Countering Conversion
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INTERVIEW

Countering Conversion

Hindus need not accept the concept that mission work is a part of "religious freedom "

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The following is an edited excerpt from an interview of Swami by T. R. Jawahar of Newstoday, Chennai, June 30, 2003, available at http://www.newstodaynet.com/swami.htm

Why do you say conversion is a form of violence?

When you physically hurt me, it is violence. If you hurt me emotionally, it is violence. And if you hurt me spiritually, that is the worst violence, rank violence. When you convert somebody, you have to criticize the person's religion, his worship, his culture. All these hurt. When he converts, there is more hurt. He has to disown his parents, their wisdom and their culture, his ancestors and entire community. You isolate, uproot and emotionally unsettle him.

How can we deal with this problem?

The theologians have to change, but they will not, because of their indoctrination. But we should keep talking about it with them. They are waiting for a time when there is more freedom for them to do their conversion work. So let that conducive

time for them to seek converts be kept away. Our people have to be made aware and proud of our religion. They should be able to say to the missionaries, "Enough is enough."

Any protest against religious conversion is always branded as persecution, because it is maintained that people are not allowed to practice their religion, that their religious freedom is curbed. The truth is entirely different. The other person also has the freedom to practice his or her religion without interference. That is his/her birthright. Religious freedom does not extend to having a planned program of conversion. Such a program is to be construed as aggression against the religious freedom of others.

But the naive fall for the lure of money and incentives.

It is not really the money that buys the conversion. The missionaries give small things, and tempt with larger. That makes a thumb space, a small opening, to enter the heart. Then the missionary says the fellow's daily puja is wrong, his altar of prayer is not right, and he has to change it. That is the unkindest cut you can get. It is a stab in the heart, his religious core, where this fellow has innocently allowed the missionary to enter. Missionaries do seemingly good things in order to commit this violence. After the conversion, he is told that his brethren and forefathers are devil worshipers!

Will the Hindu clergy allow them to reconvert?

Here in India all are Hindus until they call themselves something different. When I allow every form of worship, then where is the problem? We deem you another Hindu, only you are saying, "I am this or that." There is no reconversion. There is a prodigality and they come back like a prodigal son. We do not even need to baptize. We have to ask him to give up beef, that is all.

What is the US view of India's religious freedom?

The US government had appointed a Commission on International Religious Freedom. This Commission is an authentic body and funded by the government. The Commission gets information from all countries and then submits a periodical report to the government. Based on its report, the government of US may apply pressure on those countries where, according to the Commission, there is lack of religious freedom. You'll be surprised the Commission recommended India to be designated a Country of Particular Concern [a designation given to Iran, North Korea, Burma and several other totalitarian states the US State Department rejected their recommendation to so designate India]. They cited the anti-conversion bills of Tamil Nadu and Gujarat and some Gujarat incidents as the basis of their action. They say there is no religious freedom in India. This is according to their own matrix of norms on the basis of which they decide "religious freedom." I question this matrix. The Commission's criterion appears to be that if evangelization for conversions is allowed, then there is religious freedom. That means if missionaries are free enough to aggressively destroy my indigenous religious tradition, and if I don't question it, then there is religious freedom. If I stand up to that aggression, then it is considered an infringement upon human rights and religious freedom. Therefore, I am appealing to the government of India to appoint our own Commission on Religious Freedom, and let them report on where there is religious freedom and where there is not.

But what about the good charity work of the missionaries?

Missionaries are using charity with the aim of conversion. They should do humanitarian work the same way Hindus do. We have charities all over the world. Look at Salem or Coimbatore. How many hospitals are there? Almost all of them are run by Hindu charities. And what do they do? They don't convert, they just run the charities. There is no priest or nun there because there is no conversion program. The charities remain charities.

But to run charities for another purpose is the most uncharitable thing to do. Let me make a comparison. Have you seen how those who supply cows to slaughterhouses treat those cows a week before the slaughter? They feed the cows a lot and don't allow them to move around in a bid to increase their weight. It is called "pounding." You could say, "Ah, love and feeding! How humanitarian these people are, so human, etc." But those fellows have an eye on another goal. This is how I see all the missionaries' work it is like the love of the slaughterhouse people. Missionaries slaughter religions, slaughter traditions, slaughter cultures. Yes, they do humanitarian work, but slaughterhouse love it is.

If you really love people, just give charitably and forget about it. Don't talk about your religion. Keep your sacred religion in your heart. I find it is not a happy thing to talk about, the vulgarity of it. Even to talk about it is rather staining my tongue and leaves a distaste.

Swami Dayananda, 72, a sannyasi of the Adi Shankara and Veda Vyasa tradition, founder of Arsha Vidya centers in India, USA, Canada and Australia, has taught worldwide for over 35 years.