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ISSUES

Discussions on Dharma

From the language of puja and the Trinity to organ donation and gay marriage, the Mela's religious leaders offer their sagely opinions

As with previous melas, we brought with us a prepared list of questions regarding current issues facing the Hindu world to ask the various saints we met. There were six main topics: the Hindu concept of Trinity (Brahma, Vishnu and Siva); the Hindu approach to the post 9/11 world; organ donation; gay marriage; whether one must be born a Hindu to be a Hindu; and whether Sanskrit is the only proper language for worship. Here are the responses gathered by reporter Rajiv Malik.

Trinity: To the first question, all the swamis answered that God is one, and that Brahma, Vishnu and Siva are different forms of the same power, not separate Gods--an interpretation sometimes offered by non-Hindu commentators. Nirvanpeethadheeshwar Shri 108, Ahmedabad-based Devananda Ji Maharaj, Mahamandaleshwar, Mahanirvani Akhara, gave the most complete response: "All the three forms are taken by Him as He desires to take them. But the supreme power is one. The God has no name and form. But this world has a name and form, and in the context of this world God has three names and forms. They are the representative forms of the God; they are the forms of the God. But definitely God has a mystical identity which is other than these three forms. But then, that is a matter of research and that is a matter of sadhana. And it is also a subject of self experience."

Post 9/11: The intent of this question was to see if the Hindu leaders felt we were entering some "clash of civilizations " or pitched battle between religions. They offered mellow observations, such as that of Mahant Ram Puri of Juna Akhara. He said, "My experience of the world is that Hindus are the less violent and revengeful when compared to many other places in the world."

Mahamandaleshwar Dr. Swami Banwari Puri, who is in charge of academic and intellectual activities of Juna Akhara in India's eastern region, said, "My message to the Hindus would be to maintain peace in the world. In fact, we have been sent to the world as harbingers and messengers of peace, and we must try to play this role only." Swami Pragyanand added, "Wherever fundamentalism is there, dharma is not there. Wherever compassion, love, nonviolence and truth are there, dharma is there."

Awahan Peethadhishwar Acharya Mahamadaleshwar Swami Shivendra Puri Ji Maharaj, said, "I do not think any community of the world is afraid of Hindus." Swami Sachidhanandha, Sri Chakra Maha Meru Peethadheeshwar, Mau Maye Mandir, Nagar Para, Bilaspur, Chattisgarh, offered, "We should not follow the path of violence or get into a struggle with the Muslims. We must follow the path of dharma."

Organ donation: The swamis were universal in their approval of organ donation. They did not accept the concept sometimes heard in India that if one donated their eyes in this life, they would be blind in the next. Shri Mahant Krishan Nath Ji, based in Haryana, explained, "If someone donates an organ willingly, then there is nothing wrong in that. And it is wrong to say that if you donate eyes in this birth, next birth you would be born without eyes. We have the story of Baba Sheel Nath of Nath Sampradaya who transferred the sight of one of his eyes to that of a blind lady by his yogic powers. So our Nath Sampradaya has had such realized saints who even made people immortal. To them, eye donation was a very small thing."

Gay marriage: This question got our reporter Rajiv in a lot of trouble. Several people tried to talk him out of asking it altogether, but he explained that the editors of Hinduism Today in America sought the Hindu position on the subject as it is an issue, even in the current presidential elections. Suffice it to say that most of the swamis opposed the concept of a Hindu-sanctified "gay marriage." Swami Pragyanand, for example, said, "Gay marriages do not fit with our culture and heritage. All those people who are raising demand for approving such marriages in India are doing so under the influence of the West. Sanatana Dharma has no place for such marriages, and we do not even discuss it." Juna Peethadheeshwar Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Swami Avdheshananda Giri Ji Maharaj called the concept "so unnatural, uncommon and unusual."

Others were conciliatory, such as Shri Mahant Madhusudan Giri of Avahan Akhara,

popularly known as Nepali Baba. He expounded, "Today people are even changing their sexes. They want a lot of freedom, and this freedom is available to them. So if they choose to live in a particular way out of the consent of two grown up people, how can we stop them?" Ram Puri gave an insightful answer, "There is a principle in all Hindu law that local always has precedence. In other words, the general rules and the general laws are always overruled by a local situation. I do not think that this is something that is decided on a theoretical level. We do not have a rule book in Hinduism. We have a hundred million authorities."

The most liberal opinion came from Pandit Shailendra Shri Sheshnarayan Ji Vaidyaka. He reasoned, "Whatever is done in a hidden manner becomes a wrong act and is treated as a sin. But whatever is done openly does invite criticism for some time but ultimately gains acceptance. Why not give them the liberty to live in their own way, if they are going to do it anyway? After all, we have kinnars, eunuchs, who have been accepted by the society. Similarly these people can also be accepted. Like we have a kinnar samaj, eunuch society, we can have a gay samaj."

Born Hindus: Many swamis expressed the idea that everyone was born a Hindu, because Hinduism is the timeless faith. Only later in their life could they join another religion. So it was not a matter of conversion so much as returning to the original faith. Maharishi Sarkhandi Ji Maharaj Mahatyagi, of the Shri Ramananda Sampradaya, Digambar Akhara, Shri Sarkhandi Ji Maharaj Ashram And Yogic Centre, Gujarat, told us, "Hindus have been there for an infinite period of time. In fact, all other religions came out of Hinduism only. So the actual fact is that one is Hindu by birth. For those people who went into other religions, there is a procedure by which they can be brought back to Hinduism. Shastras have clear directions on certain things." Swami Pragyanand added, "I have said many times that if a Christian or a Muslim comes to Hinduism, it is like coming back to home."

Swami Devananda Ji said, "Normally an individual inherits the dharma which is followed by his parents. If that person, due to his freedom of thought and intelligence, feels that it would be better for him to follow some other dharma, then such a choice would be his ethical freedom and he can exercise this freedom to become a Hindu also." Swami Sachidhanandha offered, "If you do a rough calculation of Christians in India, eighty percent have been converted from Hindus. Definitely we can also make Hindus."

Language of Worship: This is a question coming up all over the world for Hindus. Should we be doing our temple and home worship only in Sanskrit, the traditional language, or should we use the language most familiar to us? Nepali Baba said, "We have to use the language in the temple worship which is understood both by the God and the worshiper. If I worship in a language which I do not understand, what kind of communication will I have with the God? Therefore, there is no harm in communicating with the God in a language which is one's own language." Ram Puri believed other languages could be used, but did not want to see the replacement of Sanskrit if it is already in use. There are such attempts in some areas to stop the use of Sanskrit in the temples and replace it with the local language. Dr. Swami Banwari explained, "Worship is something related to one's heart, and I think it is wrong to say that I can please God by praying in one or the other language. It is not essential that one does the puja worship in Sanskrit only. I think one should have the freedom to do puja in whatever language one finds convenient to converse or use. But at the same time we have to remember that Sanskrit is a beautiful and well-built language. It is a Vedic language. And because it is a Vedic language, it is good to worship God in this language."

Swami Shivendra elucidated, "I think they should recite the slokas in Sanskrit, as they were originally in Sanskrit. But if they are not able to recite in a good way and want to use their own language, I see nothing wrong with it." Swami Pragyand pointed out, "If we do not know a language, then we can create the sounds of that language but not the emotions and feelings behind the words. So if we want to change the hearts of people through worship, then they should be allowed to use the local language, the language that can make them blissful, or so emotional that tears roll down their cheeks. Something like this will never happen if you use a language other than your mother tongue. I've seen devotees in other countries sing bhajans in Hindi without understanding a word of it. So they just keep repeating the words like a tape recorder, with no emotions. Such repetition is useless."

Swami Avdeshananda concluded, "God can be worshiped in any language. In the Sanskrit language the vibrations formed are unique. Now, how do I translate 'Aum' in Hindi? How do I translate the Omkar Mantra? Our mantras have their own vibrations. These vibrations lead to the development of an aura mandala. Special musical tunes emerge out of them and they create a sacred environment. So the other languages cannot convey what Sanskrit can."