

[Feature Article: A Rare Intrafaith Gathering](#)

Category : [April/May/June 2010](#)

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Leadership

A Rare Intrafaith Gathering

Prominent Hindu swamis, acharyas and matas from around the world spoke out in consonance at the 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne

Sample spread from this article

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The Parliament of the World's Religions took place December 3-9, 2009, in Melbourne, Australia. Held every five years, this event brought together 6,000 people from over 200 faith traditions for what some said was "the best Parliament

ever." Members of local religious communities and interfaith groups from around the globe gathered with spiritual leaders, scholars and artists for a rich series of panels, lectures, workshops, dialogues, religious observances and meditations, cultural events, exhibits, films and plenaries.

Our publisher and two editors attended, speaking at six events, the Convocation of Hindu Spiritual Leaders being the most notable. The Parliament program staff brought together an international group of two dozen Hindu acharyas, matas, priests and sacred dancers in a unique assembly, the likes of which has never occurred outside India. Hinduism was the only religion to have such a grand intrafaith gathering at the Parliament. Arguably, only the Hindus, who were represented substantially in the Parliament, could have pulled off such an event in which leaders of such diverse traditions gave messages from the personal depths of their mystical realizations, each resounding in perfect harmony with every other. At the meeting's culmination, our Editor-in-Chief read out a draft "Hindu Declaration on Climate Change" (see page 21), the result of a collaborative effort between Dr. Karan Singh, Dr. K.L. Seshagiri Rao, Dr. Arvind Sharma and the Hinduism Today editorial team.

Following are excerpts from seven of the talks given at the Convocation.

Swami Avdheshanand Giri

Juna Peeth and Acharya Sabha, Uttarakhand

We have in our scriptures the best solutions available with which to face the problem of ecological imbalance today. This problem would not have arisen had we all committed ourselves to vegetarianism. Ecological problems, specifically global warming, have come about because of the world's nonvegetarian diet. The approach that we should take the maximum wealth available to us from nature, be it oil or metals, and that we should maximize our power with nuclear weapons--these also contribute to our global problems.

Our Hindu dharma has given us certain important values to implement in our day-to-day lives, including being satisfied with whatever we have. Learn to share, learn to give first, and then enjoy. This attitude will bring about harmony in society.

I would also like to affirm with confidence that the Hindu tradition has never believed in proselytizing, has never worked to enhance the fold and bring people from other faiths to our faith so that we can be more. On the contrary, this is a tradition which has always cared for the growth and religious sensitivities of each and every individual--not only cared but helped them equally to grow individually. This is the greatest good deed, or punya, that one can do in one's life.

Today the absence of this attitude has created agitation and given rise to crime and imbalance in society. The attitude that I shall grow at the cost of others is considered improper in the Hindu religion. It is a great sin against ahimsa, the principle of nonviolence, to be insensitive to the rights and demands of others and to afflict pain or hurt on them--not only physically, but by hurting their religious sentiments, their belief systems.

Sri Chinna Jeeyar Swami

Jeeyar Educational Trust, Andhra Pradesh

Man has always considered himself an evolved being and has focused more on the intellect than his physical well being. This has resulted in his aspiring for higher things. The real purpose of being blessed with higher intellect should obviously make man lead a fair and charitable life, free from jealousy and hatred, considerate towards fellow beings and thus able to realize and surrender to God.

If religion and the higher purpose of the intellect go together, all of us as members of a huge global family live well, sharing love and affection. If religion does not help in controlling undesirable tendencies, then it becomes a poisonous weapon in the hands of self-centered men.

The paths taken by each religion may be different, but the final destination should be the same. We have to remember that some religions evolved in a particular region and period. The culture, traditions and environment in which they took root played a crucial role in determining their tenets. In some cases the doctrines one or another followed were radically different, and these differences in beliefs often lead to wars. If we are to coexist peacefully in this global village, we need to understand

these differences and learn to respect the beliefs, practices and customs of others.

Every religion needs to view other religions empathetically and not attempt to dictate what others should and should not do. Neither should they attempt to allure the devotees of other religions through dubious perks, such as giving money and food. People should be allowed to practice their religion without being subjected to criticism, ridicule or torture by other religious people.

Yogini Sri Chandra Kali Prasada Mataji

Sri Kali Gardens Ashram, Andhra Pradesh

Hindu philosophy is based on the truth that there is one Supreme Power that is the sustaining force of the entire creation. Personal transformation starts with realization of this Supreme Power within one's own self. The aspirant will then be able to experience that power all around him. Thus he understands that this power is universal, nondual, indivisible and eternal. He sees unity in diversity. He will not see his fellow human beings as different from him and so does not fear. Such a person is full of compassion and unlimited love. He will work towards peace and prosperity of not only mankind but all of nature. This is accomplished only through faith and surrender to that Supreme Power and under the able guidance of the spiritual teacher who is an embodiment of that power.

The guru gives various spiritual practices, like meditation, prayer, and religious observances to attain this goal. In man's quest for inner peace, he will try to keep an open mind so that he can better understand his fellow human beings by having an open dialogue. Healing the Earth is possible by exchanging ideas and restoring spiritual values. Peace is much needed in today's world. Unless each individual changes his behavior and thinking for his own progress and for the world at large, peace cannot be established.

Dada J.P. Vaswani

Sadhu Vaswani Mission, Maharashtra

It has seemed to me that there can be no peace on Earth, that there can be no peace among nations, until we stop all killing. Stop all killing! No sentient creature must be killed. We of the Sadhu Vaswani Mission have started the SAK Association--S stands for stop, A for all, K for killing. I invite you all to join this association. All every member is required to do is to see that he stops killing wherever he finds it. You may ask me why; for the simple reason that if I kill an animal for food, I will not hesitate in killing a fellow human being whom I regard as an enemy.

All life should be regarded as sacred, for there is but one life that flows into all. This one life sleeps in the mineral and the stone. This one life stirs in the vegetable and the plant. This one life dreams in the bird and the animal. This one life is awake in man.

Creation is one family, and in this one family of creation, birds and animals are man's younger brothers and sisters. It is the duty of every man to share the love of his heart with his younger brothers and sisters. It is the responsibility of man to save his younger brothers and sisters from the cruel knife of the butcher.

Just as women do not exist as resources for men, just as black people do not exist as resources for white people, even so animals do not exist as resources for human beings. Today, wherever I go, I hear of animal welfare. But animal welfare is not the answer. Animal rights are needed!

I believe this Parliament should come together and formulate a charter of animal rights and man's duties towards animals. Every animal has certain fundamental rights, and the very first right of every animal is the right to live. For you cannot take away that which you cannot give, and since you cannot give life to a dead creature, you have no right to take away the life of a living one.

[View a video of Dada J.P. Vaswani's complete talk](#)

Swami Mayatitananda

Mother Om Mission, North Carolina

A significant guiding principle of Hinduism is ahimsa, the universal dictum by which we embrace Mother Nature, all religions, cultures, people and life everywhere. To live as Hindus, we must demonstrate maturity, understanding and compassion--compassion that goes beyond tolerance--extending friendship to all traditions. We should not look to tolerate each other because of our differences, but to embrace each other. We should not only strive to accommodate our diverse ideologies but to understand them!

As Hindus, our expression must be free from himsa (hurtfulness), not only from the violence of wars, battles and conflicts, but more importantly the violence perpetrated through our thoughts, speech and action. For this, we must work to cultivate a spirit which is free from prejudice, narrow viewpoint and the attitude of entitlement. If each one of us makes a commitment to inner harmony, we will surely succeed in achieving the ultimate goal of our human destiny, that of a spiritual freedom that unites us. Ultimately, it is the work of awareness within the individual person that will change the world for the better.

To repair the violence in nature, we must first heal the violence within ourselves. To fix the violence in our communities, we must heal the disharmony among the various ancestral and faith traditions. There can be no perfect harmony on Earth until we eliminate the mind of violence. For this, we must heal dissonant, angry and prejudicial thinking. Every war, battle, fight and conflict began in the mind of a person. Toxic thoughts create himsa--cruelty, violence and insensitivity--which spills out of us, causing hurt and injury. My healing and your healing is pervasive energy that instantly touches the soul of the entire community, humanity and world.

[View a video of Swami Mayatitananda's complete talk](#)

Swami Chidanand Saraswati

Parmarth Niketan, Uttarakhand

Healing the Earth means what? Consume less, waste less, reduce, reuse, recycle, live a simple life. The problem is that nobody wants to live a simple life. The solution is that we must change our lifestyles.

If we are concerned, we have to listen to Mother Earth, we have to save the water, we have to save the air, we have to save our Earth and then only we can bring change. I was very impressed when our Dada said, "Stop all killing." This means being vegetarian. This is the only way, believe me, tomorrow, today and yesterday.

We don't have to spend billions of dollars. We have to come to the conclusion that we have to do it, and we have to start now. We don't have to wait. Vegetarianism is difficult. I know it's not easy. But I can tell you vegetarianism is the future, the way. If you don't want to stop today, even in cutting back to eating meat only once or twice a week, you will see the difference in your life and the life of the planet. We can do it.

Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami

Kauai's Hindu Monastery, Hawaii

Speeches by world leaders emphasizing mutual respect--such as Kevin Rudd's February, 2008, apology to Australia's indigenous people and Barack Obama's June, 2009, speech to Muslims in Egypt--are important, but, in and of themselves, are not enough to solve the problem of intolerance. Clearly the challenge is to get the message being given at the top about the need for mutual respect to the individual families that collectively comprise society, along with specific suggestions for how they can implement this concept in their lives. That is where religious leaders can help in their respective spheres of influence, by presenting unique formulations about the need for mutual respect for their different religious traditions.

A cardinal principle that naturally motivates Hindus to respect other people is that every person is a divine soul. The Vedic mahavakya, or great saying, that captures this sentiment is: "Ayam atma Brahma," "The soul is God." Even a terrorist or a criminal is a divine being, though one perhaps needing many lives of further spiritual evolution. There are no people who are evil intrinsically. Their behavior may be evil, destructive, but everybody is divine on the inside. They deserve to be encouraged to come up in consciousness. It is the duty of spiritual people to strive to lift everyone up in consciousness, whether they are for us or against us.

Of course, this doesn't mean we should gaze naively at everyone through rose-colored glasses, especially those who have been taught to hate others because of their religion, race or nationality. It means not looking at people through the distortional lenses of malice, bigotry and bias. Hatred is a reality in this world and needs to be responded to realistically. While being aware of the prejudices of others and the philosophies they have been taught, we can still choose to see their Divinity and hold no prejudice toward them.

Knowledgeable Hindus are accustomed to the existence of many different traditions and viewpoints with Hinduism itself. Thus they are naturally inclined to be tolerant of other religions, respecting the fact that each religion has a different concept of the Truth and refers to it by a different name. Hindus hold the point of view that all faiths are good and the members of those religions are just fine remaining in the religions they are in. They know that good citizens and stable societies are created from groups of religious people in all nations.

In expressing tolerance toward other religions, some Hindus use the phrase "Truth is one, paths are many" to assert that all religions are the same. However, if it was making that assertion, would it not say, "Truth is one, paths are one?" The famous phrase simply indicates that the world's religions all believe in one Truth. But the beliefs and practices are, in fact, quite different. Instead of teaching that "all religions are the same," teach that "all religions are good."

Hindu Declaration on Climate Change

Presented for Consideration to the Convocation of Hindu Spiritual Leaders, Parliament of the World's Religions, Melbourne, Australia, December 8, 2009

Earth, in which the seas, the rivers and many waters lie, from which arise foods and fields of grain, abode to all that breathes and moves, may She confer on us Her finest yield.

Bhumi Suktam, Atharva Veda xii.1.3

The Hindu tradition understands that man is not separate from nature, that we are linked by spiritual, psychological and physical bonds with the elements around us.

Knowing that the Divine is present everywhere and in all things, Hindus strive to do no harm. We hold a deep reverence for life and an awareness that the great forces of nature--the earth, the water, the fire, the air and space--as well as all the various orders of life, including plants and trees, forests and animals, are bound to each other within life's cosmic web.

Our beloved Earth, so touchingly looked upon as the Universal Mother, has nurtured mankind through millions of years of growth and evolution. Now centuries of rapacious exploitation of the planet have caught up with us, and a radical change in our relationship with nature is no longer an option. It is a matter of survival. We cannot continue to destroy nature without also destroying ourselves. The dire problems besetting our world--war, disease, poverty and hunger--will all be magnified many fold by the predicted impacts of climate change.

The nations of the world have yet to agree upon a plan to ameliorate man's contribution to this complex change. This is largely due to powerful forces in some nations which oppose any such attempt, challenging the very concept that unnatural climate change is occurring. Hindus everywhere should work toward an international consensus. Humanity's very survival depends upon our capacity to make a major transition of consciousness, equal in significance to earlier transitions from nomadic to agricultural, agricultural to industrial and industrial to technological. We must transit to complementarity in place of competition, convergence in place of conflict, holism in place of hedonism, optimization in place of maximization. We must, in short, move rapidly toward a global consciousness that replaces the present fractured and fragmented consciousness of the human race.

Mahatma Gandhi urged, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." If alive today, he would call upon Hindus to set the example, to change our lifestyle, to simplify our needs and restrain our desires. As one sixth of the human family, Hindus can have a tremendous impact. We can and should take the lead in Earth-friendly living, personal frugality, lower power consumption, alternative energy, sustainable food production and vegetarianism, as well as in evolving technologies that positively address our shared plight.

Hindus recognize that it may be too late to avert drastic climate change. Thus, in the spirit of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, "the whole world is one family," Hindus encourage the world to be prepared to respond with compassion to such calamitous

challenges as population displacement, food and water shortage, catastrophic weather and rampant disease.

Sanatana Dharma envisions the vastness of God's manifestation and the immense cycles of time in which it is perfectly created, preserved and destroyed, again and again, every dissolution being the preamble to the next creative impulse. Notwithstanding this spiritual reassurance, Hindus still know we must do all that is humanly possible to protect the Earth and her resources for the present as well as future generations.