Editorial
Category : August 1995
Published by Anonymous on Aug. 01, 1995

Editorial

Rudyard Kipling

the Editor

Dear Reverend Robertson,

At the outset, thank you for your unkind words about Hinduism shared with millions of viewers on your TV program. It may seem an odd thing to be grateful for, so let me explain. As it happens, two unusually bright Hindu engineers in America read in our issue last month about your calling their faith "demonic" and proposing to keep Hinduism out of America. They took offense, discoursing for hours on how such religiously inspired animosity and intent to harm could be permitted in a nation that takes pride in its pluralism, could be uttered by a man who once sought its highest office.

"Enough of this," they resolved and set about to establish the Hindu Anti-Defamation League to give some muscle and unified clout to prevent further hateful and anti-Hindu talk in public. Your outspoken antipathy for India's spirituality has thus inadvertantly fostered new resources with which Hindus can restrain reviling rhetoric. For this, we owe you our gratitude. That Hindus may never forget what you've said and done, a statue of you is being intricately carved from the purest white marble, 108-feet high, to be placed in Rajamundry in Andra Pradesh, site of your contumelious broadcast. It is time to acknowledge openly and immortalize your contributions to Sanatana Dharma.

I know what you're thinking, "Why all the fuss? I'm not the only Christian working relentlessly to rescue India's indolent idolators." True, but you alone have

courageously set aside pretense to tell the world exactly what the Christian plan for Hinduism is. Other missionaries have waffled, dissembled, become politically correct, redefining their work in diplomatic or humanitarian terms. You have not succumbed to subtlety, but have told it like it is, revealing the evangelicals' real agenda. Now, perhaps, you understand our indebtedness.

Hindus have been attacked by the very best, excoriated by skilled conquerors and wanna-be rulers for just about ever. The louder the denunciations, the stronger Hindus become. They blindly love the path of Love and whenever they hear someone speak with a mean-spirited, intolerant tongue, they immediately-as irrational as it sounds-presume that person is not very far along the compassionate path toward God. Your candid attack has alerted dharma's faithkeepers to the Baptists' zealous, widespread and ironically unchristian intention to destroy once and for all India's soulful heritage.

Obviously you're not trying to help us, and I can't help but feel that by publicizing those statements you made in the March program Hinduism Today is partially responsible for the situation's backfiring on you like this. I'm sorry. I'd like to make it up to you by offering a few suggestions. Use the good ones and throw the rest away. To move right to the heart of it, you're being a bit too direct, too obvious, to rajasic.Conquering the Hindu heart requires an oblique, sattvicapproach. Reverend, if you will take a few more minutes to read this entire epistle, I will tell you exactly where we are vulnerable, how you can succeed where no missionary has been able to for 1,800 years-roughly when mankind's conquer-the-world-for-God enterprise began in earnest.

When out in the field harvesting Hindu souls, take care to not condemn their grandfather's polytheistic heritage as "the work of Satan." It may be idol conversation to you, but Hindus take it personally, not in the helpful way intended. Also, it's good to eschew speaking about the one-and-only-true religion or soul-saving. Hindus don't feel lost, so they can't get too excited about being found or saved. Anyway, those tactics yield but a handful of caste-burdened paupers. You need to reach the top, convert the brahmins, politicians, engineers and, especially, the movie stars. One of these is worth a million peasants, demographically speaking, not theologically. And I know how you can do this.

It may sound bizarre, but your most compelling tactic is this: be more Christ-like and accept all the wierdness you see-the naked heretics, the

cow-and-sun-worshipping tribals. Assure them God loves every creature, howsoever primitive and dark, that they are His children no less than their blue-eyed brethren. Tell them to love their neighbor, like you do, that you will tolerate anything but intolerance in a man. Hindus are crazy for that stuff. They will flock to your sermons. They will carry you on their shoulders and push aside their own mother to touch your feet.

Take utmost care at this stage not to encourage their eagerness. Proselytizers who crassly thrust themselves on Hindus are shunned. They have been likened by faultfinding observers to urban cowboys trying to push a stubborn old bull into the barn. Every untutored village cowherd knows it's better to pull the unpliant fellow by the nose. Volunteering to push your average Hindu will provoke an involuntary, above-average resistance-the kind you feel when the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses knock hopefully on your door.

Now that Hindus are drawing near your mission in droves, drive them away, throwing a small stone at them to emphasize your point. That's right! Your theological school never taught the arcane, counter-intuitive mysteries that must be known in order to evangelize Hindus. They assumed tactics that work well in Texas were exportable to Calcutta. Not so. Hindus are congenitally distrustful of foreigners selling them religious nourishment, since the original recipe is free in just about any Indian village. Remember, Rev. Robertson, these tribals suspect the West of trying to flim-flam them, and you need to cunningly counteract this fear. Counsel all field workers on this. Point out to them, as a recent non-religious example of the strategy, the US tobacco industry's morally bankrupt campaign to lure new smokers in Asia to compensate for losing millions of health-conscious customers in the West who are giving up the dangerous habit. Be careful that you don't get unfairly painted with this broad Colonialist brush, with Hindus accusing you of seeking converts in Asia because Westerners are giving up the faith back home.

As grateful crowds chant your name at the evening show, call any two potential converts forward and straightaway send them back to their village temple. Don't explain why. Next month six will return begging to sign up. Send those six away, invoking God's wrath for disturbing your serenity. Notify the would-be recruits from the pulpit there are far more enlightened teachers waiting for them in the hills near Bangalore. Before you can say "Praise the Lord," you'll have whole villages squatting languidly in the life-threatening sun outside your tent, wanting to know, even glimpse, this great soul who doesn't need them sitting in his pews.

Here caution becomes crucial. Having firmly established that you don't need their money to fuel your organization, that you won't celebrate their conversion back home at the next fund-raising dinner and that you are perfectly happy to be left alone with God, take care not to backslide into an Elmer Gantry "come one, come all, come forward, comehither" come-on. Only so long as you are drawing away from them will they move mountains to reach your tabernacle.

I realize there is a financial reality to contend with here, and don't mean to marginalize it. It's horrifically expensive to get converts in India (not to mention the lost investment when they go right back to wicked ways as soon as you move on). In 1988, the last year for which we have real numbers, Christians reported spending $2 billion on conversion outreach, of which $165 million was sent to India. Some 20,000 converts resulted. Crunch the numbers. That's $8,250 each, if you don't amortize some of it against future growth or goodwill at the annual outreach convention.

Ignore the expense. Money is no measure of the daunting, noble task you've undertaken. Lesser men would not even begin. They would be depressed by the examples of the great Christian missionaries in India. You know the history. There was Francis Xavier [1506-1552], the sainted Spanish Catholic who pioneered the missionary concept of aculturation in India, Japan and Malaysia-learning the language, adopting the ways and customs of the people he sought to baptize. Even so, he gained only a few thousand converts and remains reviled in Goa, the land he tried to conquer. Half a century later, in 1603, the 26-year-old Italian missionary Roberto de Nobili sailed to India with 14 other young Jesuits. After a few weeks, he wrote to Rome: "This country is so vast that 100,000 priests would not be sufficient to evangelize all of its population." How disheartened that sainted soul would be to know that there are today over three million Hindu monks in that land, each one more determined to preserve the religion than he was to decimate it.

You've undoubtedly run across the simplistic Indian notion that religion should be practiced more than preached. They are obstinate about this, downright pertinacious, caring not a whit for what a man believes or professes and placing almost pathological importance on how he lives and acts. To say the obvious, send only the most holy of souls to the subcontinent.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, philosopher and president of India addressed this matter with a missionary friend, "You Christians seem to us Hindus rather ordinary people

making extraordinary claims." When the evangelist objected, explaining that the claims were being made on behalf of Christ, Radhakrishnan inquired, "If your Christ has not succeeded in making you better men and women, have we any reason to suppose that he would do more for us, if we became Christians?"

We can't change this ingrained Indian idealism, so it's best to just go along. That brings us back to Father Nobili, who came to this very conclusion after struggling a few years in India. To gain the trust of the Tamils in Madurai, he abandoned his European shoes and black cassock, wore wooden sandals and the hand-spun saffron robes of an Indian mendicant, carried the ascetic's bamboo staff and water gourd, shaved his head completely, placing a sandalwood mark on his forehead, gave up all worldly amusements, learned Sanskrit so he could study the Vedas, ate but once each day, abstaining from meat, fish and eggs and endured a solitary life in a thatched earthen hut near a Siva temple. In short, he lived and behaved like a Hindu monk. How many missionaries these days have such commitment to their calling? No matter. Even the Padre's extraordinary efforts failed. When he died in 1656 near Madras, the Portuguese were being sundered by the Dutch, his missions were not self-sustaining and India remained, after 50 years of Nobili's daily proselytizing, hardly touched by Christianity.

Don't be the slightest discouraged by all this history business. This is 1995. We have TV ministry programs-okay, you have them, Hindus don't, yet-which can reach into every thatched hut in the nation's 700,000 villages. True, most sets are still black and white, but that's perfect for conversion appeals. And never-you-mind those churlish words of Charles Dickens: "Missionaries are perfect nuisances and leave every place worse than they found it." What does he know about human nature? With your help I am cheerful that God's plan will unfold as it should. Keep up the good work and write when you get a chance.

Praying this will be taken in the spirit intended, I remain,

Acharya Palaniswami

My Turn