Can You Have Religion Without God?
Category : February 1998
Published by Anonymous on Feb. 01, 1998

EDITORIAL

Can You Have Religion Without God?

Reflections on how two great faiths, both born in India, have agreed to disagree

the Editor

We first met the Dalai Lama in 1972 in Northern India. On that precious December afternoon Hinduism converged with Buddhism, and it felt like milk was pouring into milk. There were 72 of us traveling with Gurudeva, Hinduism Today's publisher, and we were nearing the end of a three-month pilgrimage. As our busses lumbered up the mountain toward Dharmasala, the remote city where 10,000 Tibetans have taken refuge from Chinese aggressions, we were in a jovial mood. Gurudeva sensed our anticipation, and led us in a spontaneous rendition of "Hello, Dolly!--a myrthful reference to the "Dolly Lama."

We entered past the heavy security and were ushered into a formal chamber where we sat on heavy carpets before an imposing chair, under the watchful gaze of rifle-bearing guards. Moments later the 37-year-old Tibetan Buddhist holy man, whose name is Tenzin Gyatso (and who would later be awarded the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize) appeared with no

fanfare. Dressed in heavy maroon robes, he surveyed his visitors, all dressed in saris, dothis and saffron robes, seated in padmasana, and smiled hugely. Gently he directed his guards to remove the chair, and sat down on the spartan floor with the American Hindu holy man and his devotees. We all reveled in the palpable affection and one-mindedness as a long discussion careened through many subjects--reincarnation, theology, God, monastic training, meditation, inner light and liberation. I especially recall the Dalai Lama's quick laugh when 30 or so among us raised their hands enthusiastically in response to his query, "Have any here ever recalled moments of a past life?" No doubt he did not expect such a reply from so many blue-eyed Hindus. That's him on the right at a recent New Delhi walk for world peace.

We met this great soul again in Oxford in 1988 and Rio in 1992 at the Global Forum for Human Survival, and again in Chicago at the 1993 Parliament of World's Religions centennial. At those meetings he spoke movingly of his struggle to free his people and to stop the killings (it is said at least 1.2 million Tibetans have been killed in their homeland). He also gave a bold voice to the Buddhist belief that there is no creator God. It was a defining moment of these sessions. In all such interfaith meetings religious leaders speak in terms of God, intone prayers to God, write their formal statements of purpose in acknowledgement of God. To the Buddhists this Creator-centric presumption is presumptuous. It leaves them out. The Dalai Lama was challenging them, in his sweet way, to find words and concepts that could bridge the Abrahamic world and the Buddhist/Jain world.

It would be nice to say this was accomplished. But that is not

so. The gap seemed, for those present at least, impassable. Christians felt it unbefitting to use generic terms like "the Divine" to address the Biblical Jehovah, and Buddhists were left to endure with resigned nobility.

Meanwhile, the Hindus at these global gatherings were perfectly at home with both views. For us, God is seen as the Creator, Preserver and Dismantler of all things. It is He who breathed out the Vedas. It is He who graces our existence and makes it potentially sacred. He is the Life of our life, the Eye of our eye, the Heart of our heart. Our prayers rise to Him, our mantras penetrate to Him, our hopes rest in Him. So we can accept the prayerful petitions of Jews and Christians and Muslims as our own.

But Hindus also see God in an impersonal way. After all, Advaita Vedantins and all Hindus who accept a nondual philosophy speak of Parabrahman, the Absolute Reality that is neither Creator nor created, that is timeless, formless and causeless. One does not offer prayers to That. One is eternally and ineluctably That. God, soul and world are profoundly one and the same. For the severest Advaita Vedantin, just as for the Dalai Lama, there is no God as personal Lord. Thinking thus, the Hindus present were perfectly at home with the Buddhists' call for using a term that does not divide the Divine from man. So, once again, Hinduism discovered its competence to bridge diverse views, to integrate divergent philosophies, as it has done through the ages.

This month we explore the nexus between Hinduism and Buddhism. We approach this comparison with the uneasy

knowledge that we are not fully competent to the task. Our tradition is the Tamil Saivism of South India and Sri Lanka. While we know that heritage well, we cannot say we know it perfectly, and our knowledge of Buddhism is far less perfect. So we enlisted the help of scholars, Ram Swarup and Vamadeva Shastri. It is especially important now, in 1997, to compare these paths. In the West, Buddhism and Hinduism are both gaining ground and providing spiritual alternatives to Europeans and Americans. These newcomers are sometimes naÃ¯ve about the subtle disparities of Asian paths. Yet, if they are to follow them faithfully they need to fathom the differences. How can they, if we ourselves don't have such understanding to convey to them?

While mapping the differences is crucial, so is acknowledging the shared values and traditions. Hindus and Buddhists both base their way on the Dharma. They both follow strict personal sadhanas and meditations. They both arose in India, and indeed the Buddha was himself born to Hindu parents. They both value noninjury to other beings. They both place stress on what is practiced more than on what is believed. They both teach of reincarnation and seek resolution of karmas toward the goal of spiritual liberation, called moksha. Little wonder that during this month's meetings with the editorial staff our publisher was heard to say, "I don't see much difference in Buddhism and Hinduism."