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Pilgrimage to Lord Shiva's ice-lingam at Amarnath began in July with the first 1,600 pilgrims outnumbered six to one by security troops. They also had unprecedented cooperation from the Jammu and Kashmir government. Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah stayed overnight at Pahalgam, base camp for the 29-mile pilgrimage to the sacred shrine. 242 pilgrims died last year in severe weather. The government had hoped to limit the pilgrims to 75,000, but 120,000 were expected to make the trek.

The "Vijay Yatra" of the Shankaracharyas of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham included a warm reception by Sikh clergy at the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Sri Jayendra Saraswati and Sri Vijayendra Saraswathi began their tour of North India in April, "to spread Adi Shankara's message of the 'spiritual unity of all mankind,' or the propagation of the tenets of Sanatana Dharma," reported The Hindu.

Buddhism is burgeoning in France. The National Catholic Register notes: 15% of French people are interested in Buddhism, and 2 million people list Buddhism as their favorite religion. France now has 200 Buddhist meditation centers. Europe's first Buddhist university is now in Paris, and Buddhist programming is even showing on government-run television.

Transcendental Meditation will be researched as a technique for preventing heart attacks and strokes among African-Americans, under a \$1.6 million dollar grant from USA's National Heart, Blood and Lung Institute. "It is the first time that funding for clinical research has been awarded to explore the unique technique as a preventive intervention for people at high risk for cardiovascular disease," said Robert Schneider, Dean of Vedic Medicine at Maharishi University of Management in Iowa.

Sotheby's, London's oldest auction house, will move all of its regular sales of antiquities to New York, following revelations it sold artifacts smuggled into Britain. Occasional sales will take place in London, but only if the items are "from collections of unquestioned provenance." The move follows increasing concern among archeologists that the international market for antiquities encourages looting and illicit excavation of religious sites, particularly in India, Russia, Egypt and Italy.

MacDonald's has prevailed in England's longest-ever court trial, but its "McLibel" lawsuit victory against vegetarians Dave Morris and Helen Steel was served with a side of humiliation. The veggies had distributed pamphlets characterizing MacDonald's as the epitome of evil multinational capitalism. While Justice Roger Bell agreed the company had been defamed, he also agreed that MacDonald's is sometimes cruel to animals, exploits children through advertising and underpays its British workers. The leafleting resumed, and the vegetarians planned to appeal.

Corporal punishment is being expelled from India's National Policy on Education. To demonstrate dedication to education as a "unique investment," a phased plan known as "operation blackboard" says, "Physical punishment may promote conformity in the short term, but research findings suggest that it tends to increase the probability of aggression and deviance."

Priceless pieces of Angkor Wat continue to be stolen and sold, but now the International Council of Museums is responding to the plunder of the world's largest religious monument. Both New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Honolulu's Academy of Arts recently decided to return stolen Cambodian sculptures. But as recently as a year ago a customer could enter an antique shop across the border in Bangkok, examine pictures of the temples and order pieces to be sawed off, said Helen Ibbitson Jessup, curator of the National Gallery's exhibit.

The United Religions Initiative, a visionary project to create daily dialogue among religions, is dedicated to peace among people of all faiths--and acts of peace are always acts of courage. Witness the apology offered by Iftekhhar

Hai, interfaith coordinator of the United Muslims of America, during closing ceremonies at the Second Annual URI Global Summit at Stanford University in June. Acknowledging history, he asked "forgiveness for any Muslim aggression ever done anywhere by any Muslim," and pledged to go anywhere in the world in support of healing by the URI. All rose in ovation. Attended by 200 people from dozens of faiths, including indigenous traditions, the week's work toward a URI charter for signing in the year 2000 resulted in 21 research and development task groups in areas as varied as "Defending Religious Rights" and "Scientific Academic Discourse." Contact: URI, 1055 Taylor Street, San Francisco, CA, 94108, USA. Email: unitrelig@igc.org

Smearing the reputation of Dr. Deepak Chopra cost the Rupert Murdoch-owned Weekly Standard a formal "correction and an apology" as settlement of a \$35 million dollar libel suit. A 1996 article made false accusations about the best-selling author. "We regret any harm that may have been done....We believe that Dr. Chopra is sincere and forthright in his teachings..." the magazine said.

Vishwa Hindu Parishad of Kerala, India, has given Hinduism Today publisher Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami its "Hindu Voice of the Century" award. The award includes a statue of Subramuniyaswami and a cash grant of Rs.5,001, according to Kerala VHP vice president Dr. Chandrababu.

Catholic nuns are aging into a health care crisis. Of the sisters now in the USA, only 569 are under age 30, just 3% under 40, while 70% are over age 60. Buildings that once housed novices are being converted into nursing homes. Health care costs for seniors are so high that orders are selling property, seeking government aid and merging orders. Accounting firm Arthur Andersen Inc. found that religious orders last year were US\$7.9 billion short of the funds needed to care for their 100,000 retired priests and nuns. The nuns serve long past the time people usually retire, and they tend to live five years longer on average.

Briefly is compiled from press, TV and wire-service reports and edited by Ravi Peruman, award-winning radio journalist at KGO in San Francisco.