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Using TV, Christian Pat Robertson Denounces Hinduism as "Demonic"

Evangelist Opposes Freedom of Religion, Says It's Time To Convert India and Wants to Keep Hinduism Out of US

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It's not that unusual for Pat Robertson's daily Christian TV show, the "700 Club," to portray other religions in less than a complimentary light. Jews, Muslims and occasionally Hindus are singled out for a scathing recounting of their spiritual errors. Still, I was shocked to see Robertson on his March 23th show label Hinduism as "demonic" and advocate keeping Hindus out of America. My concerns intensified when President Clinton later implicated hateful talk in the fatal Oklahoma City bombing.

Robertson was already a well-known figure in the conservative Christian community when his 1988 bid for the US presidency shot him into national attention and effectively anointed him leader of the Christian right wing. Talented and industrious, he is head or founder of numerous organizations, including a 1,400 student university. His political action group, the 1.4-million-member Christian Coalition, has decided influence in a new Republican-controlled Congress.

Christian evangelists regularly slander Hinduism with little impact beyond their own flock [see Hinduism Today, February, 1989]. But when a national figure like Robertson does it on a widely-watched TV program, that's different.

The March 23rd episode details Robertson's conversion of some Hindu people of

Rajahmundry in Andhra Pradesh, India, to the Christian religion. In the course of the show, Robertson makes shameful, unChristian accusations against the Hindu faith, the world's oldest religion. When contacted, Mr. Robertson's office told us he was "unavailable for comment."

To begin, Robertson's experiences in Rajahmundry are described by a narrator. The scene is of a poverty-stricken people, bathing in the river at the head of which rests a statue of Lord Siva. Water is pouring out of Siva's head and a snake is wrapped around his head as well. Robertson and his son are found in the midst of the scene, observing and mocking the early morning prayers of Hindus. As they witness the scene, they make incorrect reference to the river as "Siva's sperm," and claim that the people "were supposed to wash away their sins in the sperm of the God."

Robertson goes on to characterize Hinduism as having evil tendencies toward random spiritual worship and polytheism. Mr. Robertson's son and fellow evangelist, Gordon, stated disparagingly, "Whenever [Hindus] feel any sort of inspiration, whether it's by a river or under a tree, on top of a hill, they figure that some God or spirit is responsible for that. And so they'll worship that tree, they'll worship that hill or they'll worship anything." What was even more regrettable was Robertson's assertion of some connection between idol worship and the poverty in India. Robertson does not deny his son's claim that "Wherever you find this type of idolatry, you'll find a grinding poverty. The land has been cursed."

But if the argument of poverty as the curse of India is not enough for the American audience of "The 700 Club," they next hear Hinduism boldly labeled "demonic." Robertson says, "Siva [is] the God of Destruction, and his consort, the Goddess of death [Kali]-that black, ugly statue there with all those fierce eyes." He then suggests that the evil tendencies of death and destruction can be found in those who worship the deities: "I mean these people are out to kill other human beings in the name of their God." They mention in support of this conclusion the Aum Shinrikyo sect in Japan. This eccentric Buddhist-based organization was likely responsible for subway gas attacks in Tokyo earlier this year. Their icons, unfortunately, included Siva-sure proof, goes the Robertson thinking, of demons at work.

"Although Hinduism admits that different beings and entities can perform what we might consider evil acts," corrects Dr. Arvind Sharma, Birks Professor of

Comparative Religion at McGill University, Toronto, "there does not seem to be a single entity such as the Christian devil in Hinduism." And since there is no practice of evil or concept of the devil in Hinduism, "To call Hinduism demonic," concludes Dr. Sharma, "is really demonic."

By accusing Hinduism of being demonic, Robertson is merely reinforcing the age-old stereotype that has been placed on the Indian culture by the West. "That's been standard operating procedure missionaries have used ever since they invaded India in the 19th century," explains Dr. Gordon Melton, Director of the Institute for the Study of American Religions. "In approaching Eastern religions and African religions, it has been the stance of most conservative Christians that the deities of those religions are, in fact, personified demons. And that perspective goes back to the Jewish encounter with the Caananite culture a millennia ago as described in the Bible."

Dr. Kusumita Pedersen, Director for the Project on Human Rights and Religion, similarly observes that Robertson has employed "almost every negative image and cliché that has been used about Hinduism since the 18th century."

As the show unfolds, we finally we arrive at the real intention of Robertson's missionary trip to India: to convert Hindus to the Christian faith. A narrator describes the scene of the conversion in which thousands of Hindus were "set free from a lifetime of fear and demonic oppression. The scene was overwhelming." Actually, the scene is oddly over dramatic. Why would thousands of people in a split second throw away their entire way of life that has been passed down over the centuries, because of a brief speech given by a stranger from another country? Although Robertson mentions the naturally deep devotion of the Hindus, he apparently fails to appreciate that any religious preacher in India gets the same reception, whether Christian, Hindu, Jain, Sikh or Buddhist-though it does help to be white, American, famous and rich.

It is also apparent he was frustrated with the Hindu ability to just absorb one more God. "I preached to them the second commandment about idolatry. You know, 'They shall hold no other Gods before me,' and number two, 'You shall not fall down or make any idols of anything.' Many people accept Christ, but they still go with those processions down to those riverbanks. We followed along with the crowd and I said, 'You've got to give that up.'"

Political Agenda

The program used common stereotypes of Hinduism (as well of as other prominent non-Christian religions in America) to create fear among the American people of non-Christian religions. What is the purpose behind those tactics?

Judging from Michael Little's, President of the Christian Broadcasting Network comments on the show-"There are so many opportunities for us to take programs which will reach the people of India," and "Help us carry the light to a nation in darkness"-it is obvious that one strategy of "The 700 Club" is to gain support and money. "Give us a hand on this [India]," pleads Robertson at one point, "because it's a big one." But that is just part of the plan.

Robertson's true thinking is revealed in his 1991 book *The New World Order*. That novel discloses a secret plan being followed by the present political leaders of the world. Robertson labels that plan the "New World Order," which he sees as the formation of a one world government, one police force, one judicial system, and one economic market. Robertson claims that in this "new world government no one could speak out against the beliefs of a Muslim, a Hindu, or an animist. What we know as the freedom of religion would be taken away, and Christians would be muzzled."

But Robertson has a vision of another future, one is which "God sweeps away the pretense of the satanic and man-made counterfeits and announces His New World Order, and His anointed leader, Jesus the Messiah."

Robertson stated in *The New World Order*: "The media challenged me. 'You're not going to bring atheists into the government? How dare you maintain that those who believe the Judeo-Christian values are better qualified to govern America than Hindus and Muslims?' My simple answer is, 'Yes, they are.'"

Mr. David Cantor, Senior Research Analyst of the Anti-Defamation League, points out that such "religious tests for office are unconstitutional. It's not just a purely a religious statement. It's a political statement."

The Human Rights Issue

"In the discussion of human rights, there are different positions on the right to free speech or freedom of expression. The extreme position, that is sometimes called the `American position,' is total freedom of speech," explains Dr. Pedersen. "As Americans, we believe that even the most offensive and the most incendiary statements should be allowed in the name of freedom of expression, because once you start to legally restrict the freedom of speech, you are on a slippery slope of restricting all kinds of speech on different political or ideological ground."

Dr. Pedersen feels that such anti-Hindu statements may refer back to the 1920s, at a time when the Ku Klux Klan (a Christian white-supremacist group advocating violence against Black Americans) was on the rise, and the national belief was that all Americans must be Christians. During the 1920s, immigration laws prevented European immigrants from entering the United States. Eventually Europeans were allowed to immigrate and by 1965 Hindus were included in immigrant quotas.

However, in the 1990s, some feel that the multicultural immigration has caused a backlash in American society in the form of racial discrimination between various cultural groups. In the wake of such discontent, Peter Brimelow has recently written a book called *Alien Nation* which attacks multiculturalism and its negative effects on American society. Something must be done, Brimelow advocates, to prevent white people from becoming a minority in America.

"What Robertson is really saying is that Hindus shouldn't be allowed to come to the United States," evaluates Dr. Pedersen. "All of the Hindu engineers, doctors and computer experts who are living here should go home. This is a very big statement that he has made."

Even Christians are concerned with Robertson's manner of preaching Christianity. Sister Mary Elizabeth Moore, a Professor at Claremount's School of Theology, feels that Robertson may be overstepping his boundaries as a Christian. "I have been very distressed that Pat Robertson and others like him have used the gospel to preach condemnation of others, to judge harshly, to demonize people in other faiths and to demonize some Christians with whom they don't just happen to agree," expresses Sister Moore. "I think that's absolutely counter to the gospel of Jesus

Christ."

Hinduism is not the only religion under Robertson's extremist attack; The New World Order is filled with anti-Semitism. However, Ms. Nancy Israel of the American Jewish Committee, notes that Robertson is slowly transforming. "He's being very careful now," observes Ms. Israel, who is from the Pittsburgh chapter of the American Jewish Committee. "Up until now he's been able to say what he wanted to say, and I think that those people who don't watch 'The 700 Club' and don't read his materials have no idea what he's saying. He's been forced to back off because of this public spotlight and because he's decided to make the Christian Coalition a more mainstream organization."

Sri Anutama Das, Director of Communications at ISKCON feels that Robertson's actions should send a message to devotees of Hinduism. "It's unfortunate that such an influential religious and Christian leader as Pat Robertson demonstrates disdain for the world's oldest religious culture. As a Vaishnava, I see his emphasis in trying to spread Christianity in India, specifically among Hindus, as a reminder of the need for all of us to delve deeply into our own faith's traditions," notes Anutama, who is from ISKCON's branch in Rockland, Maryland. "As Krishna says in Bhagavad Gita, 'Raja Vija, Raja Guyam.' This knowledge of the soul, of Sanatana Dharma, is the highest spiritual knowledge. However, if we do not educate ourselves and our children and abide by the teachings, materialists will find us easy targets for conversion."

What Should We Do?

It is true that if our Hindu faith is challenged, perhaps we will become more aware of its teachings, as suggested by Anutama. If that is so, we can view the "700 Club" attack on Hinduism as a blessing in disguise. "I would say that anytime we see the extreme of a religious community, we see warning signals that need to be taken seriously," agrees Sister Moore. "Those signals usually reveal something of the larger religion, something of the possibility of distortions that people need to worry about. These distortions can stir other people who have more whole views of the religion to express and live their faith more fully."

We should use this opportunity to profess and understand our Hindu faith more

fully. We as Hindus need to respond to and erase Western stereotypes and hate speeches against our religion. There are many ways to accomplish that.

We can articulate our complaints through letters, phone calls and petitions to the government offices, such as the Justice Department Hate Crimes Division. The Indian government could express its concern, as it did for Hindus in South Africa for years. And we can bring such statements into the light of public discussion by filing complaints with the Anti-Defamation League.

The Anti-Defamation League was established in 1913 by B'nai B'rith, a Jewish service organization. The League and its parent organization defend human rights, promote intercultural relations, provide for the religious and cultural needs of Jewish college students, sponsor Jewish education among adults and youth groups and carry on a broad program of community service and welfare. They confer with governments and the UN on civil rights, immigration, abuses of freedom by totalitarian states, the position of Israel and problems affecting Jews throughout the world.

Dr. Pedersen feels that perhaps we can form our own protection league: "I recommend the formation of a Hindu anti-defamation program which will monitor these kinds of statements in the press and the media, and will gather accurate information and will speak out when something should be protested." In that way, perhaps the entire Hindu public will be constantly made aware of any false allegations made against our religion, and efforts to respond can be coordinated.

Dr. Jayaraman, executive director of Bharat Vidya Bhavan in New York, feels that the way to dispel Hindu stereotypes is to teach the common American man about our religion. "Indian philosophy should be taught methodically, either in the school system or by speakers prepared to go around the country to talk just like these missionaries," suggests Dr. Jayaraman. "In every city, in every state they should have such speakers, powerful speakers who can say with authority, 'This is Hinduism. What you are saying is wrong.'" Dr. Jayaraman also suggests that small books discussing true Hindu philosophy be freely distributed to the public.

But the main way to break down anti-Hindu sentiments is by educating our children and ourselves more about Hinduism. Such understanding will place us in a

better position to combat ignorant statements.

"Because Hindus take a generous view of other religions, they think that others will take a generous view of theirs," observes Dr. Sharma. "And even when others attack them, because of their basic nature, they don't take it to heart."

According to Dr. Pedersen, comments such as Robertson's, should be taken seriously. During the annual dinner given by Human Rights Watch, an international panel monitored by Peter Jennings discussed whether hate speech should be restricted or banned. "The next step after this truly disgusting defamation [of Robertson's] is what these human right activists on the panel call 'the speech of instigation,'" recounted Dr. Pedersen. The 'speech of instigation' is a build-up for murder and genocide. It happened in Rwanda. The press and media started to build up a rhetoric that so and so should be killed. After that went on for some months, so and so started getting killed. There is a line to be drawn somewhere on free speech, but we as Americans just don't know quite where yet."

Keeping that in mind, perhaps we should turn our thoughts to the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building. After the bombing, President Clinton spoke out against hate speeches, making a clear connection between hate speeches, propaganda and the bombing. The seeds of hate may blossom into the weeds of violence. Therefore, it is important that we take early and strong action against ignorant and hateful comments such as those made by Robertson. If we don't, we will one day face more than Mr. Robertson's hateful words.

Complaints may be made directly to the U.S. Department of Justice, Hate Crimes Division, Tenth and Constitution Ave. NW, Washington, D.C., 20530. Fax: 202-514-4371.

Letters can also be directed to Mr. Pat Robertson, CBN, 977 Centerville Turnpike, Virginia Beach, Virginia, 23463-0001.

Of Indian ancestry, correspondent Valli Guruswamy Julie Rajan is a prolific freelance writer living in Pennsylvania with her husband. She is writing a non-fiction

book on gender-based double standards in Hindu society and is interested in the betterment of women and minorities.

Sidebar: What He Said About Hindus

Excerpts from the March 23rd broadcast of the 700 Club:

Robertson: "India is not what you normally think of anymore. In the last five years, it's burst into the 20th century with modern technology, capitalism and, especially, television. They're breaking free from the old, and they're moving into the Western culture. But what that leaves is a spiritual vacuum. And yet there seems, finally in India, an opening to the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout this whole land. There is a huge population of teen-agers. These people are not locked into the old ways. They're looking for something new and better."

Cohost: "You know, Pat, we've seen in other countries where there's a certain period of vulnerability, or spiritual vulnerability. Now's the time to use the media to talk to them about what their future could really be like."

Robertson: "They have thousands and thousands of earth stations picking up satellites. It's a window of opportunity [for Christian TV programs]. Of all of India's problems, one stands out from the rest. That problem is idol worship. It is said there are hundreds of millions of Hindu deities. All this has put a nation in bondage to spiritual forces that have deceived many for thousands of years."

Gordon Robertson (his son): "Wherever you find this type of idolatry, you'll find a grinding poverty. The land has been cursed. The Bible talks in terms of the land being cursed on behalf of what the inhabitants have done to it. You erect all these idols under every green tree, on top of every hill, you're going to curse your land. And the oppression, we see it in evidence."

CBN Reporter: "[At the religious services Robertson conducted in India] they came,

by the hundreds, even thousands, to a makeshift altar to confess their faith in Christ and receive a touch from heaven, and be set free from a lifetime of fear and demonic oppression.

Robertson: "I [told] them to renounce idolatry, but many people accept Christ and still go with those processions [of Hindu deities]."

Cohost: "You said there's a connection between the New Age, as it is in America, and Hinduism."

Robertson: "It's the same thing. You see, the whole concept of Hindus is based on karma; that people have a karma attached to them when they are born, and they go through a cycle of life and they come back in the next world as something else. So the whole thought of reincarnation is karma-you come back as a cow, a pig, a goat, a dog, a snake or an untouchable. We're importing Hinduism into America. The whole thought of your karma, of meditation, of the fact that there's no end of life and there's this endless wheel of life, this is all Hinduism. Chanting too. Many of those chants are to Hindu Gods-Vishnu, Hare Krishna. The origin of it is all demonic. We can't let that stuff come into America. We've got the best defense, if you will-a good offense."

Sidebar: The Robertson Empire

The promotional literature provided Hinduism Today by the Robertson ministries details the extensive empire Pat Robertson has developed over 25 years of ministry. It is really an admirable accomplishment, tarnished only by the kind of religious bigotry demonstrated in the March 23rd program [see sidebar left]. Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network is the world's largest television ministry, with programs airing across the United States and in 70 countries. He also has interests in non-religious family-oriented television, specifically the cable Family Channel. In 1978 he founded the Operation Blessing International Relief and Development Corporation which since 1978 has distributed aid worth US\$440 million to 114 million people in 72 countries. He's written nine books, one of which was a best seller and number one religious book in America in 1984. In 1992 Robertson was selected by Newsweek magazine as one of America's "100 Cultural Elite." Robertson also founded the American Center for Law and Justice to pursue a

Christian agenda in the courts by providing free legal advice and representation in important precedent-setting cases. His Regent University [photo above] is an accredited graduate school offering degrees in communication, education, counseling, business, divinity, public policy and law.

Robertson ventured out of the strictly religious field in 1987 when he resigned his ordination as a Southern Baptist minister to run for president of the United States. As part of this effort, the Christian Coalition was formed, a "national grassroots citizen action organization" to work for "pro-family legislation and family-friendly public policy on national, state and local levels." Both are represented on the World Wide Web: Robertson at <http://the700club.org/cbn/cbn.html> and The Coalition at <http://cc.org> Robertson and the Coalition are probably the single most effective Christian voice in American politics today, as demonstrated by their recent demands to Congress for a "Contract with the American Family," including "voluntary [ie, Christian] prayer in public schools"-something presently forbidden by law. One reaction to this contract came from the Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "It's a sad day in American politics when a TV preacher's political front group dictates the agenda for the United States Congress," said Barry Lynn, the organization's executive director.