

[Hinduism: a Blessing For the World](#)

Category : [June 1999](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jun. 02, 1999

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

Hinduism: a Blessing For the World

Interreligious dialogue should be an act of true acceptance, not for conversion or coercion

Swami Yogananda Giri

The planetary situation today, above all in the West, is unencouraging: intolerance, violence, abuse and other evils dominate. Ancient texts detail the era of the Kali Yuga and its degeneration caused by the loss of ethical and moral values. Technological man, surrounded by comforts, is more and more lonely and void because of his vain search in the world outside. Many serious Westerners are researching spirituality, looking for authentic values and traditions, and they are not able to find answers in modern society. This void of ethics, moral, religious and social principles, has unfortunately weakened the basic foundations of society, such as the family and the school.

Hinduism, as a religion and through its cultural, philosophical and artistic values, can help humanity to find those principles of equilibrium which are fundamental for its well-being. Sanatana Dharma is the Mother which feeds and sustains all spiritual paths, and there is a growing interest in the great culture of India, yoga, ayurveda, dance and music. But,

unfortunately, these disciplines are practiced without an adequate knowledge of their religious and philosophical background.

In Indian universities, Greek philosophers, the fathers of Western philosophy, are still studied, while in Europe the ancient texts of the Vedas are totally ignored, even though they are 6,000 years old! Anybody who looks at Indian culture, the most ancient of the world, immediately realizes that its philosophic speculation has reached the highest peaks. Man has the need to feel himself anchored to a tradition which is able to transmit the certainty that comes from the experiences of other men who came before him. So, the correct diffusion of Hinduism's valuable inheritance outside of India is a blessing for other nations and for India herself. The wisdom of the Gurus and Hinduism, with its traditions and its sampradayas (lineages), represents an extraordinary and unique language in the religious and philosophical world. Hinduism, not being a single dogma, offers a diversity of traditions suitable for each mind and aspiration, all having the same objective--the union with God. Let all sanatanis and, above all, spiritual leaders and scholars come together as one body to give a new impulse and revival to the ancient Indian tradition, fostering its correct and truthful diffusion without prejudices.

Naturally, I don't intend to say that we must proselytize, which is contrary to dharma. But it is necessary to demolish the prejudice against those in other nations who are not born of Indian Hindu parents. This prejudice spoils our great religion and keeps devotees and sincere people away. Hindu Indians should be proud of their own culture because of its universality and not imitate Westerners' violent or arrogant attitudes.

Consciousness does not have a nationality or a skin color. It is an omnipervading, unique and indivisible Reality. Therefore it is not possible to talk of separation, exclusion or possession. Nobody owns God, but rather it is God "who owns all beings." What we witness is the madness of men unable to think in terms of unity and equality. The issue of conversion would be irrelevant if there were a true choice of one's own spiritual language, if there were a true acceptance of all religious forms. In this case, conversion would simply be the declaration of one's belonging to a particular religious tradition rather than to another.

In the West, cultural exchange brings the "new" phenomenon of interreligious dialogue. But for Hindus, this kind of dialogue, or better, coexistence, is inborn. In fact, Hinduism is a coexistence of beliefs and religions that are often very different. This interreligious dialogue must not be a political matter. It should not be an act of persuasion or conversion, nor of mere tolerance anchored to its own beliefs, but one of knowledge of other religions. This knowledge should teach respect and love for others, making interreligious dialogue an authentic act of acceptance and love, a coming together of brothers who follow parallel paths. Mutual respect can exist only on the basis of this principle. In Hinduism, truth is seen in its different forms, just as God is, so nobody can claim the right to affirm that he holds truth, or that his is the true God. Since God and the ways to adore Him are not the monopoly of anyone, I consider such statements an offense to the traditional tolerance and universality of Hinduism.

Conversion is not coercion or enticement. Unfortunately, issues of conversion and interreligious dialogue have become ones of

harassment after the cultural, economic and also religious abuse by Western cultures. But really, conversion is belonging, a deep adhesion to the religion which is closest to our ideals, which reflects our spiritual language and which is at the heart of our thoughts. It is the restless spirit seeking for transformation, discovering an expression of this truth which quenches our thirst. Finally, conversion is the recognition of that light which shines in our heart and which comes from that only source that is the sun.

Belonging to a religion does not mean forgetting that each and every heart is illumined by a ray of light coming from that same source, as is splendidly expressed in a hymn from the Rig Veda: "See unity in the diversity. Behold one divine form appearing in multiform; Immense is His vastness, unparalleled is His glory. All the countless earths, suns and planets which are seen, and which are beyond our perceptions, exist under His command. Kindled in various forms, the perennial flame is one; sprinkling the world with golden beams at dawn; painting the evening clouds with changing colors, the sun is one." (Rg Veda 8.58.2)

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