cults, in fact, function as divisive forces and constitute a threat to authentic humanity insofar as they violate the precious gift of human freedom.

Any religion which violates human dignity and freedom, any religion which divides man from man is, definitely false or unauthentic. All authentic religions are committed to unity, peace and harmony in the world. Religions today have to build bridges between nations, peoples and cultures, bridges of mutual understanding, appreciation and acceptance. They have to work together fully committed to making our world more human, just and united.

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