

Debate with Christian  
Missionaries in India:  
**The Ethics of Religious Conversions**

By

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## Debate with Christian Missionaries in India

(Talk delivered by David Frawley at a public discussion organised by Prajna Bharati A.P., on "The Ethics of Religious Conversions" at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Hyderabad.)

I was raised as a Catholic and went to Catholic school. My uncle was, and still is, a missionary. We were told that he was going to South America to save the souls of the Native Americans, people we were told were non-Christian and without conversion would suffer eternal damnation. This is the background that I came from.

Today, throughout the world, and in the United States, with very little exception, there is no "Sarvadharmā Samābhava" taught in religion. It is something I never encountered in my Christian education in the West.

We were taught that Hinduism was a religion of idolatry; it was a religion of polytheism and superstition and that there was no place for Hindus in heaven. Even a great Hindu like Mahatma Gandhi might be revered on a certain level, but he was not given the type of religious credit that he would have been given had he been a Christian.

These attitudes still exist throughout the world and India does not exist in isolation. And Hindus in India are, and India as a whole is, still being targeted for conversion. Why is this so? If all the religions teach the same thing, why is it that certain religions are seeking to convert the members of other religions to their beliefs?

Hinduism is a pluralistic tradition. It teaches that there are many paths, many scriptures, many sages, many ways to come to the Divine to gain self-realization and it should be free for the individual to find and follow whatever way he or she thinks or feels works best.

But not all religions are pluralistic. In fact, most religions are exclusive in their mentality and in their beliefs. The two largest religions in the world, with a few notable exceptions, teach that theirs is the only true faith. The average Christian throughout the world has been taught to believe that only Christians gain salvation. The idea has been projected as an eternal heaven for the Christians and an eternal hell for the non-Christians, particularly for idol-worshipping Hindus. And so far, we do not have major

Christian leaders in the world contradicting that statement.

To date, there is no major Christian leader, or Moslem leader, in the world, who is saying that Hinduism is as good as Christianity or Islam. I do not know of any Christian leaders in the West who would say that a Rama or a Krishna is equal to a Jesus. I do not know of any of them who would honor a Ramana Maharshi, a Sri Aurobindo or a Mahatma Gandhi as a God-realized or self-realized sage. I realize there may be some exceptions to this, in the Indian context. But this is not the case with, and it is also not the official policy of the Vatican. It is not the policy of the Pope at all!

I want to read a statement, from "The Coming of the Third Millennium", which was issued very recently by the Pope, in relation to the situation in Asia:

"The Asia Synod will deal with the challenge for evangelization posed by the encounter with ancient religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. While expressing esteem for the elements of truth in these religions, the Church must make it clear

that Christ is the one mediator between God and man and the sole Redeemer of humanity."

This is a direct quote. Now, what is it saying about religious tolerance? Christ is the only way. The pope is saying that we accept what is true in these religions, but we do not accept them if they do not follow Jesus as the only way. We still have to convert them. That is the message. This is not a message of tolerance and live and let live. It is not a message of let Hindus have their way and we have our and both are good. It is not a statement that Buddha or Krishna is equal to Jesus.

It is a statement of exclusivism and my contention is that such exclusivism must breed intolerance. If I think that mine is the only way, how can I be really tolerant and accepting of you, if you follow another way? And such intolerance is going to end up causing conflict, division, disharmony and poor communication.

It is going to divide communities and cause problems. So, please bear in mind that, in the Indian context, as Hindus, you have to deal with these religions as the majority of the people in the

world are practicing and believing in them, and this conversion process is continuing.

I also think that we should have a free, open, friendly dialogue and discussion on all religious matters, both in terms of social interaction and relative to doctrinal matters. There should be complete freedom of discussion, freedom of criticism and freedom of debate just as we have in science.

What generally happens in the field of conversion is that certain groups are targeted for conversion activity. I would like to discriminate between two different things. One is the change of religion, which people may opt for, based upon open and friendly discussion, debate, dialogue and studies. Nothing is wrong with that. But I would discriminate that from what I would call the "global missionary business".

The global missionary business is one of the largest, perhaps even the largest business in the world. Not only the Catholic Church, but also various Protestant organizations have set aside billions of dollars to convert non-Christians to Christianity. They have trained thousands of workers, have formed various plans of

evangelization and conversion and have targeted certain communities for that particular purpose. This multi-national conversion business is like any multi-national economic business. It is not something that is simply fair and open. It is not simply a dialogue or a discussion.

So what we see with this missionary business is a definite strategy for one religion to convert the members of other religions. This conversion business is not about religious freedom. It is about one religion triumphing over all the other religions. It is about making all the members of humanity follow one religion, giving up and, generally, denigrating the religion they had previously been following.

Why is this conversion business so big in India? Because India is the largest non-Christian country in the world where missionaries have the freedom to act and to propagate. Islamic countries - Pakistan, Bangladesh - do not allow this missionary activity at all. In Saudi Arabia, you cannot even bring a Bible or a picture of Jesus into the country. China, also, does not allow such wide-scale missionary conversion activities.

So India, because of its very openness to and tolerance of these missionaries, has become the target. You know from recent newspapers that one missionary was killed in India, which is unfortunate. But in that same week, fifty Christians were massacred in Indonesia by the Moslems there. The religious violence is going on all over the world and Christians are not always the victims.

In India, for centuries, Hindus have been routinely killed for their religion. Even recently in Kashmir, a number of Hindus were massacred, but you will notice that, in the Western media, the death of Hindus for their religion will never count and will never constitute a story. However, if one missionary - one white man - is killed in India, then these Western countries will retaliate with sanctions, criticize, and take some moral high ground.

Missionary activity has a bloody history of genocide on every continent of the world. I am not going to go into all the details here. The Inquisition was in operation in Goa in India. The British used their influence, though less overtly, to force conversions, and certainly the missionaries had an

advantage under colonial rule all over the world. In a number of countries, colonial interests used force and persuasion to bring about conversion.

We are told today that we should forget all about that, even though it has only been a generation or two since the colonial era. I say that we cannot forget so easily because the very religious groups that performed these atrocious acts have not yet apologized. If they recognize that this missionary aggression and violence that was done before 1947; that was done in the 19th century; that was done in Goa; that was done in the Americas was wrong, then why don't we get an apology for it?

You will notice that the Christians in America have made some apologies for what they did to the Native Americans. We have yet to see any apology relative to Hindus. If the missionaries want us to believe that they have changed their ways and are now purely non-violent and charitable, then why do they not at least apologize for what they did in the past?

And why should there be conversions at all? What is the motivation behind most seeking of conversions that is coming out of the Christian

background? It is their belief that Christianity is the only true religion, Christ is the only saviour of humanity, Christians gain salvation or heaven and non-Christians gain damnation or hell. That is not a policy of harmony and tolerance but a blueprint for disharmony and conflict.

What ultimately happens when someone who has that attitude comes into a community and converts people? People are taught to reject their ancestors and their traditions. Families are broken up. Division and conflict almost inevitably occur wherever this missionary business goes on. There are actually many forms of Christianity and several different kinds of Christian missionary activity going on.

And there are Christian groups that are not missionary at all, for example, the old Greek Orthodox and the Syrian Christians, but which represent old and tolerant traditions. Then there is the Catholic tradition which is promoting its missionary activity all over the world but which is doing it in a more subtle way today. They are no longer using the force that they once used in the colonial era, but they are still aiming at global conversion. There are also the old Protestants, the

Anglicans and the Lutherans, who are still promoting various types of missionary activity. That has gotten reduced to some degree as well.

However, there is a new evangelical force in the world today, particularly that coming out of the United States. What are the fundamentalist Christian groups of America? The World Vision, the Christian coalition, groups like Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Baptists and so on.

They are very actively asking for donations in America in order to convert Hindus in India. We see this routinely in the various television channels that they have. Pat Robertson, one of their main leaders, has said that Hinduism is a demonic religion.

They show Hindu gods with animal heads and say, "Oh! Look at how primitive these people are." They look at the political and social problems of India and say; "These are all owing to Hinduism. Please donate money to our cause so we can go to India and convert these people from this horrible religion that they have."

These same evangelical missionaries are going all over the world and also targeting Catholics. Recently, in Brazil, the Pope called these evangelical missionaries "wolves" because of what they were doing to, what he termed, "his flock of Christians", which was converting them to their form of Christianity.

So this missionary threat continues and some missionaries are going back to the old hell-fire, damnation, condemnation of Hinduism such as the Catholics used to do in the Middle Ages and in the colonial era. So do not believe that there is religious harmony all over the world and that the other religions respect Hinduism and are willing to live together quietly with Hindus.

In fact, in textbooks in America, it is taught that Hinduism is not a religion because Hinduism does not have only one God, one book and is not a missionary religion seeking to convert or conquer the world. So it is this missionary business which needs to be questioned and not simply conversion. And do not be naive about it!

There is a consistent use of social upliftment and charity to promote conversion. While social

upliftment and charity are very good things, they should be separated from religious conversion. If you want to raise up a country and help them economically, please do so, but do not bring religion into it. When you put the picture of Jesus everywhere obviously religion and conversion are part of your motivation.

You will note that no country in the world has been raised up economically by religious conversion. What has made Japan a great country economically and what made the United States a great country economically are economic means, not a change of religion. Christian countries include some of the poorest countries in the world. The Philippines is the most Catholic and the oldest Christian country in Asia. It remains one of the poorest countries in Asia and has one of the greatest gaps between the rich and the poor.

The most devout Catholics in the world are in Central and South America. They are certainly not found in North America and in Europe, where Christians are more nominal than strong believers. Central and South America also have tremendous social inequality and a tremendous gap between the rich and the poor. But the Catholics there are not telling the poor people that they should

convert to another religion in order to raise themselves economically.

So this whole attack on Hindu society by stating that we will raise the poor on religious grounds is based upon the motivation of conversion. Then there is the whole issue of hospitals, orphanages and schools. It is all very wonderful to selflessly help other people. But why do you have to put a religious form there? As long as the picture of Jesus is there, particularly when you have a two thousand year history of aggressive conversion activities, how can you expect people to believe that there is no seeking of conversion? That it is purely selfless service and love of God?

If we love God, if we love our fellow human beings, we will love them regardless of what their religious belief is. We will love their religion as well. We will honor and respect their religion whether they are aboriginal people, Hindus, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Moslems or Christians. We will not see any need to convert them. In fact, we should not even be conscious of their religion at all. True love of God does not seek converts. It is not based upon names, forms or identity. It is based upon recognizing the Divine presence in all.

One of the great swamis of India, Swami Rama Tirtha, when he came to America, was asked about religion. He said, "You do not belong to any religion. All religions belong to you." The human being is not a property of any Church. You are not some thing which is owned by anyone or anything. The soul does not need to be saved. It is the eternal and immortal part of our nature. We need only understand the Divine within us.

You cannot change the nature of any human being. Hinduism is based upon respecting each individual and the Swadharma of each individual. We should have many paths and many religions. The idea of only one religious faith for all humanity is like having only one set of clothing for all humanity. It is like people having to eat only one type of food, or people having only one type of job. There should be diversity, abundance and freedom in the religious realm as well.

Unfortunately, all religions do not have the same goal. Religions have various goals. Religions are various paths. We should note that all religions are not theistic. There are non-theistic religions like Buddhism and Jainism where there is no creator

God. There are religions with a multiplicity of deities. Monotheism is not the only form of religion in the world and it is not the best form either.

All forms of religious worship have their validity and Hinduism recognizes them whether they are, polytheism, monotheism or monism. Even atheists have their place in Hinduism. People should have complete freedom to reject religion if that is what they want to do. Hindu tradition is a sadhana tradition that aims at spiritual practice for self-realization. Most Christian traditions, for example the Protestant tradition, claim that faith alone is enough to save you.

This means that a person may be a mass murderer, but if on his deathbed he converts to Christianity, he will go to heaven. Another person may live the life of a saint, but if he does not convert to Christianity, there will be no heaven for him. Recently, in the United States, a woman who had been convicted of murder was converted to Christianity on death-row and the Christian leaders - particularly the fundamentalist Christians - asked for the death sentence to be removed because since that woman had converted to Christianity therefore the sin no longer counted.

The same people would not have made the statement had the woman converted to Hinduism or any other non-Christian faith. We do need religious harmony and dialogue throughout the world. One of the most unfortunate things is that there is so much misinformation and even disinformation about Hinduism in the world. For example, in the New York Times, only last year, there was a story about the Amarnath pilgrimage in India. And what did the New York Times call it?

"Hindus going to worship the sex organs of Shiva, the God of Destruction." What kind of tolerance is that? What kind of point of view is being projected by it? But I have to tell you that the fault for this is not really all with these western people. The fault lies with Hindus themselves. They have been very poor at expressing what their religion is and in countering disinformation and propaganda against them. They do not study their religion properly and so, they cannot explain what it is. They are also misinformed about other religions and think that other religions are just Hinduism in another form.

But you will not find these rich traditions of yoga, meditation, Vedas and Vedanta, in other traditions. Particularly in the Protestant tradition in the West they are rejected almost altogether and, to these Evangelical Christians, they are considered to be the work of the devil. Some people say that all religions teach the same thing. Well, Hinduism teaches the Law of Karma and Rebirth.

Christianity and Islam do not accept that. Some people say all religions teach the same things and they only differ in inessentials. Is the Law of Karma and the process of Rebirth something inessential?

Now, certainly there should be a respect for universal, ethical values such as truthfulness, non-violence, peace and harmony. These should be accepted for all human beings regardless of their religion. In fact, they should be projected for all of nature. One of the problems that I see in Christianity, as most Christians believe it, is that animals are considered to be devoid of a soul and only human beings can gain salvation.

One of the reasons that we are exploiting and destroying this planet is because we do not see the

presence of a soul and consciousness in nature, the animals and the rest of the Universe. We must move beyond all our narrow, human-centric creeds. True religion is not a matter of name, form or identity. It is a matter of that which is eternal, that which is universal, that which no one owns and is a matter of consciousness, awareness and Truth.

The highest goal of the Hindu religion is self-realisation, not simply knowing God, but understanding who we are and the Divine presence within us. One of the main problems of humanity is that we do not understand ourselves and our motivations. Instead, based upon some dogma or belief, we are trying to get others to think and act like we do before we understand ourselves and understand them.

So let there be a dialogue. Let there be open, friendly and also critical communication in religion just as in science. But please let us expose and put an end to this missionary business and let us not think that the missionary business is tolerant. The missionary business is not about freedom of religion. It is about the triumph of one religion. It is not about secularism. The missionary business

accepts that only one religion is true. It is a religious war aimed at religious control.

The way to challenge this is not through violence or through intolerance, but through being properly informed. It is through being open, friendly, dialoguing and talking to people, so they understand what the Hindu point of view is, so that any distortions about Hinduism are removed. We are all the same Divine being. We all share the same human nature and we must recognise that in all human beings for harmony to exist.

At the same time, we should not be naive about the forces of the world and the forces that are trying to disintegrate this society and this culture. I think it would be a tremendous loss if India gave up Hinduism and became another Christian or Islamic country. We have enough of these already. India has a wealth of its own spiritual traditions that the rest of the world needs. Why do Westerners come here? They come here for this wealth of spiritual knowledge. In fact, you should be exporting your religion. That is one thing you have enough of. There are other more important things that you need to import.