

CHRONICLES

I

MULTIRELIGIOUS PANEL DISCUSSION

(January 3rd, 4th, 7th, 1978)

In the wake of the "Crisis in Faith Seminar", the Multi-religious Panel Discussions being conducted in the important cities of India are attracting the attention of many in the field of religious dialogue. In Bangalore, the **Centre for the Study of World Religions, Dharmaram College**, in collaboration with a number of other centres of the same nature, sponsored a three day multi-religious panel discussion from 3-7 January, 1978.

The aim of the panel discussion was to provide an opportunity for a large number of college students to discuss with scholars and followers of different religions, their views about "Values in a fast-changing world." This general theme was split into three topics, namely, religious values, social values and political and economic values in a fast-changing world. A questionnaire was prepared well in advance and circulated among the students in order to focus on the issues selected for the day. Among other things, the questionnaire raised issues such as the following: Are there certain unchanging, eternal values or norms for conduct, valid for all societies and for all times? Does not change and evolution in time affect the basic values of society? What values are being changed in India as regards attitude to sex and marriage relationship, dowry, family planning, caste and inter-caste marriages, co-operation of religious with the policies of the government, employer-employee relationship, teacher-student relationship and communal relationships?

As regards religious values, one of the questions which always comes up for explanation, in the Indian context is the idea of secular state. The question is: What religious value one can promote in a secular state? Are there, after all, certain values as distinct from the "secular" or profane values? Are the traditional religious values of the Hindus, Muslims and Christians undergoing any changes, for better or worse, due to the so-called modernism in religious thinking? How far are the modern scientific discoveries, the crusade against God-men and miracle-workers,

the phenomenon of the followers of different religions coming together in multi-religious conferences, *satsangs*, meditation-sessions, joint-prayer experiences, influencing one's own religious convictions?

In the field of politics and economics also there are certain values in which religions are interested. Are the religious values, as some political pundits put it, an obstacle to political reform? Has religion in India been an "opiate" to the oppressed people? Are not our rich religious institutions and their programmes, directly or indirectly, supporting the privileged few and the oppressive structures of our society instead of practising institutional self-sacrifice? What value do the political leaders of developing countries attach to the ideal of self-rule or democracy? Can men of opposing political ideologies, namely, a Gandhian and a revolutionary Marxist, find certain values which would enable them to co-operate in certain common programmes for the improvements in our political life? The panelists of the various sessions held at Bangalore addressed themselves to one or other of these questions and shed much light on that issue.

In the panel discussion at Dharmaram Centre for the Study of World Religions, Mir Iqbal Hussain, (a former High Court Judge), Miss. C.N. Mangala (Principal, N.M.K.R.V. College), Dr. S.R. Rao (Field Adviser, N.C.E.R.T.), and Mr. Narayanaswamy (W.C.R.P. Bangalore) spoke on the various aspects of the change in the field of religious values. The crusade against the so-called God-men is, ofcourse, to a certain extent commendable, remarked Mir Iqbal Hussain; but one should not refuse to cross the frontiers of mere experiments. There are certain values such as the cultivation of the human mind, where science alone cannot bring us. C.N. Mangala rightly pointed out that there are certain uncontestable values which we all cherish. Nobody really wants to spread unhappiness. Everybody seeks happiness, peace, prosperity, unity of purpose among men, friendliness and so on. But if at all there is disunion, and dissension, it is due to ignorance and lack of trust in the other man. S.R. Rao was of the view that the eternal values are not changing but that we have not found them as they are. It is personal conviction that makes a man the follower of a particular religion. As long as the conviction lasts there is no question of man moving from one religion to another.

Dr. M. N. Narasimhan (Govt. Arts College), Mr. Sadiq Suhail (Advocate), Mr. C. Madhukar (Principal, R.V.T. College), Mr. L.A. Fullinfaw (Social Worker), Miss. Prathima Rao (Student Representative), and Dr. Albert Nambiarambil (Secretary, Dialogue Commission, CBCI) were the panelists at the session held on social values at Ashirvad, Bangalore. Dr. M. N. Narasimhan started with the question, 'what is value?' It is something man alone can realize in his life. Man takes certain things which cater to the needs of the body as valuable. So also there are other values which satisfy his feelings, intellect, aesthetic sense and religious cravings. He sees a hierarchy among these values and it is man's own dignity which is the basis of this value perception. Mr. Sadiq Suhail spoke of value in the multi-religious context of India. The value that Hindus, Christians, Muslims, and Jews attach to certain public events such as marriage, birth ceremonies, disposal of the dead and the social behaviour such as the role of women in the public life, the use of intoxicants, differ from place to place and community to community. Hence the question of a single value system for all will always be a vexed question. C. Madhukar, being a teacher, picked up the question of student-teacher relationship. The spread of the ideal of democracy has adversely affected the Indian concept of **Guru**. The high esteem and honour commanded by the Indian **Guru** has been considerably eroded and to this problem at present no solution is in sight. According to Mr. L.A. Fullinfaw it is the exploited common man in the street who really experiences the blunt denial of the social values. The rich become more rich at the cost of the poor and the religions seem to be silent witnesses to the injustice of the decision-making groups of the privileged few. Miss. Prathima Rao, (the student representative) brought in the idea that any standardization of the values is practically impossible. Dr. Albert Nambiarambil winding up the discussion remarked that though there are conflicting views about values in a society the search for values has to go on. In a modern society the communication media, the elite, the politicians, the film and other such agencies and groups of people turn out to be the "value-setters" to the masses. But religions which preach the sacredness of human life have to become the foundation of social values.

The value-consciousness of the modern man in the political and economic field was the topic of panel discussion at the Indian Institute of World Culture. One of the panelists, Mr. Kengal Hanumanthiah, a veteran politician and the former Chief Mi-

nister of Karnataka, was of the view that the present erosion of values in social, political and economic life of the people is due to the influence of the uninspiring life of the leaders. The motto of love and service constantly preached by the religions is the only thing that can help to improve the situation. Prof. H. K. Cheluvvaraju (Bangalore University) distinguished between theoretical and practical aspects of religion and asserted that the radical criticism of religious values had its source in the neglect of the practice of religion. Marxism had its origin when Christianity started tottering in the nineteenth century. Though it is difficult to teach the tenets of all religions in schools, the time has come to initiate even the students of lower grades into the comparative study of the values in religions. Mr. Jaffer Ali (Principal, Alameen college), struck a practical note when he observed that power corrupts when it is in the hands of corrupt men. Men who would take themselves to politics should regard it as a sacred privilege to serve our fellowmen in need. Dr. Thomas Aykara, (Director, C.S.W.R.) in his concluding remarks rightly pointed out that change is a must, and it is inevitable too. But when it is in the area of value consciousness, it has to come about by the intelligent and informed free decision of man. In this process of reformation, religions can provide dependable guidelines.

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II

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST

An interesting seminar was held at the Divine Word Seminary, Poona, under the auspices of the Indian Theological Association from 2-6 January, 1978. The theme of the seminar was "Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Christ". Among the participants there was a fair representation of current theological trends of thought from different parts of India. The spirit of openness and the readiness to understand each other, provided an excellent atmosphere for frank and fruitful discussion on this crucial and sensitive subject.

In his paper, "Christian Theology and other religions: Issues and Orientations, Fr. John B. Chethimattam, C.M.I., pointed out that there are a few ambiguities in the contemporary Christian attitude to non-Christian religions, and these ambivalent attitudes require careful consideration by theologians lest theology should become a closed and irrelevant doctrinaire cut off from the actual issues of life and experience. The author indicated also a few paradigms for inter-religious dialogue, and said that in the face of "different paradigms the theologian's task is not to choose one of them rejecting others.... Our task is to examine each paradigm, uncover its weaknesses and understand the specific theological method implied in it. The more such paradigms of the interrelationship of different religions within the one divine economy of salvation we can discover, and the more carefully we bring them together into a coherent system, the better our understanding of religions also will be."

Fr. K. Luke O.F.M., in his paper on "The Tension Between Particularism and Universalism in the Old Testament" said that the Israelites considered themselves to be a particular people because of their understanding of God as their God, and their conviction that they are specially chosen by God. However, universalism which is the explicit declaration that Yahweh is the saviour of the Gentiles as well, is also indicated in the OT: "Gentiles come to Jerusalem accepting Yahweh as their God." The paper as a whole served as a good background for understanding how Israel was considered to be a particular and specially chosen

people, and how this concept was carried over to Christianity and thus narrowed its own vision.

In his prayer on "Paul and Gnosticism: A Case Study in Dialogue and Syncretism", Fr. Lucien Legrand spoke about the way in which St. Paul faced the Colossian heresy, and the lessons we can learn from it in the context of religious dialogue. He remarked further that Church in India today faces a "gnostic" challenge fought with risks but rich in possibilities of enlarged and deepened vision.

In his paper on "Metaphysical and Religious Pluralism in Ancient India", Fr. Thomas Kadankavil, C.M.I., showed that Buddhism, Jainism and the Upanishads had divergent approaches to the question of reality. Although all these systems claimed uniqueness and exclusive possession of truth, for an outsider these approaches appeared to be complementary and not mutually exclusive. From this philosophical position, the author argued that this is true also in the case of different forms of religions based on varying philosophies. In the light of this he raised the question whether the "uniqueness" claimed by Christianity was acceptable.

Fr. Antonio F.X. Rodrigues, C.Ss.R., in his paper, "Religious pluralism and the Upanishadic Point of View", suggested the Upanishadic approach to God through *pratyaksha*, perception as a corrective to our traditional syllogistic approach to God.

Swami Vikrant, S.D.B. stressed the need for a new methodology of inter-religious dialogue based on Hindu thought patterns. This should be inclusive rather than exclusive: *sive...sive* rather than *aut...aut*.

Fr. Claude Grou, H.C., spoke about "Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Christ in the Context of Contemporary Hinduism." He said "The classical models in which Hinduism can fit the Christ-event are two: the Upanishadic tradition which can see Christ as a realized soul; and the Gita (4: 5-8) tradition which can see Christ as one of the *avatars* of the Lord to the world. While these classical models provide a space to accommodate the Christ-event, Hinduism does not provide any model that would allow for a unique and definitive historical fact."

We find in certain trends in Hindu thought a model that would provide a better background to speak of events as being unique and definitive. In the modern period this model is well

expressed in the writings of Aurobindo. In the evolution of the world, the whole reality has a purpose and certain events can mark the evolution of history in a unique way. However, in a model of that type there is only one possible reading of history and one risks to come in conflict with any other attempt at giving definite roles of various historical events.

According to Fr. George Koovakal, C.M.I., who presented a paper on "Islamic View on Religious Pluralism", Islam stands for peace and universal brotherhood and is very tolerant towards other religions. Accepting all the prophets of the world as messengers of God, Islam bears the marks of a universal religion. In our Christian approach to Muslims the prophetic aspect of Christ would be a fruitful starting point.

Fr. Dupuis, S.J., in his paper, "The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the Early Christian Tradition," after defining the meaning of "absolute" and "relative" uniqueness, and of its "exclusive" and "inclusive" understanding, develops in the first part the general pervading attitude of the early Fathers who take for granted Jesus' unique place in God's economy of salvation because there is only one human race created by God in his own image. In the second part the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is developed following the line of Ireneus' conception of the *anakephalaiosis*—Jesus Christ summing up, fulfilling and sustaining in himself the human race.

In his paper "Questions Related to Theocentric and Christocentric Theology," Fr. X. Irudayaraj, S.J., poses the question, "Is it possible to reconcile the uniqueness of Christ with Pluralism of Religions?" In his attempt to find a solution he says that one may not prefer a theocentric approach to a Christocentric one, as the latter is always implicit in the former if it is truly Christian. He added that authentic pluralism presupposed uniqueness of faith. If this is accepted how can we relate the uniqueness of Christ to pluralism of Religions? For the time being, within his limited experience he accepted the uniqueness as proclaimed in the New Testament as well as religious pluralism. One has to be totally committed to Christ and fully open to the faith of one's partner in dialogue. The paper thus transcended the polarity between theocentrism and Christocentrism.

In the outline of a paper, Fr. Bede Griffiths has given an idea of the shape of things to come as regards religious pluralism. He starts from the mystery of the economy of salvation which

first became effective in Christ, and then in the Church. He then says that this same mystery of salvation is present in Christ and in other religions; but the signs of salvation differ; and some are more or less effective. In the Church sign, the effect of salvation is always present. However, the Church has to grow by encountering the signs of salvation in other religions. This has to be manifested in her doctrine and ritual, and in the organization.

Fr. Fallon, S.J., in his paper, "Christ the Converging Centre: Religious dialogue as a search for Convergences" says that religious dialogue, goes much farther than religious comparitism and religious syncretism. He also adds that dialogue is not a search for similarities but for convergence in Christ. This approach based on personal experience came as a confirmation of much that had been said during the seminar.

In general, we can say that the papers and the discussions opened up new perspectives on the questions related to the uniqueness of Christ. It became clear how important it is to go back to the historical, social and cultural background to understand the development of the concept of uniqueness in its application to the mystery of Christ.

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