

1. Religious persecution appears to be unprecedented around the world. How can people of all faiths work together to make religious freedom a universal right?

Despite the proliferation of bad news flooding our screens lately, I would not agree that today's religious persecution is unprecedented. Globally, it has been far worse in the past. Then, persecution resulted from the king's understanding of his faith. For example, in the Mughal Empire under Aurangzeb in the 17th century, millions of Hindus were subject to the Muslim jizya tax on non-believers and thousands of temples were destroyed. Even here in Texas, other religions were outlawed under Spanish rule in 1820, though local officials didn't actually enforce that very well. Still, just 200 years ago, it was the law. Historically in India, Hindu rulers have not restricted religious practice. With some exceptions, the Buddhist, Jain, Christian, Jewish, Parsee, Sikh and tribal religions in India have all freely coexisted under Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh rule.

We find today's starkest case of persecution of Hindus (as well as Christians and others) in Pakistan, where the Hindu population was 22% at the time of India's partition in 1947. Today that has plummeted to 1.7%, because they make it so difficult and even dangerous to be a Hindu. For example, it was only this year, 68 years after independence, that the government finally passed a law allowing Hindu marriages to be legally registered. But even that has yet to go into effect.

Religious tolerance depends in part upon people of different religions getting to know each other. When Swami Vivekananda came to the US for the Parliament of the World Religions in 1893, it was for many in attendance the first time they had ever heard a Hindu speak. Protestant groups of the time who were active in sending missionaries to India to convert those they considered heathens were taking a back by Vivekananda who spoke so eloquently and seemed anything but primitive. That visit permanently changed the attitude of some ministers and many in the media.

Fifty years ago there were few Hindus in Texas; now there are a quarter million. The Muslim community has also burgeoned. So we need to take time to get to know and understand each other. As mutual respect is developed, religious freedom should flow naturally and persecution will diminish. There's the current controversy here in Farmersville, Texas, about a Muslim cemetery. Reading a National Public Radio article, I was impressed by one person interviewed, Harvey Sisco, who has lived in Farmersville for more than 60 years. He said he has a good relationship with the few Muslim people he knows and has no problem with the cemetery. He is not against them, so he is not against their need to respect their dead.

I would add, however, that for some Christians in Asia, "religious freedom" is code for the freedom to gain converts by coming into a struggling or recently devastated community, and offering food, housing, money, education and other inducements. This was just seen following the April earthquake in Nepal, where instant tweets went out saying the earthquake was a blessing that would open the nation to a harvest of souls because of the opportunities created while giving aid. There were credible reports that some Christian aid workers on the ground there would only help those willing to convert. The same thing happened in South India following the 2004 tsunami. To me, such activities are not an expression of "religious freedom."

561 words

2. How does your faith tradition view homosexuality, and how will you deal with the recent decision by the Supreme Court to require equal treatment for opposite-sex and same-sex marriages?

Hinduism is not a centralized religion in which a singular view is issued from a known seat of authority. Hinduism is comprised of a vast number of independent lineages with independent authority. This results in stark differences in the view on many things, including homosexuality.

Historically, Hinduism has always recognized a wide range of sexual expression. Between the Kama Sutra and the explicit sculptures adorning the thousand-year-old Khajuraho Temple, Hindus did not leave much unwritten, unpainted or unsculpted. India counted 490,000 “3rd gender” people in its last census. In many areas, they are a community unto themselves, and occupy a special niche in religious rites. For example, in Kashmir, at a certain point in a wedding ceremony, a cross-dressing male arrives to tell dirty jokes until he/she is paid off to leave. Despite the pretense of annoyance at their presence, they are there to bless the wedding, and it would be considered inauspicious were no one of the third gender community to show up, or were someone to treat them badly.

It was only under British rule in modern times that homosexuality was outlawed in India, and very oppressive laws were put in place. Even today it remains outlawed. Homophobia is common among the many Indians in India who adopted the cultural perceptions of their former colonizers. This is true also among some swamis and religious leaders, who not only condemn homosexuality vociferously, but claim they can “cure it.” A decade ago at one Kumbha Mela, a huge religious gathering, our reporter asked two dozen swamis about homosexuality. Many, I have to say, scolded him for even asking. Most judged homosexuality as aberrant. Others with a more cosmopolitan attitude had a kinder view.

A related factor is that all matters sexual are kept in private in India. Public express of affection towards one’s spouse is frowned upon--one would rarely see an Indian couple holding hands on the street, and kissing is never displayed in movies. Our Gurudeva used to joke that the complete absence of public affection made him wonder how to account for such a large population.

Hinduism understands and accepts that some individuals are born with a gender identity that does not fit into the standard concept of what a man is like and what a woman is like. Hindu literature uses the term prakriti, meaning nature, to describe gender identity and lists three: the male nature, female nature and what is simply called the third nature, which includes what today are termed gay males and lesbians.

Our Saiva Siddhanta Church holds the view that God abides equally within everyone regardless of gender identity, and that the opportunity for further spiritual advancement is the same for all. There is for us no moral flaw, no sin, not even a wrong implied by being homosexual or bi-sexual or pan-sexual or non-sexual.

Whether a couple is heterosexual or homosexual, our organization’s counsel is to be faithful to one another, make a life-long commitment to each other and create a stable home. To that end, the new right to gay marriage is a definite help. Our Gurudeva spoke strongly against promiscuity before or during marriage, believing both contribute to the weakening of society and the breakup of marriages. If laws permitting gay marriage can help LGBT

couples create faithfulness in relationships and a stable home life, especially for the hundred-thousand plus gay couples with children, then gay marriage is of great benefit to society.

570 words (was 547)

3. How does your faith tradition approach health and healing?

When it comes to healing, Hindus look to medical doctors and not to temples, and not just because so many doctors in Texas are Hindus—that's a result of US immigration policy, not Hindu religious belief.

Our traditional medical system is called ayurveda, meaning the science of life. Practitioners are focused to a large degree on preventive medicine, on keeping the body well rather than waiting to treat it when it falls ill. Hence there is great emphasis on a healthy habits, diet and a positive mental outlook. Numerous modern studies have shown the health benefits of hatha yoga and meditation as well.

Here's some medical advice from the Tirukural, a 2,200 year old scripture: "The body requires no medicine if you eat only after the food you have already eaten is digested." And "The thoughtless glutton who gorges himself beyond the limits of his digestive fire will be consumed by limitless ills." Nothing out of date about that advice, is there? If examined by an Ayurvedic doctor—and there are many in the US now—you would more likely be asked what you eat for breakfast than the details of any ailment afflicting you, because diet is so central to health.

If afflicted with an illness that doctors aren't able to cure, many Hindus will turn to personal prayer, visit the local temple, or go on pilgrimage to places known for their healing power. The devout may approach a great sage for insights and restorative blessings or ferret out a known healer who may prescribe breathing exercises or medicinal concoctions known for generations in the family. Others will consult an astrologer when faced with an illness, and undertake remedial measures prescribed to him. Now this might sound unscientific, but I have seen predictions about a person's health read from their chart come to pass with startling precision. It's not infallible for sure. One world-renowned astrologer we know was so convinced he would die at a certain time that he announced it to his family and friends and said goodbye to the monks. When the moment came, he did have a heart attack—more likely from anxiety than the stars—but he did not die.

In the Hindu view, illness isn't something that randomly afflicts a person. True, we all get the flu when it is flu season, but serious, life threatening illnesses are often regarded as a manifestation of a person's karma, and not "accidental." A religious Hindu will, therefore, look upon a serious illness as an expiration of karma, and will accept his malady as a step forward in his soul's evolution. That doesn't mean he will not try to be cured. A Hindu will fight as hard as anyone, but when a cure is not forthcoming, his religion helps him accept what is happening to him, without blame or fear.

473 words

4. What according to your religion, is the source or cause of evil?

In the broadest sense, Hinduism views the universe and everything in it as divine perfection. To us, as my guru's guru, Yogaswami of Sri Lanka, said, "There is no intrinsic evil." There is no force or personification of evil which opposes the goodness of God. We don't, therefore, accept the premise of the question that evil exists per se. The better way to ask this of a Hindu, is "What to you is the source of what seems evil?"

When it comes to the question of evil, Hindus take a long view. We believe that the soul is created by God, and matures over many, many lifetimes of existence. At first, the soul is young and prone to make mistakes, to make karma, some good, some bad, all of which will return to it. When we see a person acting in a cruel or horrific way, we are seeing a young soul who will evolve over many lives out of cruelty and into compassion, we are seeing the evolution that all souls follow.

Now, we should be clear that karma is also a broad concept involving more than just the individual. We have a family karma, a national karma, a racial karma, even a karma as a denizen of the Earth. If it is our destiny that an asteroid will hit the planet again, then we're all going to equally suffer the consequences, no matter what our individual karma may be.

In the Hindu view, an embodied soul has a three-fold nature—intuitive, intellectual and instinctive.

The instinctive nature includes the impulses of our physical body, our cravings, our desires, etc. This phase of mind functions automatically. Self-preservation, procreation, hunger and thirst, as well as the emotions of greed, hatred, anger, fear, lust and jealousy, are all instinctive forces. They are very real in animals and humans alike. What is thought of as evil behavior is the instinctive, or animal, nature taking action with anger and violence.

Man alone develops the intellectual mind. This phase is a mixture of man's instinctive desires and cravings coupled with the knowledge he has gained in life. The intellectual mind serves to control the instinctive nature, though not in a completely reliable manner. At times, it is capable of justifying instinctive desires and acting in what are considered evil ways. A misguided man, driven by an intellectual justification of his instinctive rage, can behave far more ruthlessly than any animal.

More complex and more refined than the instinctive or intellectual phases is our intuitive or superconscious nature. It is mystically known as the mind of light, for when one is in this state of mind, he may see light within his head, and sometimes throughout the entirety of his physical body, if his inner sight is sufficiently developed. When man is extremely perceptive, tremendously creative and knowledge seems to come to him from the inside spontaneously, he is a superconscious being. Evil is absent from this state of mind. As a person evolves spiritually, he lives more and more in the superconscious mind, ultimately being released from the cycle of rebirth into worlds where even seeming evil is not present.

526 words

5. How does your faith tradition approach ex-prisoners and their reintegration into society?

Our organization's first experience with prisoners was a yoga program our founder, Gurudeva, set up in the early 1960s at the San Quentin prison near San Francisco, where we had a temple. The warden told Gurudeva, "You can teach them anything except levitation." The program ran for a while, and a few of these prisoners were released and showed up at the temple, having no place else to go. Well, we weren't a half-way house, and they did not fit in with the relatively sophisticated congregation of temple goers, leaving us with no practical way to help them. The program was terminated soon thereafter.

Forward now to 2000, to our small island of Kauai where the mayor asked us to help with her anti-drug program. As part of it, I was assigned to create an audio CD along the lines of the "scared straight" program where at-risk youth visited local prisons where convicts would talk to them bluntly about what they would face if they continued on the road they were on.

So I went to the local jail, Kauai County Community Correctional Center, and asked permission of the warden, Neil, to interview four of his model inmates for the CD. KCCC, as it is called, had an innovative program called Life-Time Stand where prisoners who pledged to participate enthusiastically in its strict regime of drills, schooling, counseling and gardening were allowed to live in cabins outside the main jail. KCCC is adjacent to the main highway, and there is no fence to stop one of these dozens of prisoners from just walking off the grounds, but that hasn't happened.

The warden told me that things had changed greatly in the years he had been there, that they used to get members of what he called the island's criminal families who were lawless generation after generation, but now, 95 percent of the inmates were there because of drug possession, dealing, or theft to buy drugs, and that they came from all levels of society.

The four inmates I interviewed, two men and two women, were there because of drugs, mostly crystal meth. They told me the sordid tales of their lives, how many people they robbed to buy drugs, how sorry they were for how they had behaved, how much they appreciated what was provided to them in the Life-Time Stand program and how they were going to completely change their life after they got out.

So we made the CD, which included interviews with the mayor, police, hospital personnel and more, and distributed it to all the schools on our little island.

A few years later, all four of the star prisoners were back in jail. Why? Simple: they got out and went back into the exact same circle of family and friends that got them into drugs and crime in the first place

The takeaway from that experience? Prisoner rehabilitation is no easy matter, and in our drug-soaked world, it's beyond the means of most local churches. It was clear to us that ex-convicts must have a well-run half-way house to keep them from falling immediately back into trouble—Kauai county is "considering" one, but stuck over where to put it and how to pay for it. As to the individuals themselves, warden Neal said they needed to stop blaming someone else for their troubles and blame themselves. Then they might get on the right path.

Hindus in the US have one of the lowest incarceration rates of any community, so reintegrating prisoners is not something we see happening much and not something that

Hindus are very involved in, though there are some yoga and meditation programs such as the prison ashram project.

616 words

6. The Pew Research Center identifies a large portion of the population of the USA who answer "None" to the question of religious preference. They are called the "nones." What can we do to reach out and involve them in our faith?

First let's parse the data a little more closely. The question is about Pew's "America's Changing Religious Landscape," poll published in 2015. It lists "nones," or more precisely "unaffiliated," as 22.8%, a 6.7% increase from their 2007 poll and more than triple the 7% nones in 1972.

For comparison, a recent poll in India, where 85% of all Hindus live, found there are 2.8 million Indians who claim no religious affiliation, a mere 2/10th of a percent of the 1.25 billion population—a hundredth the rate of the US.

Pew breaks down the USA unaffiliated or nones group for 2015 further as 3.1% atheist (doubled from 2007), 4.0% agnostic (also doubled) and 15.8% "nothing in particular." I found this somewhat encouraging. If only 3.1% are declared atheist, the other 96.9% of Americans are at least willing to give God a chance. The atheist rate is far higher in Europe—20% in the UK and fully 30% in France.

In 2012, Pew did a more detailed analysis of the nones—which at that time was 19% of the population. Two-thirds of those polled said they believe in God, more than half said they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth, a third classified themselves as spiritual but not religious and one in five said they pray every day.

According to the Pew reports, "Overwhelmingly, [those polled] think that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics." In short, they found the very religious organizations they expected to connect them with the divine to be too materialistic.

Now that's an interesting charge, and one that perhaps poses the more apt question, what can we as religious organizations change about the way we operate to better fulfill the needs of those who ultimately become nones? How can we prevent the affiliated from becoming the unaffiliated in the first place--an ounce of prevention being worth more than a pound of cure.

I've heard from more than one Hindu youth that it's the politics that turns them away from the temple. Specifically, it is the interference of the elders with the temple's youth organizations and activities that rile them. I don't know if there is a similar issue in Christian, Muslim or Jewish places of worship, but I would guess there is. Youth don't want to be treated like children.

The BAPS Swaminarayan group, one of the largest Hindu organizations in the US, has a proactive policy of giving the youth ownership in the organization. By that, they mean giving them substantial responsibility as early as possible, and staying out of their way while they fulfill it. They also make sure that the youth leaders don't hold on to their posts

beyond their time, but age out of the programs in a systematic way to make room for new leadership to emerge.

My first answer to this question is to ask how do we prevent people from becoming nones in the first place? "Nones" aren't necessarily nonreligious. Those who were formally affiliated with a faith are telling us their religious needs were not met by the religious organizations they knew.

Second, we can nurture the nones by being relevant to their spiritual needs, by being true to our traditions, by earning their respect and love, by accepting their challenging ways and answering their impossible questions.

564 words