

## EDITORIAL

The word 'religion' seems to have fallen into discredit in our times. The reasons for this devaluation are many, either because the notion itself is very abstract or because it has failed to help men and women in their search for peace and prosperity. As a result many people have become either indifferent to religion or even anti-religious. A few others try to develop a religionless religiosity as a way out to solve this problem. Moreover, the co-existence of many religions in the same socio-cultural context and the claims of each religion to uniqueness and superiority have only added to the decreasing influence of religion on human life. The growing impact of secularization and humanism and the achievements made by science and technology for the improvement of human life also paved the way for a new way of looking at religion as something superfluous and irrelevant.

However, religion is still understood as an essential aspect of human life and the basic need of religion for an authentic life is still being recognized. The very phenomenon of religion being questioned and new ways of expressing it being discussed in our times are clear signs of the interest modern man has in matters religious. This challenging approach to religion seems to be one of the most effective ways in which religion is kept alive in the modern world.

The history of religions has proved that religion is not a monolithic concept and that it is something which grew up and survived because of periodic crisis, questioning and challenges. The origin of Buddhism is a typical example of it. The author of the letter of St. James also criticized the prevailing notion of religion in his times. He writes: "Religion (*threskeia*) that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (James 1:27). This author wrote it when people had adopted a very abstract and selfish way of understanding religion. The rich had been oppressing the poor, and social behaviours were characterized by partiality. In fact, in this criticism the author was following the tradition of Jesus of Nazareth himself who challenged many of the existing practices in his religion in which he grew up, and exhorted people to develop a more positive approach to religion and religious practices. The Gospels are clear proof of this approach to religion.

Time and again such challenges shake the very foundation of religion, and no religion is an exception to this. Whenever religions become a mere matter of ideology, wherever religions deviate from their radical demands, there appear people who raise questions and propose new ways of affirming their religious commitment. Mother Teresa of Calcutta and her mission are a typical case of such a religious commitment. Through her challenging life and the message she has communicated for humanity, she is universally recognized as a great person with a great mission in our times.

A characteristic phenomenon of our times is that many of the challenges religions face are very much of the same nature. Consequently the kind of religious commitment that is expected of all religions is very much the same. Practically all religions are now committed to a rejection of a narrow-minded approach in favour of a broad-minded one in their inter-religious relationships. They now speak a language of complementarity over against intolerance and hatred. Likewise all religions are concerned about their this-worldly dimensions over against a one-sided understanding of religion as an other-worldly reality. As a result, religions are asked to get involved in the secular dimensions of human life as the sure way of meeting God and finding the real meaning of religion.

It was precisely this new theology of religion which Rabindranath Tagore emphasized long ago. He wrote: "Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! When doest thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee! He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil... Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense! What harm is there if thy clothes become tottered and stained? Meet him and stand by him in toil and in the sweat of thy brow."

Some of us may find these lines of Tagore too secular and consequently a denial of religion itself. Some of the new forms of religious commitment sponsored by *Gurus* and *Acharyas* may consider this approach as advocating the principles of communism and promoting its anti-religious ideologies. If communism has enabled us to rediscover some of the forgotten principles and ideals of religions, we should only be grateful to it for that. The fact is that God is concerned with the total life of humanity and all religions

are expected to safeguard this holistic approach to life. But it very often happens that those who are supposed to take care of these wider dimensions of religiosity become myopic and get interested and involved in some selfish areas of religious commitment and thereby spoil the integrity of religion. It is precisely against this phenomenon that reformers of religion took up the task of purifying their religions, sometimes becoming victims and facing opposition and persecution.

Many of such challenges in the past were isolated events, whereas in our times it is a common phenomenon characteristic of all religions. In fact, it is one area in which all religions feel the need of an inner purification. The root causes for the stagnation and loss of vitality may be different in different religions. But it is a common concern of all religions. The various studies presented in this issue of the *Journal of Dharma* is an attempt to look at the problem from the perspective of different religious traditions. They are supposed to throw light on the various aspects of religious commitment as seen by the authors. No attempt has been made for an exhaustive study of this topic; but the studies given here are expected to create interest in this topic which seems to be a vital concern of all religions in our times.

**Joseph Pathrapankal**  
*Associate Editor*