

Satsang with Sri Swami Tattvavidananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
The Essentials of Hindu Dharma - 1

Question

Swamiji, you are a Hindu monk, I would like to begin by asking you what is Hinduism?

Answer

Hinduism is not a religion in the strict sense of the term. It is more a way of life, what we call a Dharma, rather than a religion. It is a very ancient culture that encompasses in its fold many modes of worship. It amounts to saying that Hinduism includes many religions within its fold. Hinduism is an all-embracing culture with a wonderful catholicity - exceptionally wide-ranging - in its approach and outlook. Therefore, I would like to describe Hinduism as a Dharma, a way of life and a culture rather than as a mere religion.

Question

Swamiji, if it is not a religion, then when did it start? Most of the religions of the world have been started by a personality, isn't that the case in Hinduism too?

Answer

We say that Hinduism is a *Sanātana Dharma*. By that we mean it is a way of life since time immemorial, since the hoary past. In the case of a religion that is started by a person, because it is started by a person, such a religion has a date of birth. For example, Buddhism was started by Lord Buddha. Hinduism has no date of birth or it has no beginning as such. All the great saints or incarnations that are worshipped in Hinduism were actually born into this Dharma. They were not the initiators of this Dharma. Therefore, we describe Hinduism as a *Sanātana Dharma*, and cannot really fix a particular date for its beginning.

Question

Swamiji, is there some basic text, for example, the Bible in Christianity that defines the Hindu religion?

Answer

In Hinduism, we have a galaxy of saints, prophets and incarnations of God. We have also inherited a large collection of books. And thus if I have to name a book which represents the essence of Hinduism, it becomes a daunting task. Despite this difficulty, if I am pressed to point out one and only one book, then I would have to say that the book of the *Bhagvad Gita* represents the essence of Hinduism.

Question

One of the questions that people have, or a common impression that people have, about Hinduism is that the Hindus worship multiple Gods. In fact, Hindus worship idols. Is there any truth in that?

Answer

To say that in Hinduism many Gods are worshipped is a misconception. Such a statement originates from a wrong understanding of Hindu Dharma. I would not even use the word monotheism - worshipping one God – to describe Hinduism. It is something much more than that. In Hindu Dharma, there are not multiple Gods. One may argue that there is not even one God. The true essence of Hinduism is that there is only **the God**. Our understanding based on the Vedanta philosophy of Hindu Dharma is that this entire universe is not a special creation of an external God. Furthermore, we do not look at God as someone residing somewhere in heaven, and having created this universe from that vantage position is now controlling it as an outside entity. We do not at all look at it that way. The concept of having many Gods, in my opinion, is rather ridiculous. It is not possible to have many gods. So, there is only one God, and to put it even more

precisely, there is only the God. This entire universe happens to be not a special creation of the God as I mentioned before, but is itself a manifestation of the God. Therefore, I prefer to use the word Godhead, rather than the God. The connotation implicit in the word God is not acceptable to people following the Hindu philosophy. Therefore the Godhead, which is called the *Para Brahman*, is used to describe the non-dual Existence Absolute which also happens to be limitless Awareness. The Godhead has manifested in the time space framework as the plurality of this entire universe. And therefore, every particle of this universe happens to be the manifestation of that Lord or that Godhead. Once one understands Hinduism in this fashion, one clearly sees the fallacy in the belief that the Hindus worship many gods.

Question

And the idols therefore represent succinctly a symbol of the assimilated truth.....

Answer

Yes, you're right. Many people say that Hindus worship idols. I would like to differ with that kind of a description. We do not worship idols; we worship Īśvara, which is the Godhead. Indeed, we worship the Godhead called Īśvara in our Dharma. The Godhead, Īśvara, has essentially no form. Īśvara is formless, and not limited in time and space. Hence Īśvara can manifest in the framework of time/space as any form and every form. But the human mind being what it is, functions within the framework of space and time. It can therefore relate to forms and names alone. And hence at least in the beginning of religiosity and also spirituality, the human being needs a form to relate to Īśvara. And he can choose any form because there is no superiority of one form over another. Since every form is the manifestation of the formless Lord, the choice is left to the devotee. The devotee can choose any one of the myriad of forms available. He can then worship or relate to Īśvara, he can propitiate the Godhead through that form.

When the devotee offers a flower to an idol, it appears to an outsider that he is offering a flower to a piece of stone. But the devotee has a clear understanding that he is offering a flower to Īśvara. And the idol helps him to gain the *Bhagvad ākāra* or the particular mind modification, in which the mind is filled with the *bhāvana* or the devotion to Īśvara. Therefore the form serves a very limited purpose of fixing Īśvara in the mind. Afterwards it is the mind which relates to the Īśvara as it understands Him. Therefore the idol is simply an intermediary step even while one offers flowers to the idol. In reality, nobody worships idols; nobody offers flowers to a piece of stone. The devotee's offering is to Īśvara, fixed in his mind as he relates to this particular form presented before him by the idol. In a nutshell, idol is nothing but a symbol of Īśvara. If you allow me to give you an example, a young man in love keeps a passport size photograph of his beloved in his wallet. He smiles when he takes out and looks at the photograph with love and affection. When he relates to that photograph it is clear that he is not relating to a piece of paper but he is relating to his beloved who is brought into his mind by this photograph. An idol serves a similar purpose for the devotee¹.

¹ This transcript is based on Swami Tattvavidanandaji's TV interview in California with Mr. Vijay Kapoor. Transcribed and edited by Mohan Bhujle.