

[Interviews: Tackling Today's Thorny Issues](#)

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INTERVIEWS

Tackling Today's Thorny Issues

HINDUISM TODAY asked three insightful ministers four tough questions at the Hindu Mandir Executives' Conference held in California in August, 2012

1 We are encountering more Hindus today who avoid the word Hindu and use the word Vedic instead. What is your view on this?

Swami Parameshananda: As my guru, Swami Pranavanandaji, said, all Hindus, believers of Hindu Gods, should come under the word Hinduism. Vedic tradition cannot be inclusive of all Hindus because this is a very intricate scripture, and the people nowadays, youths nowadays, are not ready for that, because it's not something they can study and put into practice. Yes, there are specialized teachers coming from institutions in India bringing the Vedas here, but not enough people have access to it, neither the time, and it's not very appealing.

If we go under the umbrella of Hinduism, then we'll have the might and power to take it to the world at large. All Christians call themselves Christians, all Muslims call themselves Muslims. They don't use a different name. All the different faiths of Hinduism should come under the umbrella of Hinduism. This will be our savior from the world in the long run, and it will give us the opportunity to participate in interfaith dialogues and be respected, not be criticized by other faiths that we are fragmented.

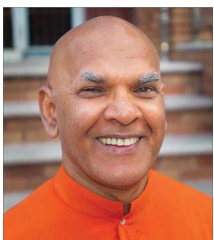
Swamini Svatmavidyananda: Unfortunately the word Hindu has become a bad word.

People don't want to use it because of the tremendous pressure within most colonized societies to become like the colonizer. We see this in India: everything foreign is good, even if it's a buck, because it has come from the US or somewhere else.

In other colonized cultures, the whole indigenous tradition was wiped out due to forcible conversions. India was spared because of the resilience of the Hindu dharma. Therefore we are very, very lucky. We were left with our culture and our tradition, but we were also left with the scarring of internalized oppression caused by mainstream colonizers' inculcating this hatred.

That is why there is great shame and dilution of our tradition, or a refusal to accept it at all. Due to this dilution, we have unfortunately seen established orders in India apply for minority status. This is very sad, and it shows that there is something wrong. The whole Hindu tradition is nothing but religious; there is not a single thing that is secular about it. Secular should mean that if I'm secular I treat everybody equally—all beliefs, all traditions, all people. But unfortunately, secularism has meant erasing myself, self-effacement in order to appease someone else, and that is not correct. This is the factor, embodied by the government and the media, that has influenced the Hindu heart so much that one will stick up for the Muslim neighbor and the Christian friend and not think about himself as a Hindu.

I have had this experience at world interfaith conferences where they will say, "Please, all the Christians rise;" everybody rises. "All the Hindus rise," and I was the only one standing up! Afterwards I asked some of the people there, who said, "No, we are not Hindu. We believe in compassion," as though Hinduism is about non-compassion. It's ignorance, basically, causing self-hatred. And that self-loathing is a very sad thing, because it doesn't let us grow spiritually, it doesn't let us grow into our full potential. That self-loathing has to be eradicated.



Swami Parameshananda: New-York-based United Nations and international representative for Bharat Sevashram Sangha

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We have to network and educate. A meeting like this conference is good for boosting self-esteem. We have to boost our own self-esteem and that of others around us, because self-hatred brings us down. It's almost like the colonizer is sitting inside; the colonizer has replaced Bhagavan within, and that is what we have to change.

The inner landscape—perhaps we have to say the inner jungle—has to be pruned a little bit to eradicate this self-hatred through relating to Bhagavan, through being proud of our achievements, our culture, our understanding. The Hindus are generally proud of the past; it's the present they have a problem with. So we have to look for things in the present—icons, swamis, role models in all fields—so that this allergy for one's own nature is gone.

Sadhvi Bhagawati: The media is sensationalist. So, in the West Hinduism tends to be portrayed as radical, fundamental, a tiny percentage of what Hinduism is about. For example, we have the Kumbha Mela coming up. Watch the media coverage of the Kumbh: naked men with spears, nails that have been uncut for the last 20 years. It's sensationalism. It's not the fact that 130 million people have come together, with no advertising, no registration, no Facebook page, having gone through all kinds of hardships to get there—and more after they arrive, because there's no Hilton—and they're joyful and happy. It's not the martyrdom syndrome. It's because they know it's Prayag, the sangam of the Ganga, the Yamuna and the Saraswati; it's a holy place. But the media coverage does not express that.

When Western media coverage of Hinduism focuses almost exclusively on a tiny number of radical, fundamentalist Hindu hardliners, it's not surprising that peace-loving, tolerant, accepting Hindus want to disassociate themselves from those positions.

I think one of the strengths of Hinduism also tends to be one of its weaknesses. We are absolutely embracing of pretty much everything: "You worship Krishna, great. You worship Siva, great. You worship Ram, great. You worship the Divine Mother, great. You worship that tree outside, fabulous. You worship your grandmother, great." It's all Hindu, and that's one of Hinduism's strengths.

The problem comes when you arrive in a country with a culture in which there is one way, one name; it's Christ or Adonai or Muhammad. Some are at a loss, and they start to wonder, "Am I really Hindu? What does it really mean?" They're looking for something to identify with that tends to be more specific.

When you take Hindus out of India and put them into a non-Hindu place, they need something to hold onto. They need to unite with other Hindus and understand that we are all Hindus.

2
In a mixed-religion marriage, what advice do you give to the couple about how to make their marriage succeed and how to approach religion when children are born?

Swami Parameshananda: It would have been nice if we could have caught it before it happened, but we're talking about when it has already happened.

I think the mother should be the key role-player in what religion the future offspring will follow. The mother is the closest to the child, and if there's any kind of separation in the future, the laws always favor giving the right to the mother to keep the child. The wife's faith is the dominant one in any home, because the mother is the one that is going to take the child to the place of worship most of the time. This is inevitable, and we should be prepared for it.

Sadhvi Bhagawati: The only real advice that you can give is to ask, "Can you find a sense of self, a sense of identity, a sense of connection to the world, separate for a moment from your religious beliefs? When you connect with each other, when you hold each other in your arms, you're not holding each other as a Hindu and Jew,

or Hindu and Muslim, or Hindu and Christian, youâ€™re holding each other as you and as me, and that you and me becomes we. Itâ€™s not that weâ€™ve merged Hinduism and Christianity; we left them at the bedroom door. We merge into this divine union together. And are we able, when it comes time to make decisions about our children, to come into it the same way that we go into the bedroom? Can I leave my career, my makeup, my hairstyle, my clothes, my diamonds and this religion I identify with aside for a moment? Can we just be naked on every level, you and me, who love this child more than anybody on Earth, who are one with this child, and leave dogma aside for a moment, use our heart knowledge, our heart connection and our heart wisdomâ€”what Pujya Swamiji calls our inner GPSâ€”to guide us?â€” Otherwise youâ€™re going to butt heads forever.

On a logistical level, it really depends on the religion. Thereâ€™s no way you can prevent religious conflict if one of the religions believes the child is going to burn in hell if he doesnâ€™t follow that religion.



Swamini Svatmavidyananda: Resident acharya of Arsha Vijnana Gurukulam in Pavo, Georgia, USA

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Swamini Svatmavidyananda: It is difficult, because religion is not just a set of beliefs, itâ€™s also how we enact religion, just like how we enact gender and so many things. And in this doing, many possibilities remain. â€”Kartum shakyam, akartum shakyam, anyathava kartum shakyam: I can do, I need not do, I can do differently.â€” We have to transcend doing and focus on being.

There is a reason why we are not called human doings; we are called human beings. So, we have to learn how to be, and learning how to be cannot happen unless I let

the other person be. In a marriage there are already so many differencesâthe way of cooking is different, the way of eating is different. In an intercultural marriage itâs not just the marriage; everything is different. This is something we have to live with; it is a growing reality of modern times.

I would tell the couples to focus first on teaching values that are absolute and universal, what we call samanya dharma, which means what is correct, what is incorrect, what is right, what is wrong. These are absolutes, and they are all there in the mandates. Then we have to focus on the interpersonal, vishesha dharma, how those values translate in living together. The maxim there would be âlive without hurting another or getting hurt in the process.â Finally, svadharma, minding oneâs own business. âYou do what you have to do;â that is really svadharma. Donât look into the other personâs portfolio, asking, âHow come you are not doing this? What are you doing?â

These definitions of dharmaâsamanya dharma, vishesha dharma, and svadharmaâare extremely important, because they are not peculiar to the Hindu tradition. They should be something that is practiced universally. They are universal, even though we have a very sophisticated understanding of them in Hinduism.

When children come into the picture, it becomes even more important to inculcate in them these values. Children are very sensitive; they are influenced by how the parents think, how they act. So, to maintain that harmony in the child-rearing process is very important. Itâs also important to give in, because when one willingly concedes an argument, one wins by growing spiritually. I would say to the couples, especially after having children, to compete with one another to lose an argument. Who will lose the argument first?

3

In your opinion, what is the most important issue needing to be addressed in the Hindu community in North America today?

Sadhvi Bhagawati: As I just concluded with the youth in their session, their connection to Hinduism is really what is going to anchor them and ground them in life. And even though this is a culture that says âmore, higher, better, newer,â

it is also a world in which the top ten medicines prescribed fall into four categories: anti-depressants, anti-anxiety, sleeping pills and Viagra. In this country we have achieved everything, accomplished everything, obtained everything, but now we take pills to do what animals can do: a pill to go to sleep at night, a pill to wake up in the morning, a pill to convince ourselves that life is worth living, a pill to procreate. This can't be enough.



Sadhvi Bhagawati: Senior assistant to Swami Chidananda Saraswati of Parmarth Niketan, Haridwar

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There is something else, and that something else is a connection to something that makes each of us feel like we are not alone with the whole world on our shoulders, that makes us feel it's not all about me. What our religion gives us is a connection to something that's real, unchanging, deep, something that's higher, profound, that makes us understand: "Oh, now I get it! This is all set design; this is all just decoration on the stage." What Hindus have in their culture is a ready-made answer to whatever ails them—how to live their life, how to live a married life, how to have a family, how to have a career. Whether you're looking at the scriptures, the teachings of the great rishis, saints and sages, the wonderful historic examples that we have, wherever you go, there's an answer.

What's really important is to not get starry-eyed over the glamour, glitz and allure of people who think they have it all, but to stay anchored, to stay grounded. This doesn't mean to not be fabulously successful. You can be fabulously successful and fabulously dharmic at the same time, but don't forsake that which is really important for that which at the end of the day is just going to put you standing in line for a prescription at the pharmacy.

Swami Parameshananda: We should learn from our past that India has been conquered because of "divide and rule." Here in America we have the freedom not to fall in that trap again, because we're living amongst each other—there's no North and South India here. In New York City, let's say, people from all over India—North and South, whatever language they speak, Telugu or Bengali or Hindi or Marathi—are living in the same community, and our places of worship should tolerate that mixture of prayer. Sometimes in the beginning there might be a little resistance, traditionally so, but eventually the spiritual leaders should provide programs where all denominations can pray together. This way we will be united under the same Hindu umbrella.

The danger will be if we are divided. The Sikhs in Wisconsin are a very united people, and they will eventually get all the Sikhs in America to be united. This is God's way of making us united: when we are in the comfort zone we don't see the need for unity, but when tragedy strikes we're looking everywhere for support—mental support, support from the government, which should recognize the solidarity of the Hindus in America. Individually we won't be able to influence the political system, but as a people under the banner of Hinduism we can.

Individually we're doing well—we might be rich, professional—but as a people we haven't learned yet how to be united. In my travels around the world, not only America, I have found this is the problem Hindus have; we stay within ourselves, and we don't go out on the world stage and be part of the negotiation for world harmony. We should start by being united at home, here in America.

Swamini Svatmavidyananda: Bhakti: that is something we have forgotten after we emigrated from yoga bhumi to bhoga bhumi. This is bhoga bhumi, because this is the land of instant gratification. We forget the connection to the Ultimate, the nurturer of the soul for all beings. It is bhakti, which is devotion and reverence, that is the real key to success in everything. Bhakti makes one able to weather all storms. It gives one an inner strength. Most of all, it clears the heart, because bhakti is the cloth that wipes the inner mirror, the antahkarana mirror, and shraddha is the Windex. Shraddha is reverence and faith for the Vedas, for the teachers, for Bhagavan.

The only reason we don't have inner darshan of Bhagavan—the ultimate goal in the Hindu tradition (to understand the truth of what we worship as oneself), despite Vedanta, despite temples, despite all these things—is that the mirroring

medium, the reflecting medium, is full of dust and dirt. This is what Bhagavan Krishna says in the third chapter of the Bhagavad Gita when Arjuna asks why is it that, after all these teachings, as though by force, one goes down the wrong path, toward papa (wrongdoing), although the two paths are very clear—one is dragged down the wrong path even though one wants to do the right thing. Bhagavan Krishna says there is a film on the mirror. Just as the film on the mirror covers the reflection, it covers who you are. The antahkarana, the inner instrument, the mirror, is eminently cleansable. That is the ninth-tenths of Hinduism that is preparation, while one-tenth is knowledge.

4 How can we encourage youths to care for their elders at home rather than sending them to assisted-living facilities, as is becoming more and more common in the UK, US and India?

Swamini Svatmavidyananda: In the Vedic tradition, when we have reverence, then there is caring. Reverence and caring go together. We are told, "Matru devo bhava, pitru devo bhava, acharya devo bhava" (Revere your mother as God, revere your father as God, revere your teacher as God). Even atithi, the guest, is an incarnation of Bhagavan. So, be the one unto whom your elders are incarnations of Ishwara. That cannot happen until you value your elders and the guidance they provide. We can coordinate in this country and in India and use the services of the retired people to teach their knowledge, their values, and the methods of inculcating these values in the younger generations. That is what makes it valuable and dear.



Sharing knowledge: Mr. Sant Gupta speaks at the inaugural session of the Hindu Mandir Executives' Conference in San Jose

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The reverence of everything as Ishwara—where the elders are also manifestations

of Ishwaraâ€¦is strong until the teenage years, when rebellion starts. In the difficult ages between 13 and 30, until they settle down and have their own children, youth tend to see an elder as another mouth to feed or something that takes up time.

The value of elders has to be inculcated, and the best way to do this is by example. We could have classes at old-age homes taught by elders who are able, thus providing constant contact between the younger and older generations. The younger generation are in crÃ¢ches and day cares, and the older generations are in homes: this is the problem right now. So we have to have more contact.

Swami Parameshananda: I would like to speak from my experience. Our family of 11 siblings, mother and father migrated from Guyana to the US. Before I took sannyas diksha, I took care of my mother. I think she chose to come to where I was staying because she recognized the connection, the love that we enjoyed. While performing this great seva that my siblings were not in a position to do, I endured moments when she was very ill. She told me, â€œIâ€™m going to bless you.â€œ I donâ€™t know what she meant by that, but I can attribute my later becoming a swamiji directly to her blessings.

I had a beautiful dream about a week after she passed away that she was ascending in an escalator while a beautiful bhajan was being sung, a bhajan that I know. I didnâ€™t see her as a person passing away, or old and not looking very well, but a beautiful mother. I felt that she ascended into the higher regions of the Gods. That mutual love between child and mother and mother and child contributed directly to my life. We can take that to the masses of the people, the children, and tell them that a motherâ€™s or fatherâ€™s blessing is better than even Godâ€™s blessing. Let us endure their hardships, their difficulties, for a little while until they say goodbye, and weâ€™ll all benefit. All of us will get old.

Sadhvi Bhagawati: This is a symptom of a problem rather than the problem itself. Therefore, the solution has to go deeper than the superficial level. The core problem, the reason most old people are sent to the home, is not issues like Alzheimerâ€™s or dementia. Itâ€™s not parents who are a danger to themselves or to othersâ€¦itâ€™s the basic issue of convenience. On a more fundamental level, the problem results from changes to our values, our priorities. With 24 hours in a day, we all have to make choices; we have to decide that this is more important than that. If people are saying they donâ€™t have the time or resources to properly care for their elders, the question becomes, where exactly are their time and

resources going? What have they chosen over their parents? Usually they have chosen a job with potential for career advancement, events deemed important for social advancement and extracurricular activities performed for enjoyment or to fit in with one's social group.

To reverse this trend, we have to ask people why they think it is more fulfilling to spend extra hours at work or a social engagement instead of at home taking care of their parents, or why they keep a spare room available for a friend's occasional visits instead of sharing their room with that guest or sleeping on the couch so their parents can have that extra room. We have to help people understand what really makes our life fulfilling, what makes us feel, at the end of the day or the end of our lives, like we did something good. It's never the money, the extracurricular activities and the social engagements. But we never realize that until it's much too late. People who are in touch with what's really important don't have to be convinced to keep their parents at home.

How can we get back on the right track? Last night in my talk I shared a favorite quotation from Mahatma Gandhi: "What's the point of running so fast if we're running in the wrong direction?" That's what's happening with the Indian community that has moved abroad. In the effort to assimilate or acculturate, to prove something to someone—to American society, to the Indian society that they've left back in India, to themselves, to whom I don't know there's almost an epidemic rush for more and more and more.

As Pujya Swamiji Chidananda says so beautifully, "Either you focus on your shelf or you focus on yourself." If we spend our lives trying to fill our shelves, at the end of it we realize that our self feels pretty empty. It's not about where you vacationed, what car you drive or your diamond necklace. We must return to the old values. These aren't just Hindu values; they are universal values. Hinduism happens to have the benefit of volumes and volumes of scriptures that tell us what is important, what our traditional values are.