Seeing God's Face
Category : April 1999
Published by Anonymous on Apr. 01, 1999

MY TURN

Seeing God's Face

Divine imagery is an immediate reality

Anand M. Saxena

Hindus have been criticized and ridiculed by Jews, Christians and Muslims for worshiping statues, and for representing God in many forms. They call us "pagans, heathens or butparast (idol worshipers)." Extermination of non-believers was once considered a holy act of jihad, or crusade. Today, leaders of the Christian right and Muslim fundamentalists often call us "despicable and doomed." This ridicule from so many directions has caused some among us to retreat and apologize for our practices, feebly offering: "The images do not represent God, but are only symbols to help us concentrate." So strong has been the onslaught that some Hindu reform sects have banished icons from their temples. But worship of images of God is a most progressive and beautiful feature of the Hindu religion, one which has kept it free from dogma and allowed it to evolve with the times.

Churches and synagogues are ultimate halls of decorum and discipline. God is in the background, the priest, the only visible authority, interprets God's word for the audience. But our

temples are noisy places where people push each other to get a better glimpse of the Deity during the short arati. God's immediate Presence makes any other authority superfluous. Each one establishes a direct and personal relationship with the Deity. We can even set up a simple stage in our homes with some images, offer flowers and food and open a line of communication with our chosen Deity. We can anoint Him, prostrate before Him, talk, complain or beseech Him, without the help of a Father or a Maulawi, Pope or Ayatollah. God Himself is present in any place of worship. This is in stark contrast to Muslims who must face Mecca to pray.

A Hindu's personal e are all children of God, not sinners from the day of birth. Our judgments in daily life are based only on our conscience, God within. There is no need to listen to the Christian agenda on subjects such as birth control, homosexuality or abortion. The Christian Right's rhetoric incites extremist followers to kill abortion clinic doctors and maim and torture homosexuals. We never get a command from our Deities to prove our devotion and to take action against followers of other faiths. The established hierarchy of Western religions preserves its position by convincing its followers of the superiority of their faith, and inciting their followers to take action against heretics. On the other hand, right from the time of the Rig Veda, our prayers have acknowledged the possibility of different approaches in spiritual matters.

This direct communication with God has enabled the Hindu religion to evolve with the times. Since our ethics and morality are derived from our relationship with a living God, any problems may be resolved by examining our conscience and

spiritual heritage. We are never fazed by new developments in science and technology, and consequent ethical problems, because we can simply meditate and decide on the proper course of action.

Obviously all the images we make will not be alike. Individuals of any faith are bound to have different concepts of Divinity. Since Hindus are allowed to give a form to the Divine, our imagination finds full expression, instead of being stifled. A consequence of worshiping different Gods is the recognition that a religious approach to life does not have to be monolithic, a knowing which makes us tolerant of other belief systems. From ancient times, we have made our way through a complex world using simple principles: concern for other human beings, respect for all forms of life and acceptance of a diversity of opinions. These hallmarks of Hinduism are intertwined with our mode of worship, which has helped us survive through the ages despite physical, material and intellectual attacks from dominant world forces.

ANAND M. SAXENA, 58,is a research scientist at the Brookhaven National Laboratory. He and his wife, Mala, have two teenagers.