In this thesis are discussed two controversies — one about idol worship, the other about conversion — as they have taken place in the history of the relationship between the Hindus and the Christians. The Christian point of view was represented by mostly the missionaries, and the Hindu point of view by Raja Ram Mohun Roy, Swami Dayananda Saraswathi and Mahatma Gandhi.

(a) According to the Christian point of view, idol worship was idolatry; it was to treat an object as it were God. The objection to idol worship found a sympathetic echo both in RR and DS; but not for the same reasons as in the case of the Christians who objected to it. RR objected also on account of the kind of worship offered; and DS also on account of the fact that the Vedas did not contain such worship.

But Gandhi did not find the worship of idols objectionable: (i) The idol was a symbol. (ii) There is no worship in which some kind of symbolism is not involved; and a distinction between symbol and symbol is one not of principle; but one based on personal background, performance etc. (iii) There is no reason to condemn idol worship on account...
of evils that might be associated with it. This might happen to any symbol. Of course when that happens, a great religious leader wants to change the symbol — and he might succeed in doing so; but not to professors of religion.

If Gandhi's account is more acceptable, then the Christian point of view, as also the points of view of RS and DS, misunderstand their own religion and those religions of the others; misunderstand the function of worship. Whereas Gandhi understand the function of worship and therefore there is no misunderstanding of the function of idol worship. The function is self-purification.

(b) Conversion, according to the Christian point of view, was justified by (i) the superior rationality of their beliefs/theories; (ii) by the absence of morally repugnant practices/rituals; (iii) by the fact that only in Christianity and through Christ there can be salvation, and (iv) by the fact that it has been enjoined to spread the good news to all nations.

According to the Hindu point of view, there is no superior rationality (RR), the morally repugnant practices are either not so; or are excrescences and not really part of the real (Vedic) Hinduism and even if there were actually in the post-Vedic Hinduism they could be removed (DS); and
there can be salvation otherwise; and what is propagating the good-news of Christ? (Gandhi)

(One of the important theoretical questions could be of the interrelationship between these different aspects)

What is propagating the Good-News of Christ? Surely it is not merely practice. It also means freedom to convert.

Yes, but the motives, methods and consequences, show that it is not merely propagating the Good News of Christ — it is many things besides. And this will throw doubt on the issue of whether it is propagating the Good News of Christ.

But surely this is not so. It is propagating the Good News of Christ, because motives are good, methods need not be against the aim of propagating the Good News of Christ; and the consequences also need not be there politically or socially detrimental to the parent community. Whatever problems arise, could be solved by inculturation etc.

At this stage the controversy can hardly be settled. It can result in wrangling about motives, methods and consequences.

There can be two ways of meeting the situation. One is practical; another theoretical. The practical way will be one side simply enacting the Law and banning the conversion;
the other side simply going on protesting against such legislative measures, with a view to claiming their freedom. But the difficulty of proving the case on either side cannot make the anti-conversionists to follow the way they want to, can neither support the pro-conversionists' claim to the right of freedom which they want to.

The theoretical way of meeting the situation is to see the relationship between the different elements and see the function of each in religion. This will once again show that the theories and practices can vary, without affecting the fundamental goal of religion. This is acceptable also to Christians.

If this is right, then the claims for conversion are to be modified; and there can be no total ban on conversion. People should really be neither for conversions nor against conversions, but for religious living. But if on account of an eminently religious life, conversions occur naturally and spontaneously, or when they occur on account of rare, and genuine circumstantial factors, there will not be any problem. Even if any, it will be very marginal and easily manageable.

(c) In the thesis is also considered the issue of the interpretation of scriptures. This controversy, in so far as it is a controversy, is generally within religion and not inter-religious. Our discussion revealed that there is always
selection, isolation, emphasis of texts either to condemn or meet condemnation. The missionaries emphasizing certain texts (missionary) of the New Testament in isolation, found support for their 'quick' conversions. And basing themselves on other texts, they condemned Hinduism as idolatry. The interpretation of RR and DS was no different from the missionaries. They shared with the missionaries presuppositions (regarding one type of theory as against another, and one type of worship as against another) and accordingly their interpretations of their own scriptures was not varied. In the process, they had to reject some portions of scriptures either as no scriptures (DS) or as meant for the ignorant, secondary etc. (RR). Even with regard to what they accepted as scriptures they re-interpreted so as to suit their own theories. But Gandhi's approach was essentially different. He did accept the possibility of re-interpretation of scriptures. But it has to be done in terms of religious life rather than a particular theory or practice. And, bringing out the need of reading the scriptures of other faiths, he said, it could be done only with a view to enriching oneself with the acceptable features of other faiths, never with a view to condemning them or bringing out defective side of other faiths.

Our analysis further showed that the scriptures are not so fixed. They are flexible. However, the flexibility is to be achieved not through attempting to establish certain theory
or practice, but to enable people to live religiously, and to enrich themselves with the acceptable features of every other scriptures.

(ii) **Implications**

In the light of the above, we can derive certain features of the nature of religious controversy.

A religious controversy arises when people of one religion accept the principles and presuppositions of one's own religion as the only correct ones, and tend to judge other religions in terms of the theories and practices that have developed in one's own context.

Even if one accepts one's own religion as true, that will not be a problem, if one approaches another religion with a sympathetic attitude towards it. That is, taking into account the best interpretation of its doctrine, or the best practice of that religion (best meaning that which is followed by a good follower of that religion), and avoiding the historical and sociological factors involved in a practice or theory (which might have been deteriorated or distorted owing to many reasons).

The contention is that what is essential to religion is the question of 'living' not so much theory or practice. Owing to a variety of factors (historical, practical, political
social and even geographical) some sort of theories or practices have developed in different religions differently. But they all aim at tackling the problem of living (the fundamental Predicament of Man). That they all have also tackled it successfully is clear from the similarity of great saints in their variety of models of living, produced in each religion.

In this context, then, it becomes crystal clear that one has to really transcend particular religions and think of Religion as non-denominational. For, the best of one religion corresponds to the best of the other, in spite of certain differences in the concrete expressions of theories and practices, which may be due to a variety of contextual factors. So, with sufficient justification we can say that life is essential to religion, whereas adherence to one type of theory or a particular type of practice are not that essential although some theory and some practice are important.

If this is realized by the followers of different religions many controversies would have been avoided.

Another important point to be noted in the controversies is that sometimes both the critics of a particular religion and the adherents of that religion might agree that some specific point was wrong in that religion (i.e. RR and DS agreed with the missionaries that idolatry as a form of worship was bad). But that need not be correct. Even though
it might have been true as a matter of fact, there is no reason to think that it was bad in principle.

This suggests that one should give the 'best' understanding of a practice or a theory before judging it, (best meaning not only the best as it existed, but the best possible understanding one could give to it). This sort of best understanding of a practice or theory of a given practice or a theory in a religion comes from partly what that religion offers, and partly what one creates out of it.

Now when one is making a 'creative response' to one's own religious theory or practice, i.e., when one is purifying one's religion from the sort of practices of degenerations, imperfections, etc., one must be ready to give that sort of possibility to another religion also. In other words, while one must have readiness to change one's religion, purifying from any degenerations, one must be also ready to give the same readiness to another religion to change.

If this is right, then the most-held idea that religions cannot be modernized is untenable. People often think that they can modernize every department of human endeavour, economics, politics, technology etc., but religion cannot be modernized, because religion is regarded by communities as fixed, unchanging. But as we have shown in the different chapters of our thesis, people are flexible in the understanding
of their religions as they tackle various problems, in the different circumstances, according to the varied needs. And most religions think that they do it successfully, whatever others might say about it.

As a result, one cannot say that 'this' religion is superior or 'that' religion is inferior on the basis of a given understanding of religions. This is so not only in the case of the usually called 'higher' religions, but is also in the case of all religions, including Khasi Religion and Naga Religion.¹

If the implications, we have derived from the features of controversies, are correct, we can further derive something about the nature of religions too. That is, if it is correct that (i) 'life' is essential in religion, and not so much a theory or practice, and that (ii) every religion can 'grow' and be 'modernized', then, it is true to say that (a) no religion can claim superior to another or others either in terms of theory/practice etc., and that (b) no religion can be said to be inadequate on the ground that it cannot come to be the best, whatever be that best may be. And in so far as this is so, knowledge of other religions, either by contact or by reading about other religions, or dialogue with other religions, cannot be used for negative or derogatory purposes, say for instance to condemn another but only to bring out
what is perhaps already contained in that religion, or to enrich one's own with all the acceptable features from other religions.

(iii) Practical bearing

If we are justified in this understanding of religion, we will be able to find in it the answer to the very first question we raised in the Introduction: "Which of the four relationships is the right relationship between religions?"

Obviously the first of the relationships, mentioned therein, cannot be the right type. Even the second type of relationship, viz., that of 'mutual tolerance' cannot be the right one. For, 'toleration' implies a non-recognition of the other as the other, and even a gratuitous assumption of the inferiority of the other faiths to one's own. It is actually an affirmation of superiority in a subtle way. The 'relationship of dialogue' overcomes this drawback. It recognizes the other and is willing to learn about the other, and listen to the other. But knowing the other, with all its limitations and imperfections may not give rise to the right type of relationship, and even may do a greater harm to establishing a healthy relationship, unless there is respect and reverence for the other faiths. All the religions should realize that each one of them has both truth as well as imperfections, and that each one of them has the need and ability to 'modernize'
herself, by removing its own imperfections in the context of others' encounters, and also enriching oneself by accepting the good feature of other religions. Thus the idea of 'complementarity' of religions which, we hope to have brought out in our inquiry will contribute a great deal towards making the inter-religions dialogue more mature and fruitful.

The practical bearing of each of the issues we have discussed is also of great significance. Thus our findings of the issue on Idolatry (viz. that the so-called idolatry is not intrinsically evil, and that even a worship without idols can become idolatrous and superstitious), if born in mind by the different kinds of worshippers in a community, many of the riots arising on the basis that an idol procession has passed by this street could have been avoided. Many of the destruction of temples, and consequent rivalries between two communities with different forms of worship could also have been avoided.2

In the case of issue of conversion our analysis showed that conversion is not intrinsically wrong. But it is extremely difficult in most cases to decide whether it is right or not. And therefore one has to have conversions which are fairly clear. Otherwise they may have many undesirable consequences. If only this is realized by people, then both the parties to the controversy about 'Law and Conversion'
would not hold on to what they try to hold on. Thus, if the methods cannot be proved legitimate or illegitimate, and if motives and consequences of conversions cannot be proved to be religious or non-religious, then the Law-supporters cannot think of a legal ban on conversion. And precisely for the very same reasons those who claim for freedom to 'convert' also cannot do so. Rather, both the parties will try to promote the real religious cause of making the men of different religions to live up to their own faith in a much better way, so that many more saints are produced in each one's faith, and that people even remaining in their own faith get converted truly, in the sense of self-purification and Self-realization.

As regards the issue of the Interpretation of Scriptures, we have concluded that there is enough flexibility within the scriptures of one religion itself to accommodate to many changes, circumstances, theories etc. If only the great truth implied in this is realized (viz. that the word of God remains the same, but the spirit of it is ever widening), then many of the religions would not have struck only one type of interpretation so as to suit one particular theory or practice only, but rather would have shown readiness to re-interpret them according to the needs of the times. This does not mean that one could re-interpret the scriptures unanimously. The re-interpretation has to be done according to the eternal principles of living, namely Truth,
and
Non-Violence

Reason (Morality). If this was realized say in Christianity of 17th century, perhaps the stand of the Church at the time of the Reformation, would not have been what it was, and consequently the great division would not have taken place; or at least one of the major causes of the separation could have been avoided.

(iv) Theoretical hearing

The understanding of religion we have arrived at will also have a great theoretical bearing upon many disciplines like Comparative Religion, Sociology of Religion, History of Religion, Psychology of Religion, so on and so forth. To substantiate our contention just with one example we may illustrate it with reference to comparative Religion. There has been a consistent trend among the scholars of this discipline to think that there is no fundamental unity among the different religions of the world. In the first quarter of the present century, in J.N. Farquhar's The Crown of Hinduism, "a straightforward essay in Comparative Religion" it was maintained "the highest manifestations of Christianity are taken to 'fulfil' the highest manifestations of Hinduism." The implication was that Hinduism even in its highest form was no religion, but was to be complemented by Christianity. Later, Prof. Zaehner, referring to another work which tried to show that there is a fundamental unity underlying all the great religions,
expressed his wish that that "attempt was worth making if only to show that no such unity can, in fact, be discerned."° Recently, H. Kraemer, commented that the features of the different religions, "in spite of their relative similarity they are too indefinite in the matter of real content, to be capable of expressing the real essence of each one of the religions, let alone of including within their general scope what is alike valid for and essential to all the religions." 7 When one examines some very basic features of various religions, e.g., salvation, revelation etc. one can find out "that both features and terms have connotations not merely radically different, but mutually irreconcilable."°

The failure on the part of these authors to see the unity of religions is indeed correct, given their method of procedure. They approach the different religions with a view to finding univocal concept, in all religions. And obviously, they fail in their attempts. But given the method of our approach, viz. the lives of great saints as the essence of religions it is easy to see where the Comparative Religion has gone wrong, and where one ought to find the fundamental unity of religions. Given the fact that saints of a particular religious framework represent the highest possibilities of life within that framework, and given that the essence of religion is religious life, it follows that comparative
Religion should focus not on doctrines/theories/beliefs/practicals/rituals etc., but on the examples of saintly life.

Another mistake that has been committed by the well-known scholars of Comparative Religion seems to be that they have attempted to see the possibilities of 'modernization' of their own religion: "I see my own religion, Catholic Christianity, in terms of creative evolution, but an evolution in which each of the world religions has or will have its distinctive and individual part to play.... I venture to think that there is much in Eastern Religion that is still valid, and it is my hope to show in these lectures that not only is this so, but that Christianity has much to learn from them, much indeed it must learn from them if it is ever to become not in name only but in truth the Catholic Church whose very name, as Augustine saw, implies that it was designed by its founder to become the religion of the whole human race."  

Here, what he holds in the first part of the extract remains unquestionable, indeed. For, any genuine follower of a religion is sure to think that one's religion enriches itself with the knowledge of new religious encounters. But will he grant the same possibilities to other religions to modernize themselves? This is a big question. But actually Z. does not seem to have the intention to give this such
possibilities to other religions. This is clear from what he says at the end of the above extract. He only wants to see his own religion as the religion of the whole human race. This shows clearly his partisan approach to the study of religions, which is precisely thwarted by the understanding of religions we have developed in our thesis. Hence, we can safely contend that the conclusions of our thesis will have a great bearing upon Comparative Religion. If we are right then what has gone on in the name of Comparative Religion cannot go on the same lines, with the same presuppositions, as in the past.

The principles of understanding religions, which we have arrived at, if accepted, will have a great bearing on Sociology of Religion also. For, if an attempt to understand a religion should not be done on the basis of one's own presuppositions and theories etc., but on the basis of the lives of saints and its founder etc., then, one cannot claim to be doing the right type of Sociology of Religion, by raising such questions as: "Whether the belief in God is there in this society or not," and so on and so forth. Rather, they will start their investigation on such questions as: Whether are there great lives of saints in that society? What are the peaks of attainment? What sort of influence have they on the society's beliefs, practices and so on?
Likewise, our principles of understanding religions will have great consequences for studying what is normally known as History of Religion. For, what is important in the History of Religion say of Christianity is to find answers to such questions as the following: What was the life of the followers of Christ? How far were the tenets of Christianity understood and practised? How far was the Christic experience imbibed by the people? and What was its influence on others? Where were the saints? What did they do? Did the followers of Christianity really follow those saints? It is only if such questions are raised and answers sought for then it could be history of religion in the proper sense.

In the same way we hope that our principles of understanding religions could also affect Psychology of Religion and other related fields of academic interest in religion.

(v) The Limitations and the Strength

The limitations as well as the strength of our attempt derive from the fact that it has considered the controversies not hypothetically, (and therefore not merely theoretically, only on the basis of fundamental metaphysical considerations), but rather in reference to controversies that have actually taken place. No attempt has been made to formulate additional arguments for/against the positions mentioned, though we have attempted to formulate the basic presuppositions so as to
bring out the relationship between theoretical foundations and concrete details. We have attempted to formulate the arguments on both sides with fairness and impartiality. It is hoped that we have maintained these at least to such an extent that the main contentions of the thesis are not vitiated.

Rising from these actual controversies and our formulations, we have mentioned some of the basic theoretical issues that are involved in those controversies: e.g., in the case of idolatry, the nature and functions of symbols and/or mythology, demythologization; in the case of conversion, not only the question of relationship between motivations, methods and consequences, but the basic question of the sense in which one can talk of truth of a religion; and in the discussion on the interpretation of scriptures, we have seen that the basic theoretical issues are those of understanding the scriptures on the whole and yet in the best manner as possible, and also of understanding them in the context of the best possible lives that have been or that can be there.

The theoretical foundations could be and need to be further considered. Thus, e.g., our discussion of the issues would have become more enhanced technically if we had entered into the spate of controversies that have gone on in the contemporary West about the nature and function of symbols,
de-symbolization, motivations, methods, consequences, their nature and interrelationship, the different methods of hermeneutics and so on. However, our purpose was not so much technical sophistication as discovery of a competence to handle religion philosophically so as to suggest perspective on understanding the nature of religious controversies, and consequently religion itself. This has enabled us also to indicate a direction for establishing a proper relationship among religions, in a multi-religious context like that of India.

Incidentally we have also achieved another important thing. We have been able to see the great significance and importance of Gandhi's thought in the context of inter-religious contacts and in the field of Comparative Religion. It has been suggested by Prof. Nirmal Minz that "when one has perceived the inner coherence of Gandhi's thought, one does discern the relevance of Gandhi's life and thought for the religious and theological problems facing contemporary India." He proceeds further, "In a sense Gandhi's thought has a much wider relevance for modern India than the thought advanced by the other Hindu writers. The reason is that the simple yet profound ideas of Mahatma Gandhi have gone into the very fabric of India's religious thought today. Any encounter between Hinduism and other religions in modern India is essentially a confrontation with Gandhi's ideas and insights,
and with his solution to the problems of the relation between religions."\(^\text{10}\) This position is the more an intuitive understanding of Gandhi's thought than of any systematic study. The author, dealing with Gandhi, in his work: *Mahatma Gandhi and Hindu-Christian Dialogue*,\(^\text{11}\) has focused "on the theology of a Hindu-Christian dialogue."\(^\text{12}\) But he does not really work out how Gandhi's thought has a much wider relevance than the thought advanced by the other Hindu writers, based on comparison between the thought of Gandhi and those of other writers. Our thesis has addressed itself precisely to such a comparative analysis.

There are other works which are more comprehensive, showing the relevance of Gandhi to Comparative Religion; e.g., Prof. K. L. Seshagiri Rao's *Mahatma Gandhi and Comparative Religion*.\(^\text{13}\) This is a detailed, and a well-documented study which in the words of its author, "traces Mahatma Gandhi's own religious development and focusses on his study of and approach to the major world religions,"\(^\text{14}\) whereby the Mahatma "developed a universal and integrated view of religion and its significance to humanity",\(^\text{15}\) and "believed that the study of religions would contribute to healthy religious pluralism which would respect genuine religious differences."\(^\text{16}\) etc. But, how mistaken are these claims can be seen in the light of our discussions.
Gandhi's understanding of religions is not without the reading and the understanding of scriptures of all religions. And yet, what is significant about his understanding is that it is based on a most serious attempt to scrupulously lead a religious, that is, pure life. This has perhaps much more influenced his understanding of the scriptures than the scriptures themselves have influenced his life. That is why his understanding of the scriptures is not that of a scholar but of a creative religious persons. And what is true regarding his understanding of the Hindu scriptures is also true regarding his understanding of the scriptures of other religions. He has been influenced by other scriptures not so much by their theory or beliefs or the practices based on them, but through what they could contribute to his practice of religious life.

And therefore, this kind of understanding of the scriptures puts the study of other religions altogether on different foundations from those accepted by the disciplines of Comparative Religion. This discipline emphasizes the scriptures/theory/belief/practices and so on, and attempts to derive a way of life and its justification from this. This involves a study of other religions through the scriptures/theory/etc., and a comparison of scriptures/beliefs/etc. But to attribute to Gandhi this kind of study, or to believe that this kind of study can lead to a proper understanding of
other religions, and will promote religious harmony etc., is to thoroughly misrepresent him in a matter of the greatest importance. In fact, it is to ignore the very different and distinctive approach of Gandhi, viz., that of viewing the unity of all religions on the basis of the lives of great saints, and of developing a sense of respect to and reverence for other religions on account of the possibilities they are able to provide for.

In short, our thesis has tried to demonstrate the possibility of comparing religions in a valid way, on the basis of a detailed analysis of the controversies arising out of inter-religious situations. We have also established that Gandhi's ideas constitute a concrete manifestation of such a methodology.