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How Hinduism Got Rid of All Her Heretics

the Editor

Now that we are faced with a future in which Pat Robertson, the anti-Hindu zealot, might actually run for (or, Ganesha forbid, actually become) president of the most powerful nation in the world, Hindus have to think differently. No jokes about it's being the Year of the Rat. No more complacency. No more assuming the West will come to its senses one fine morning and recognize the subtility and depth of India's spiritual heritage. It's not going to happen, everyone. If he wins, he promises no one will get an immigrant visa to the USA for five years and we will all be marked as demon-worshippers and godless heretics.

Webster defines heresy as "a religious belief opposed to the orthodox doctrines of a church, especially such a belief specifically denounced by the church." It is one of the uncounted charms of the Sanatana Dharma that long ago it banished all heretics from its fold. That's right, there are no heretics in Hinduism. Not one. We may well be the only religion that has managed such a theologically adroit feat, and later I will explain just how we did it.

Others, of course, have tried for centuries, and failed. You can't blame them for making an effort (okay, you can, but show a little compassion when you do). Who is there running a respectable religion today who wouldn't love to have all those nonconforming nay-sayers, all those contrariwise Cardinals, all those renegade rabbis vanish?

It's a sad truth, painful for contemporary Christians to confront (though there is a growing capacity to face it), that Christians were more fiercely intolerant of their own during most of history than they ever were of us heathens. It's like modern family life, where the spouse is more likely than a stranger to batter and beat others in the home.

You know the awful history of how good souls were maligned and mercifully murdered by more saintly ones, all in the name of God. This comes about when one group regards itself as the custodian of a divinely imparted revelation which it alone is competent to expound and interpret. Any view that differs from the official doctrine is heretical [from the Greek hairesis, originally a neutral term that merely signified holding a particular philosophical position].The term turned negative in the New Testament, and downright malicious in the early centuries when the Catholic Church established firm definitions of orthodoxy and corresponding descriptions of heresy. Naturally, laws breed scofflaws, so many heresies arose in those days, obscure ones that shook Church doctrine then but mean little to us today--Docetism (the belief that Jesus merely seemedto have a physical body), Pelagianism (which denies the doctrine of original sin) and more.

Once a heretic was uncovered--and scientists like Galileo joined philosophers like Swedenborg as frequent targets--the initial form of punishment was excommunication, by which he was sent away to dally with his new-found dogma in a very bad place for a very long time. But not all cooperated, so in the 12th and 13th centuries the Inquisition was designed to dissuade dissidents. "Trials" were held and the guilty handed over to civil authorities for punishment, which was usually execution.

Many will say all this is gone, history, no longer an acceptable view. True, the trials and terrific punishments are gone, but the fear and hatred for those who believe differently is very much alive. It is important to say this, for it is, and was, fear and hatred that killed Joan of Arc at the stake, not the fire. And it is fear and hatred of those different from us that continues to fuel wars and conflicts in the name of religion.

Nor is it true that heresy is a thing of the past. To evaluate its presence in human consciousness today, I did what any pseudoscientist would--I logged onto the Internet, using the vast Alta Vista search engine to comb through a mind-boggling 21 million Web pages. Eleven seconds later I was staring at a list of over 6,000 World Wide Web entries on heresy! There was a long series of articles about an on-going heresy trial in the Episcopalian Church (scheduled for May 13th in Delaware) accusing a bishop of breaking his vows when he ordained a self-professed gay man into the clergy. There was notice of attempts to bring heresy charges against Bishop Pike for his public denials of such doctrines as the virgin birth of Christ, the Trinitarian character of the Godhead, and other headline-catching statements which he makes from time to

time. There were lots of historical papers about medieval times, some lyrics from rock bands, a list of beliefs that one group claims makes Mormons all heretics, and calls by many to take heresy more seriously and stop thinking people should be allowed to just believe anything they want. One group asserts that psychology is a heresy that "undermines Christian values," and wants it abolished from the earth. So, it's clear, heresy remains with us even today.

Hinduism took another approach to its iconoclasts. It entitled them, formalized them, gave them a page in the family album. Thus Hinduism, in its broadmindedness, got rid of all her heretics by embracing them, accepting them and their inimical ideas. You can believe anything and be a Hindu, or nothing at all. A self-indulging hedonist has a place, in the materialistic school called Charvaka. Even the most radical atheist can be a good Hindu, called Nastika.

We rejoice that we have never met--and will never meet--a Hindu heretic, or be called one. What a lofty concept! What a wonderful freedom! We should all revel in our religion's big-hearted approach to those who think differently than we. It makes one think that it is possible, perhaps imperative, to apply the principle more broadly to other human problems. What if we redefined our enemies, and instead of casting them out and wishing they were either dead or more like us, draw them in and treat them like part of the family? What if similar differences in our political, familial and economic life could be reengineered, setting up more functional relationships with those outside our field of knowledge, outside our race and language group, outside our country? I know what you're thinking: "Pollyanna's poppycock! What fun would life be then?

Religion would be reduced to some divine do-it-yourself kit where your right is my wrong. Whom would we belittle and excoriate? With whom would we do righteous battle in the name of our God? Might not the noble machines of war rust and recede? And answer me this, what would CNN and the BBC report on each night?" True enough. Then again, perhaps we would discover other entertainments.

All of this doesn't mean that Hindus are one, big happy family with nary a difference, that they don't argue with petty enthusiasm or they don't harshly judge the next man a hapless fool for following some hopelessly weird path. We indulge in such things as well as the next person. But all that is allowed, counted part of the larger spiritual process. Yes, this means that there will always be a little retrograde place in God's universe for Mr. Robertson's small-minded bigotry. As one modern sage said: "They drew a square to keep me out. I drew a circle and took them in."

I confess to having not been totally candid with you in this matter. There is a single heresy in Hinduism, one belief which it will never permit among its followers, for which it will shun and shame and repudiate a man. That is the doctrine of heresy itself. I feel better for having confessed that.

"Heresy is what the minority believe; it is the name given by the powerful to the doctrines of the weak." Robert Ingersoll