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Update

R.K. Mission On Leaving Hinduism

When the Ramakrishna Mission opted for non-Hindu minority status to avoid government interference in Bengal in 1985, many Hindus were appalled. News analysts called it a betrayal of the Hindu cause and the principles of Swami Vivekananda, the lion-like Hindu missionary who founded the Order after Sri Ramakrishna, his Guru, passed away. Hindu stalwarts within the swami order, and they are there, fumbled to explain, "We are the most staunch of Hindus. We did what we had to do, but nothing has changed."

A few writers have begun raising the question all over again: "Are Ramakrishnaites Hindus or non-Hindus?" Swami Bhashyananda, a senior monk serving in the US for over 20 years, told Hinduism Today that the official word from the governing body is "The Ramakrishna Mission made no claim that we are non-Hindu...Our lawyers advised the court that we are Hindus, but special Hindus."

To hear that "We are not Hindus" is almost insulting to the stocky 70-year old Maharashtra-born monk, one of 1,400 in the Order. Yet the facts are fairly plain, though admittedly cloudily enough to allow for dispute. On October 7, 1985, Judge Bandopadhyaya of West Bengal ruled that the "Ramakrishna Mission is a religious minority" and "the cult of Sri Ramakrishna [is] a new religion different from Hindu religion." He was responding to the fervent arguments of the Mission attorneys. His ruling granted the Mission protection under Article 30(1) of the Constitution, which meant legal shelter from the civil suit brought against it by private teachers and the Bengal government. An appeal awaits a hearing date.

Judging from the Mission's history and purpose, however, the formal declaration of Ramakrishnaism as a new religion is not surprising. The Mission has always been universalist, priding itself in multi-religious membership and resisting any attempt to be pigeon-holed.

Practically speaking, the Mission's action points out a serious inequity in India - that minority institutions (Christian, Muslim, etc.) are free to operate as they wish, while institutions run by Hindus, (because they are the majority) must follow a different set of rules. Some analysts project that if the ruling is not overturned, other Hindu sects may take the same route. Ultimately, as stated Mr. J.N. Singhi of Calcutta, "If Government does not stop interference, a day may come when social organizations will not build schools and colleges."

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