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Category : August 1999
Published by Anonymous on Aug. 01, 1999

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Frank views on the controversial issue

Conversion from Hinduism to Christianity and Islam and back again, long a "so what?" topic, is a headline-worthy issue today in India. It was a hundred years ago, April, 1899, when Swami Vivekananda gave the following interview in Prabuddha Bharata magazine. It is reprinted by the RK Mission in "The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda" (v. 5, p. 233), an eight-volume set containing many wonderfully unvarnished gems of Swami's thought in letters to friends and fellow monks and in interviews like this to local publications. Here he takes a strident tone, declaring that conversion is not only possible, but desirable. When traveling in the West, Swamiji often said he came to convert no one, that his Vedanta would make a Christian a better Christian. This was a prudent policy for the time in the West, when Christians took a dim view of missionaries of other religions who had the temerity to invade Christian home territory. The RK Mission today pursues a policy of "no conversion" of lay people, though it allows, according to Swami Atmarupananda of the Ridgely Manor retreat center, that monks who have taken sannyas are considered Hindus, whatever their previous faith--and Christians, Muslims and Sikhs have entered the RK Order. In the '30s, Swami Agamanandaji of Kalady Centre, Kerala, engaged in reconversion and issued certificates recognized by the state government. Asked about the issue, Mission General Secretary Swami Smarananda said, "All conversion smells of politics," a statement that explains the Mission's current stand against

conversion. Vivekananda had quite sternly forbade the Order to engage in politics, judging such worldly enterprises to be the downfall of many religious organizations. In India, every conversion has political overtones and ramifications, so the present Mission policy to stay aloof from the issue can be viewed as a compromise between two directives. Still, it is useful to know what Swami Vivekananda said on the issue. The interviewer's name is not given.

Having been directed by the editor to interview Swami Vivekananda on the question of converts to Hinduism, I found an opportunity one evening on the roof of a Ganges houseboat. It was after nightfall, and we had stopped at the embankment of the Ramakrishna Math, and there the Swami came down to speak with me. "I want to see you, Swami," I began, "on this matter of receiving back into Hinduism those who have been perverted from it. Is it your opinion that they should be received?" "Certainly," said the Swami, "they can and ought to be taken." He sat gravely for a moment, thinking, and then resumed. "Besides," he said, "we shall otherwise decrease in numbers. When the Mohammedans first came, we are said--I think on the authority of Ferishta, the oldest Mohammedan historian--to have been six hundred millions of Hindus. Now we are about two hundred millions. And then every man going out of the Hindu pale is not only a man less, but an enemy the more.

"Again, the vast majority of Hindu perverts to Islam and Christianity are perverts by the sword, or the descendants of these. It would be obviously unfair to subject these to disabilities of any kind. As to the case of born aliens, did you say? Why, born aliens have been converted in the past by

crowds, and the process is still going on. "In my own opinion, this statement not only applies to aboriginal tribes, to outlying nations, and to almost all our conquerors before the Mohammedan conquest, but also to all those castes who find a special origin in the Puranas. I hold that they have been aliens thus adopted.

"Ceremonies of expiation are no doubt suitable in the case of willing converts, returning to their Mother Church, as it were; but on those who were alienated by conquest--as in Kashmir and Nepal--or on strangers wishing to join us, no penance should be imposed." "But of what caste would these people be, Swamiji?" I ventured to ask. "They must have some, or they can never be assimilated into the great body of Hindus. Where shall we look for their rightful place?"

"Returning converts," said the Swami quietly, "will gain their own castes, of course. And new people will make theirs. You will remember," he added, "that this has already been done in the case of Vaishnavism. Converts from different castes and aliens were all able to combine under that flag and form a caste by themselves--and a very respectable one too. From Ramanuja down to Chaitanya of Bengal, all great Vaishnava teachers have done the same."

"And where should these new people expect to marry?" I asked. "Amongst themselves, as they do now," said the Swami quietly.

"Then as to names," I enquired, "I suppose aliens and perverts

who have adopted non-Hindu names should be named newly. Would you give them caste names, or what?"

"Certainly," said the Swami, thoughtfully, "there is a great deal in a name!" and on this question he would say no more.

But my next enquiry drew blood. "Would you leave these new-comers, Swamiji, to choose their own form of religious belief out of many-visaged Hinduism, or would you chalk out a religion for them?" "Can you ask that?" he said. "They will choose for themselves. For unless a man chooses for himself, the very spirit of Hinduism is destroyed. The essence of our Faith consists simply in this freedom of the Ishta." I thought the utterance a weighty one, for the man before me has spent more years than any one else living, I fancy, in studying the common bases of Hinduism in a scientific and sympathetic spirit, and the freedom of the Ishta is obviously a principle big enough to accommodate the world.

But the talk passed to other matters, and then with a cordial good night this great teacher of religion lifted his lantern and went back into the monastery, while I, by the pathless paths of the Ganga, in and out amongst her crafts of many sizes, made the best of my way back to my Calcutta home.