LETTERS
Category : July/August 2001
Published by Anonymous on Jul. 01, 2001

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Who Said, "No Conversion"?

Recently, an American friend of mine who had been researching Hinduism said, "It all made so much sense to me." She wished to convert to Hinduism. But, despairingly, she said that she read that in order to be a Hindu, one must be born a Hindu. I was appalled, and immediately told her this is not true. She was overjoyed to learn that she could become a Hindu both in thought and practice. Later I was troubled by this misinformation. Where had she read this? Will people curious about Hinduism read in some dubious source that ours is an inclusive cult? I know this not to be true, as I have personally known many converts to Hinduism. I suspect this ludicrous belief was fabricated to differentiate Hinduism from the proselytizing of Christianity. But, if a person, under no deceptive outside influence, truly wants to convert to another religion, who is to stop him? If Hinduism is to grow and prosper as a true world religion, such shameful untruths must be eliminated.

Ashish Thaker,guju_112@excite.com

Yes, Ashish, you are indeed right! Our own recently-published book, How to Become a Hindu, tells the whole story about full and ethical conversion. Get it at your local bookstore or www.hindu.org/books/.

Yes! Conversion Is Possible

I was really thrilled to read about the conversions to Hinduism (Nov/Dec 2000). I always associated conversion with people converting to Christianity! Past doctrines were brainwashed into me as a child: not to even read about other religions, much less learn of or convert to them! Your magazine has surely opened my mind to more reasons. However, I am not yet convinced that it is essential for one to be ethically [formally] converted from one's religion to Hinduism, or maybe I am just not courageous enough! As for me, I accept the teachings of the Vedas, and I live a self-professed Hindu life and see nothing wrong in it. Or is there?

Alphanso D'Souza, alphanso@homemail.com

Calypso Wrongly Castigated?

I was a bit worried to see your article "Trinidad-Counter Calypso" (Jan/Feb 2001). I am of Indian descent but firmly Trinidadian and though the roots of the calypso art form are African in nature, it is not used primarily as a means for African descendants to throw barbs at the Indian ones. Calypso as a means of expression has many different facets, running the spectrum from social commentary to multi-cultural dance music. Some "racist" calypsonians attempt to throw veiled darts at certain populations, but others seek to unite our society, for example, "Jahaji Bai" (sung by an African calypsonian, Brother Marvin), and "the Ganges and the Nile." The pichakaree is commendable and a good form of expression that shows our cosmopolitan nature but as an Indian from Trinidad, I disagree that it serves as "...a welcome medium through which [Indians] can respond to those who criticize and mock them in this, a cosmopolitan society."

Sonja Sabita Teelucksingh,
sst101@york.ac.uk

Our Correspondent Replies:

Sonja is correct. there are many facets of calypso. But since the Afro-dominated PNM lost power to Basdeo Panday, the face of calypso has been radically changing. It is now essentially an "art form" which attacks and denigrates Indian women and what is called the "Hindu/Indian" government. Sonja fails to mention that Indians no longer go to the calypso tents. She also fails to mention calypsonians who do nothing but attack everything Indian. She talks of "Jahaji Bhai," but fails to mention that the Afro community did not like it when the singer "descended

into the Indian arena." He was criticized by many Africans for "selling out" to Indians. Today he is an outcast in the calypso world. Sonja Sabita should ask Shri Ravi Ji about pichakaree and how it is now evolving into an art form which "hits back"!! Maybe she should come home and feel things brewing and things possibly to come.

Anil Mahabir-Hinduism Today c orrespondent, Trinidad, mahal@carib-link.net

Fantastic Kumbha Mela Issue!

This was the best issue ever. the

best reporting in the world on the Kumbha Mela. (May/June 2001) The space photo was super! The article on "How to be a Journalist in India" is something I've always wanted to see in print. It should be e-mailed to every journalist on the planet. This issue should be on every media person's desk in the world. Groundbreaking! Earth-shaking! A fatal blow to the Hindu-bashing Media Demon!

Easan Katir,

Who Are the Siddis?

upon reading the article on siddis, i did some research (Mar/Apr 2001). Ronal Segal writes in his new book Islam's Black Slaves, "Black slaves were imported in its wake, mainly for military service. Ethiopians were particularly favored. The term Habashi or Habshi from the Arabic for Ethiopian came to be applied to other Africans as well Freed blacks called themselves "Sayyad," or descendants of Muhammed, and became known as Siddis. As a group, they were both cohesive and aggressive, formidable in battle, and

especially renowned as excellent sailors. As early as 1100, they established kingdoms of their own in Janjira and Jaffrabad in Western India. Siddi commanders even rose to become admirals of the Mughal Empire Habashi communities still exist in several Indian states, though widespread intermarriage and a pressure to adopt the norms of the wider Muslim community have accelerated assimilation."

Ishani Chowdury,

pardesi1@juno.com

Harvard Professorship

It is gratifying that the institution of new courses on Indic Civilization at Harvard University was considered newsworthy by Hinduism Today (Mar/Apr 2001). Permit me to clarify two points: (1) The arrangement is not a "Chair" but a "Visiting

Professorship." (2) The course, entitled "Interpretations of Common Concepts in the Study of Indic Civilization" will involve a critique, where justified, of Western presentations but not be confined to this.

Arvind SharmaBirks,Professor of Comparative Religion, McGill University; Visiting professor of Indic studies, Harvard University

cxlj@musica.mcgill.ca

Untenable Social Theologies

The publication of the vatican document "Dominus Jesus" (Jan/Feb 2001) calls for examination. The belief that salvation can be attained only through the

Catholic Church does not square with the doctrine that souls, depending on what they had done, will suffer eternally in hell. What would be the fate of the priests belonging to the Catholic Church who have, in recent years, been found guilty of various social crimes? If there is a God, there can be only one God. No salvation outside the Catholic Church?! It is beyond one's imagination

that God created souls before Jesus and will keep on creating a vast majority of the human race as non-Christians, only to throw them into eternal hell. The term "Dominus" sounds rigid and uncompromising. The conflict between the Catholic belief in Dominus Jesus and the Islamic position, as stated by Muzammil Siddiqui, president of the Islamic

Society of North America, that the Catholic belief about the salvation of man is deficient, is a very serious matter. It is this conflict, this rigidity, that led to the Christian Crusades against Islam in which millions of innocent lives were mercilessly sacrificed at the altar of religious ego. But which of these two beliefs is correct? They are the teachings of two

declared-to-be-revealed scriptures, the Holy Bible and the Holy Koran. Is it not possible that God revealed one thing to Jesus and later said something different to the Prophet of Islam? The assertion that Jesus is the only way for salvation of man does not have any basis, physical or theological. In the history of mankind it is this blind faith that has been the cause of so many wars and

socio-religious conflicts. The recent destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statues is its perfect testimony.

Dr. Jatindra Saha, University of Plymouth, UK, jsaha@plymouth.ac.uk

What Do the Vedas

Really Say?

For the first time a leading magazine has carried such an excellent profile of Swami Dayanand and the Arya Samaj (Mar/Apr 2001). May I, however, point out a discrepancy. On the question of idolatry, Swami Dayanand never

bowed to pressure from pundits regarding the matter. Also, nowhere in the Veda is idol worship condoned. In fact, the text is unequivocal when it says, "Na tasya pratima asti, yasya naam mahadyashah." "There is no image to compare with Him, who is the greatest glory."

Swami Agnivesh,
agnivesh@vsnl.com

Kumbha Mela Unseen Message

Returning from the Kumbha Mela ifind its significance has been missed in public

discourse. Given the size of the crowds, physical needs and suffering, all sorts of frustrations, how easy it would have been to create a riot, a stampede. Though a competent U.P. government made excellent arrangements, the

success depended, fundamentally, on every Hindu pilgrim's self discipline, patience and tolerance, for which the Maha Kumbha Mela was a supreme testimony. While pilgrims looked for, and saw, asceticism in the Naga sadhus, the

cameramen, like Auschwitz guards, were doing their job photographing their nudity and eccentricities, little wondering what it meant. Similarly, like Eichmann scheduling trains, the editors at magazines like India Today and India

Abroad were sensationalizing pictures to sell their wares, never questioning the ethical dimensions of demeaning the pilgrims. Maha Kumbha Mela can't be explained by the Western intellectual tradition, which is like

the salt doll wading into the ocean to measure its depth. Kumbh is inherently, and fundamentally, spiritual; it is all about amrit, the meeting of three waters, an act of faith, a phenomena of transcendence.

Once again and after a long time, one gets a different and better view of Indian society: beautiful, peaceful, real, serene, spiritual and vast as contrasted with the India seen through Bollywood and media: vulgar, violent, unreal, ugly, poor, materialist, greedy,

corrupt and bounded. At the Maha Kumbha Mela, low caste and untouchables performed exactly the same ceremony, at the holiest of holy Hindu events, of dipping in the holy waters, as any brahmin or Hindu sage destroying the old myth that casteism

and untouchablity are fundamental to Hinduism. Also, at the Maha Kumbh, 5,000 ashrams made it clear and obvious that there are many different shades of ideas, opinions, philosophies and practices in Hinduism that can peacefuly coexist, a

manifest refutation of the new charges of Hindu fundamentalism. Compare this to Christianity which has never had a single gathering of all various denominations.

The Maha Kumbha Mela is authentic

evidence of the vast and multidimensional Hindu faith, beliefs, practices and rituals. Its analysis and implications would take many, many years and fill major treatises. And it confirms that in spite of abuse for the past one thousand years, and still from

those in authority, Hinduism is today alive and well. I got a tiny glimpse of transcendence in this unique phenomena and left Prayag feeling proud of the Hindu religion and of this great civilizational heritage.

Romesh Diwan, Rensselaer Polytech Institute, Troy, NY, diwanr@rpi.edu

Purusha Sukta All One Person

The great vedic

hymn, purusha sukta, starts with the emphatic statement that all that was and will be is Purusha (Supreme Person), meaning we are all one and equal. Only after saying that does it go on to say that chatur varnas (four castes) came from

the great body of the Purusha, again emphasizing that all castes are equally sacred. But in the "real" world, all sorts of inequalities were perpetuated in the name of Hindu religion. Other religions criticize Hinduism on this

ground and try to convert those that are discriminated against. In my view, Hindu spiritual leaders fell into this sinful illusion of inequality, because both in the sukta and even in the Gita (chatur varnyam maya srustam, etc.), the

word equality is not used explicitly. How difficult would it be to introduce the samanam "sameness" (samanam vruksham, etc.) of the Upanishads, into these verses and modify and redefine Hindu fundamentals.

There is nothing wrong in modifying the scriptures to make the spirit of Hinduism more explicit so that no one can misinterpret.

Sankar-Rao Mopidevi, smopide@erols.com

Nonviolence In All Contexts?

I would like to commend your honorable work of spreading the messages of Sanatana Dharma throughout the four

corners of our world. There is one topic of discussion I encounter in your magazine quite frequently: ahimsa. In my opinion, the word ahimsa means nonaggression and not nonviolence. Nonviolence means not harming any

living being, even if another living being does harm to you. Nonaggression, on the other hand, means not being the aggressor in any conflict. But I believe that, when all other options have been unsuccessfully exhausted, people

should reserve the right to choose violence as a final option to defeat an adharmic, unreasonable and malicious enemy. Pondering these questions: would Gandhian nonviolent marches and protests have been able to

prevent the Jewish Holocaust during WW II at the hands of the Nazis? Has Buddhist nonviolence been able to save the Tibetan civilization from the communist onslaught? Would nonviolence be successful in defeating the likes of

Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein?

Manav Tandon, tantiatopi1@excite.com

Beef Flavored Fries

Lori Home, office customer satisfaction department, McDonald's Corporation, recently answered my friend: "For flavor enhancement, McDonald's US

suppliers use a minuscule amount of beef flavoring in the raw product of our french fries and hash brown. Like food labels you would read on packaged goods the ingredients in 'natural flavors' are

not broken down."

Sheela Chandrasekhara, schandrasekhara2001@kellogg.nwu.edu

How Fares Dholavira?

I was interested to read your article on the archaeological site in Dholavira

(Jan/Feb 2001). Was this site heavily damaged by the earthquake in Gujarat?"

Guy Werlings, guy.werlings@wan

adoo.fr

The Dholavira remains are intact, but the archeologists' facilities were flattened.

Corrections

On page 34 of the May-June issue of Hinduism Today, the reference to Rajan Malik was

incorrect. The correspondent who covered the story is Rajiv Malik.

Letters with writer's name, address and daytime phone number, should be sent to:

Letters, Hinduism Today

107 Kaholalele Road

Kapaa, Hawaii, 96746-9304 USA

or faxed to: 808.822.4351

or e-mailed to: letters@hindu.org

Letters may be edited for space and clarity.