

STATEMENT OF THE CMI THEOLOGICAL FORUM

Indian Ecclesia: An Interreligious Community

1. We, thirty three members of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) held a colloquium from Feb. 4 to 7, 1999, at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore which was the first meeting of the CMI Theological Forum on the theme: **Indian Ecclesia: An Interreligious Community**.
2. We find the present increasing animosity against Indian Christians on the part of some Hindu fundamentalists a great challenge and an invitation to engage in a prayerful reflection on the Christian approach to and outlook on other religions. Actually our mission of continuing God's dialogue of salvation with humanity is inspired, not by any rivalry with other religions, but in full collaboration with them in our common search for the Kingdom of God and for answers to the existential riddles of human life. The Indian Church itself was originally inspired by the apostolic spirit of St. Thomas who left behind his own Palestinian culture to identify himself with the aspirations of the Indian people. We believe that Jesus himself represents God's plan to lead humanity to its fulfilment. Hence we understand that the church itself is an interreligious reality, which presents the Word and the Spirit as active in the hearts of people, striving after peace and justice through human fellowship in a multi-religious context. Christian ministry of active witness, authentic interreligious spirituality and humble service to all our fellow human beings have to be 'contextually' envisaged and 'critically' realised taking into account the interreligious nature of Indian culture and society.
3. We humbly recognise that sometimes in the past Christian mission work was characterised by a certain sense of religious exclusivism and superiority in its attitude to the religions of world. Even today, our approach to religious mysteries is not completely free from a Graeco-Western methodology. Actually what should have been the attitude on the part of Christianity was one of gratefulness to and appreciation of Indian religions for proclaiming the sacredness of life in the midst of human suffering and attempting to deepen our insight into the mystery of

life. Indian religious traditions made it plain that only through the practice of sacrifice and the discipline of detachment can we accept, without overwhelming despair, the facts of life's corruptibility and death.

4. The St. Thomas Christians of Kerala showed how they could combine the ancient culture of India with the Christian faith brought straight from the Master, Jesus Christ. Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Christians, Jews and later Muslims, both Indian and foreign, lived in our country in symbiotic harmony. Each religion brought to this common socio-cultural fabric not only a creed but also its own specific way of life. Though small communities of Christians did live at different times in various parts of India, it was in Kerala that they gained a symbiotic fellowship with people of other faiths. They were able to incorporate in their religious tradition various elements from Indian religious culture. Besides, the Indian Church had the unique experience of being from its very origin in the midst of other religions forming themselves as one people of God with people of other faiths. Each of them interpreted the one divine gift of faith differently in the light of their differing historical situations, cultures and life orientations. Christians have to recognise that the interpretations given by other religions have a certain normativeness for them too since they may be emphasising certain dimensions neglected by them in their own understanding and praxis. This is a contemporary heightened understanding of the church in the dialogical context of multi-religious and multi-cultural India.

5. Before vested interests split the community into artificial blocks as touchables and untouchables, scheduled and unscheduled castes and classes, the St. Thomas Christians identified themselves with their socio-cultural milieu with the consciousness that God becoming human assumed everything human and redeemed all social and

cultural values. Their long encounter with the Hindus helped them to develop a style of life implying theological vision of other faiths. The Indian community today has to retrieve this vision of one people united by their experience of God.

6. Among the various gifts of God to humanity are the prophets and gurus who initiated new historical religious movements at critical

moments of history like Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Zorastorianism, Jainism. According to Christian faith Jesus Christ, at the same time both Son of God and son of man, is unique. Only through the Son of God humans get the possibility of becoming adopted sons and daughters of God. Jesus' uniqueness, however, is not a denial of the unique roles played by other mediators and agents of human salvation since each one of them had a distinctive role and function in the respective tradition interpreting salvation in a specific way for all humanity.

7. The task of Christians is to communicate to others the truth of and faith in the Incarnation. Besides the various prophets and sages through whom God has spoken to humanity in various ways and at different times, the Incarnation of the Son as Jesus of Nazareth enhances and compliments what was already communicated and revealed in the religions of the world. The unique message embodied in the Incarnation is the assurance that God is not a monistic impersonal One but a Communion and Love and, that humans are called to participate in this Love-Communion which is salvation.

8. Christianity, continuing the universal mission of Jesus, maintains its continuity with the community of his disciples with a certain discontinuity with regard to its structures. Its attitude is not one of antagonism or condescension towards other religions but of active collaboration. This community of the disciples reaches out to all humanity in a visible way through its celebration of the living memorial of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the continued preaching of the Gospel of human salvation accomplished for all. This outreach to all is invisibly accomplished by the presence of the Risen Jesus and the Spirit in all human beings.

9. The Church is not a dominant theme in any of the New Testament writings and much of its development in the West came from the imperial structure of Rome, which needs a good deal of timely correction, especially a move away from the pyramidal structure of authority. Located in the socio-political context of history the church needs continuous reform. Still its development according to the

circumstances was and is guided by the Spirit, and is according to the mind of Christ. Communicating to all the historical fact of what God did in Jesus for the sake of all humanity, it joins all other religions in the common search for answers to the riddles of life, and serves as a catalyst to bring out clearly the unique contributions of other religions.

10. Against the background of the wide horizon illumined and animated by the Holy Spirit, an interreligious communion has to create appropriate aesthetic expressions to witness to faith and life, and to recognise, preserve and foster the spiritual, moral and socio-cultural values of all religions. This has to come first in the lived experience of fellowship of a multi-religious and multi-cultural fellowship that will invite all to be bearers of life and joy to all peoples. In this connection we appreciate very much the special recognition accorded by the Viswa Hindu Parishad to Swami Sadanand CMI of Saccidananda Ashram, Narasingur, for evolving a life-style in tune with the local culture and Indian tradition.

11. Prayer is the one communal experience that shows forth the presence of the Spirit, and fellowship in prayer and penance should help to bring people together. Similarly, working together for breaking down traditional structures of injustice and oppression and rectifying cases of injustice and helping people on the lowest economic rung of society to help themselves to achieve freedom and self-reliance should characterise an interreligious 'ecclesia' that loves not merely in word and by tongue but in reality in deed and truth.

12. What is specific to human creativity is the transformation it effects on material things to bring out a spiritual meaning. Persons engaged in this creative work participate in the same transformation and attain a corresponding spiritual experience. Every spiritual *sadhana* or activity produces symbols that correspond to the inner experience of the *sadhaka*. But, every cultural symbol, whether religious or social, needs continuous examination and honest self-criticism and the service of mutual criticism, so that it really expresses what it professes to do and human fellowship in society is based on truth and mutual respect.

13. We are deeply disturbed by the recent heightened activity of certain Christian fundamentalist groups and certain individuals who in the name

of *Christu-Jayanti* of the year 2000 denigrate other religions and distort their scriptures. They often engage in a questionable 'apostolate' not in consonance with the spirit of the Good News and without being sympathetic to the sensibilities of the Indian multi-religious context and societal harmony for all God's people. This surely goes against the spirit of the Gospel, which announces salvation free from all cultural identifications. It is to be mentioned here that the policy of high ecclesiastical authorities who are stuck in the traditional method of theologising has to become more sympathetic to contemporary theologians who try to interpret Jesus' message in the matrix of interreligious vision and experience.

14. We are also very much pained by the action being taken by certain Hindu groups against Christians such as the burning alive of Mr. Graham Stewart Steins, the Australian missionary and his two sons, rape of several religious sisters in different parts of the country, attacks on tribal Christians and the burning of their churches in Gujarat. Priests have been executed, Bibles burnt, churches demolished, educational institutions destroyed and religious people harassed. Explicit statements of many Hindu leaders like the RSS leaders Rajendra Singh and Prem Chand, the secretary of VHP and Ashok Singhal its president, suggest that these events are not accidental but that there is a hidden agenda and a conspiracy behind them to extirpate Christianity from India. This goes counter to the age-old religious traditions of India which always welcomed, tolerated and encouraged a great diversity of cultures, creeds, ritual traditions all under the one ideal of the *pancasila* led by the values of truth and *ahimsa*. It must also be pointed out that the antagonism, exclusivism and fanaticism of the Hindu fundamentalists is the very denial of the essence of Hindu Dharma which is universal, all-inclusive, tolerant and synthetic.

15. This violence specially directed against the service rendered to the poorest of the poor clearly appears to be an attempt to maintain and reinforce the hegemony of the rich and powerful castes and classes over the weaker sections of our society that constitute the largest majority. Hue and cry against conversions are intended to camouflage the effort to keep the downtrodden always under the structures of oppression. Our

answer to this overt evil design of some misguided groups and individuals is not any legal appeal to the Constitutional rights of the minority nor a defence of the secular fabric of our society, nor even leading protest marches to show the political might of one group or another. CMI Forum appeals to the genuine religious conscience of our nation, which considered all the people of Bharata as one, among whom some happen to be Hindus, some Muslims, some Christians and followers of other religions. They all belong to the same divine plan of salvation and are led by God from the interior of their hearts to pursue the path of salvation pointed out by all our religious leaders like Buddha, Mohammed and Jesus.

16. In the spirit of one interreligious *ecclesia* of India we have to re-organise our dialogue programmes from talk about our interreligious differences to a common effort to face together the needs and problems of our country. Hence our schools and colleges besides being merely official dispensers of degrees and certificates must engage directly in the task of dismantling the structures of oppression and building up social democracy by programmes of social awareness and conscientisation. Indian religiosity is a holistic and comprehensive vision and approach in which no aspect of human life, either personal or social, is left out. Interreligious dialogue in which each religion makes its own unique contribution to human salvation has become an important part of evangelisation. Many of the activities in our mission areas can be implemented on an interreligious basis. Thus, there can be interreligious advisory bodies to help our institutions, have interreligious prayer meetings as a regular feature, and accept promotion of harmony among religions as a declared objective.

17. Finally, we feel that all people of India should unite in the basic value of *Ahimsa* and Truth, both physical and intellectual. Respect for all life sees in every living being a manifestation of the *atman*, that according to the Upanishads is smaller than the small and greater than the great residing in the heart of every being. This is also the common ground of religious faith that sees in all things the Creator in whose image all things, especially the humans, are created according to the Bible. When you did it to the least of my brethren you did it to me is the

norm of final judgement according to Jesus. Only by discovering the Divine in the humanum of our fellow beings and seeing the basic unity in the divine gift of faith can people of all religions live in peace and fellowship and move with confidence into a future, that offers hope even to the last and the least of the human family.

Fr. Antony Kalliath

Co-ordinator and Secretary

Dharmaram College, Bangalore 29