

Proselytization and Religious Freedom

By Swami Dayananda Saraswati at the World Religious after
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What is Religious Freedom ?

It is understood that as a human being I have a certain freedom to think, to believe or not, to act, to say. The freedom to practice one's religion is not negotiable. Even in a country, where I am not allowed to actively participate in an overt way in religious functions, rituals, or forms of prayer; no one can deny my freedom to my silent prayers or beliefs. In a free country, where there is freedom of speech and action, I have the freedom to practice my religion. The Human Rights UN charter has the article number 18, which talks about the right to change one's religion. If one wants to change one's religion, one must not be denied that freedom. One can change one's religion in private, and in community, and one should be able to profess one's religion. It is a good thing that we have in the Charter of this global body, a clause protecting religious freedom, but then this freedom, like any freedom, has certain responsibility. When exercising my freedom of speech, I have to make sure that my words do not incite or hurt others. No one enjoys a freedom without certain responsibilities.

Freedom to practice and preach one's religion is fine. What is the responsibility associated with the freedom on the part of religious preachers? If that responsibility were followed, we would still have the indigenous cultures of Egypt and South America. All the indigenous traditions that

were responsible for such colossal structures like the pyramids, which are not only in Egypt but also in Mexico, are no longer in existence. When I visited Egypt a few years ago, I asked the Egyptologist who was with me, if I could see the people belonging to the cultural tradition that made the pyramids, the Egyptologist replied that there was not a single person to be found. The culture was totally wiped out. The ancient Greek culture, the South American culture, and other indigenous cultures are all gone. All over the world, the indigenous traditions not given to expansionism through conversion programs are slowly disappearing.

A Live Culture is Protected by One Who Lives It

We first name the culture as "pagan," or "heathen," which amounts to saying that they have no right to exist. Once you call a dog a street dog, you have the right to kill it. We give names so we can do what we want without a dash of guilt. To think that one is right in perpetrating an act of destruction without guilt is acceptable on the part of humanity. Therefore, I have the right to be a Christian, a Muslim, a Parsi, or a Hindu. As it is, it is my responsibility to see that I do not destroy the Christian culture and religion, I cannot retain the culture and tradition unless I retain the Christian. You cannot protect Islam, without protecting a Muslim. To protect is to allow

the person to have his or her form of prayer, tradition, and culture. You cannot protect dharma, without protecting the dharmi.

A live culture or religion is protected by one protecting the one who lives it. A practitioner of Islam or Christianity has a right to practice and preach his or her religion. Whatever your rights, I will defend them at any forum, but this cannot give you a sanction to have a program of aggression and destruction. You are committing violence. The indigenous spiritual traditions were not aggressive by nature –they did not go about converting others. The number of Parsis is 100,000 globally. They have the right to live; the Jews have a right to live. These are endangered species, the danger to whose existence is by other human beings. The non-aggressive traditions are pitted against aggressive traditions, which have in their theologies certain mandates. In the name of religion, they are mandated to do what they are doing. In all conferences I have attended, I am asked to help with the committee that drafts resolutions. I always have asked for the term “mutual respect of among all religions” to be included as one of the resolutions, but always this mutual respect clause is struck down, and is replaced by “freedom of religion.” The freedom of religion is understood by some as the freedom to preach and convert with an evangelistic program. They feel they are mandated to convert, and they think they are saving souls. According to them, I am to be saved. I do not need to be saved. The situation is similar to the story of the person who went to a pond and started to pull out all the fishes from the pond and throw them on the grass. A passerby was shocked and exclaimed: “Hey, what are you doing?” The man replied, “I am trying to save these fishes from drowning.” Like this person, one can have the right to believe anything

one wants. You are committing violence through conversion. It is not a market share, or a propaganda war.

It is against my genes to convert, so it is important to safeguard those cultures not given to conversion, which are the losers at the hands of these traditions. The previous Pope visited India in 1999. I wrote him an open letter, in which I told him that India was the land in which Hinduism is the native religious culture, with a tapestry of ancient traditions. I asked that we please live in harmony with one another. The Pope made a public statement in which he said that in the first millennium they had planted the Cross in Europe, in the second millennium, they planted the Cross in North and South America, and in the third millennium, they were going to plant the Cross in Asia, as there were many souls “waiting to be harvested.” After this proclamation, missionaries have increased their activity, and millions are pumped into missionary activities in Asian countries. We saw evidence of this during the recent Tsunami, where the missionaries were fishing aggressively for converts in Tsunami waters. Whenever Hindus protest such activities, they are branded as fundamentalists. If I do not give you the freedom to convert me, you dub me as a fundamentalist. We do not need religion for perpetrating such atrocities.

Conversion is the Rankest form of Violence

The religious person is the core person. Even if you say that you are not religious, that is your religion. One plays many roles in the course of a lifetime –son, daughter, brother, sister, parent, etc. Each role comes with different scripts. I am a son to parents, and a parent to my son. Who is the person

that inhabits these roles? The basic person is one who is related to the whole, to the one called God or Allah. When confronted with the threat of conversion, that basic person is hurt, and the hurt is not shallow. It is a very deep hurt, when someone talks against that particular person, or his or her religion, or beliefs. It is rank violence. There are many shades of violence. For us, non-violence, ahimsa, is not just physical. Absence of all shades of violence, and destroying another culture is the rankest form of violence, and elicits anger. This is to be realized. In May 2006, the Vatican convened a meeting on the subject of conversion, as they are concerned with the increase in activities of neo-evangelical sects. At the same time as this meeting was taking place, the Indian ambassador was told that there was absence of religious freedom in India because a state had passed an anti conversion law banning forced conversions. They passed some resolutions against forcible conversions.

How are you going to convert without putting down the other's religion? In the internet, there was a document issued by the Vatican, coaching the clergy with regard to how the Hindus must be talked to. The document said that the Rsis prayed to the Lord thus: *asatoma sadgamaya, tamasoma jyotirgamaya, mrtyorma amrtam gamaya,*" which means, "Lead me from untruth to truth, Lead me from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge, and lead me from time-bound existence to freedom from time." Whoever wrote this quoted the the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad correctly, but the meaning was distorted to suit their proselytizing agenda. They translated this prayer as a testament to the fact that the Indian Rsis were groping in darkness, waiting to be saved. As an answer to this prayer alone, Christianity came into the world.

Ethics are not Mandates of God, they are Manifestations of God

For us, ends do not justify the means. Ethics are not mandated by God –they are another form of God. Therefore, we do not require to be told what to do so that we can enjoy some reward at the end. However noble the ends, the means alone make the end noble. Any form of conversion is rank violence against culture, tradition, family, and society. In India, there are congregational religion that can talk to the congregation about how to cast their vote. There are vote banks, and they can negotiate politics. Thus it is a big issue for Hindus who vote indiscriminately, regardless of their religious affiliation. Being what they are, they can never think on these lines, and therefore Hinduism suffers a damage. If the government of Egypt decides to have a housing development complex at the pyramid site, there would be a great hue and cry, as the pyramids are no longer the private property of the state of Egypt, but an international legacy of humankind. The Hindu culture, likewise, is unique, for whatever it is worth. It is a living culture that says that all is God. Space, time, and everything in space and time are non-separate from God. All here is Ishwara, God. Save Hinduism at least for its antique value. If we have problems, we will solve them, let us take care of them ourselves. We have something rich, beautiful and ancient. Let us have a mosaic of religions in the world, let everyone –indigenous Americans, indigenous Africans, the Romuvas— be left alone, so that we can enjoy one another as we are. We talk of saving endangered animals; let us preserve and enjoy the great indigenous cultures of the world, as each and every one of them is as sacred and valuable as Christianity and Islam.