Hinduism, the Greatest Religion in the World (Part 1)
Category : February 2000
Published by Anonymous on Feb. 02, 2000

PUBLISHER'S DESK

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In the wake of the Pope's visit to India, Hindu's have many reasons to unite in proud defense of their faith

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Recently, as you will read in this issue, the Pope visited India. It is worth noting that his parting message to his missionaries in Asia was to pour more energy into converting the "lost souls" of India. He called on his people to impose their religion on the people of India to bring them to Jesus. But India has Hinduism, its native religion, which is as sophisticated, mystical, practical and dynamic as any in the world.

I think a very informative definition of what is and is not a religion comes from the United States Internal Revenue Service, which qualifies churches for tax exemption. They say a true religion has the following increments: a creed and form of worship, a formal code of doctrine and discipline, a religious history, a congregation, clergy, ministers, priests, missionaries, scriptures, places of worship, regular religious services, theological seminaries and religious schools.

Hinduism is overqualified on all these points. Its creed is a set of beliefs in karma, reincarnation, the existence of an all-pervasive divine force, and the path to liberation. Its forms of worship are complex (including festivals and pilgrimages like the Kumbhamela, still the world's largest gathering of people, over 45 million at a single event) and mystical and remain a potent and energetic part of every Hindu's daily life. Its doctrine is equally vast, and its disciplines are rich in yoga, confession, penance, meditation and purification. Its religious history is second to none, older than any other, said to go back six to ten thousand years. Its congregation is nearly one billion strong, spread to virtually every nation on Earth. Its clergy is composed of three million ordained holy men and women and of millions more in the initiated lay temple priesthood. Its places of worship are the millions of temples and shrines worldwide, some ancient, many recently built. Indeed, while Christians are selling their places of worship and learning [see page 7] due to lack of attendance and support, Hindus are buying them. Hinduism's religious services are abundant, daily for some, weekly for most, annual for one and all--these are the pujas, the homas and yajnas, the festivals, parades and home shrine observations. Its theological seminaries are the aadheenams, mathas and ashrams, some thousands of years old with an unbroken chain of sacred succession. Its religious schools are in every village, run by monks and missionaries of every Hindu sect. Its scriptures are innumerable and more ancient than any on the planet. Does this tell us anything about the ongoing international strength of the immortal Sanatana Dharma?

Religion is man's association with the Divine, and the ultimate objective of religion is realization of Truth. Forms which symbolize Truth are only indications; they are not Truth itself,

which transcends all conceptualization. The mind in its efforts to understand Truth through reasoning must always fail, for Truth transcends the very mind which seeks to embrace it.

Hinduism is unique among the world's religions. I boldly proclaim it the greatest religion in the world. To begin with, it is mankind's oldest spiritual declaration, the very fountainhead of faith on the planet. Hinduism's venerable age has seasoned it to maturity. It is the only religion, to my knowledge, which is not founded in a single historic event or prophet, but which itself precedes recorded history. Hinduism has been called the "cradle of spirituality" and the "mother of all religions," partially because it has influenced virtually every major religion and partly because it can absorb all other religions, honor and embrace their scriptures, their saints, their philosophy. This is possible because Hinduism looks compassionately on all genuine spiritual effort and knows unmistakably that all souls are evolving toward union with the Divine, and all are destined, without exception, to achieve spiritual enlightenment and liberation in this or a future life.

Of course, any religion in the world is a mind stratum within people, isn't it? It is a group of people who think consciously, subconsciously and subsuperconsciously alike and who are guided by their own superconsciousness and the superconsciousness of their leaders, which make up the spiritual force field which we call a religion. It does not exist outside the mind. People of a certain religion have all been impressed with the same experiences. They have all accepted the same or similar beliefs and attitudes, and their mutual concurrence creates the bonds of fellowship and purpose, of doctrine and communion.

The people who are Hinduism share a mind structure. They can understand, acknowledge, accept and love the peoples of all religions, encompass them within their mind as being fine religious people. The Hindu truly believes that there is a single Eternal Path, but he does not believe that any one religion is the only valid religion or the only religion that will lead the soul to salvation. Rather, the Eternal Path is seen reflected in all religions.

Naturally, the Hindu feels that his faith is the broadest, the most practical and effective instrument of spiritual unfoldment, but he includes in his Hindu mind all the religions of the world as expressions of the one Eternal Path and understands each proportionately in accordance with its doctrines and dogma. He knows that certain beliefs and inner attitudes are more conducive to spiritual growth than others, and that all religions are, therefore, not the same. They differ in important ways. Yet, there is no sense whatsoever in Hinduism of an "only path." A devout Hindu is supportive of all efforts that lead to a pure and virtuous life and would consider it unthinkable to dissuade a sincere devotee from his chosen faith. This is the Hindu mind, and this is what we teach, what we practice and what we offer aspirants on the path.

Still, Hinduism is also extremely sectarian, altogether assertive in its beliefs. Its doctrines of karma and reincarnation, its philosophy of nonviolence and compassion, its certainty of mystical realities and experience and its universality are held with unshakable conviction. Perhaps this is due to the fact that Hinduism is a religion more of experience than of doctrine. It prefers to say to its followers, "This is the nature of Truth, and these are the means by which that Truth may be realized. Here

are the traditions which have withstood time and proved most effective. Now you may test them in your own life, prove them to yourself. And we will help as we can." Hinduism will never say, "You must do or believe thusly or be condemned." In Hinduism it is believed that none is eternally condemned. That loving acceptance and unremitting faith in the goodness of life are another reason I boldly say that Hinduism is the greatest religion in the world.

Within Hinduism, as within every religious system, are the practical means of attaining the purity, the knowledge and the serenity of life. Each Hindu is enjoined to attend a puja every day, preferably at a certain and consistent time. He must observe the laws of virtue and the codes of ethics. He must serve others, support religion within his community. He should occasionally pilgrimage to sacred shrines and temples, and partake in the sacraments. If he is more advanced, an older soul, then he is expected, expects of himself, to undertake certain forms of sadhana and tapas, of discipline and asceticism.

No other faith boasts such a deep and enduring comprehension of the mysteries of existence, or possesses so vast a metaphysical system. The storehouse of religious revelations in Hinduism cannot be reckoned. I know of its equal nowhere. It contains the entire system of yoga, of meditation and contemplation and Self Realization. Nowhere else is there such insightful revelation of the inner bodies of man, the subtle pranas and the chakras, or psychic centers within the nerve system. Inner states of superconsciousness are explored and mapped fully, from the clear white light to the sights and sounds which flood the awakened inner consciousness of man.

In the West it is the mystically awakened soul who is drawn to the Sanatana Dharma for understanding of inner states of consciousness, discovering after ardent seeking that Hinduism possesses answers which do not exist elsewhere and is capable of guiding awareness into ever-deepening mind strata.

As the Pope returns to Italy, one message he is hearing is that however tolerant Hindus are, they are not tolerant of any efforts to destroy their traditions, philosophy and culture by those who seek to convert, to undermine the weakest, the tribals, the uneducated, the sick or the lonely. They have too much love of the venerable Sanatana Dharma to allow it to be assailed from outside.

Next Month: Part 2 of "Hinduism, the Greatest Religion in the World."