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Category : English
Published by Anonymous on Mar. 01, 2007

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Does humanity's most enduring faith maintain its relevance amid the challenges of 21st-century life?

By Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami

Published in:
Hinduism Today
April/May/June 2007

Some months back in australia, a group of Hindu teens asked me what relevance Hinduism and temples have to modern life. They said it as though the answer were obvious: None. But they were callow and yet to be schooled in the noble religion they had been born into. After our session, their question echoed in my mind for days. It is a question on many minds, deserving a complete answer. I would like to share with our readers the four major virtues that I singled out for those students, virtues which make Hinduism profoundly relevant in today's world: nonviolence, tolerance, worship and life's four noble goals.

The Virtue of Nonviolence: On November 13, 2006, we watched with interest a television report on the groundbreaking ceremony inaugurating a memorial to American civil rights hero Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Washington's front yard, the National Mall. President Bush said he was proud to dedicate the memorial in its "rightful place," between monuments to Thomas Jefferson, who "declared the promise of America," and Abraham Lincoln, "who defended the promise of America." Dr. King, Bush offered, "redeemed the promise of America."

Dr. King came from a staunch Christian family. His grandfather was a Baptist preacher. His father was pastor of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church. King earned his own Bachelor of Divinity degree from Crozier Theological Seminary in 1951 and his Doctor of Philosophy from Boston University in 1955. While at the seminary, King became acquainted with Mohandas Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent social protest. On a trip to India in 1959, King met with followers of Gandhi. During these intimate discussions, he became more convinced than ever that nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.

Dr. King went on to effectively utilize the Gandhian principles of nonviolent social protest to bring to the world's attention the unjustness of US racial discrimination laws, which were subsequently changed. Dr. King and all the millions he impacted would certainly affirm the relevance of the key Hindu principle of nonviolence in modern society.

The world has changed significantly in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Everyone has become more aware, and increasingly appalled, by the rampant incidents of brutality occurring worldwide every month. A great deal of violence is based upon the concept of the strategic necessity of retaliation - "An eye for an eye." "If they kill one of us, we must kill one of them." Contrarily, Hindus view retaliation as unwise. Gandhi made an insightful statement to counterpoint the call for revenge. He warned: "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." He also declared, "I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent."

In a world awash in wars and conflict of every kind, Hinduism's gentleness and noninjury by thought, word and deed is more than a relevance. It is a necessity for the future of humanity.

The Wisdom of Tolerance: The Hindu value that compliments and underlies the principle of nonviolence is that of tolerance. The Hindu belief that gives rise to tolerance of differences in race, religion and nationality is that all of mankind is good; we are all divine beings, souls created by God. Hindus do not accept the concept that some individuals are evil and others are good. Hindus believe that each individual is a soul, a divine being, who is inherently good. The Upanishads tell us that each soul is emanated from God, as a spark from a fire, and thence begins a spiritual journey which eventually leads back to God. All human beings are on this journey, whether they realize it or not. The Upanishadic mahavakyam, or great saying, that expresses this is Ayam atma brahma, "the soul is God." The Hindu practice of greeting one another with namaskara, worshiping God within the other person, is a way this philosophical truth is practiced on a daily basis.

This is taken one step further in the Vedic verse Vasudhaiva kutumbakam, "The whole world is one family." Everyone is family oriented. All that we do is for the purpose of benefitting our family. We want them all to be happy, successful and religiously fulfilled. And when family is defined as the whole world, then it is clear that we wish everyone in the world to be happy, successful and religiously fulfilled. The Vedic verse that captures this sentiment is Sarve janah sukhino bhavantu, "May all people be happy." Certainly the key principle of tolerance is a major demonstration of the relevance of Hindu teachings to our modern world in providing a more compassionate and universalistic worldview, one that embraces the growing pluralism in world societies.

Effective Forms of Worship: One question the teens in Australia asked was, "If God is omnipresent, what is the need to build big temples to worship Him. The cost of construction is quite large; plus after it is built you have the ongoing cost of monthly maintenance. Couldn't all that money be spent in a better way?"

I asked them a question in response: "Since God is omnipresent, shouldn't we able to experience Him equally everywhere? For example, God permeates this room. By looking intently at the room shouldn't you be able to experience God? In theory you should." I then asked, "How many of you can see God permeating this room?" All present had to admit that they could not.

Practically speaking, God's omnipresence is a marvelously subtle form of consciousness, too subtle for most of us to experience unless we are skilled in meditation. I continued by giving the following series of analogies with other objects

that are difficult to see. If we want to see a distant galaxy, we must go to an observatory and use a powerful telescope. To look into the nucleus of a cell, we go to a laboratory and use an electron microscope. Similarly, to see God, we go to the temple and experience God through the sanctified murti, or statue, of the Deity. Temples - and particularly the murtis within them - can connect us with the Divine because they are especially sacred. There are three reasons for this: construction, consecration and continuous daily worship.

A temple is designed and built according to strict rules laid down in scripture. This governs what shrines are included in the temple, the shrines' location and the overall dimensions of the temple. Consecration occurs through the powerful ceremony called kumbhabhishekam, during which a large number of priests perform elaborate rites for days on end. Thereafter begins the routine of daily worship conducted by professional priests. In these three ways, the temple and the murtis within them are sanctified and endowed with potent energies.

Hindu temples in every corner of the world offer Hindus an achievable way to experience God's sacred presence. Divinity's presence uplifts those attending the temple, inspiring them to bring forth and perpetuate traditional Hindu culture in the form of sacred music, art and dance. As such, the temple becomes the hub of religious life in the surrounding Hindu community and thus is undeniably relevant to modern life.

Four Noble Pursuits: Hinduism's relevance to modern life is perhaps most personally important in the sphere of spiritual fulfillments and worldly attainments. Each Hindu seeks the highest and best for self and family, including closeness to God and blessings in every arena of experience. Hinduism has tools, maps and guidelines for reaching those very human goals. Consider the concept of the purusharthas, Hinduism's four traditional pursuits. The first two are wealth and love, known in Sanskrit as artha and kama. Common to all mankind, these embrace the pursuit of love, family, children, career and financial abundance. The third is dharma, which provides direction and balance to the first two. Dharma is piety, virtue and right living. It includes the ideals of seeking wealth and love in an ethical manner, being honest in business and loyal to one's spouse.

The fourth noble pursuit is moksha, spiritual illumination and liberation from rebirth on Earth. Liberation comes when all our karmas are resolved, dharma has been fulfilled and God has been realized. Hindus know that dharma, artha and kama are

not ends in themselves. They provide the necessary surroundings, relationships and experiences which help the embodied soul mature over many lives and attain an ever-deepening God consciousness. This maturing process eventually culminates in moksha, at which point the soul has outgrown the need to continue its cycle of birth, death and rebirth. The goal of moksha, which sharply distinguishes Hinduism from Western religions, reminds us not to become so enthralled with the world that we neglect our foremost aim: God realization and liberation.

It is hard to imagine a mega-message greater than Hinduism's call for human concord, noble aims for our worldly existence and spiritualizing of our daily life. In addressing these fundamental human needs, no system of thought and theology is more germane. Having visited communities around the world, I am convinced that Hinduism remains vitally relevant in this era of space travel and global communications, and of worldliness and conflict on every continent. This vitality derives from its yoga, its teaching of all-pervasive Divinity, its health system of ayurveda, its mystical architectural system of vastu, its immense cultural gifts and so much more. It is relevant in providing the human race a profound self-understanding - illumined insights into life and consciousness, into human nature and our highest purposes. We can restate the Australian youths' question: "Is there any religion in the world that is more relevant today than Hinduism?" Our answer is a resounding no.