

## CHRONICLES

### I

#### FELLOWSHIP IN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

"Religions of the world are experiencing today a greater openness and are steadily moving from their self-centred identity to a broader vision; mutual co-operation and healthy complementarity", said Dr. T.A. Aykara, in his orientation talk at the inaugural meeting of "Fellowship in Religious Experience" (FIRE), organized by the Centre for the Study of World Religions (CSWR), Bangalore on August 6, 1978. Instead of approaching each other for a mutual deeper understanding, religions in the past, shut themselves in their own traditions, customs and thought-patterns. Now people are more and more coming to realize that religion becomes authentic and healthy only when it has an open mind in its approach to other religious traditions. While taking pride in one's own religion, one must also be humble enough to admit that no religion can exhaustively express the Infinite. It is not easy to make such an attitude prevail in the field of religious belief, if one is engaged only in the comparative study of Religious Traditions. Prayer however, has a wider scope in its unifying force. Men of different faiths can realize a sort of fellowship in the God-experience in prayer. It is this conviction which prompted the C.S.W.R. to launch the programme of periodic gatherings of men of different faiths in prayer. Religion is as much a subjective and personal reality, as it is an object of one's intensive study. When dogmas and doctrines divide men of different faiths, prayer and contemplation unite them. Hence the fellowship in Religious Experience tries to focus its attention on certain dominant common values in which many can easily share, such as, our fellowship in the Divine Call, faith in the self revealing God, sacredness of human existence, openness to different religions and their complementarity, quest for peace and universal brotherhood, a deeper experience of one's own faith and its identity in the context of others' faiths, and the building up of a new community and a new man.

The inaugural meeting of FIRE was organized in two sessions: a Discourse Session and a Prayer Session. The Discourse session was presided over by Prof. V.K. Gokak, former Vice-Chancellor of Bangalore University. Swami Harshananda,

Dr. J.B. Chethimattam and Mir Jaffer Ali shared their prayer-experience in Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, respectively. All the speakers accepted prayer as the common ground on which all religions could meet. When we enter into prayer, according to the speakers, all factions, divisions and challenges disappear. And, in fact, during the prayer session led by Dr. F. Vieneeth, Swami Harshananda, Mir Jaffer Ali and Prof. P.J. Toliya, the participants could really go beyond the visible symbols of particular religious traditions to the ultimate thrust of all religions, namely, unity in the spirit.

The organizers hope that this programme of the Centre will bring men of different religious faiths closer so that all men may, as new human beings, work together for building up a new community to which this Fellowship in Religious Experience would become a real FIRE

*Antony Kariyil*

### II

#### INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE ON RESPONSE OF RELIGIONS TO THE WORLD OF TODAY

As part of the programme of the triennial meeting of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, meeting for the first time in Asia, C.S.W.R., Bangalore organized on August 27, 1978 an inter-faith dialogue to reflect upon and discuss the problems religions face in the world of today.

Tackling this worldly dimension of religions seems to be a very important task of all religions of the world in our times. In the past, the major preoccupation of the religions was either to preserve their identity or, at best, to come to terms with other religions or denominations without in the least disturbing their own time-honoured and precious structures. This is true of Christianity with regard to its ecumenical enterprises, and it is equally true of inter-religious dialogue, in which the major religions of the world took active interest. But the main purpose of these discussions was to find out the extent of the common and complementary thoughts and orientations shared by these religions and the result was very often a sense of complacency which each one developed by conceding to the other that all religions have a common heritage and that the destiny of all religions is one and the same.

The call of the hour, however, seems to be entirely different. Unless religions come together to face the challenges of the world of today, challenges that are being caused by technology, urbanisation and industrialisation on the one hand, and widespread poverty, unemployment and the widening gap between the developed and the developing nations on the otherhand, these same religions engaged in preserving their orthodoxy and orthopraxy will soon lose their relevance. More than ever now the world is facing the paradox of great affluence in certain quarters of the world on the one side, and on the other, the vast majority of humanity, which had its expectations heightened by modern progress in science and technology, suffering a great deal of poverty and deprivation of even the basic necessities. The gap between the affluent countries and the so-called developing nations is ever widening. Some Western sociologists and economists have already written-off millions in the poorest nations of the world as being beyond all help, and judged all efforts to save them as mere waste of the meagre resources available to humanity. The developmental schemes to help the poor nations of the Third World have only been fallen far short of the massive Marshall Plan that revived hopes for the broken nations of the post-war Europe, and have rather helped more the helping nations than those that were intended to be helped. In fact, it would appear that in our present world of diminishing natural resources, the poor will have to be kept poor if the rich have to continue to be rich and maintain their unrealistic standard of living. This tragic situation has been rendered worse by the unscrupulous way in which such aid-schemes have sometimes been misused and exploited by subversive agencies. Hence the term 'development' itself has gained a bad connotation in the Third World, and now people would rather speak of 'liberation'.

It is in this tragic situation that the consciences of religions have to be awakened, play an all important role in facing these challenges, and do something concrete and meaningful to save mankind from its precarious situation. Religions are for man; not the other way round. In fact, among those disciplines that work for peace and human progress like politics, economics, sociology, social psychology, history, and international law, religion and theology either find no place at all or are listed under the general heading of sociology. Most of the recent changes for the better in the socio-political life of humanity, like the liberation of the countries of the Third World from colonialism and

international developmental schemes, were achieved not with any noteworthy help from religions and religious authorities but rather in spite of them since they were generally on the side of the status quo even when it implied institutionalized violence. Infact, religions have earned a bad name when it comes to the socio-temporal problems of man. History raises a host of bad memories against religions namely, the Crusades, inter-religious persecutions, Jihads, Inquisitions, religious colonialism and apartheid, for which religion can provide no justification.

This negative picture of the actual role religions have been playing in the past and are playing at present is not the end of the matter. It is heartening to see in many developed and developing countries theologians and religious thinkers facing the challenge of the world of today and inviting people to dedicate themselves to solve these human problems of a global nature. Increasingly, we have begun to realize that the traditional structures are inadequate to cope with the modern situation and that we have to develop radical measures to face the challenges of our times. The theology of liberation now gaining momentum in South America and also in other parts of the world is an eloquent example of the social involvement of religious leaders in the problems of the world. What these theologians and thinkers do is to liberate religions from their passivity and self-centredness and make them dynamic realities affecting man in the totality of his life. Religions should develop a strategy through which all religions together can face the common problems of humanity, whether they be those arising out of affluence and materialism or those originating from poverty, over population and unemployment. With this perspective in mind the following problems were raised for discussion:

- 1) How far can the authentic understanding of religious faith help the modern man to face courageously and effectively his socio-economic and political problems?
- 2) How can the different approaches, to liberation, like the non-violence movement of Mahatma Gandhi, the liberation theology of the South American Church, and Black Theology of liberation be brought together in a single religious perspective?
- 3) How can religions modify their traditional structures to meet the contemporary world situation?

- 4) How can we effectively proclaim today the common message of religions: fellowship of all men in the one family of God, liberation from suffering and misery, fellowship in faith, and eschatological hope?
- 5) In what ways have religions to shift their traditional emphasis to make their teaching appealing to the modern man?
- 6) How can the World Religions in India co-operate towards building up an authentic community of man in a country like India?

Questions are easily raised, but to find answers for them eternal vigilance and constant search is the only way open to men.

*Joseph Patrapankal.*