

[An Open Letter to Evangelicals](#)

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An Open Letter to Evangelicals

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We send greetings and the rainbowed aloha from Hawaii to you, Stan Guthrie, to Rev. James Reapsome and our friends at the Evangelical Missions Quarterly. You have asked us to reflect on the "growing missionary spirit in Hinduism" with special reference to the reasons behind it, the extent of its influence and what the future holds. When I opened your letter, I thought the subject too vast and the time too short. A proper response would require months of research, not to mention the days of crystal-ball work you threw in. Then I realized that every worthy enterprise in history began with someone's rash and unruly theory and suddenly felt a new sense of competence in undertaking the task you set.

There are many who will tell you that Hinduism has no missionary dimension at all. Zip. They have witnessed the devastating social and personal effects of unethical missionary effort over several centuries, and this impels them to repudiate the missionary spirit. If by the word missionary we mean the attitudes and strategies of aggressive world proselytism, then they are right. Hindus find such an approach to spirituality uncouth, not spiritual at all, but more akin to the ways of door-to-door encyclopedia salesmen. To a Hindu, spirituality is humble, loving, serene, introspective, all-embracing. The corollary is that anything which is arrogant, disdainful, anxious, externalized and intolerant is not spiritual. And right or wrong, Hindus view most missionaries as possessing the latter qualities in healthy measure.

On the other hand, if by the word missionary we mean an eagerness to share our beloved faith with those who want to know of it, then these people are dead wrong and Hinduism is a missionary tradition. Adi Shankara was a missionary of this type, so were Chaitanya and Appar. Hindu philosopher and ex-president of India, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), wrote in *The Hindu View of Life*: "In a sense, Hinduism may be regarded as the first example in the world of a missionary religion. Only its

missionary spirit is different from that associated with the proselytizing creeds. It did not regard as its mission to convert humanity to any one opinion. For what counts is conduct, not belief."

I think you are right that Hinduism's missionary sense is growing. Witness the internationalization of dozens of Hindu institutions locked for centuries inside India. Consider the successful and controversial ISKCON, or Hare Krishna movement, with an artistic and well-funded publications program distributing millions of books in dozens of languages each year. The rapidly-growing Radhasoami and Sai Baba movements have made vigorous efforts to move onto the global stage. There is the Brahma Kumari sect, strong in education and the peace movement, working effectively at the United Nations. Their millenarian concepts (unusual in the Hindu world), feminist emphasis, disciplined ways and ecumenical meditations make them a force to contend with.

The real action is not in the big movements, it's in a million villages from Georgetown to Montreal, from Durban to Chicago. Hindus everywhere are becoming stronger and more assertive. You have asked why. I offer six possible reasons: 1) There has been an unprecedented influx of talent and money from the West in the past 30 years, giving these groups the ability to reach out. When a Hindu moves into a US boardroom or an American truth seeker joins a rural ashram in Kentucky, suddenly members have access to new resources, to computers and communications facilities. The group's message is the same, but the means to promote it has been amplified several magnitudes; 2) The West is clearly open to the Hindu message, ready to hear about yoga, meditation, mysticism, healing and the ancient ways. Such "products" were too sophisticated for public consumption 30 years ago, but today they're the hottest item on the shelf. Not a small part of this phenomenon is related, indirectly, to the coming of age of the New Age movement: 3) The new rules of world spirituality are a reason. As once-believing nations bury communism's failed effort to conquer the world, so a large part of the non-Christian/non-Muslim world is laying to rest the conquest-driven, one-way-only concept of religion. They are replacing it with views of the Divine which they perceive to be more healing, more focused on the individuals search for enlightenment, more naturally devotional, richer in technique and less authoritarian. A related trend is the wholesale rejection of concepts of hell, sin and satan. A 1990 San Francisco Chronicle poll showed that 35% of the local residents practice yoga or meditation and 25% believe in reincarnation. Hindu institutions find they have answers when people ask about chakras, inner light or consciousness. They have methods when people want to calm the mind and "go within." This knowledge is the stock-in-trade of any Hindu teacher; 4) The dual support which science and the Green Movement have inadvertently given to Hindu custom and thought, which is inherently aligned with human and animal rights,

with strict nonviolence, with an awareness, indeed a reverence, of nature; 5) The remarkable discovery made by the human family of late, that ethnic and native cultures possess value and must, like species, be preserved from further extinction. This can be seen among the Hawaiians, the Eskimos, the Native Americans, the tribals of Africa, Japan, Australia-virtually everywhere! Hinduism, with a culture older than them all, has benefited from, and supported, this ethnic renaissance; 6) A backlash among certain Hindus who feel they have for too long been abused by succeeding waves of missionaries: Dutch, Portuguese, Moslem, British and American. They seem to have reached their limit to forebear, preferring now to express defiance, to wield power instead of wisdom. Unfortunately, this decidedly violent and un-Hindu response is burgeoning.

That is the why of it all. Now to what the future may hold. I suspect that Hinduism will have a surprisingly sophisticated network around the globe in another 20 years. You will see the first Hindu encyclopedia and far more publications from Hindus, and people will appreciate their lack of unbending dogma as a new wisdom. There will be no TV evangelism, no mass meetings in football stadiums. That does not fit the Hindu's way. It will be small, intimate, grass roots. You will see the unusual missionary style of the TM movement proliferate - a button-down, quasi-scientific validation of the ancient Vedic tradition. You will see alliances form among Hindus and Christians (probably Episcopalians at first, not the Assembly of God). International conclaves, especially the peace and ecumenical movements, will be deeply affected by Hindus. A small army of yoga missionaries - hatha, raja, siddha and kundalini - beautifully trained in the last 10 years, is about to set upon the western world. They may not call themselves Hindu, but Hindus know where yoga came from and where it goes.

We hope this proves useful to you. I close with a quote from Swami Vivekananda, Hinduism's greatest modern missionary, spoken in January of 1895, "What I now want is a band of fiery missionaries." It's a hundred years late. but it appears he's going to get his wish.

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