

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND HINDUISM

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Abstract. I discuss here the Hindu values of religious tolerance and democracy. This is a revised draft of the speech delivered at the Asian Values Conference at the Florida Atlantic University in 2002. People belonging to different religious traditions spoke at the Conference.

Hinduism is the world's oldest religious tradition; it goes back to the very dawn of history. The hymns composed some 5,000 years ago are still recited today.

Hinduism is the third largest of the world's religions, after Christianity and Islam. Nearly 800 million people or one-seventh of humanity call Hinduism their spiritual home. Millions more in South and Southeast Asia and in the Far East trace their spiritual roots to Hinduism.

Hinduism is also the world's largest pluralistic tradition. A multiplicity of spiritual paths and ways are recognized as valid in Hinduism. Hinduism is not based on the teachings of a single Prophet or a single Book. The teachings of many different sages and saints find home within Hinduism. God may be worshiped both in male and female forms. Hinduism has much in common with the earth based religious traditions of the world.

Hinduism is not a creedal religion, based on dogma. Its emphasis is not on correct belief but on search for the Truth. The scripture describes several paths to spiritual development. The mountain peak may be reached by taking any of the several paths.

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), the great Indian seer of the first half of the twentieth century declared that Hinduism (also known as *Sanatan Dharma* or the eternal tradition) was rising not for India alone but for the world. Arnold Toynbee in his *A Study of History* was of the view that Hinduism will gain the status of a world religion in the new century. What lies behind such tall claims for Hinduism?

The events of September 11 have made clear the extraordinary importance of religious tolerance for peace in the world. I will describe here a few of the Hindu precepts as they relate to religious tolerance. I will also comment on the impact of Hinduism on democracy and economic development in India.

HINDU THEOLOGY

Hindus believe that Reality is One—*Ekam Sat*. This Reality is everywhere, in everything, in every being. It is One and Many at the same time and it also transcends them both. At the popular level, the One Reality is worshipped as the Trinity: Brahma the creator, Vishnu

the preserver and Shiva the dissolver. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are not different gods, but they represent different faces of the One Supreme. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva have their respective female consorts: Saraswati, Lakshmi and Durga. Even though God is One, Hindus worship God in a number of both male and female forms. Ram Swarup puts the matter this way:

Spiritual life is one but it is vast and rich in expression. The human mind conceives it differently. If the human mind was uniform without different depths, heights and levels of subtlety; or if all men had the same mind, the same psyche, the same imagination, the same needs, in short, if all men were the same, then perhaps One God would do. But a man's mind is not a fixed quantity and men and their powers and needs are different. So only some form of polytheism alone can do justice to this variety and richness. - - *The Word As Revelation: Names of Gods, 1980.*

THE AVATAR. The Avatar is God in human form. When God takes birth in Human body, He is known as the Avatar. The Hindu scripture Bhagavad Gita States that God descends when religion is on the decline and immorality is on the rise. The Avatar comes down to earth from age to age.

*Yada yada he dharmasya
glanir bhavati Bharata
abhyuthanam adharmasya
tad atmanam srijami aham*

*paritranaya sadhunam
vinashaya cha dushkritam
dharam sansthapan arthaya
sambhavami yuge yuge*

“Whenever there is decline in religious values and increase in unrighteousness, at that time I take birth. For the establishment of the good, for the destruction of the evil-doers, for the enthronement of the Right, I am born from age to age.”--
Bhagavad Gita, 4:7-8

The Avatar helps mankind move to a higher level of consciousness. Rama and Krishna are popular Hindu Avatars. Buddha is accepted as an Avatar, even though he was a dissenter and a critic of the ritualism and caste distinctions of the Hindu system of his day. Many Hindu teachers accept also Jesus Christ as an Avatar. This is typical of the inclusiveness of the Hindu teachers.

FOUR PATHS. Hinduism prescribes four ways of spiritual salvation, depending on the personality of the seeker.

- For the active person, there is Karma yoga, the path of selfless works.
- For the contemplative and intellectual person, there is Jnana Yoga, the path of Knowledge.
- For the emotional person, there is Bhakti yoga, the path of love and surrender. Bhakti yoga is said to be similar to the Christian path of love.
- Finally, Raja yoga is the path of meditative exercises including concentration and one-pointedness. This path focusing on meditation has become popular in the West.

Pluralism and tolerance of diversity are built into Hindu theology.

India's long history is a testimony to its tolerance of religious diversity. Christianity came to India with St. Thomas in the first century A.D., long before it became popular in the West. Judaism came to India after the Jewish temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. and the Jews were expelled from their homeland. In a recent book titled *Who are the Jews of India?* (University of California Press, 2000), author Nathan Katz observes that India is the only country where the Jews were not persecuted. "The Indian chapter is one of the happiest of the Jewish Diaspora." p. 4. Both Christians and Jews have existed in a predominant Hindu India for centuries without being persecuted.

Zoroastrians from Persia (present day Iran) entered India in the 7th century to flee Islamic conquest. They are known as Parsees in India. The Parsees are an affluent community in the city of Bombay without a sense of having been persecuted through the centuries. Among the richest business families in India are the Parsees; for example, the Tata family controls a huge industrial empire in various parts of the country. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the powerful Prime Minister of India (1966-77; 1980-84), was married to Feroz Gandhi, a Parsee (no relation to Mahatma Gandhi).

HINDUISM AND DEMOCRACY

The impact of religious values on democracy and economic development are topics of interest in our period. The failure of democracy in the Middle East is often attributed to the authoritarian nature of Islam.

There is indeed a close connection between religious beliefs of a people and their system of government. Absolutist religions give rise to absolutist regimes and pluralistic religions give rise to pluralistic regimes. It is no wonder that absolutist Ayatollah Khomeini established a theocratic Shia dictatorship in Iran in 1979. For the same reason, Calvinistic Geneva was an absolutist theocracy in Europe in the 16th century. The relative success of democracy in India owes to the pluralistic nature of Hinduism.

Modern political science scholarship has emphasized the impact of economic development on democratic success. Research articles by S. M. Lipset, Dean Neubauer, Phillip Cutright,

and Bruce Russett have demonstrated a statistical relationship between economic development and democracy. Democracy is more common in countries which are economically developed. In this research, the level of economic development is treated as the independent variable, and democracy is treated as the dependent variable, the effect. Statistical analysis shows a strong positive correlation between the level of economic development and democracy. India, however, is an exception to the rule. India is poor and underdeveloped and also riddled with vast amounts of corruption. Yet it is democratic. Fourteen free and competitive national elections have been held in India. Peaceful change in government has been a regular feature of political life so far. India's record of democracy is unsurpassed in the developing world.

Political scientists have paid less attention to the influence of values on democracy. The role of values in understanding democratic success in my view is paramount. The failure of democracy in the Middle East cannot be attributed to poverty, as most countries in the region are petroleum rich but to values. Democracy in Europe succeeded only after the values of secularism and religious pluralism were established. Indian democratic success can be explained in terms of the pluralistic nature of its majority religion.

HINDUISM AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

India today is poor and underdeveloped. One often hears the argument that Hinduism is responsible for India's poverty. This conclusion is unwarranted. One cannot condemn Hindu teachings for the poverty in India any more than one can condemn the teachings of Christ for the many wars fought in the European continent. One cannot condemn the teachings of Bhagavad Gita for Indian squalor any more than one can condemn the Sermon on the Mount for the high crime rate that exists in the United States.

Contrary to stereotypical information in the West, Hinduism is not life-negating, other-worldly or pessimistic in its philosophy. It does not condemn material success. It does not forbid the enjoyment of legitimate needs. The four legitimate wants allowed in Hinduism include: *Artha*, *Kama*, *Dharma* and *Moksha*.

- *Artha* is material prosperity
- *Kama* is pleasure
- *Dharma* is righteous conduct
- *Moksha* is spiritual liberation

Dharma and Moksha come after Artha and Kama.

Indian poverty cannot be blamed on Hinduism. Nor is Hinduism opposed to science and rational thinking. Ancient India contributed handsomely to mathematics, astronomy, the physical and the medical sciences.

Poverty is a recent phenomenon in the long stretches of Indian history. It dates to the

period of colonization. India fell to colonial exploitation first by certain Muslim dynasties originating in Central Asia and then by the British in the 18th century. The invaders and plunderers were drawn to India's wealth. When Muslim adventurers ransacked India in the 11th and 12th centuries, it was the richest country in the world. When the British left India in 1947, it was the poorest.

THE INDIAN DIASPORA

Hindus have migrated to many lands. The US Census counted 1.6 million people of Indian origin living in the United States in the year 2000. This number is likely to be more than 2 million in the year 2005. Hindus also have settled in Britain, East Africa, Fiji, Trinidad, Jamaica, Singapore, Malaysia, and in smaller numbers in many other countries. Wherever Hindus have settled, they achieve high economic and professional success. In the United States, Hindus enjoy among the highest standard of living. Their religion does not come in the way of their material prosperity.

India has the third largest number of engineers and scientists in the world, after the United States and Russia. Its export of computer software engineers now is global in scale.

GOD AND NEIGHBOR

I return to the theme of religious tolerance. Ram Swarup, an Indian thinker puts the matter eloquently this way:

"In the spiritual realm there are two categories: God and your neighbor. And correspondingly there are two ways of looking at them: you could look at God through your neighbor or at the neighbor through your God. In the first approach, you will think that if your neighbor has the same needs and constitution and impulses as you have, then his God, in whatever way he is worshiped and by whatever name he is called, must mean the same to him as your God means to you. In short, if your neighbor is as good as you are, his God also must be as good as yours.

"But if you look at your neighbor through your God, then it leads to an entirely different outlook. Then you say that if your God is good enough for you, it should be good enough for your neighbor too. And if your neighbor is not worshiping the same God in the same way, he must be worshiping Devil and qualifies for conversion or liquidation.

"The first approach promotes tolerance, though it gives plurality of Gods and varieties of modes in worship. The other approach gives one God and one mode of worship, but breeds intolerance." - *The Word as Revelation: Names of Gods*, 1980

Mahatma Gandhi's favorite hymn, chanted regularly at his evening prayer meetings, says:

*Raghu Pati Raghav Raja Ram
Patit Pavan Sita Ram
Ishwar Allah tere Naam
Sabko Sanmati De Bhagwaan*

“The Lord God is One, people call Him by different names. Some call him Ishwar; others call him Allah. O Beneficent Lord, bestow on humanity the peace of Thy Harmony.”

The globe has shrunk and is now a much smaller place. Thanks to the Internet and the mass media, people in distant lands are now our neighbors. We cannot have peace in this shrunk globe so long as we insist that we are in possession of the truth and all others are groping in the darkness. Every method of spiritual growth and worship is worthy of respect. Hinduism has much to contribute to build a pluralistic global system that is peaceful and compassionate.

I will conclude with the words of Radhakrishnan, the philosopher President of India (1962-67):

What counts is not creed but conduct. By their fruits ye shall know them and not by their beliefs. Religion is not correct belief but righteous living. The Hindu view that every method of spiritual growth, every path to the Truth is worthy of reverence has much to commend itself. - - *The Hindu View of Life*, 1962.