Editorial
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Pitfalls of Dialogue

the Editor

A few years back Hinduism Today was invited to Moscow for a week of remarkable encounters with 700 spiritual and 700 political leaders under the banner of the Global Forum for Human Survival. A priestess of the Hawaiian faith joined us, a gentle, intelligent woman much loved here. While sharing the old Hawaiian creation story, which involves a cosmic placenta, she was ordered silent by the moderator, a Jewish leader who found offense in her explanation. Even here, where knowledgeable people came to get along, interfaith tolerance proved less than perfect. The rabbi later apologized, but the Polynesian priestess never got to finish.

Thirty-seven hundred miles away, near Madras, and fifty years earlier a better example of the collision of creeds occured at the singular meeting of Ramana Maharishi and Sage Yogaswami. Sri Lanka's sage met South India's in an extended, perfect and profound silence. The fact that not a single word was spoken is unusual and instructive. They sat together on the floor of that spartan ashram at the foot of the sacred hill for a long time. Men from different traditions, yet not themselves different, for they knew the same One. It was a form of interreligious dialogue, but not the kind that happens each day.

Serious discussions between diverse faiths, like debates over human rights, are relatively new in human history. Even sincere efforts are treacherous. Consider the pope's most recent dilemma. On the eve of his first-ever visit to Sri Lanka, where on January 20th he will beatify a 17th century priest from Goa, Buddhist monks are up in arms. The furor arose from the pope's statements published in Crossing the Threshold of Hope, the first popular book ever published by a Catholic pontiff. In a

seven-page chapter titled "Buddha?" the pope acknowledges "a certain diffusion of Buddhism in the West," and proceeds to define it as "in large measure an atheistic system" which possesses "an almost exclusively negative soteriology (doctrine of salvation)."

He offers another statement which more broadly impacts India's spiritual heritage: "It is not inappropriate to caution those Christians who enthusiastically welcome certain ideas originating in the religious traditions of the Far East-for example, techniques and methods of meditation and ascetical practice."

Buddhists see these as criticisms of their doctrine of salvation and a life of self-discipline and meditation. Lanka's sangam threatens to boycott the pope's visit unless he apologizes and retracts his words. If such troubles can arise from those who really want to dialog, like John Paul II, imagine the discussions between those who don't really care to comprehend the ways of others.

What to do? Here are some helpful reflections published in Europe by our friend, Prof. Raimundo Panikkar, a Catholic theologian and translator of the Vedas, now retired in a hamlet (population 61) in the mountains of Spain.

Prof. Raimundo Panikkar:

When you enter into an intrareligious dialogue, do not think beforehand what you have to believe.

When you witness to your faith, do not defend yourself or your vested interests, sacred as they may appear to you. Do like the birds in the sky: they sing and fly and do not defend their music or their beauty.

When you dialogue with somebody, look at your partner as a revelatory experience as you would-and should-look at the lilies in the fields.

When you engage in intrareligious dialogue, try first to remove the beam in your own eye before removing the speck in the eye of your neighbor.

Blessed are you when you do not feel self-sufficient while being in dialogue.

Blessed are you when you trust the other because you trust in Me.

Blessed are you when you face misunderstandings from your own community or others for the sake of your fidelity to Truth.

Blessed are you when you do not give up your convictions, and yet you do not set them up as absolute norms.

Woe unto you, you theologians and academicians, when you dismiss what others say because you find it embarrassing or not sufficiently learned.

Woe unto you, you practitioners of religions, when you do not listen to the cries of the little ones.

Woe unto you, you religious authorities, because you prevent change and (re)conversion.

Woe unto you, religious people, because you monopolize religion and stifle the Spirit which blows where and how she wills.