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The Human Right to Follow Our Path

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Mauritius is a wonderful island nation, so culturally diverse and protected by its remoteness. It also happens to be one of only three countries where Hindus are in the majority. Hinduism Today has been published there for the past five years, and in 1995 the responsibility passes to a new team, lead by computer businessman, Parmesh Pallanee, shown above with us during his recent stay in Hawaii. Parmesh came to our Garden Island for three weeks in January to sign a franchise agreement and to work with my editorial staff developing his strategic publishing plans. We all welcome Parmesh, bless him and know that he will be divinely guided in this important work for dharma.

Last month we talked about how human rights relate to religion. It is not always clear just where some rights stop and others begin. For instance, when does your right to bring others into your faith begin to erode my right to protect and preserve my tradition? I remember an old adage: "One man's right to swing his arms ends at another's nose."

Behind many past wars and before us today we find unconscionable conversion efforts that infringe on the rights of not only the individual, but of groups and nations. When religions set out with a consciousness of conquest and make inroads on each other, this naturally becomes a major concern to families, communities and nations. Is it not the right of each of the world religions to declare dedication to their uncontested law books of shoulds and should nots, holy texts telling us how to pray, meditate and behave? Freedom to choose one's religion as well as freedom to leave it if one wishes is a fundamental human right, and it is a human wrong to deny or even limit it. This may seem obvious, but it is not a freedom many people of

the world fully enjoy.

Fewer today than in ages gone by would claim to possess the right to forcefully dissuade and deny the beliefs and the chosen or born-into path of the religious human, or even the nonreligious human if that be one's preference. I think it is useful to distinguish those wandering souls who have no religion at all from those who do. The first can be freely proselytized, the second should be left alone. They should not be told, "My way is the best and the others are less than nothing." While freedom of spiritual belief is the uncontested right of every human, it does not carry with it freedom to diminish or destroy another religion.

People of every class and creed should be freed from the jaws of well-meaning but misguided missionaries-and here I mean of any faith, including Hinduism. Conversion efforts and the vast sums of money they consume would be better spent in other ways. Making their own followers stronger, more committed and bringing those who have not been indoctrinated into the first religion of their life on planet earth are two legitimate options.

Readers may think that forced belief is a thing of the past. It is not. It happens daily. Muslims are afraid of inroads made by Protestants. Protestants are vying for souls with Catholics. Catholics are worried about members becoming Buddhists and Buddhists complain of being marginalized by Hindus. Faiths large and small all feel the need to protect their own, to keep their numbers strong. I am reminded of a lament made at a conference in Singapore by an erudite scholar discussing conversions: "Vietnam was Buddhist Vietnam before the war. Now it is Christian Vietnam." No more needs to be said. You all know the problem. Religion is a great force, but like any force it can be misused. And often is. We shall never have a really Global Village, a New World Order or a New Age until we all keep out of one another's backyard.

It is fear and rivalry that leads religionists to reach out beyond their natural boundaries to attract members. One way to harness the urge to force others away from their path and toward ours is to agree on a form of ethical conversion. We cannot eliminate conversion, nor would we want to. That too limits someone else's human rights. But we can make them ethical, honest and acceptable to both sides by requiring that a convert study both faiths and leave one to enter another only when he has convinced the spiritual leaders of his first religion that he rightly understands what he is doing and receives blessings to leave.

Few today would defend the devastation wreaked upon the Hawaiians, Tibetans, Cambodians, American Indians and Aztecs. What happened to them and their faith would be widely regarded as criminal today, though it was celebrated at the time by the victors. That being so, why is there so little outcry when religions seek to impose the same destruction on other religions and their followers, even referring to their work as a "harvest"?

We cannot presume to make the definitive statement on human rights from the Hindu point of view, so we shall proceed in the wise way and ask a few of the over three hundred thousand leaders of the Sanatana Dharma for their opinion. We will publish in the not-too-distant future the insights of sadhus, saints, matapathis, satgurus, yogis and panditas of the four major sects and the various sampradayas and guru lineages that have branched out in the fifty years that followed the Christian Raj in India into every country of the world. Questions about the religious side of human rights have come forward that need answers. Perhaps you can help. Write to us your ideas, inspirations and deepest feelings. These are some of mine.