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# Editorial

## 'Tis the Season

the Editor

Ah, the ancient pagan winter solstice festival is again upon us, that season of brotherly love, shopping and sharing. For a few, the traditional Ho, Ho, Ho has turned to Oh, Oh, Oh no!

It seems that Santa Clause is coming to town with grown-up gifts for yogis and swamis who have been naughty and nice, things like subpoenas, an expose article in November's The New Yorker Magazine and tickets out of town. It's startling how many leaders of Hindu-based institutions have come under fire this month. Here's a partial list: Swami Rama of Himalayan Institute (he returned to India), Yogi Amrit Desai (he voluntarily resigned), Mahesh Maharishi Yogi (he's a perennial target), Gurumayi Chidvilasananda (she just opened a center in Los Angeles), Swami Prakashananda (you know how thrilled Texas rednecks were to see his gorgeous ashram open recently near Austin) and Catholic Mother Teresa. No kidding! Amid worldwide disbelief, a British documentary purported to expose the Noble Laureate as politically motivated and more interested in money than in Calcutta's dying poor. The point is, no one appears to be exempt from this cynical cycle.

The accusations against Hindu leaders are the standard ones: cultishness, financial indiscretion and sexual impropriety. Until the courts become involved-and they probably won't-it is all bitter gossip and allegation. What intrigues us is how people are reacting to the torrent of tattle-telling, for the response underscores how East and West differ. It's the messiah versus the avatar. Let me explain.

In its spirituality, the Judeo-Christian West awaits a prophet or messiah, the savior sent by God to liberate us. The messiah is commonly envisioned as handsome, mild of manner, having conquered every truant human tendency. Dressed in spotless white robes, he is the embodiment of perfection-indeed, the only perfect human being ever born. All others are less, flawed by the fact of not being Him. The next best thing is to be near Him, for there lies heaven's path.

The implications of this are writ large on Western consciousness. First of all, there is the matter of time. History is vast, messiahs rare and there is but one lifetime allotted. What if I don't find Him? What if I do and He doesn't accept me? When the messiah is found (and often these days he is a swami or yogi from India who didn't apply for the position), he is placed upon a pedestal high above all others, there to receive our adoration and unquestioned obedience. Alas, if we err in our choice and this saint shows himself to be human, we feel betrayed, outraged, ruined, shamed by our mistake. It is not enough that we leave him to his deceptive ways. No, he must be exposed, brought down, and since we erected his high place, our hands must now destroy him so he will not harm others. And so it is, in the West, when spiritual leaders disappoint us, we crush and crucify them with the same zeal and doggedness that we once offered in their service, thinking by this we will be vindicated. "I am good," we cry, "It is he who is bad."

So we set the dogs of litigation upon those who disappoint us. We picket their peace rallies, invalidate their visas, prejudice their devotees and start a support network for ex-followers, soliciting them by mail (We receive appeals from four such groups).

It is different in the Eastern religious view. There the avatar is inwardly divine, but outwardly he may not be the picture of holiness. An enlightened soul may be found wearing a dingy blanket, may be no stranger to foul phrases. He may not be thought of as a person at all. Four of Vishnu's ten forms are said to be animals: a fish, a tortoise, a boar and a lion-man. Already, you can sense that the expectations surrounding divine descent are different. I once was informed by a young woman rushing to leave a guru's upadesha, "He's a fraud." "How so?" "He just sneezed. An enlightened man can control such things." Hmmm! My theory is that these expectations provide an insight into why errant swamis are hounded so horribly in the West, and vigilantly ignored in the East.

In the East, there is a decidedly more subtle and inner response, based in part

on the knowledge that God may be most evident in the avatar, but he is equally present in all peoples, all creatures, all creation. If I have had the bad judgment to chose a less-than-perfect guru, it does not become my duty when this is revealed to obliterate him from the face of the earth. He is in me. I am in him. As his attainments were once a promise of my own, so his shortcomings are now a reminder of mine. His fall need not be mine. There is time, many lives to reach the goal. Other gurus will be faithful to their vows, and I now know better how to choose one. The Eastern shishya knows that vengence, even when justified, is not the path, and to seek it is to follow offenders into lower consciousness.

So, Eastern devotees withdraw, content in the knowledge that karma is the best and final arbiter of things gone wrong. I urge followers of any guru, even one gone terribly awry, to keep to Eastern wisdom's way. Leave, if you must, but don't be tempted to become virtue's avenging angel or wallow in Western rites of retribution. It leads nowhere. It diminishes all who participate.