

FIRE

Fellowship In Religious Experience

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Fellowship in Religious Experience (FIRE) is a programme organised by the Centre for the Study of World Religions, Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore, promoting understanding among religions and inter-religious harmony. It is a creative and fruitful response to religious pluralism in India, and serve as a model for cosmopolitan and metropolitan cities where peoples of different religions and cultures are learning to live together in harmony. FIRE fosters interest and understanding in the religious dimensions of societies and peoples in India, enabling the participants to understand and interpret the diverse religious beliefs and practices. Through a phenomenological and participative approach to the study of religion, the programme shows the uniqueness of each religion with similarities and differences with other traditions. The participants visit sacred places of various religious traditions and share in the spiritual and social life of believers, monks, and nuns. Besides listening to discourses and meditations given by Gurus and Mathas, the participants observe rituals and participate in festivals of these religious and cultural centres.

Varieties of religious experience is a fact of our living and a fellowship programme is designed to cultivate an attitude for all believers. The programme shares in the ancient Indian understanding, *ekam sat vipraha bahuda vadanthi* (the truth is one; the scholars speak in various ways) and is giving a practical expression to the Catholic Church's teaching:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people ... The Church, therefore, exhorts her children, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with

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prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these people.¹

Fides querens harmonium vitae (faith seeking harmony of life) is the motto of the programme.² In the Catholic tradition this sharing is an instance of *communitio in sacris*, allowing the participants to live the unity and integration religions envisage by sharing in the sacred symbols, rites, or myths the world religions provide.

Religion can be fruitfully compared to fire, a singularly unique natural element in the life of human beings. Fire is used by nearly every human being on earth in a controlled setting every day. Since early time, human beings had experienced the heat and light generated by natural occurrences in the form of lightning, forest fires, and volcanic eruption. Learning the art of making and controlling the fire to their benefits brought dramatic changes in the habits of early human beings and paved way for their transition from nomads to settlers. Fire became important to humankind for several reasons, including cooking, light, warmth and protection from animals on the hunt. Fire is used as a tool in landscape management, especially for agricultural purpose. Fire has also been used for centuries as a method of torture and execution. Hunter-gatherer groups around the world used grass and forest fires to injure their enemies and destroy their ability to find food.

In those days, fire was very precious, it required constant attention and was kept in a special place, the hearth. They took extreme pains to produce fire and watched attentively and lovingly over the live coals on their hearth, whereas today when flames can be produced instantly by striking a match we are inclined to lose sight of the importance of fire. For the early settlers, however, most activities, such as cooking, eating, socializing and sleeping, were centred around the hearth. It also became a focus for social gatherings and an early symbol of religious thought and ritual. Fire in many ancient cultures and myths has been known to purify

¹*Nostra aetate*, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, 2. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html. Retrieved 3 March, 2010. See the full text in pages 85-89.

²Theology was considered traditionally as *fides querens intellectum* – faith seeking understanding. The visionary bishop Jonas Thaliath suggested a new attitude with his definition of theology as faith seeking harmony of life. His vision is given in “*Harmoniam Vitae: Dharmaram Vision of Theological Formation*,” 91-95.

the land with the flames of destruction; however, it is also capable of the renewal of life through the warmth and comfort of those very same flames.

Fire, the provider of heat and light and the source of life and growth, has been the centre of religious rituals in many traditions. In the Indian tradition, Agni (fire) is one of the most important Vedic gods and serves as a central element in the Yajna, playing the role as mediator between the worshipper and the other gods. He is ever-young, because the fire is re-lit every day, yet he is also immortal. The figure dancing Shiva carries fire, the instrument of destruction, in one hand and in the other, a musical instrument, representing creation. Through the symbols of drum and fire, Shiva is pointing to the creation and the destruction that follow each other in the universe. In Buddha's teachings, light is the symbol of truth that dispels the darkness of ignorance. Zarathushtra reformed the fire cult and made it the symbol par excellence of Ahura Mazda. Zoroastrians consider fire to be an agent of purity and as a symbol of righteousness and truth, and keep it burning in their temples. Traditionally, fire has represented the active and masculine or the Yang of Chinese symbolism. The Aztec of Mexico and the Inca of Peru worshiped gods of fire with sacred flames, which the Inca ignited from the Sun's rays. Fire rituals were also very important to the Celts. In one Greek myth, Prometheus stole fire from the gods to protect the otherwise helpless humans, but was punished for this charity. Fire is also an element of theophany in the Hebrew Bible (Burning bush, Pillar of Fire). In the New Testament the Holy Spirit is manifested as "tongues of flame." Dias, candles, censers and ancient imagery continue to reflect the mysterious nature of fire.

The spectacular glory of the lightning have profoundly impressed our ancestors and have caused them to regard it as divinely hurled from heaven to earth by the god, for good or for evil. Not only lightning but also every formation of fire reflected in some measure the splendour and the power of god. Fire represents many things to many people and cultures. It is recognized as a purifier, a destroyer and as the generative power of life, energy and change. It represents illumination and enlightenment, destruction and renewal, spirituality and damnation. Fire represents the creativity and passion that all intellectual and emotional beings have. It is an active force that has the passion to create and animate things. The opposing values of good and evil can be attributed to fire: it is cookery and apocalypse; it is warmth and torture; it creates and destroys; it shines in paradise and burns in hell. Poets and creative writers speak of the fire of

inspiration, the fire of love, the fire of righteousness, the fire of emotion, the fire of compassion, the fire of devotion, the fire of the life, etc.

Like fire, religion is also a singularly unique element in the human history. It is divine and human; it is used for good and evil. Religions are the personal and social expression of the religious conscience of people. There were no civilisations that did not have altars to offer prayers and sacrifices. Majority of humankind continue to believe in the divine and follow one or other religions.

Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?³

What unites all religions today is their common search for answers for the fundamental riddles of life, regarding origin, final goal, meaning of suffering, and the like. In different ways they look for answers, and the commonality of search constitutes an inter-communion of religions.⁴

Fellowship in Religious Experience (FIRE) promotes frank and friendly contact for the good of the entire community and seeks the values inherent in the various religions. This is done with a view to reciprocal acquaintance and enrichment in the matter of moral and spiritual values, in an atmosphere of friendship, mutual respect and liberty. As Pope Paul VI said, during his visit to India, “We must meet as pilgrims who have set out to look for God, not in buildings of stone, but in the hearts of men.”⁵ Since God lives in the hearts of all people, people cannot hate each other and the violence in the name of religion is fundamentally against the spirit of religion. The participants of FIRE look with sincere respect upon the ways of conduct and of life, the rules and teachings of other religions which differ in many particulars from what they themselves hold. They reject nothing which is true and holy in these religions. To the knowledge and practice of one’s own faith, participants are given a sufficient idea of the

³*Nostra aetate*, 1.

⁴Aykara, “Foreword” in John Britto Chethimattam, *Towards a Theology of Intercommunion*, Rome and Bangalore: CIIS and Dharmaram Publications, 2001, 9.

⁵Address to Non-Christians in Bombay, December 4, 1964; *Il viaggio di Paolo VI in India*, 77.

religion of those with whom they engage in fellowship experience. It is assumed that there is good in all people and there is also good in every religion, since it is human and everything human preserves the original divine imprint. The participants are encouraged to look for what is luminous, beautiful, noble and great instead of turning instinctively to what is base and ugly.⁶ Participants, thus, become acquainted with the human foundations which God has placed in each culture and in each human being for the edifice of the Spirit. We must begin from these foundations and not from our own when we set about building a civilisation of love.

FIRE recognizes the fact that religion is not primarily an intellectual enterprise, though not without cognitive content; it is a way of life involving reason and passion. It is not the theoretical knowledge and systematic interpretation of the dogmas that normally affect the faith of a believer, but his personal experiences and commitment. Wittgenstein once observed,

I believe: it is through the word ‘believe’ that much terrible disaster has been caused in religion. All the tricky thoughts over the ‘paradox’, the eternal significance of a historical fact and similar things. If, however, instead of ‘belief in Christ’, you say, ‘love of Christ’, the paradox, i.e., the irritation of the intellect, disappears. What has religion to do with such a tickling of intellect? (Also that can for one person or another belong to his religion). Not that one can now say: yes now everything is easy – or intelligible. It is not at all intelligible, it is only not un-intelligible.⁷

FIRE shows us a way to understand other religions and one’s own religion, not to make it intelligible but to show that they are not un-intelligible. This is welcome change and more practical and fruitful way than many a intellectual debate and discourse on religion. Year after year, the participants of the FIRE vouch that they learned more about religion in these noble fellowship sessions than in the scholarly lectures on various religious traditions. Wittgenstein explained the dynamics of learning:

The child learns to believe a host of things. I.e., it learns to act according to these beliefs. Bit by bit there forms a system of what is

⁶*Toward the Meeting of Religions: Suggestions For Dialogue With Members of Non-Christian Religions*, Vatican Secretariat For Non-Christians, September 21, 1967, 5.3.

⁷*Wittgenstein’s Nachlass*, The Bergen Electronic Version, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, MS 183, 238-9: 17, 19.4.37.

believed, and in that system some things stand unshakeably fast and some are more or less liable to shift. What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it.⁸

Like in other aspects of life, religions are also learned and practised bit by bit. There are number of fibres that make up the web of religion and the strength of the web does not depend on any one fibre. The religions are not without the fibre of cognitive content; but what makes them important for the believers is not the conceptual content. FIRE recognizes this fact and turns the attention of the participants to the other aspects of religion. They understand that the believers are not being silly or intellectually irresponsible when they cannot give sufficient and necessary reasons for their basic beliefs. Neither is it ignorance from their part nor is it the case that experts can give the necessary and sufficient reasons. In religion, we are not after a correct doctrine in terms of a verifiable theory. Religion is a life framework which directs the stream of life with commitment and passion. As Wittgenstein observed, ‘A correct doctrine need not take hold of you; you can follow it as you would a doctor’s prescription. – But here you need something to grasp you and turn you around.’⁹ Such passionate commitments are facts of our natural history, facts about how we live, move and have our being. FIRE enables the participants to meet believers in their stream of life where they find meaning and significance for their lives, in a religious manner.

In the life of believers religion is something ‘fundamental’, showing who they are and how they live in the world. At a later stage, a person may deepen his knowledge and experience of God or may lose his faith not typically because of the merit or demerit of a doctrine but because of various experiences in the course of one’s life. Those beliefs that are held fast are so believed not because of their intrinsic rationality but by what lies around them, namely, their form of life. FIRE brings the participants closer to those forms of life. Plurality of religions is not only a fact of life but also a blessing. It is not just something that is to be tolerated, but something precious that is to be celebrated, knowing very well that no religion is superior or inferior or even equal; they are singularly unique.

⁸Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, (eds.), Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969, 144.

⁹Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, G. H. von Wright (ed.), Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980, 53.