

# Margaret Alva

General Secretary of Congress

## 'Religion has become politicized'

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**Margaret Alva is general secretary of the Congress.**

**What does spirituality mean to you?**

It is one's relationship with God which transcends religion and other beliefs. God has been a dominant factor in my life, with the awareness that there is a power beyond me, in a form or another.

**Do you believe you are guided and protected by a superior force?**

Yes, I am a Christian and a believer. All my life, in my darkest moments, when everybody would fail me, I felt this supreme being guiding me and giving me hope. It is so much easier to walk the path of life knowing that someone is there listening to you, giving you answers and strength, taking your hand and leading you on. Without that faith I would have felt such a vacuum in my life. And on my own, I could have never achieved all that I have.

Of course, prayers are not always answered immediately. But this does not mean that God has failed me. I have learnt over time that answers are delayed when God wants you to wait, as He has other plans for you. It is simply meant that way, and I accept it.

### **Do you believe you have a special mission or purpose in this life?**

I always say that we have a destiny as designed and willed by God and we do it as long and as best as we can.

As a child, I did not know or think I would be in politics. I definitely had leadership inclinations since I was a debater and always ended up class prefect in school. Later on I also was very active in the students' movements. There I met my husband who came from a highly political family in Delhi. His parents had been the first couple in Parliament; they had been in and out of jail during the freedom struggle. So I married into politics. One does not choose to join politics; circumstances bring you in, as if led by God's hand.

In 1969, my mother-in-law suddenly died in the middle of the Congress' split and I joined politics full-time. I may not have become the best of politicians, I have had my frustrations, and I have felt let down at times. But I have done the best I could, and I stood for my beliefs. So my conscience is clear and I do not feel I have wasted my time in politics.

Yet, I do not feel I have achieved all I wanted to. Today, I feel restricted politically because I cannot say all the things I would like to express and do all the things I would like to do. I have been very active in the women's movement and on social issues, but when you get "packaged" in a certain way, you feel obliged not to violate the norms that have been set for you, and therefore feel constricted. Sometimes I ask myself if I am being really faithful to the issues I care for and would like to focus on – such as women, children, Dalits, farmers, minorities and so on. Even though I feel very upset about those issues, I cannot speak out as I am not expected to. When you hold a responsible position – and at the moment I do, as the general secretary of the Congress, looking after eight states – you have to look at the political angle and fallout of anything you say. And it is more restrictive than if you are a social activist for instance. You feel a conflict between what you believe and what you are supposed to say.

So in fact, as I have been in politics for forty years, I am now asking myself occasionally if it is not time to step down, sit back and enjoy myself in different ways.

Also, I do believe there is a life beyond this one and what we do here determines what happens thereafter. We cannot therefore only live for ourselves, we need to live in relation to others. And as I have been asking myself all along what is truth and what it means to be true to oneself, I have tried to live by my consciousness.

### **What is spirituality for you in your day to day life?**

I start and end my day with prayer, asking for strength and spiritual guidance, for the safety of my family, for any blessing from above. Because I know that without it, I could do nothing. I also read the Bible every day.

### **What is the role of spirituality in your work?**

Spirituality has been a guiding force in my work as it sets certain norms. Also, it has been a source of strength as it sustained me through the ups and downs of a quite challenging public life.

### **Can you share a unique experience that changed or shaped your beliefs?**

After thirty years in Parliament and ten years as a Minister, I lost elections four years ago. I thought back then that it was the biggest disaster in my life. I used to think I could not start a day without going to Parliament, dealing with committee meetings and so on. But I understood gradually how right it was as if God felt there were better things for me to do, rather than fighting elections and wasting my time with that kind of politics.

After the defeat, my children told me "you were not listening to us but we are now thanking God for taking you out of this madness, as He has decided it is not anymore the life you should lead". And in many ways, I have been so much happier outside Parliament. I was so tied up with the constituency, the politics there, fighting this and that. I suddenly realized those things did not matter that much. And I am now freer than ever. It was a liberating and transformative moment for me in many ways.

### **What have been your main spiritual inspirations?**

All my life I have seen people with different beliefs behaving in the most spiritual ways. In my case, Christianity and its basic principles have been the core guiding force. The Christian approach to life inspired me, in the way I saw it practiced at home and in the convent school I attended. It helped me know what the strength of religion and spirituality can be – feeling that guiding divine force, finding solace in prayer during my darkest moments, and knowing that I shall get an answer.

### **if you were to be reincarnated, what would you like to be reincarnated as?**

According to Christianity, we do not believe in reincarnation but in life after death. Had I to choose though, I would like to be born as myself, with the ability to fight for all the causes I believe in.

### **If there was one question you could ask God, what would it be?**

Why is there so much injustice in the world? Why does He let it happen? And these days, I keep asking about the violence against minorities, for instance against Christians in Orissa. Innocent people are being persecuted because of their beliefs, they are being butchered and driven out of their homes.

My household is an open and diverse one – I have a Rajput daughter-in-law, a Tamil Brahmin, a Coorgi and so on. But when my Delhi-based grand-daughter who is seven years old tells me she is afraid to go to church because people may burn it, I get really worried. My grand-son asked me "what if they know where we live and come to burn our house?" To have children worried about those things is unthinkable and completely unacceptable. I would have never thought I would live to see this kind of thing in India. And no one seems to be bothered.

And I wonder: is that what the freedom fighters fought for? I gave forty years of my life with a certain idealism, fighting for a secular State and today I ask myself – what for? I look around and wonder how we have reached such a state and see so much violence in the land of the Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi. Something has gone wrong somewhere with the Indian psyche. Religion has become politicized and it was never meant to be. Have we forgotten the lessons of Partition? I believe that a sense of oppression, of hopelessness, of being left out creates violent reactions among young people. Only love, understanding, dialogue can help find a way out. But there is so little of it and so much blame all around. This is the tragedy of India today. And I can only say in the words of Christ 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do'.

**What is your idea of happiness?**

It is being at peace with myself and the world around me. I never pursued wealth or such things. I do not even own a house in Delhi. As I lost the elections four years ago, I was packing and leaving Delhi when Soniaji asked me to stay. I couldn't since I did not even own a roof. But she arranged things and the assignment I was given also gave me a place to stay.

So I am happy with whatever I have. And I have this one gift from God: I sleep immediately, as soon as I lay my head on a pillow. I sleep no matter where I am, in a plane, a train or a bullet cart. Basically, I go to sleep with a clear conscience.