Confessions of a Western Hindu
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IDENTITY

Confessions of a Western Hindu

Thousands of non-Indians follow the practices of Hinduism and are intrigued by its philosophy. So, why don't they call themselves Hindu?

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I am director and founder of the shiva ashram near Melbourne, Australia. Like many seekers of my generation, I left the West (in 1970) seeking spirituality in India. I assayed various paths, both Buddhist and Hindu, until I found my guru, Swami Muktananda. After that, I considered myself to be a yogi, a meditator, a spiritual seeker and devotee--but not specifically a Hindu. However, in 1977 at my guru's request, I was inducted into the Saraswati order of monks by Mahamandaleshwar Brahmananda Giri.

Certainly, I love the Hindu scriptures, rituals and even the so-called "feel " of Hinduism. In my ashram, we chant and do puja, even though most, but not all, of the participants are Western. We enjoy making mini-pilgrimages to the local Hindu temple, where the brahmin priests are our good friends. These same priests have presided at religious functions in our ashram.

It wasn't until we had to incorporate as a religious institution here in Australia that the issue of Hinduism arose. At that time, it became obvious that the most truthful path for us was to incorporate as a Hindu institution. That was plateau number one.

Plateau number two occurred as a result of my being invited to represent Hinduism at local interfaith conferences. Before I knew it, I was being generally regarded as

the leading spokesperson for Hinduism in the Melbourne area. This was curious, since I still noticed within myself some reluctance to refer to myself as a Hindu.

In addition to the 25 people in residence here at the ashram, we have a significant grihastha (family) community living nearby. I have asked many of these family devotees which box they checked under the heading of "religion " on government and hospital forms. A remarkably small percentage said they were Hindu--perhaps one in fifty. Most of them wrote in something like "Shaivite, " "Shiva Yoga " or "Kashmir Shaivism." Some checked "Catholic " or "Presbyterian, " falling back on their childhood religion.

I have friends and colleagues who are leaders of the Buddhist community here in Melbourne. They say that, in general, the Western Buddhist practitioners under their tutelage have not the slightest problem saying they are Buddhist. What's the difference between them and us? Why is it easier for Westerners to call themselves Buddhists than Hindus? It's not simply because Buddhism is more fashionable at the moment, being apparently more rational (fewer Gods), or currently enjoying the charisma and leadership of the Dalai Lama. Why should a person who practices yoga and meditation, believes in karma and reincarnation, honors Hindu tradition, chants Sanskrit and venerates Hindu deities be reluctant to call himself a Hindu?

Buddhism has taken root in many cultures. Because of this, we have Thai Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Korean Buddhism, Zen Buddhism and more. Such a precedent makes an American Buddhism or an Australian Buddhism more palatable. While Buddhism does not consist of any one predominant ethnicity, Hinduism is overwhelmingly Indian.

Also, many Westerners have trouble dealing with certain concepts and practices they witness in today's Hinduism of India--like the caste system, for instance. Indeed, some Hindus have trouble with that as well. It is a fact that many low-caste Hindus have adopted Buddhism and Christianity--even Islam--to escape it. Where would Western yogis fit into such a system? Certainly, the answer is obvious. Why would we Westerners voluntarily enter a world in which we have a low status?

Further, there is a negative view of Hinduism that has come out of the British Raj. In this view, Hinduism is a "heathen religion " given to idol worship and superstition.

The first Western spiritual aspirants steered away from the H-word in favor of terms like "Theosophy, " "Vedic religion " and even "Vedanta." Such practices were then considered more "transcendental " than Hindu. Even today's New Age philosophy--perhaps unconsciously--has incorporated many Hindu ideas, like reincarnation and karma.

While Hinduism is generally dignified by an extraordinary tolerance and universality, it is also true--and I've experienced this myself--that Westerners are sometimes barred entry into Indian temples. Also certain Indian Hindu leaders have just told me flatly that Westerners can never really become Hindus. To be fair, I have also been told the opposite.

Many Western candidates also have difficulty accepting the diminutive status Indian Hindus bestow upon women. This position is represented to an extreme in concepts such as sati (the self-immolation of widows). It's easy to see why a stance like this--even when its origin is well explained--acts as a deterrent for Westerners considering whether or not they want to be identified as Hindus.

In summary, we may say that, for understandable reasons, many Westerners accept certain beliefs and practices of Hinduism but reject others. Because of this fact, a Western Hinduism has naturally begun to develop. This needs be acknowledged.

Some might ask, "What's in a name? Why call it anything?" While it is true that you can successfully get to the top floor of a building by the stairs, an elevator or an escalator, you can't use all three at once. You must choose one of them to actually get you there. While realizing "I am the Self " is perhaps the highest truth, it is also necessary to have clarity at the social and religious levels.

There are at least two main reasons for considering these questions seriously. First is the children. In our community, many children come to our satsang (religious gathering). They enjoy the atmosphere, especially the chanting and the puja (Hindu worship ceremony). During the talk and meditation, they go off to a children's program, which they also love.

Many of the parents ask me what they should tell their children about their religion and how they should instruct them in talking with the kids they meet at school? "Isn't it important for children to feel the security of a recognized tradition?" they ask me.

The second reason for us to seriously consider calling ourselves Hindus is self-empowerment. If all the Western Hindu groups remain small and separate, they lose their voice in government and society. The Buddhists have a strong voice, because they are able to unite and say, "We are Buddhists and our rights should be respected." I am not saying that there should be a Hindu lobby. But where Christians, Jews and Moslems and their institutions are afforded certain rights, privileges and immunities, why should we be deprived of them?

I have been using the title "Western Hindu " in this essay. In the past, I have also used "Philosophical Hindu, " which suggests that being a Hindu is not only a matter of birth but of attitude. My final take on the situation is this: We are, in fact, Hindus. But when asked, we are likely to be more comfortable referring to ourselves as "Shaivite yogis " or "Vaishnava bhaktars " or "TM meditators, " only admitting to being a Hindu after additional dialogue. But in this sense, we are perhaps not unlike the Indian devotee who is more inclined to refer to his or her specific Hindu lineage or theology when asked about religious identity. Perhaps it's a Hindu characteristic not to want to say things too bluntly.

And so I throw this discussion up to the readership of Hinduism Today--to both Westerners and Indians. My experience has made me want to confess that I am a Hindu. But I am a new kind of Hindu. I believe that Hinduism is a living entity that is only now transcending ethnicity. Yoga is not Buddhism, not Christianity, not New Age. It is Hinduism of some kind.

In my own ashram, I value both independence and tradition. We work with the brahmin priests, but at the same time we have simplified the rites of passage and pujas that we perform into forms more suitable for our cultural context. We live in a time of an unprecedented interchange between cultures. What Swami Vivekananda began in 1893 in Chicago has become an important cultural phenomenon. The East has come to the West, and it is my belief that Western practitioners must find their unique identity and expression in this.

As Western Hindus, we are pioneers writing on a clean slate. We are on the cutting edge of a cultural and spiritual evolutionary process. Some Western gurus and their students no longer have any organizational affiliation with Eastern groups and truly stand on their own.

One of the remarkable features of Hinduism is its lack of a central authority, each guru and lineage being essentially independent. Now that this tradition has translated to the West, we have reached an important moment of self-definition. A new chapter in the evolution of Hinduism has arisen. We should acknowledge this and embrace it.

Swami Shankarananda is a disciple of Swami Muktananda. His teaching and his recent book, Consciousness is Everything, focuses on the path of Kashmir Shaivism.