Oh, For a Fair View of Hinduism...
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EDUCATION

Oh, For a Fair View of Hinduism...

Meet a few of the brave souls who dispel myths and teach Hinduism at schools, colleges and interfaith meetings

Lavina Melwani, New York

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Those attending the speeches of Swami Vivekananda at the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893 had never heard Hinduism presented in such an enlightened manner. One was heard to remark, "That man a heathen? And we send missionaries to his people? It would be more fitting that they should send missionaries to us." Well, that day has come, and there are Hindu missionaries by the millions across the Western world potential missionaries, at least. "The problem, " according to Ved Chaudhary, "is that our religion is like a closet religion. Indians are everywhere, in hospitals, universities. They are doctors, lawyers, accountants. Americans say they know a lot of Indian people, but ask them if they know any Hindus, and they say 'no.' This is because we don't identify ourselves as Hindus we only identify ourselves as Indians."

"The result," he continued, "is that many interfaith dialogues have Muslim, Buddhist and Sikh participation, but no Hindu representation. We have to be assertive and take time and interest. Otherwise, we can complain, but we'll be ignored, and we'll not become part of the community as Hindu-Americans. And the same thing will be true with our children, who are growing up here."

Chaudhary has pinpointed a major issue among Hindus of the diaspora in many countries, not just America. I was assigned by Hinduism Today to investigate just who had come forward in our community to represent and explain Hinduism to the

non-Hindus. An appeal in our e-mail news service, Hindu Press International, brought a hundred responses from those engaged to a greater or lesser extent in doing just that. They are on the front lines, talking at schools, churches, Rotary Clubs and interfaith meetings, or bringing people to their local temple, trying their best to put forward our great religion in an understandable fashion. Impressive especially are the efforts of Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Neasden, London, who have introduced their temple and Hinduism to a quarter-million non-Hindu students over the past eight years.

There are many traveling swamis and holy men and women of Hinduism who also interact with the non-Hindu public. But this article is an account of those brave modern missionaries who are lay Hindus, ordinary men and women. They are benign souls who denigrate no other faith, nor seek for converts. Rather they provide their friends and neighbors a glimpse into Hindu spiritual life.

Some when questioned on certain issues could become shy and defensive qualities conspicuously absent from Swami Vivekananda's presentations! The best of our missionaries are religious men and women, confident and content with their own beliefs and possessing a broad knowledge of Hinduism and other religions.

Meet the missionaries

Let's begin with Ved Chaudhary, (photo below) who hails from the district of Itawa, 150 miles southeast of Delhi, India. He came to the US in 1965 as a graduate student at Rutgers University. He worked as an engineer with Bell Labs and its subsidiaries, until he retired last year. He received his training in Hinduism from his father, a teacher, who made sure his son knew all about the faith. He laughs, "My name is Ved ["knowledge "], after all!"

He has participated in interfaith activities in churches, schools and colleges. As part of his effort to educate non-Hindus, he started the Hindu International Council Against Defamation, on the lines of the Jewish Anti-Defamation League, to take action against any misinformation or defamation of Hindu Gods and rituals. HICAD (www.hicad.org) keeps a vigilant eye on how Hinduism is portrayed in the mainstream and takes offending organizations to task. Last year, after the Global Dharma Conference in New Jersey, Chaudhary, along with other participants, helped

initiate an organization which would be able to correct inaccuracies --the Educators' Society for the Heritage of India (ESHI) --where various professors can get together and network about an accurate presentation of Hinduism to the mainstream. Their website, www.eshi.org, is still under construction, but contains a short statement of purpose.

There is a lot of misinformation out there about Hinduism, Chaudhary says, and it starts right in school. Sixth graders have a course called World Cultures, which still contains wrong information about Hinduism. "If there are ten pages about Hinduism, several pages may be devoted to the caste system, as if that is the defining characteristic of Hinduism. It is very hard to fight this situation; in New Jersey alone there are 600 school districts I would have to go to each one to convince them to use or not use certain books."

American school texts are indeed a major source of misinformation the text situation is slightly better in the UK. Those venturing to present Hinduism in local schools should first become familiar with what is in the textbooks. They likely will be shocked by the contents (our opening gatefold cartoon quotes four real-life, very wrong statements on Hinduism made in US schools). It is possible to impact the problem by going directly to the publishers, and Hinduism Today has successfully done so. In fact, one major publisher sent us a pre-publication manuscript of their chapter on Hinduism for review. We returned a highly edited version which they accepted almost in entirety. Still, some concepts, like that of the Aryan Invasion (which many modern scholars question), are virtually impossible to extract at this time, as is the emphasis on caste.

One missionary who has focused on the texts is Yvette C. Rosser (Ram Rani). Now 52, she's spent many years in India, is a devotee of Neem Karoli Baba and identifies herself as Hindu. She's made presentations in classrooms and to teachers for the last twelve years in the Austin, Texas, area. Her paper, "The Clandestine Curriculum: Temple of Doom in the Classroom " (http://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/s_es/s_es_rosse_EAA.htm) discusses the factual errors about Hinduism and India in four texts used in American schools, and forms the basis for her presentations to students and teachers. It's a useful document to study, because you will very probably find some errors in the books used at your local middle school.

Yvette has done about twenty classroom presentations in her local area, to 10th

grade World History and 6th grade World Civilizations classes which are mandated by the Texas curriculum. The classes are just 50 minutes, so she tries to keep it simple. She gets the students' names from the teacher in advance, and makes out a card with their name spelled phonetically in Sanskrit. She brings props like conch shells for the children to blow and essential oils of sandalwood, jasmine, etc., "to get a whiff of India, " she says. Incense is out because it sets off the smoke alarms. "I do a little stereotype lesson and challenge the students' preconceived notions, as well as address issues raised in my Temple of Doom article, such as cows, bindi, etc." She also works with Beth Kulkarni's program in Houston.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the Swaminarayan temple in Neasden has set an excellent standard. They've brought 260,500 students from 5,820 schools through the temple. The school children are given a short lecture on basic Hinduism, then go to the main temple to see the Deities and elaborate carvings, and view a short video on the temple's creation. The last part of the experience, the temple spokesman said, "is a visit to the Exhibition on 'Understanding Hinduism' which portrays the origins, growth and glory of Hindu Dharma and outlines what Hindu values can contribute to the individual, society and the world at large." As well, children are allowed to undertake school projects on parts of the temple, such as the Deities, the architecture or the temple's activities. The BAPS organization, which owns the temple, has an outstanding record for training well-informed guides for its exhibitions.

Also active in London is physicist Jay Lakhani (vivekananda @btinternet.com), one of our few full-time Hindu missionaries. His family is originally from Gujarat, and he was born and raised in Kenya. Lakhani came to the UK for further studies at the age of 15. Now 55, he says, "I took early retirement to focus on what I love best studying and promoting Hinduism." Although he received no formal education in Hinduism, Lakhani has been inspired by the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. He has become a popular speaker in the London school system, having interacted with over 100 institutions, from elite public schools like Harrow to the inner-city schools in deprived areas, speaking with young people from all faiths and no faith. Besides doing a yearly series of talks at the Christian Ministerial College, he is a regular Hindu presenter on the interfaith scene and the main speaker on Hinduism on BBC World Service, with 20 million listeners worldwide.

He has fielded many questions from non-Hindus, but he finds that they are most attracted by the idea of the divinity of man: "When talking to youngsters of the Abrahamic faiths, this idea of the essential nature of everyone as 'divine' equating it

to God grabs them and makes them run after me, asking me excitedly again and again: 'Is this really Hinduism?' This single concept from Swami Vivekananda works like a bombshell. The religious education teachers, the students and the school staff become transformed. They are now in love with Hinduism! Any non-Hindu exposed to this presentation becomes a lover of Hinduism forever. How can anyone fault this religion that gives highest dignity to mankind?" Dr. Karan Singh in his interview on page 26 expresses a similar perception, that the high-minded concepts of Hinduism are wonderfully received when correctly explained.

Lakhani said that since the vast majority of religious education teachers in the UK are women, the Hindu idea of God as female is the most exciting thing they have heard in religious education. He laughs, "Hinduism has stolen their hearts forever! On a serious note, this pluralism of Hindus removes the misconception of Hinduism being polytheistic and at the same time gives resolution to the thorny question the world faces of interreligious harmony."

Lakhani is often faced with the C-word, and works hard to demolish the idea of caste-based discrimination as being part of Hinduism. He says, "I term this an 'atrocity in the name of religion' and not religion. This is a very important distinction that sometimes gets overlooked in the way Hinduism is presented in the West. This does serious damage to the more important and vibrant aspect of Hinduism as promoting the divinity of man."

Enthusiasm for Hindu concepts can lead to inquiries about conversion, and many of our missionaries seemed unsure in this area. Hinduism, like Judaism, accepts those who freely wish to join the faith, but makes no attempt to pull a person out of another religion. A good response to someone who inquires about conversion is to refer them to How to Become a Hindu, by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami. It is available in full on the Internet at http://www.himalayanacademy.com/books/hbh/.

Addressing common issues

The most frequent questions encountered by our missionaries are: caste, dowry, sati, cows, Gods, yoga, methods of worship, conversion, definition of who is a Hindu, holy books and a Hindu's obligation to a temple. One can take a reactive or a proactive approach to explaining Hinduism. The reactive approach is to make

defensive explanations and assume a certain degree of hostility on the part of the questioner. The proactive approach is to assume questions are being asked honestly and without the intent to embarrass the Hindu. With this approach, questions are answered clearly and simply, but one doesn't get bogged down in the cow/caste/karma arena to the exclusion of a well-rounded presentation of the Hindu view of life and religion. Still, it is easy to get put on the defensive because of the presentation of Hinduism in the school textbooks, the negative portrayal of Hinduism by the Indian media and even the anti-Hindu fund-raising propaganda of the fundamentalist Christian missionaries touting their India programs to save Hindu "heathens."

It can be necessary to "set the record straight " with some issues. Yes, untouchability is a major social evil in India. But why does the blame for it get laid at the feet of Hinduism, when Christianity is not blamed for racism in other countries? Anti-Semitism, which is still a major problem in Christian countries, is a result of the belief by Christians that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus. Racial hatred of black people also has its basis in religion, for the black Africans are regarded as the offspring of the cursed Ham, son of Noah, a story recounted in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. The story of the curse was freely used by Christian ministers and priests to justify slavery right up to the 19th century, and is still used today by America's white supremacists.

Why, then, is untouchability, which isn't even supported by our scriptures in the way it exists today, a "fault " of Hinduism, while racism and anti-Semitism are not the "fault " of Christianity? Hate crimes are such a problem in the West that hate-crime legislation has had to be implemented in the last several decades in several countries, including the US and UK, to deal with it by adding additional penalties to any crime committed with racial hatred as a factor.

Proceeding with confidence

Das Menon, 63, an industrial design consultant, has been in the US since the 80s (mmenon9018@aol.com). During his college years, he studied all the works of Swami Vivekananda. He observes, "India, Hinduism and Sanatana Dharma are my passions. I think it is time to spread the word about human divinity and the universality of the spiritual path. It is much needed in a world that is torn between constrained views of God and humanity."

Menon, who has spoken to various church groups, local college study groups and at schools, has encountered the standard misconceptions about Hinduism, including that Hindus confuse many Gods with one God, are primitive in their belief system, are superstitious and worship animals.

Menon, who is working on a book about Hinduism, explains 'Why so many Gods?' to non-Hindus as one impersonal Spiritual-Reality that manifests in infinite personal names and forms in the spiritual and material realms: "For Hindus, there is no separation between the Creator and that which appears to be created. There is nothing that is outside God. There is no second entity." He has a useful set of questions and answers about Hinduism at http://www.hometown.aol.com/mmenon9018/myhomepage/faith.html

In a small town in rural Pennsylvania, yet another Hindu is sorting out the myths for non-Hindus Dr. Jeffrey D. Long, 34, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies in Elizabethtown College (longjd@etown.edu). He did his PhD in comparative religious studies at the University of Chicago, focusing on Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Long has been involved with informal study of Hinduism since his childhood and ultimately embraced it.

Non-Hindus are curious about caste, especially untouchability, he says. "I always try to problematize caste, explaining that the original Vedic ideal was not of birth-caste, but that birth-caste became the norm at a later period, and that the notion of birth-caste has been contested throughout the history of Hinduism. In the classroom, I generally treat this in historical fashion, citing various reform movements that have occurred throughout the centuries from the Buddha to Mahatma Gandhi."

He adds, "If I am speaking as a Hindu, to a more informal gathering, I share my own philosophy, which is that of Swami Vivekananda, that our oneness in God ought to supersede all other factors in our treatment of other beings!" The most prevalent misconceptions he encounters regard cows and Gods: "There is a commonly held view that if people in India ate their cows, their hunger problem would vanish. This is, of course, absurd."

He explains the symbolic importance of the cow in Hinduism, as well as the fact that

respect for the cow is really emblematic of respect for all life. Countering the perception that Hindus are idol-worshipers, Long explains the symbolism involved in murti puja and the respects in which the many Gods are simultaneously One God.

"Since my audience is usually Christian, I typically make an analogy with the Christian ideal of the Trinity, saying something like, 'Imagine the Trinity extended to an infinity, and you get the basic concept of God in Hinduism,' " he says. "I also distinguish between the high Gods Vishnu/Siva/Shakti conceived as supreme manifestations of Saguna Brahman and the many other devatas, who are liberated or advanced souls, which I compare to angels and saints when I speak with Christian groups."

When facing questions on idol worship, cow/monkey/rat worship, bride burning or female infanticide, Dr. Sudhir Prabhu, 53, (slprabhu1@yahoo.com) has two secret weapons: "Although my answers are anchored in the scriptures, I always use logic and humor to convey the points to the audience. The responses are almost always well received."

Prabhu, who has been teaching to varied audiences in churches, interfaith groups and youth study groups in Jacksonville, Florida, for over 20 years, had no formal training, but was, as he likes to say, "trained on the job." A physician specializing in allergies and asthma, he has served as the chair of the board of the local Hindu temple and on the boards of organizations such as the Red Cross and American Lung Association.

He confided, "Since I make frequent presentations in my field, I have taken some public speaking courses, studied the ways of effective communicators and applied these to my presentations. This background has helped me relate to the Western mind and audiences with ease." Prabhu recommends that more Hindus volunteer and conduct classes but suggests they also study the history of monotheistic religions and their concepts.

"Naturally, I tend to get what I call 'the three Ks' on a regular basis: Kaste, Kows and Karma, " says Fred Stella, 49, an actor and yoga instructor who lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan (stelthom@juno.com). He is president of the Interfaith Dialogue Association and has received training in the Self Realization Fellowship and the local

Vedanta Society ashram.

Stella started attending a Hindu temple when he was 15, when he was still being educated in the Catholic school system, and so "developed the ability to speak about Hinduism to those with a Christian mind set."

He points out that the only exposure many church groups have to Hinduism is through missionary films which show images of destitute villages in India and say "Well, this is what you get when you practice bad religion."

Misconceptions he faces? "That Hindus don't acknowledge one absolute source of the universe or God and that karma is fatalism. Critics assume that the cruel tradition of caste bigotry is blessed by our scriptures, and that we are somehow related to Islam. They even confuse tamasic (the philosophic category of dullness) with turmeric (the spice)!"

In the schools where Stella teaches, 99 percent of the children are from conservative Christian homes, many of whom may never have encountered a real, live Hindu. "Knowing all the misinformation these people are going to come across in their lives, I feel content that I may be the one source who will put it in a different perspective for them, " Stella grins. "So perhaps when these people meet their next Hindu--whether it's at work, or someone who moves on to their block or joins the same social organization --they will meet that Hindu with less prejudice than if they did not attend my talk."

Of course, there are many more people doing good work for Hinduism. One notable program is that of the Hindu University in Florida, which conducted a four-hour seminar led by K. C. Gupta (gupta@hindu-university.edu) last year for 35 hospital chaplains and others to explain how to relate to Hindu patients. They gave a list, for example, entitled "Hug, Kiss or Fold Hands?" which covered some of the basics, like shaking hands or not, proper vegetarian diet and Hindu attitudes and customs upon the death of a loved one.

We learned, too, as responses came in to our request for input for this article, that

presenting Hinduism to non-Hindus is a developing craft. There is no "Office of Interreligious Affairs " for our decentralized Hindu religion, nor a one theological seminary where the necessary skills might be taught. Each instructor heard from had a different approach and different answers (some not really correct) to the most common questions about Hinduism. (We offer answers to ten such common questions in our Insight article in this issue). Complex issues such as caste were often dismissed with oversimplified responses, such as "The brahmins created caste to dominate the other Hindus "--an assertion that doesn't match the historical facts of the matter. Another common pitfall is to present one's personal beliefs as if all Hindus held them. For example, several speakers explain temple worship only from the perspective of the Smarta Vedanta interpretation of the Gods as "symbols " of transcendent reality and not from that of the rich devotional, bhakti traditions, which hold the Gods to be very real. Denial is another faulty response to aspects of Hinduism that seem bazaar to non-Hindus. The fact is, for instance, some Hindus do walk on fire, sleep on beds of nails or pierce their bodies with small spears, not just "even today " or "still today, " but as an active, even growing, form of religious penance.

In conclusion

The work of teaching Hinduism is a vital endeavor. Jay Lakhani spoke for many when he observed, "It is only when the West recognizes the true value of Hinduism, incorporating ideas of the divinity of man and the role of religious pluralism, that Hindus themselves will come to their senses about what valuable treasures they possess. Deciphering Hinduism for non-Hindus is of paramount importance."

Unquestionably, the movement among Hindus to clarify their faith is rapidly growing, as more and more see the need and gain the courage--to reach out to non-Hindu friends and neighbors with clear, friendly presentations. The experiences recounted here and the information in our Insight section this issue just might prepare and inspire you to join their ranks!

ONE STUDENT'S ORDEALS

The Abuse Hinduism Receives In US Schools Is

Intolerable

By Trisha Pasricha, age 15, Houston

It's 8:00 am, and students slowly trickle into Mr. West's sixth-grade history class. The majority of the people, including the teacher, are white. One African-American, two Orientals and myself, a second generation Indian girl, make up the rest of the class. On the blackboard is written "World Religions." As the rest of the class prepares for a boring two hours, I can already feel my stomach sink --what did I do to deserve this?

We are handed a fill-in-the-blank chart of major world religions and are instructed to look in our books for the answers. Finishing quickly, I hand in my chart to Mr. West at his desk, and turn to leave. "Now wait a minute, you put 'monotheistic' down for Hindooism [as he pronounces it], " he remarks. "I know, " I reply, feeling my face burn as the class looks up. "Hindoos are polytheistic." "No, they're not." "Are you a Hindoo?" "Yeah." "Oh."

Scattered murmurs break out among my peers, whispering about how freaky Hindus worship elephants and monkeys. Great. "Well, " Mr. West says standing up and going to the chalkboard, "from what I understand, Hindoos are all about their caste system." And he begins a long, irrelevant and incorrect explanation, which he memorized from our textbook. What does that have to do with being monotheistic? I don't even bother correcting him, to save myself any more embarrassment. I wanted to get out of there. Fast.

Seventh grade starts, and it's culture day in history. "Both of my parents are Indian..." I begin when it's my turn. "Do you mean Native American Indian, or Middle Eastern Indian?" my teacher asks. Sounds like it's going to be another fun year in social studies.

India and Hinduism are summed up in a few short sentences by the teacher. India is described as filled with pollution, cows and poverty-stricken people. Hindus love to bathe in rivers where they throw the ashes of their parents and yes, they do worship elephants and monkeys.

"Do you speak Indian?" I'm asked at least two times a week. "I heard there were two thousand Gods, and every full moon you had to give a sacrifice to them. Do you do that?" No. I try to explain that all the Gods are really aspects of one Almighty Being. I've never sacrificed anything except my dignity, which slowly dwindles with each question. The release of popular award-winning books such as Homeless Bird, which portrays the typical Indian girl who is forced to get married at thirteen, didn't help Indians anywhere. And, who could have guessed, the author hadn't even been to India! No kidding. Six entire chapters in our textbook were devoted to Christianity, whereas one page is given to the history of India and the teachings of Hinduism. A second page is entirely about Lord Siva, accompanied by a rather unbecoming picture of an ancient dancing Siva statue. Buddhism gets one paragraph.

This doesn't make sense, as most of the school already knows so much about Christianity, but hardly any even knew Buddhism or Hinduism existed. Now that they did, we would be ridiculed publicly. Thank you, Board of Education.

At last, high school starts. I almost die of shock when I see the ninth-grade textbook has devoted an entire three sentences to Sikhism and Jainism. It claims Sikhism "combines the Muslim belief of one God with the Hindu belief of reincarnation." Christianity in India and the ever-popular "Western influence " get pages and pages of text. One of the main pictures which help represent "typical life in India " is one my fellow students describe as some sort of drag-queen in make-up doing an obscure peacock dance. Out of all the dazzling pictures of Indian culture, that is the one they have to stick in? They chose that one over a picture of, say, the classic Taj Mahal?

But the fun just gets funnier --the next picture of a sari earns a whole two sentences. Oh, but it's not an exquisite silk or glittering embroidered sari. Nope, it's a dirty yellow (perhaps once white) cotton sari worn by an old woman bathing in the Ganges River. In spite of its pollution, "Hindus readily drink and bathe in the Ganges' water. People even come to die in the river." To further prove their point, they stick in a picture of a filth- and trash-laden section of Ganges, not a clean part, which much of it is. I kid you not, upon reading this and looking at the picture, a boy in my class had to be excused to the nurse's office because his stomach had become queasy. Now we come to the sacred cow. They say entire streets are blocked because Hindus don't want to run over our beloved cow. C'mon, even in America, people aren't going to just run over a local cow; they'll find a way to move it or get around it. On an ending note, stated in the book, Indians are technologically behind. They fail to mention that we have a space program, nuclear

capabilities, and many Indians, believe it or not, have heard of a computer.

Every day, young Hindu children and teenagers are unreasonably tormented because of our perceived background. The school textbooks are half the cause. The average American knows precious little about India, and with the help of poorly researched textbooks, they learn nonsense. The sheer embarrassment of the situation is enough to make Hindu students everywhere wish we could have been "normal " by American standards.

It is not fun for any young Hindu to explain to her (or his) peers that she doesn't worship a thousand Gods like the Greeks; that her grandmother doesn't force her to bathe in dead people's ashes every full moon; and that even though she knows how to bhangra, kuchipudi, or whatever it may be, she's never danced with a drag-queen. But why do we put up with it? Jewish, African-American, and Orientals all have organizations against defamation and they are represented correctly in the textbooks. Why aren't we?

If Christians can effectively lobby to remove the theory of evolution from school science textbooks, then certainly we should be able to at least correct the blatant misinterpretation of our culture. Read what your (or your child's) Social Studies textbook says on India and Hinduism and write a simple letter or e-mail to the editor and your local board of education. It can make a world of difference for not only you but for thousands of others who face ridicule because of what is taught about Hinduism in our American schools.

Presenting Hinduism's Four Goals of Life

Personal, human values are interesting to everyone

by satguru bodhinatha veylanswami

I have found that presenting the purushartha, the four Hindu goals of life, is an effective way of introducing Hinduism to non-Hindus in a classroom environment. This is due to the fact that the students have almost always learned about Hinduism from a religion or history textbook that focuses on India and events in the past, plus the fact that none or few of them have ever met a Hindu. Unfortunately, this leaves

the impression that Hindus are quite different from them, their family, friends and neighbors.

Thus the goal of this presentation is to have the students realize that Hindus are pretty much the same as everyone else. The presentation begins by writing on the blackboard the word purushartha and its translation as "goals of life " and underneath writing each of the four goals in Sanskrit and English: dharma, "virtuous living; " artha, "wealth; " kama, "love; " and moksha, "liberation." Then the explanation begins.

In Hinduism the goals of life are called purushartha, and there are four of them: dharma, virtuous living; artha, wealth; kama, love; and moksha, liberation. Let's look first at love and wealth. Love and wealth are indeed the goals of all of mankind. Most everyone, monks excluded of course, is living life in a way that pursues these goals. They want to fall in love, get married, have children and live a happy family life. They want to learn a profession so that they can earn a good living and provide for their family a home and all the necessary possessions. In this regard, Hindus are the same as everyone else, not at all different in fulfilling these natural human pursuits.

Next we have dharma. Dharma is not really a separate goal from artha and kama but rather governs the way we pursue them. Are we honest or dishonest in the way we acquire wealth? If we are honest, then that is fulfilling the goal of dharma. Are we loyal to our spouse or do we have extramarital affairs? If we are loyal, that is again fulfilling dharma. In addition to the idea of following virtue, dharma outlines our natural human duties in life. We have obligations to our immediate family members, guests in our home, our parents, our community, our state and our nation. Dharma tells us that we should help others, and perform our part in the service and upliftment of society. Dharma also includes the concept of regularly worshipping God. There is a verse from the Hindu scripture Tirukural which nicely summarizes these duties, "The foremost duty of family life is to serve duly these five: God, guests, kindred, ancestors and oneself." Dharma can also be translated as religion, and we can clearly see that Hindus pursuing dharma act the same as anyone else who is following a religious tradition.

Finally, we have the goal of moksha, or liberation. All religions have a final goal. Some call it salvation; others call it enlightenment. Hinduism calls it liberation, which refers to being liberated from the cycle of reincarnation on Earth. Moksha

comes through the fulfillment of dharma, artha and kama in the current or past lives, so that you are no longer attached to worldly joys or sorrows. We can see that this concept is different from that held in religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam but similar to that held in other Eastern religions such as Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism. Therefore, in their pursuit of moksha, Hindus are the same as others in the Eastern religions but do differ in this one regard from those in the Western faiths.

Getting to Know Your Hindu Neighbors

Beth Kulkarni came into Hinduism through marriage to a Hindu from India and is an evocative interpreter of the faith for non-Hindus. She has spoken at school, university and church religious classes. She also takes non-Hindus on tours of Houston's Sri Meenakshi Temple, where she is an Advisory Council member. Beth, 62, is a retired technical trainer for a multinational corporation (Kulkarni@hal-pc.org).

"One of the most frequent misconceptions is that Hindus are polytheistic. I reply that we believe in an 'Ultimate Reality' that is simultaneously both with form and without form, and that this Ultimate Reality is both transcendent and immanent, both personal and nonpersonal. I give the example that I, Beth, am a wife, mother, grandmother, friend and community worker, with different functions and relationships due to these various roles, but am still the same 'Beth.' How, I ask, could God, therefore, not have different roles, functions and relationships?"

Kulkarni is a part of the Indian-American community and has raised her two children in it. She therefore finds it even more imperative to change the perceptions people may have of Hinduism. She says, "So many Americans know very little about Hindu traditions. I tell them, 'It's not like 40 or 50 years ago when Hinduism was the religion of people on the other side of the globe. Today they are your doctors, they are the motel owners down the street, they are your neighbors.' "She finds that children are very open to new ideas, as are senior citizens, maybe because they have seen enough of life to realize that no one tradition has all the answers.

Beth has been instrumental in the organizing of Indic Culture and Traditions Seminars (ICATS@pobox.com). These are training sessions for non-Hindu teachers who present India and Hinduism in their classes on World History and World Cultures. Beth explains the main concepts including karma, moksha, dharma and the Hindu concept of God --simply and clearly. Cows and caste are put in perspective. Said one high school teacher after a seminar, "I am really surprised at the lack of knowledge we had." Another said, "The books were always stuck on the caste system, population and the worship of cows. I didn't want to keep teaching badly. Even I thought Hindus were polytheistic."

Beth concludes, "Hindus are part of the community, and we have to know about the traditions of each other. It's extremely satisfying when I explain reincarnation or karma, and non-Hindus realize that they are not such strange notions after all because they do make sense."

AT GLOBAL FORUMS

Present the Deepest Concepts

Dr. Karan Singh has found the profound mystical principles of Hinduism are much appreciated in the international interfaith world

Dr. Karan Singh, member of the Rajya Sabha of India's parliament and son of the last maharaja of Kashmir, is one of Hinduism's most popular and erudite representatives at the international level. Hinduism Today correspondent Rajiv Malik interviewed him in Delhi on his experience in presenting Hinduism to non-Hindus at meetings of global, interfaith leaders.

Hinduism Today: How is Hinduism received by interfaith leaders?

Karan Singh: At the interfaith level we are already dealing with people who are open

to other religions, by definition. Otherwise they would not be in an interfaith gathering. They may be convinced that their religion is the best, but they are at least open to learning about the other religions. So I find that if Hinduism is presented in a manner which is more universal than denominational, there is a very broad acceptance among the people. In a way, Hinduism itself is a one-religion interfaith movement. Right from the very beginning, when none of the other religions were born, you could worship a saakar Brahma [a divine with attributes] or nirakaar Brahma [divine without attributes]. In the saakar you could worship a male or a female deity. You could worship Siva, you could worship Vishnu, Rama, Krishna, Hanuman, Ganesha, etc. There is a whole array of paths to the divine. So, I think the basic, key concept of the interfaith movement is the acceptance of multiple paths to the divine. Ekam sat viprah bahuda vadanti. That is the Vedic edict which means, "The truth is one, the wise call it by many names." I find that if Hinduism is presented in this universal manner, there is a good appreciation.

HT: How do you present Hinduism?

KS: I concentrate on the Upanishads and on Vedanta. And I take certain universal concepts such as, Ishavasya idam sarvam yatkinch jagatyam jagat. This means that the entire universe or cosmos is permeated by the Divine. This is a concept which can be very well understood, because there are billions upon billions of galaxies, and Hinduism is not confined to this tiny speck of dust that we call planet Earth; it is universal. Then I talk of the atman, Iswar sarvabhutanam rideshe tishthati. This means that the Divine resides in the hearts of all beings. Then I point out that the joining of the Brahman and the atman is what is known as yoga. The word yoga in English comes from the same root as the word yoke. Then I talk about the four paths of yoga. The way of wisdom, jnana yoga, the way of devotion, bhakti yoga, the way of work, karma yoga and the way of spiritual practices, raja yoga. Then from there I go on to this concept of the multiplicity of the paths to the divine --Ekam sat anekah panthah [Truth is one, paths are many]. Then from there I discuss concepts like Vasudhaiva kutumbakam [the world is a family]. Then I speak about the concept of Bahujan hitaya, bahujan sukhaya, the welfare of the many and the happiness of the many. If you present Hinduism in these universalist terms, then I find the acceptance level is very high. But not if I start talking in denominational terms and say that you have to worship in this particular way or you have to chant the mantras in this particular manner, which is very important for Hindus, but obviously not that important for non-Hindus.

HT: What is the impression of Hinduism at the interfaith level?

KS: It is good, but it is a very small elite, as it were. No one has ever asked me about the issues you mention, such as cow worship, bindis or caste. In this regard, I would like to point out, there are two kinds of customs. One kind of custom is benign. For example, wearing a bindi, doing puja and so on. Some of the customs are malign, as it were, such as untouchability or animal sacrifice. They are also a part of Hinduism, let us remember that. But then that has to be kept aside. We have to tell them that such wrong practices may have been a part of Hinduism at some stage, in some communities, but they are not an essential part of Hinduism. The whole history of Hinduism is a history of constant reform and rearticulation.

For example, Swami Vivekananda came and he thundered against the so-called "kitchen religion." He said that if your religion is so fragile that if you eat with someone [of another caste] and it collapses, then it does not deserve to be a religion. All the great Hindu social reformers have tried to educate the public that the core beliefs of Hinduism are the beliefs of the Vedanta, the Upanishads. But there are some undesirable elements which need to be purged.

There are misconceptions abounding about Hinduism abroad. It is like somebody saying that because the Christians believe that the sacrament, the bread and the wine, is the body and blood of the Christ, therefore Christianity is a cannibalistic religion. If somebody says this, it is prima facie ridiculous. But it can be put in that way. That is the sort of distortion that people do about Hinduism, which is entirely wrong. It is symbolic. Symbolism is often mistaken for the reality. The communion given by the Roman Catholic Church is a symbolism of the divine prasad [food offered to the Deity and then given to the devotee] as it were, which they give, as far as I understand. So you can distort these things if they are not properly explained. One should not approach an interfaith gathering as if it is a debate over the superiority of one religion over another.

HT: What is the key to a better understanding of Hinduism?

KS: The big thing in Hinduism is that we are not bound down to one particular path. Each of us can choose the path, and we can change it in the course of our lifetime. In my own life, for example, at one stage, my own devotion was to Lord Krishna. But for some mysterious reasons He disappeared behind the veil and Lord Siva came to the front. So, according to one's developing needs you can change your methodologies. That flexibility is something unique. There are many religions where you cannot change. This is what you must do. This is your prayer. This is your path.

And any deviation from that path is apostasy, which is to be totally rejected. That is not the approach of Hinduism.

HT: How have recent events impacted the image of Hinduism?

KS: The destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and then these terrible riots in Gujarat have given a very bad impression of Hinduism. It is a well-known fact that Muslim rulers and invaders of India destroyed vast numbers of temples and did all that. But Hindus had the proud privilege of saying that, "Look, we have never done that." Now unfortunately after these incidents, questions are being raised. These attacks and riots are very wrong. They are anti-Hindu acts, un-Hindu acts, shall we say. Jihadis have totally discredited Islam, though maybe they represent a tiny fraction of Muslims. Now Islam itself has become some kind of a menace and threatening force around the world. I wrote an article in which a key sentence was that it would be a tragedy if we do to Hinduism what the jihadis have done to Islam, which is becoming a word coterminous with terror and fear. If that happens to Hinduism, that would be a disaster.

HT: What else do you bring up?

KS: I talk about Hinduism and the inner path. For example, when somebody comes to me I ask him, "Are you on an inner path? Maybe outwardly you are a software manufacturer, chartered accountant, businessman, politician or whatever. What is your inner life ? Are you moving towards something inwardly? Do you have an inner focus in your life?" That is the question which I ask, one-on-one particularly, or even in groups. I say, "Look, life is fleeting. How long does one last 70, 80 or 90 years? Have you used this life to move towards some kind of inner integration? Or have you just wasted it skimming the surface of consciousness?" Non-Hindus understand the inner-life concept, not perhaps in the same manner as the Hindus would understand it, but they do understand it. If you explain to them that your inner life is important, then they can focus on their inner life. Inner life is also a focus in Christianity, but not always visible. Even in Islam, which is looked upon as severe, there is the Sufi movement, which is a much softer, much more spiritual side. You must see these Sufi dervishes go whirl round and round in great devotion. Even to watch them is a spiritual experience.

HT: How have your talks been received by non-Hindus?

KS: You seem to suggest that I must have faced a barrage of hostile questions from these people. No such thing has ever happened to me. In fact, people come to me after my speech and confide, "This is the first time we have begun to understand some of the basic concepts of Hinduism"