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INTERVIEW

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We need spiritual leadership to end aggression against other religions

ASHOK SINGHAL

A follow-up report: Millennium World Peace summit of religious and spiritual leaders, August, 2000, New York

Sri Ashok Singhal, 75, is the Working President of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, which brought a large contingent of representatives from India to the UN gathering. In his interview with Hinduism Today, toward the end of the Summit in New York, Sri Singhal shared his views on a range of topics.

When you call a meeting of religious and spiritual leaders, I think the meeting should be conducted by the religious and spiritual leaders. Of course, those intellectuals who are

connected with religious programs and religious organizations have a right to speak and should speak. But most of the time should be given to religious and spiritual leaders. People haven't come here to hear the grihastas, the family people. In our country, Bharat, there are meetings of acharyas, dharma gurus. The grihastas never speak before them. They come only to hear them. People should be guided by spiritual leaders, those who have had their own experiences of peace, as a result of their tapas, austerities, and know how peace can be achieved.

Religious freedom: The connotation of religious freedom as it is in the Declaration on Human Rights of United Nations of 1948 is far different from what most people think. "Freedom of religion" should mean that as you protect the frontiers of your nation, so also there should be the right to protect your religions; as there should be no aggression against countries, so there should be no aggression against religions. The UN says it will protect the sovereignty of countries, but the sovereignty of religion is far more important, for aggression against religion is violence. It can never bring peace in this world.

Religious harmony: The Christian and Islamic world has to realize that theirs is not the only way. All those people who have reached the feet of the Lord know there are thousands of ways to reach God. People who do not think like this have no respect for other religions. The question of respect for other religions is of greatest importance for bringing peace in the world--the greatest importance. In Bharat there are a very large number of religions that coexist peacefully because each knows that the entire exercise is to realize God. There are

hundreds of paths in our country. Nobody fights. They live in harmony in our country and are an example for the world. They respect each other, and they respect the great mahatmas who have realized God. This is what we have in our country, in Bharat.

Suffering Hindus There are 350,000 refugees from Kashmir, another 150,000 refugees from the Northeast, all displaced within our own Motherland. There are 100,000 Hindu refugees from Bhutan; 110,000 from Sri Lanka in India and another 80,000 who went to Europe; 110,000 from Tibet, 100,000 from Suriname who went to Holland, 80,000 from Guyana who went to New York. Hindus are suffering because we are a tolerant people and will not aggress against anybody. Now there is an awakening among Hindus that we should not be aggressed against. We do not believe in aggression, but we should not be aggressed against also. Conversion is the greatest violence. It should stop henceforth from this Summit.

The pope's apology: He apologized and the aggression continues. What is the point of apology? Now this is what a great swami says, "Standing on our toes, you say you want to have dialogue. It is not possible. There can be no dialogue while you are standing on our toes." I have one more thing to say on this. When the pope came to our country, he sat with one saffron-robed person at his Delhi event. The name card said, "Bishop Sankarcharya." It was the biggest fraud. The man was not a Sankarcharya. What should we expect when there is this fraud before the pope? Then the pope said that, in the next millennium, we'll harvest the entirety of Asia, we'll harvest the crop of the faith of Jesus. If this Sankarcharya is sitting with him, it means he is giving his consent to the pope's

plan.

Violence against Christians: I have said ten-thousand Hindus have been killed in Kashmir, and a large number are being killed in the Northeast. We speak nothing about this before the world forum. Who is going to listen? Then a few Christians are killed. Definitely it is against the tenets of Hindus to harm anybody. All our teachers have taught nonviolence. If there is no nonviolence, that teacher is not following dharma. We condemn the killing completely. But when there is one such incident in Bharat, the entire world says Christians are being harassed in Bharat, which is totally wrong.

Nepal: The Christians have a plan to convert the whole of Nepal in the coming years. The first thing they are trying to do is to reduce the population of Hindus living in the hills. They call them "tribals." Nearly everyone in Nepal is a Hindu. But if you cut out a portion of the Hindus by saying they are tribals, you reduce the Hindu population. I think this is the greatest mischief being done, to break the people into different segments. It will disturb the peace in the whole of Nepal. And disruption of peace in Nepal will have repercussions everywhere, because India cannot tolerate disruption in Nepal. It is a Hindu nation, the only Hindu nation. After Nepal became a democracy, about 300,000 people have been converted to Christianity. Those people living in tribal areas do not know the real trouble ahead.

Homelands: If there is going to be the continuous program of building homelands for religious groups, peace can never be achieved in this world. For example, there are 98% percent

Hindus in Bali, but they form a part in Indonesia, a Muslim-majority country. I think it would be wrong for the Hindus there to want to be a separate nation. They should continue to remain as Hindus in that part of the country. Now the Tamils of Sri Lanka are calling for a homeland. It can never bring peace in this world, because it then becomes a game of numbers. You increase your numbers [by conversion, migration or birth], and demand your homeland. Then it is political, it has nothing to do with religion.