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A Call For India's Rebirth  
Voice of India 1998



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## **A Hindu Call For Religious Pluralism**

From *Awaken Bharata: A Call For India's Rebirth*

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Hinduism is the largest pluralistic religion in the world. It teaches that there are many paths, many sages, and many holy books and that no religion can claim any exclusive or final representation of truth. This does not mean that Hinduism does not recognize a unity to truth. On the contrary, Hinduism recognizes a total and profound unity but one that is broad enough to allow for diversity and to integrate multiplicity, like the many leaves on a great banyan tree.

This Hindu pluralism has confused people coming from singularistic religious traditions, such as have dominated the Western world, who are baffled by the great diversity within Hinduism. It has caused them to look upon Hinduism as a collection of cults or sects rather than any consistent religious heritage. However if we look deeply into the many-sided vision of Hinduism we will discover that it has much wisdom to teach everyone. Today in the emerging global era we must learn to handle the great diversity of human beings and their often very different cultures. This requires a pluralistic vision in all aspects of life, from which religion, often the most important aspect of human culture, cannot be excluded.

Hinduism is built upon diversity and holds within itself an amazing, even bewildering, variety of teachers and teachings from what appear to be the most primitive forms to the most abstract spiritual philosophies and yogic practices. One could say that there are more religions inside of Hinduism than outside of it. Hinduism has more Gods and Goddesses, more scriptures, more saints, sages and *avatars* [divine incarnations], than any other religion in the world, perhaps more than all the other major religions put together. This is because Hinduism has sought to preserve all the main spiritual practices that developed in India over the past five thousand years. It has never sought to reduce itself to any one

teacher, book, faith or revelation. It has always remained open to new teachings and revelations on one hand, and yet has not cut itself off from older traditions on the other. It would be as if in the Western world today, along with the dominant religions of Christianity, Islam and Judaism, that the old Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Babylonian and Persian religions had been preserved, as well as an acceptance of newer teachings and religions.

We can contrast the Hindu view with that of dominant Western religions and their standard formula of one God, one prophet or savior and one holy book that has led them to promote the supremacy of their belief for everyone. Christianity and Islam, with few exceptions, have sought throughout history to convert the entire world to their faith, and to this end have often tried to discredit, if not suppress other traditions — a practice that still continues in various parts in the world. On the other hand, Hinduism has never tried to create any one center, one church, one pope, or one doctrine or to impose its views through any army or group of missionaries. It has sought to preserve diversity and emphasizes local application of the teachings.

In the dawning global age we can no longer claim that any one religion is the only truth for all humanity any more than we can claim that one language, culture or way of life is the best for all. We must have a broad enough view to recognize what is of value in the different peoples and cultures of the globe from so-called aborigines, who have a much deeper understanding of nature than modern people, to the great civilizations not only of Europe and the Middle East but of America, Africa and Asia, including those not built upon Biblical religious ideas.

Any great civilization, we must note, is a product of diversity. It is able to bring together many different views and practices in science, religion, art, and culture as well as embrace various racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups. It also has a long sense of history and can integrate within itself many different historical currents. A culture where everyone must have the same beliefs and follow the same practices is not a true culture and must deny the human spirit that always seeks to grow and express itself in a variety of ways.

### **Religious Pluralism and Unity of Religions**

Some modern Hindu teachers have stated that “all religions are one”, that they are all ultimately the same and all equally good. They look upon different religions as merely alternative ways to reach the same goal, as little more than different names for the same thing. This has caused them to mix different religions together, often with little discrimination, trying to be all things to all people. While their view may be motivated by a sincere effort to bring about religious harmony and world peace, it has led to many distortions. Above all it has gone against the pluralistic approach of the Hindu tradition.

Making all religions the same is a denial of pluralism and can breed another form of intolerance. Pluralism in any field does not mean that all alternatives are the same but that we do have different choices, which may not all be good or equal. Having pluralism in food, for example, means that we can choose from many different types of food. It does not mean that all food articles are of equal nutritional value or of the same taste.

This equating of all religions as equal and good makes it appear wrong for religions to disagree with one another, even if their views are contrary. It destroys discrimination in religion and makes people blur over different views of God, immortality, the goal of life, and the ways to achieve these. Rather than honoring diversity in religion, it attempts to reduce this diversity to a vague identity that no one can challenge. Rather than giving people a number of different choices in religion it tries to make all these choices appear to be the same or inconsequential. In eliminating choice it destroys freedom and inhibits inquiry and growth.

And on what grounds do we make all religions the same? Do we do it on the grounds of monotheism, the belief that there is only One God? This debars non-monotheistic religions like Buddhism or Taoism, as well as many native beliefs. Do we propose it on that all religions teach us to be good? Yet what is said to be good in one religion may not be good in another religion. Like any other human cultural phenomena religions are so diverse that if we try to reduce them to a common pattern, we will only have a few bones left over, not a real human being. Could we reduce art all over the world to a single standard of sameness without destroying its richness and

vitality? This attempt to make all religions the same is a continuation of the effort to stifle religious differences and prevent freedom in the religious realm.

What Hinduism really teaches is religious pluralism, not the need to make all religions the same, which is intolerant of religious differences that are often not at all minor or inconsequential. Religious pluralism, on the other hand, is tolerant of religious differences. It does not seek to reduce all religions to a common model. It lets their differences stand out as they are and does not seek to cover them over with a veil of unity. Pluralism says that it is fine for us to have different or even contrary views about religion and this does not have to be a problem. The important thing for us is to seek truth or God in the way that is most meaningful for us.

Pluralism in religions does not require that we reduce all religions to a common mold in which their distinctions disappear into an amorphous unity. It certainly doesn't mean that we have to practice all religions or bow down to all their leaders as great and holy. Pluralism in religions does not mean that we have to believe in or accept all religions as true, regardless of what they teach. Pluralism means freedom. There should be freedom in the pursuit of the spiritual life, even if it allows others to arrive at a different understanding of truth than what we ourselves honor. This means that we should not bar people from changing their religious beliefs, nor should we seek to impose religious beliefs upon people by force or propaganda. We should give people the space to discover the truth without our interference.

After all truth is the truth. It is not a fantasy that has to be protected. If we allow people the freedom to discover what is real they cannot avoid it. On the other hand, if we try to impose truth on people, what they arrive at will not be their own truth, their own discovery but a mere doctrine, label or fantasy. Truth is self-evident. The truth that fire burns does not require a religious sanction or political law to protect it. It doesn't need a priestly order or a police force to enforce it. We don't need to use persuasion to make people believe that fire burns. We need only let them work with fire and discover what it is. The same is true of all the great laws and powers of both nature and the Divine. Hindu pluralism does not deny the unity of truth or the fact of cosmic law but regards it as a matter of

self-discovery and self-knowledge, not the enforcement of a mere belief or opinion.

### **Pluralism and the Clash of Different Paths**

A pluralistic religious view accepts that there are many different religious paths. These paths have various degrees of differences between them, some perhaps minor, some perhaps major. Different paths will appeal to different individuals relative to their varying temperaments or levels of development, which are bound to be diverse and ever changing. Some of these paths may be good or noble, others may be naive or perhaps even despicable. Some may appeal to a low level of religious temperament, others may appeal to a high level of spiritual realization.

A pluralistic view does not seek to force these paths into any preconceived harmony or bar people from following paths that are not good or exalted. It does not attempt to police the paths, but rather to sustain the freedom that prevents any one path from imposing itself upon all as the final truth. In pluralism there is no final judgment on these different paths. Each person is allowed their own opinion of what they think is best. The freedom to follow a path is as important as what any path may be.

A pluralistic view does not bar either disagreement or debate between different paths. It allows people to critically examine and choose between different paths to find out what is valid for them on an individual basis. In fact a pluralistic view encourages free and critical discussion and does not place religions, like sovereign nations, outside the sphere of examination as if anything called a religious faith could no longer be questioned. Pluralism allows the clash of paths, not as an outer battle, but as part of a spirit of free examination. This clash of paths is as important as any unity between paths for helping the human spirit grow. We grow spiritually more from dialogue with those who disagree with us than from having our beliefs unquestioningly affirmed by others. This requires that we are willing to have our own views scrutinized as well as being willing to examine those of others.

Yet though creating a forum for possible debate, a pluralistic tradition does not seek to finalize that debate or even insist that people partake in it. Pluralism asks that we maintain tolerance in

spite of such disagreements and debates. It means that we should accept religious differences as a fact of life, like other natural variations, even if all such variations are not entirely wholesome. Pluralism not only does not require that we make all religions the same, it doesn't even require that we like all religions. It allows us to have our own judgments, however narrow or wide these may be, as long as we allow others the same freedom of opinion.

Nor does pluralism try to reduce one religion to another. It doesn't say that Buddhism has to become a form of Hinduism regardless of what Buddhists might think, that Christianity and Judaism must reunite, that all religions have to become sects of some greater religion, or similar attempts to equate or unite different religions. Nor does it say it is wrong for people to have such ideas. Pluralism allows different religious views to exist including those which are synthetic and those which are not. It allows religions to come together if they wish but to stay apart if that is their inclination as well. It recognizes that differences in religion can contribute to the beautiful diversity of life and don't have to be a problem.

Pluralism therefore does not mean that a person cannot be strong in their particular path. Pluralism does not mean that a Hindu cannot be a staunch Hindu but has to be a Christian and Muslim as well in order to be tolerant. Similarly it does not mean that a Christian cannot be dedicated to his faith as the highest. It means that however much we may think our path is the best for us that we must allow other people a similar dedication to their own path, even if it is contrary to ours, including the freedom not to follow any path at all.

Pluralism means that we must make the freedom of religious practice a more important principle than the supremacy of any particular belief. We should not only respect but uphold our neighbor's right to follow another religion, even if we think that it is contrary to the real truth. This means that missionary efforts to convert others by persuasion and intimidation should come to an end and be replaced by a free examination of religious issues with honesty, courtesy and friendliness.

To arrive at truth in any field we need freedom. Freedom creates diversity. Both freedom and diversity allow for creative growth and inquiry. In this development truth can be arrived at as an individual



experience, rather than imposed upon the resistant individual as a collective belief which makes it little more than a blind emotion.

Human beings naturally have their different temperaments, inclinations and states of development. We should have learned after so much bloodshed throughout history that to try to impose one way of thought on all people is an error. It is not only not spiritual, it goes against nature and life which are filled with every sort of variation. Should we insist that the wind only blow in one way or that plants only grow on one type of soil?

Of course groups that deny freedom and diversity to sustain their power and control may not be happy with demands for pluralism. They may prefer to have their own territory where no competition is allowed. But their period of rule is coming to an end. Even singularistic religious traditions will soon have to recognize the validity of pluralism, including granting a new respect for the very pluralistic and so-called polytheistic traditions, like Hinduism, that out of intolerance they have not only failed to understand but have oppressed.

In Hinduism the ultimate goal of life is freedom or liberation, *Moksha*. This is not an outer freedom to get what we want but an inner freedom to go beyond all external limitations. This freedom is the real unity behind the diversity of Hinduism and the key to its many sides. Hindu pluralism therefore is not the denial of unity but the affirmation of real unity which transcends outer differences. True unity is built upon freedom, not conformity, and is a state of the heart or inner consciousness, not an outer condition of labels and slogans. While the West has emphasized external freedom, which has given it a sense of pluralism in the outer aspects of life, Hinduism teaches inner freedom, without which outer freedom has no real meaning. This inner freedom allows for the full flowering of the soul so that our entire human potential, which is ultimately one of spiritual aspiration, can manifest and bring truth and beauty to our entire existence.



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