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Spirituality

In the Church of Oprah...

Why does Hinduism get the short end of the stick?

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Who would have thought that a talk show host would be able to motivate millions to look within themselves, reevaluate religion and reflect on spirituality? Of course, this is no ordinary talk show host, for Oprah Winfrey has a ministry all her own with millions of viewers across the globe. According to Nielsen ratings, her show has been number one for 21 seasons and is syndicated in 135 countries.

Oprah's Soul Series on her XM radio show hosts teachers, thinkers and authors to talk about matters of the soul. She has touched upon many faith traditions, but none has created as big a reaction as her espousing of the book *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* by Eckhart Tolle, whose philosophy seems to have been gleaned for the most part from Eastern faiths.

The book was published in 2005, but it only became a major sensation after it was anointed by Oprah's Book Club. *A New Earth* is the centerpiece of a free, ten-part virtual class on Oprah.com, which anyone can watch. It has already been downloaded by Oprah fans 30 million times!

In the classes, Oprah and Tolle take readers through the book chapter by chapter, and even lead meditations. "Being able to share this material with you is a gift and a part of the fulfillment of my life's purpose," Oprah Winfrey told her viewers when she inaugurated the new selection. "It was an awakening for me that I want for you, too."

Oprah's "awakening" wasn't particularly welcome to many Christians. As John Jalsevac wrote in an article on LifeSiteNews.com, "Oprah, who is a self-labeled Christian, was recently named the 'most dangerous woman in the world' by Bill Keller, considered by some to be the world's leading Internet evangelist. He accused Oprah of peddling the equivalent of 'spiritual crack.'"

Indeed, looking at discussion boards on blogs you find many Christians are uncomfortable with Oprah's brand of religion, where she and Tolle basically say that God is one, and the paths to God are many; life is eternal and that the stillness within us is who we are at the deepest level. That is a message that Hindus will not find fault with; these principles are the very cornerstone of Hindu dharma. Browsing through the book, you find many Hindu ideas and beliefs, although their source is rarely pointed out in the book. Most of the philosophical concepts are credited to Buddhism. Yet, the core has clearly been derived from Hinduism.

"The German word for breathing, atmen, is derived from the ancient Indian (Sanskrit) word atman, meaning the indwelling divine spirit, or God within," writes Tolle. "The fact that breath has no form is one of the reasons why breath awareness is an extremely effective way of bringing space into your life, of generating consciousness." Now, isn't that something that Hindus have always known?

On yet another page, Tolle writes: "When I no longer confuse who I am with a temporary form of 'me,' then the dimension of the limitless and the eternal--God--can express itself through 'me' and guide 'me.' It also frees me from dependency on form."

Perhaps the strongest nod to Hindu belief is this paragraph: "Through the present moment, you have access to the power of life itself, that which has traditionally been called 'God.' As soon as you turn away from it, God ceases to be a reality in your life, and all you are left with is the mental concept of God, which some people believe in and others deny. Even belief in God is only a poor substitute for the living reality of God manifesting every moment of your life. However, there is an even deeper level to the whole than the interconnectedness of everything in existence. At that deeper level, all things are one. It is the Source, the unmanifested one Life. It is the timeless intelligence that manifests as a universe unfolding in time."

Surely, the silken threads of Hinduism seem to run through the tapestry of the book. So how have Hindus taken to A New Earth and Oprah's promotion of it? Hinduism Today talked to a young Hindu who has read the book and has strong feelings about it.

Suhag A. Shukla is a lawyer who advocates for the Hindu American Foundation. She believes that all the negative feedback and words of attack about the book are coming from dogmatic and fear-mongering people, who foster intolerance. "Oprah has embraced a path that is, in essence and fact, the Hindu philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, and those who have refused to respect multiple paths to God and the divinity in all beings are lodging the same attack on her that they have against Hindus for centuries," says Shukla. As she points out, Oprah's call for respect of the various paths to the one Truth is not new, not revolutionary and is not the teaching of a modern prophet. It is nothing but "ekam sat vipraha bahuda vadanti" or "Truth is one, the wise call it by many names."

While lots of Hindu beliefs are mentioned in the book, Hinduism is hardly mentioned by name. Anyone with even a passing knowledge of Hinduism cannot fail to notice this lacking. As Shukla explains, "A New Earth is nothing but a partial rendition of Advaita Vedanta, but without proper credit or citation. Eckhart Tolle himself, outside of the context of the book, has acknowledged amongst his main sources of inspiration the teachings of Ramana Maharshi and the Bhagavad Gita."

While Tolle states that his teachings are a continuation of the teachings of Maharshi and J. Krishnamurti coming together, Shukla finds this a misleading statement. "It seems that Tolle is prescribing only the path of raja yoga through short, daily meditations in which individuals are asked to step back from daily behavior, relationships, situations, etc., and reflect upon their Beingness, Tolle's relabeling of the unity of atman and Brahman," says Shukla. She feels this gives only one part of the Advaita Vedanta approach. Ramana Maharshi prescribed a total path including bhakti yoga (worship), karma yoga (selfless service), raja yoga (meditation) and jnana yoga (knowledge), to be utilized one with another as a way of spiritual evolution toward liberation.

What Shukla finds most disappointing as a Hindu who spends her time advocating on behalf of Hindu Americans and Hinduism is Tolle's reluctance to give Hinduism

due credit. She laments, "He is quite liberal in his references to Buddhism, and throughout the book reinterprets select quotations from the Bible using Advaita logic. But the word Hinduism and Ramana Maharshi's name are cited only a few times. Unfortunately, this slight by Tolle is no different than that by leading teachers of today's yoga movement in America."

Some say Hindus bring this upon themselves, citing the many spiritual teachers who are Hindu yet decline to label their teachings as Hindu. Shukla adds, "We Hindus for too long have allowed those outside the Hindu fold to create Hinduism's image to the outside world, and we have lagged in defining our faith to better reflect our actual beliefs and practices. By this we have allowed the widespread caricaturization of our faith and created an atmosphere in which non-Hindus have become most familiar with the 'caste, cows and curry' version of Hinduism. The general understanding of Hinduism, then, is not based on its deep philosophy or logic, but on ritual and social and cultural practices (and taboos) considered to make up a religious tradition that is not palatable for a primarily Western audience. I believe we should take ownership of Hinduism and define it on our own terms."

Still, the very fact that Winfrey and Tolle have brought Hindu philosophy--by whatever name--to the printed page and the web and airwaves is a positive happening. Shukla admits that there are some plus points: "Tolle offers a well-written introduction to one school of Hindu philosophy, and its age-old teachings are now reaching regular Americans in an unprecedented way due to the popularity and widely-held respect for Oprah. It is indeed unfortunate that most will likely never know of the original sources because of the lack of credit and, more importantly, that there is so much more that they can learn, apply and benefit from, as there are immeasurable amounts of spiritual writings from Hindu saints and sages that are readily available."

Oprah's charisma has inspired even young Indian Americans to take the online course. They rave about the wisdom in it. Some Hindus, unfamiliar with their own faith, are enthusiastic about A New Earth without realizing that many of the ideas have germinated from Hinduism, an ancient faith from which Buddhism later sprang.

So what would Suhag Shukla say to Hindus who tell her to read this book? "I have had friends refer this book to me without realizing that these teachings are not new by any means but simply a retelling of age-old wisdom passed down from our great

rishis," she responds. "I tell them that if they enjoyed and found inspiration in A New Earth, they would benefit from going to the source by reading the teachings of Ramana Maharshi, Aurobindo, Ramakrishna Mission, Chinmaya Mission, Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Saiva Siddhanta Church and so many others to find a deeper and more comprehensive approach to translate what on first reading can be overwhelming, esoteric philosophy into a truly fulfilling and meaningful way of life."Pipi

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Oprah's Support Has Wrought Wonders

Ved p. chaudhary, general secretary of the Hindu Collective Initiative of North America and former board member at Rutgers University, recently read A New Earth and has a positive opinion of the book with regard to its mention of Hinduism. He offered, "Overall, I was happy to see that Tolle cited Hinduism, Vedanta, the Upanishads and India more times in this book than Deepak Chopra did in his books."

Chaudhary feels that Tolle tries to involve the American public by liberally interpreting the words of Jesus to agree with the message of Hinduism: "I think that's a good approach because it allows many Americans to see the messages of Vedanta and Hinduism without prejudice; thus he is able to convey a radically different message of Vedanta and Hinduism to the American public."

Chaudhary feels Tolle is preparing the ground for Americans' greater acceptance of Hinduism in the future. He added, "Oprah's support has done wonders in this regard. So, even though I wish he had given more credit to Hinduism, on the whole I would like to support him and promote his book and ideas in the hope that he and other western authors will be more forthcoming in acknowledging and spreading the message of Hinduism in America and Europe."

Chaudhary believes that Tolle actually is at an advantage when he writes about Hindu values: "I think no Indian author could write a book like this, because those who practice and promote Hinduism just do not have the world view and the

modern language proficiency. They just keep repeating the deep Hindu ideas and philosophy in the language of the ancients. And those Indians who have the world view and the modern language skill generally do not practice or promote Hinduism."