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HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE CHURCH

Editorial

The concern for human rights is one of the most noteworthy features of humanity's collective consciousness at the turn of the third millennium. Men and women of good will from all cultures and countries, religions and ideologies are becoming more aware of the numerous and widespread violations of human rights and are, in increasing numbers, coming to the realization that unless they join their forces to put an end to such violations their very humanness would stand compromised. Such awareness is giving rise to so many groups and organizations that have dedicated themselves to the task of safeguarding human rights.

Human rights violations are, of course, not new in human history. From the earliest periods of recorded history there have been so many incidents of human rights violations, sometimes of the most heinous and horrifying kinds. The powerful individuals and groups have almost everywhere perpetrated crimes and unleashed oppressions of the most cruel sorts on the weaker sections of the populations. Military conquest and sheer difference in race, religion, caste or colour have been used as pretexts to justify economic exploitation, deprivation of the most basic rights and to consigning peoples to conditions no better than slavery.

Contact between cultures and religions, criticism by humanistic thinkers and ideologies and the spread of modern media of communication with their enormous power to realistically picture the poignant condition of the victims have greatly contributed to the heightening of humanity's moral consciousness with regard to the violations of human rights near or far. As a result we have been sensitized not only to recognize the age old violations that have far so

long remained unnoticed but also the new and the more subtle ones that have resulted from the new economic order of globalization, liberalization and unbridled privatization and the associated alien cultural domination.

Assurance of human rights is one of the basic and concrete ways by which a society acknowledges and expresses the dignity due to the human person. They are rooted in the human person's inviolability and his or her irreducibility to the state of a means. They ensure the needed space for every individual to preserve his or her personal identity and integrity and to grow and contribute as a full member of the society. They also provide a firm foundation on which a society that is humane in its structures and harmonious in its functioning can be built up. In fact, one of the surest yardsticks by which the quality of any society or culture can be judged is the measure in which it safeguards and promotes the rights of all its members and particularly its least and last.

For the religious believers, however, human rights have an anchoring that is much deeper and far nobler. In so far as the human person is created in the very image and likeness of God human rights have roots that go beyond the human and reach to God himself. Along with this recognition of the true foundation of the human rights comes the obligation of the religions to secure and promote them in their societies. But unfortunately the track records of religions in this regard are far from being creditable. Some of the worst kinds of human rights violations in human history have been carried out by or with the support of religions. Christianity is no exception to this.

The Indian society and culture are built on foundations that are deeply religious. But such foundations seem basically flawed in so far as human rights violations are inbuilt into them due to their sanctioning of evils such as the caste system and patriarchy. The advent and spread of Islam and Christianity have not made much of a difference in this state of affairs. Despite such a past, religions do have the needed resources that can contribute effectively to the eradication of human rights violations in India. Christianity in particular has a singular role to play in this regard. The articles in this issue of *Vaiharai* are attempts to facilitate such a contribution.

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