

## *Editorial*

# RELIGIONS AND HARMONY OF LIFE

The Earth Charter approved at a meeting of the Earth Charter Commission at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, March 2000 declared:

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.<sup>1</sup>

Religions shoulder great responsibility in achieving these goals. We are earthlings and that is our primary identity; we live move and have our being on earth. As one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny, we are called to live in conversation and collaboration. We have no rational alternative to live in harmony; the other alternative is mad – mutually assured death. From *cogito ergo sum*, (I think, therefore I am), we are to move into *sumus ergo sum*, (we are, therefore I am). Religions can no longer promote a life living in splendid isolation and solitude, contemplating the indwelling spirit in the cave of heart; they are to be alive and meaningful in the hurly-burly of daily human lives, in conversation and collaboration. Dialogue and fellowships are the ways at the threshold of third millennium, for survival, growth and development.

Religions promote peace and harmony in personal and social life – that is the claim of religious believers. Although religion can make a valuable contribution to political life, it can also be a pernicious influence. According to the academia and the media, religions cause violence. To them, the connection between religion and violence is so obvious that it does not need any arguments or proofs. It is often said as a truism, 'more wars have been waged, more people killed, and more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other human institution.' History of religions is marred with so much violence that it is sometimes presented as

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<sup>1</sup>The Earth Charter, <http://www.earthcharter.org>

history violence. Often terror is created and war is waged in the name of God; crusades, Inquisition, witch hunt, suicide bombings, Hindu Muslim attacks in India, Hindu Christian rivalry in Indonesia, etc. are cited as examples. Religions are accused of supplying the kindling that fuels wars and acts of persecution, sparks torture and murder, and inflames ethnic hatred. It is to be noted, however, that the most destructive acts of violence in the last century – World Wars, Nazism, Fascism, use of atomic weapons, atrocities in Stalinist Russia and Maoist China – were not done in the name of religion. From time immemorial people fought wars for a variety of reasons like survival, land, power, and ideologies; in most of the wars, religion played very little direct role, though the warriors often prayed, offered sacrifices to their gods and even attributed to success to their gods. The present day war in Iraq and Afghanistan is also not fought because of religious reasons. Bin Laden's hate for the West is not because the West is Christian, but the policies of the west. The September 11 attack on the World Trade Centre, however, was given a religious twist and was carried out in the name of Allah, as part of the holy war, *jihad*. The Jewish extremist Jigal Amir, who assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, also claimed that he was merely carrying out God's will. Even if none of the violence was caused by religion, religion failed to stop it, and was a useful tool for those perpetuating it. Blaise Pascal is often quoted to show the alleged nexus between religion and violence: "Men never do evil so cheerfully and so completely as when they do so from religious conviction."

Do religions cause violence; or do they promote harmony? is the question that Journal of Dharma addresses in this issue on "Religion and Politics of Violence." Religion, politics and violence are concepts with blurred edges. Though they are common terms in our daily conversations they defy clear definitions. We do not have necessary and sufficient conditions to name something as religion, politics and violence; yet we understand the terms when we use them. Whether something is a religion or not is generally interesting only for the academia. Whether Buddhism is a religion, because Buddhists do not believe in a personal God, whether nationalism is a religion because people are so passionately committed to it that they are ready to die and to kill for it and similar questions are for the academia. Religion, politics and violence are facts of our daily life, providing a vicious triangle in which religiously justified violence functions as means to political ends. Religiously justified violence differs

from political violence in that it is symbolic, absolutist, and transcends space and time in its goals. The crusaders in the past and the suicide bombers today are assured that they are doing God's will and will be rewarded in heaven. The religions that promise heaven afterwards seem to create a veritable hell on earth, for themselves and for others.

The Republic of India, home to one fifth of humanity, is a secular, constitutional democracy. Mass poverty and religiosity of the people are characteristics of India: India is home to a third of the world's poor, and the majority of the population practice religion. Corruption infects every corridor of power, economy and society are dragged toward a skewed vision of the twenty first century, without debate, without scrutiny, and under the delusion that 'there is no alternative'. Indian history, ancient and medieval, colonial and contemporary, is also marred with serious acts of religious violence in spite of India's religious heritage in the past and the secular constitution in the present. The root causes of religious violence run deep in history, religious activities, and politics of India. Religion plays an increasing role in reinforcing ethnic, linguistic and class divides among the people. As in other countries, religious fights were never only for religious reasons; there were political, economical, and ethnical reasons. Those who were in power often used, misused and abused the religions for their own benefits. They called for fighting in the name of God, but people were fighting for the goals of those who are in power. There exists unholy nexus between the priests and rulers.

Fellowship in Religious Experience (FIRE) is a programme conducted by the Centre for the Study of World Religions. Religion is fire. It is vital for human life, enhancing the quality of life, but can also provoke hatred and destruction. The absolutistic, divisive, exclusive and irrational elements in religions bring mutually assured destruction, whereas the values of truth, love, peace, forgiveness, service, sacrifice, etc. instilled by religion bring peace and prosperity. We need to strengthen fellowship in religious experiences, first of all, by accepting and celebrating differences. Truth and holiness is not the monopoly of any religious tradition. Absolutistic and divisive claims are to be rejected in view of what is common for all. The participants visit sacred places of religious traditions and share in the religious and social life of believers, monks, and nuns. Besides listening to discourses and meditations given by Gurus and Mathas, the participants share meals, observe rituals and participate in festivals of these religious and cultural centres. 'If God dwells in the heart

of people who dare to hate whom?’ asks Mahatma Gandhi. The Catholic Church, in the document on other religions, exhorted her children to ‘recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among other religions’ ‘through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions.’<sup>2</sup> We should develop an attitude that celebrates what is true and good in other religions, traditions and cultures. This would promote a dialogue of religions rather than a clash of civilisations. The hermeneutics of suspicion and belief can provoke a vicious circle, believing blindly one’s own and suspecting and demonising other beliefs; it can promote a vital circle, critically examining one’s own beliefs and respecting other beliefs.

Religions remind us that we are earthlings, human and divine; these three realms intermingle and flow together in the stream of lives. As earthlings, we are rooted in nature and are called to work on the earth; as human beings we belong to a community; and as God’s creation, we are created in the image of God, with a capacity to integrate these three realms into a harmony of life, according to God’s plan. According to Bishop Jonas Thaliath, the mastermind of Dharmaram, theological education is *Fides querens harmoniam vitae* (Faith seeking harmony of life). He suggested this as a complement to the medieval dictum: *fides querens intellectum* (Faith seeking intellection), as understanding is only one important aspect of theological formation. Through participative approaches to the study of religion, we could understand and celebrate the uniqueness of each religion with similarities and differences with other traditions. The goal of theology and religion is harmony of life.

The scholarly articles in this volume of the Journal of Dharma critically and creatively analyze the complex triad of religion, politics and violence and suggest possible solutions. In presenting the fruits of their research, in this volume, I thank most sincerely Prof. Saju Chackalackal, the outgoing chief editor, who brought the Journal of Dharma to new horizons during the last seven years, through his committed service and erudite scholarship in the fields of philosophy and religion. He will continue to serve the Journal as the Review Editor and promised his expertise and assistance in every way possible. At present he is the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram.

Jose Nandhikkara, *Chief Editor*

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<sup>2</sup>“Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religion,” Vatican Council II: 1965, n. 2.