

[What's Right and Wrong With Sectarianism?](#)

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Christianity Today interviewed us last week for a major article they are publishing in February about Hinduism. It makes sense that Christianity Today would approach Hinduism Today to inquire into the Hindu-Christian experience, but I must confess to an uneasy feeling about what directions such an article may take. Ideally, it would be a story urging these two giant communities to get along, encouraging them to seek deeper understandings of each other's values and teachings, to find their common spirituality. In a perfect world, such an article would explain just what Hindus think and believe. In fact, I asked the journalist to print our list of nine central Hindu beliefs, so that Christians could be permitted a richer look at their Hindu brothers and sisters.

I don't think his editors will print the beliefs. They are too beautiful. They show too clearly the profundity, the subtlety and the philosophical sophistication of our faith. In general (though there are important exceptions) lay Christians have yet to show a serious inquisitiveness about what Hindus really believe. Interested readers may want to get a copy of Christianity Today, see how their article turned out and let the editors know how well they conveyed the Hindu experience.

This points to the question: What is right and what is wrong with sectarianism? Unenlightened sectarianism - which exists in every religion, including Hinduism - is closed-minded, dogmatic, isolated, arrogant and intolerant. That kind of sectarianism has alienated many who flee its narrow world and embrace universal principles, avoiding close commitments at all costs. That's understandable. But the result can be half-hearted spirituality, lacking the passion and the power which sectarianism awakens in followers.

Next time you are in a group with a liberal Hindu, watch closely. You will see him or her wince noticeably whenever a devotee speaks adoringly of Vishnu, Siva or Sakti. Liberals would prefer that we all use generic terms when referring to God, abstract aliases like Divinity or pale pronoun like That. They reason this is good because people will then not pit their God against their neighbor's, assuming in the course of their argument that somehow two Gods must exist if man has two names for God.

It is an irony that those Hindus who wish to destroy sectarianism are working night and day to impose their own brand of Vedanta upon the world. Liberal Hindus will call a Krishna bhakti "sectarian" in hopes he will relinquish his love of Krishna and embrace their love of Vedanta. Here is a sect organized to destroy sectarianism, to replace your view of religion with theirs. The curious twist here is that the Krishna devotee is willing (most of the time) to accept the Vedantin's right to believe as he chooses, while the "liberal" is too dogmatic to return the honor, and thus becomes the least open-minded among men.

Those who wish to stifle another's man's beliefs should take a look around, see the beauty (and the necessity) of nature's diversity, imagine a rainbow with just one color, even if it's their favorite hue. They might envision a world where the rich culinary diversity has been reduced, by one chef's particular palate and appetites, to one kind of food. Perhaps he judges Southern French food is best, and so forbids all other fare. Think of it! No Chinese stir-fry, no Boston-baked beans, no Italian spaghetti, no blistering hot Madras curry.

Of course, it's unthinkable. Humans like variety. We would never eliminate "unorthodox" foods. How bland! What we savor today may jade our appetite tomorrow, and so having the options is assuring, enlarging, life-enhancing. What is obvious about our physical food is less apparent when it comes to our language, our cultural, our costumes or our spiritual diet. Why can't we see that the existence of many faiths, many paths, many religious traditions is also enriching to the human experience? Why does anyone ever think that one path for all would be better, that all others should be barred and banished? And why don't those who preach petty "one pathism" ever stop to ponder that among the thousands of choices humanity just might not select theirs as the One? In short, it is possible to savor and be satiated by one's religion, while still knowing ours is not the only thing on the menu.

Having said something of unenlightened sectarianism, let me propose that true sectarianism is both good and necessary. It is a celebration of custom, conviction and divine diversity. The greatest of the world's religious leaders, saints and sages have magically merged universal consciousness with staunch sectarian commitment. Recall Swami Vivekananda's astute observation that Ramakrishna's one-pointed love and devotion to Goddess Shakti had, in some manner beyond the young skeptic's vision, created a truly complete and illumined being. Enlightened sectarianism is benign and non-proselytizing. Far from being the blight which the enemies of dharma proclaim, it is dharma's true center and strength.

All this was provoked by one question the Christianity Today journalist asked, "Would you like to see Hinduism as the only precious and would not want theirs to be the only religion, knowing that would imply the extinction of others. A faith, a culture, a spiritual tradition is a living entity, a species. Today people weep when a hundred-million-year-old species leave the Earth forever, and they are working hard to preserve biological diversity. Hindus look upon religion in a similar way, and would want all the varieties and variations to survive. They know that, like life in a rain forest, each one adds its unique power and prowess to the existence of the others."

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