

Joseph Pathrapankal
DPI, Dharmaram, Bangalore

The Ultimate Concerns of Man and India's Response

Before we can speak about the ultimate concerns of man today and India's response to them, it is important that we first of all understand clearly the very concept of the ultimate concerns of man at any time. By ultimate concerns we mean those objectives and aspirations of humanity which on the one hand control human activity as a whole, and on the other hand enable human society to face the various challenges in its historical march. These concerns include freedom, equality, dignity of the human person as well as other factors which make life peaceful and meaningful. The various forms of the social life of man endeavour to analyse these concerns and suggest ways to tackle the problems which hamper the realization of these concerns and aspirations. The family, the society at large, the state and, above all, the various religious traditions have been committed to this task over the centuries. But what has happened, however, is that a convergence of these concerns at the various levels has not been achieved. Whereas the state has stood for a welfare society as its ultimate concern, religions have had a somewhat spiritual and other-worldly goal of human life as their ultimate concern, leaving aside its material and this-worldly dimension. They understood freedom and equality as well as the dignity of human person exclusively from a spiritual point of view.

I

But of late a change has occurred in the religious traditions. More and more religions are trying to recognize the integral human pattern of life with its this-worldly as well as other-worldly aspects. It is difficult to say how this has happened; but it is now a clear accepted fact. Consequently, religions now see human life more as an integrated whole with spiritual, cultural, political, economic and social aspects and dimensions. In fact, the various religious traditions had to undergo a long process of purification and self-analysis to arrive at

this consciousness. We have also to recognize the influence of para-religious and even anti-religious movements and organizations which have played a part in this process. What has happened is that religions all of a sudden began to view man in his totality; and humanity as one family which undergoes the same crisis and faces the same problem and challenges, whatever be the nature of man's religious belongingness. In other words, religions have become more 'worldly' and more 'secular', so much so that they cannot help getting involved in the problems affecting humanity as a whole.

The problem which all nations encounter today are those arising from technology, urbanization, and industrialization on the one hand, and widespread poverty, population expansion, unemployment and the widening gap between the developed and developing nations on the other hand. There is much exploitation, oppression and discrimination on the basis of caste, creed and colour practised all over the world. More than ever before, the world is facing the paradox of great affluence in certain sections of the world on the one side, and on the other the vast majority of humanity, which had its expectations raised by modern progress in science and technology, suffering a great deal of poverty and deprivation of the basic amenities of life. The gap between the affluent countries and the so-called developing nations keeps widening. Some Western sociologists and economists have already written off millions of the poor nations of the world as beyond redemption and described all efforts to save them as a colossal waste of the meagre resources available. In fact, it would appear that in our present context of diminishing natural resources, the poor will have to be kept poor if the rich have to continue to be rich and maintain their unbecoming standard of living.

It is in this tragic situation affecting humanity as a whole, that religions have to be conscientized. They must be made to realize their important role to face these challenges and do something concrete and meaningful to save mankind from this precarious situation. The various 'aid organizations'—national and international—can have only a marginal influence in this, the more so because many of these aid schemes have been infiltrated and exploited by subversive agencies.

Consequently, religions, which are above politics of any kind can and have to plan and work together for a better world, a better

deal to humanity, and for this they have to fight against all forms of exploitation whether at the national or international levels. The ultimate goal of all these efforts is to create a new atmosphere in which human beings love in harmony, related to each other on the basis of the image of God they carry with them. God created humanity as one big family; religions are expected to maintain this holy heritage and to build up this family and make it more united and integrated. Any attempt made by any religion to destroy this unity in any manner would be an outrage. Strange enough, most of the recent changes for the better in the socio-political and economic life of humanity like the liberation of the countries of the third world from colonialism and international developmental schemes, were achieved with little or no help from religions and religious authorities; actually in spite of them, since religions were generally on the side of the *status quo* even when it implied institutionalized violence. In fact, religions have earned a bad name as regards the socio-temporal problems of man, as history bears ample evidence with its record of such happenings as the Crusades, inter-religious persecutions, Jehads, the Inquisition, religious colonialism and apartheid, all of which called upon religion for their support and justification.

II

But the scene as a whole is changing. It is heartening to see in many developed and developing countries, theologians and religious thinkers facing up to the challenge of the world of today and inviting people to dedicate themselves to solve the human problems of a global nature. It is being increasingly realized that traditional structures of religions are inadequate to cope with the modern situation and that we have to have recourse to radical measures to face successfully the challenges of our times. It is also becoming more and more clear that religions are to be liberated from their passivity and self-centredness and made dynamic realities endowed with the capacity to help man in the totality of his life. This is true of all religions, and especially those which claim to have the right to say the last word about human life and its destiny.

It seems, in this context, the Indian situation is a highly favourable one for developing a universal consciousness about the role of religions to work together as an united front to establish a just society. This assumption is made on two considerations. First of all, this

country has the privilege of accommodating and encouraging various religious traditions, all enjoying the same rights. This makes it possible for one religion to have an open mind as regards the others and prepares the way for the co-operation of all these to usher in and establish a prosperous society. This is very different from the situation where only one religion exists, because there that one religion monopolizes and controls the whole structure to make or mar it. The presence of many religions with their different philosophies and theologies facilitates a kind of mutual foundation and corrective criticism as a result of which a sound and healthy society can emerge. The only condition is that these religions have to be tolerant towards each other and be ready to co-operate among themselves.

Moreover, the still unaccomplished social and economic equality in this country presents a challenging situation for all these religions to engage themselves in an urgent struggle to establish a just society, conscientizing both the Indian society and the international community about the need of a radical change in the established structures of this society. They have to use a common language and evolve a common policy for action. The services of sociologists, theologians, anthropologists are all to be pooled together in organizing this struggle. The traditionally acclaimed truth about India that it is basically religious-minded and characterized by its interiority must inspire all religions to come out of their little shells and initiate a process of mutual co-operation in this vast sub-continent.

In this, however, India has still a long way to go. The major religions of India have to undergo a *tapas*, a process of renunciation and sacrifice by which to identify the essence of these religions and become more tolerant, more open-minded and more co-operative among themselves. The country is still the battle-field of religious feuds, and the level of mutual understanding between religions so far reached is very unsatisfactory. The stories about disputes and quarrels between the followers of different religions still taking place in this country are a clear indication that religions in this country are not playing their dynamic and creative role for effecting national integration. There is still much suspicion and apprehension expressed in inter-religious relationships. As a result, it is difficult for them to come closer and draw up a common policy and line of action for eradicating social and economic evils.

To my mind, the religions of India have a long way to go and to reach this goal it is an arduous pilgrimage. It is true that we have virtually passed the stages of intolerance and hatred among religions. There is greater tolerance and readiness for dialogue expressed in inter-religious relationships. In some quarters at least there has developed a closer understanding between religions, which tries to establish a principle of complementarity, according to which each religion shows its readiness to be purified and perfected through its association with another religion. But all these are peripheral and sometimes all forms of religious dialogue are discredited as lacking in true religious authenticity and attempts to introduce religious indifferentism and syncretism. This is not the place for me to discuss the merits and demerits of these accusations. What I mean is that we followers of various religious traditions, have to become more open-minded and receptive. In our inter-religious relationships we have to practise the very principles to establish which religions have to work together, namely, freedom, equality and justice. Instead of straining ourselves to get more and more people into our own religious group we have to set out as a united force to meet the needs of the people struggling for a better human life.

It is true that India has a rich religious heritage, filled with the richness of so many religious traditions existing in this nation. This is a gift but it also imposes a task. We have to accept this gift and undertake this task in all humility and with courage. It is a task we have to fulfil in relation to the whole world. We cannot assume an indifferent attitude towards the world. Human history is now at the crossroads. Our world has become one world and it will either stand as one or perish altogether. The need of the hour is to save this world and mankind. Science and technology can render only very little service in building up a human community, whereas religion can play a very decisive role in this, provided all religions come out of their morphological fundamentalism and commitment to the structures of by-gone days. India seems to be the ideal place for the major religions of the world to launch a united effort to face the challenges of the world of today, especially because this country is blessed with the presence of several ancient religious traditions and at the same time confronted with problems of enormous dimensions. In the face of these challenges the religions of this country should engage themselves in a *satyāgraha*, a process in which they pray and suffer along with the oppressed and also fight for justice and truth.

The concrete expression of this *satyāgraha* (grasping the truth) in the emergence of an Indian theology which takes into account the complex situation in which India finds itself today. What I have in mind is not the theology of a particular religious denomination but a non-sectarian, trans-denominational theology to which the followers of all religions have to make their contributions. It is a theology about God as experienced and articulated in the complexity of the life of the millions. It is at the same time a theology derived from the age-old tradition of the religious reflection of this country. It takes into account God in his relationship to the world at large and at the same time it speaks about man and his concrete existence. One could say that it is theology and anthropology seen in their mutual relationship. Such a theology developed within the concrete life-situation of this country will go a long way in constituting meaningful response to the world of today and to the problems of modern society. The articulation of the ultimate concerns in such a theology will be the common patrimony of humanity, as it is the result of dispassionate reflection away from the turmoil of a technological society.

What Gustave Gutierrez in Latin America did a decade ago, confronted as he was with the challenge of his society and the history of his country, we have to be doing today. He reacted to the established principles of interpreting religion and its relation to society, principles which were handed down the centuries without reference to time, culture and needs of the society. The power he released through the bold interpretation of his religion is making inroads to many countries of the Third World and is challenging men and women to commit themselves to a more radical and relevant interpretation of their own religion and Scriptures. Understood in this way ours is a continuing world, our society at large and our history understood in its totality.