Wisdom: A Little Forthright Talk Down Under
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A Little Forthright Talk Down Under

Hindu leaders speak to us in Melbourne about the financial crisis, gay marriage, yoga and religion

Last December, the publisher and two editors of Hinduism Today attended the Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne, Australia. The event attracted the heads of many of the major Hindu religious organizations from around the globe. Hinduism Today seized the opportunity to sit down with those illustrious torchbearers. Here are excerpts from interviews with five of the leaders.

On the Global Financial Crisis

Dada J.P. Vaswani, head of Sadhu Vaswani Mission, Pune: The teaching of Hinduism essentially is that you must live a simple life. All the great ones in the Hindu faith, from the days of Manu to the days of Gandhi, have been men of simplicity. Financial situations have not effected them at all. They live in eternity. The financial situation affects people who run after the world, but the great ones of Hinduism have not run after the world; the world has run after them. The true Hindu is unaffected by this financial situation. He knows the world always has ups and downs.

Swami Amarananda, head of Centre Vedantique, Geneva: It is due to the tremendous greed. Manu Samhita says that it is normal for a human being to have the propensity for enjoyment. But dharma has to be present. There will be chaos in society if everyone wants to enjoy the maximum possible. Dharma is there to guide kama (pleasure), to limit it. Udyog Parva says that you should not try to bring about a situation which is disadvantageous for another person. Swami Vivekananda explained that whatever you do for yourself, in a selfish way, is adharma; whatever you do for others, that is dharma.

Swami Atmapriyananda, Vice Chancellor of Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda

University, West Bengal: You have had so much money, enjoyed so much; now the present circumstances dictate that you enjoy a little less, have less money. The crisis is in the mind. Be content with what you have. Swami Vivekananda once said that in the West you have experimented with how much a man can possess: "I will have this, I will go on acquiring, possessing, accumulating and enjoying." In India, in the East, we have experimented with how little a man can possess: "Do I need this shirt? No. Do I need these trousers? No." Thousands of people over the centuries have experimented with this. We have discovered we don't need anything at all. To keep the body and mind going, you may keep something, but don't think it is essential. The whole teaching in the Gita and in the Hindu scriptures: be unattached. This financial crisis you are talking about comes from being attached to something. When it is taken away, you feel there is a crisis. If you have nothing, there is no crisis at all. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, there's plenty for man's need but not plenty for man's greed. Nature will never deprive you of the most basic necessities if man is not greedy, vengeful and cruel.

Swami Avdheshanand, head of Juna Akhara, Haridwar: One of the main reasons for the current economic crisis in the West is the haphazard and lavish spending on military operations such as the manufacture of arms and ammunitions, nuclear power and the organization of wars as an expansionist policy of Western governments. The enormous levels of military expenditures incurred incessantly over the last several years should be slashed drastically. Sincere efforts in this direction will bring their economies back on the right track. Secondly, there has been excessive spending on luxury items such as branded apparel and cosmetics, expensive homes, fancy cars, alcohol, cigarettes, drugs. Such spending habits beyond one's capacity to afford have resulted in the credit crunch. Indians, on the other hand, generally attempt to live within their means. The Indian philosophy has always been one of simple living and high thinking, which should be adopted by the West.

On Gay Marriage

Swami Mayatitananda, head of Mother Om Mission, North Carolina: From the perspective of ahimsa, we cannot afford to have a person be denied their human rights and civil rights, including their inalienable right to happiness, to comfort, to relationship, based on full acceptance of where they are on their own journey. We must have a nonjudgmental attitude towards couples of the same sex. Anything less is himsa. However, I do not feel marriage should be redefined. Marriage is an institution between the opposite sexes. The world's constitution defines marriage as that. We cannot serve the underdog at the expense of established communities. We have to serve the underdog without impinging on the accepted social structure of our society. Whatever the union is called does not matter. What is important is that the couples' civil rights have to be protected. The human spirit needs to be

protected in the process of making laws. They should have the same rights as married couples. Why not? Someone is dying in a hospital: you can't go see them? You can't decide how they need to be buried? You can't say these people can only have those rights and those people can't. We cannot isolate, alienate and separate like that. There's a whole bundle of rights that go together. That bundle of rights, whether it is marriage or civil union, has to be observed.

Swami Amarananda: If persons of the same sex fall in love, and that is banned, you are trying to ban a sentiment, and that is immoral. If you look at marriage itself in Hinduism, you will find that many types of marriages have been mentioned. But it is evident that there are some kinds of marriages which are tolerated--there is no approbation, but they are tolerated. The Manu Samhita definition of dharma includes a whole system of marriage that was conceived for the benefit of society. There are much bigger issues coming up in the future--bigger than this--for example, new methods of procreation, even cloning. The modern leaders of all religions must go to the foundation of ethics and do only those things whereby the welfare of society is guaranteed, stabilized; otherwise everyone will suffer. Everything should be judged from that angle. If gay couples give positive input to society--raise children to be contributing, ethically minded citizens--then it should be tolerated. As with men and women, loyalty to one partner is important.

Swami Atmapriyananda: I would answer from Swami Vivekananda's own words in which he says that a religion should not meddle in social matters at all. Social matters come up because of the dynamics of society. Religion shouldn't get directly involved in the "yes" or "no" because there is going to be change again. These are societal things which continuously keep changing, like politics. That's why Vivekananda forbade Ramakrishna Mission from getting into politics at all, because it is continuously changing. There is no end to it. So, in that sense, religion should not pronounce anything definite about this, but certain regulated principles of dharma based on the smriti shastras should be followed. I don't know exactly whether this is discussed in the smriti shastras, but Vivekananda said smriti shastra continues to be rewritten. Certain principles have come down over years of experimentation. Perhaps they said this kind of a tendency has to be regulated and sublimated. Thus, one good answer could be the principle of sublimation: you sublimate your instinct, take it to that higher channel from where you will be able to decide what is right and what is wrong.

Dada J.P. Vaswani: Gay marriage is something unnatural. That's what I think. But I am not qualified to answer because I have not studied the subject.

Swami Avdheshanand: Homosexuality is an unnatural way of life.

On Yoga's Relationship to Hinduism

Dada J.P. Vaswani: Yoga is one of the shad darshanas (six philosopies). It is essentially Hindu. Yoga is a gift of Hinduism to the nations. Hinduism makes a gift of it willingly! Just as people in China have Tai Chi, we don't say that is part of Hinduism. That is not part of Hinduism. Yoga is part of Hinduism, an essential part. All humanity must follow the yamas and the niyamas. Because humanity has not, it has to pay a heavy price. If yoga, the yamas and niyamas, were followed, we wouldn't have come to be in the condition we are in. Yoga is born out of the insight of the great rishis. It is not just bodily exercises, but yes, hatha yoga, too, is essentially Hindu.

Swami Avdheshanand: Patanjali was born in India. Yoga is one of the shad darshanas. So, of course, yoga is a part of Hinduism. But not the yoga aerobics, dancing yoga, laughing yoga, clapping yoga, smile yoga, hot yoga, yoga for beauty, yoga for the wrinkleless face. Today, instead of "the whole world is a family," the whole world is a market, and everything is a product that must be patented, sold, marketed. What nonsense. It's a nuisance to yoga. Yoga is for everyone. Yoga is a way to the Almighty. Yoga means to know the Supreme Being, who is the Creator, who is omnipresent. But ashtanga yoga is an ancient part of Hinduism. Nobody can deny it.

Swami Amarananda: First of all, by yoga, ordinarily the West means hatha yoga. In hatha yoga there may be elements of Hindu religion, but in the West normally it is catered in such a way that it is dogma neutral. The pope and the Muslim religious communities are worried because if someone performs yoga and thinks it is beneficial, they will thereby develop some respect, admiration and sympathy for the Hindu religion. They think that is dangerous, that people will go deeper in their explorations. They don't want their followers to peep over the fence, but remain within the fold. Whether they ban it or not, people will still do it, because they perceive the positive results of it.

Swami Atmapriyananda: Suppose you have a doctrine from physics or chemistry and it has been discovered at a particular place and time. Would you say that Einstein's relativity theory is specifically a Jewish or American tradition? No, because

it is universal; science is universal. In exactly the same way, all the great masters of Hinduism or any other religion brought forth the core principles that are always universal. Yoga emanated from the Hindu tradition, but it is always universal. The universalization of certain fundamental principles is the beauty of the Sanatana Dharma. Now, because yoga has become very popular, there is a tremendous reaction by those who say there is a subtle conversion going on--people are getting converted to yoga. That would be like saying if you are a biologist, and I introduce certain principles of physics to you that you find fascinating, I am converting you to be a physicist. There is no such conversion going on. Scientists don't have this problem. If yoga is acceptable universally, and it benefits humanity, why not? Hinduism is not threatened--that's the beauty--because it assimilates. But the moment some people see it assimilate, they feel threatened.

On the Challenges Hinduism faces

Swami Amarananda: What is most important in Hinduism is not even the holy books, it is the leading acharyas. If the Hindu population has some perception that this or that person is an accomplished being, they will listen to him. The problem, in my opinion, is that most of the gurus who are highly mediatized have an exaggerated notion about their importance in society--they are pontifical, consider themselves to be great gurus. One of the tests of spirituality is self-effacement. If you do not have humility--you may have great talent, you may be a scholar--you are not a man of spirituality. Correct behavior is important. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that it is not sufficient that you observe a holy person only during the daytime. Observe him also during the night and test that person as a money changer tests his coin. There are great holy men in India, and thousands of young people are flocking to India each year in search of a guru, but they are usually trapped by the gurus who are making the big headlines, gurus who generally will not be able to give them what they are looking for. Hinduism is not a structured religion, so there is no control. I have seen, for example, young persons who are in the order two or three years come to the West, and suddenly they have the Paramahansa title at the beginning of their name.

Swami Mayatitananda: We have to renovate our thinking. We have to renovate our focus. There's work to be done. Those of us who call ourselves leaders really have to put the common goal before our individual differences and address the social issues in our communities. No Hindu spiritual leader ever took an oath to go and collect part of the market share. This is not our goal. The goal is to influence people with certain teachings. But we are out there very much like a business getting more share of the market. This compromises the work that needs to be done in the trenches, at the grass-roots level. Those organizations that have humongous outreach programs and are doing so much, how wonderful it would be if the leaders could pull together like we are forced to do during a natural calamity. Why do we

need a national calamity to bring us together and serve the common good?

Swami Avdheshanand: The greatest challenge to Hinduism in the next two decades is to analyze and make efforts to uproot the menace of rising terrorism flowing in from the neighboring countries and getting settled in this country. There has to be a constant dialogue amongst all the religious heads for maintaining communal harmony, which is essential for the stability of all religions.