

Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana:
The Pub with no Beer, and the Temple without God:
A cautionary tale

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Ashutosh Vardhana witnessed the visit of a group of Christian and Muslim secondary school students to a Hindu temple. The Maharaj (Hindu priest) of the temple was on annual loan from India, was fluent in Sanskrit and Gujurati but did not speak English. A temple administrator was therefore tasked to guide the students and answer their questions. The result was a disaster.

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A cautionary tale

INTRODUCTION

Let this mandir be forever forgotten: let it be in Leicester, or London, where there are so many Hindu temples that it cannot be identified since this story is not directed at a helpless individual such as Mr Nitwit, but wants to castigate a matter of principle, which must be attacked wherever it occurs and whosoever is responsible.

Nitwit certainly is not responsible, he cannot help being born like this, being ignorant, knowing nothing about Hinduism, not being a theologian or being motivated by the desire to puzzle his audience and to show off fragments of half-digested asinine knowledge.

Anyway he is a junior administrator in this here mandir, which means that he can read and write, file, answer the phone and operate the photocopier - no doubt superbly.

His only qualification for giving 'talks' about Hinduism to non-Hindu (mainly Christian) visitors to the mandir is that he has a Hindu name and that his parents are practising Hindus.

His other qualification may be that, in the eyes of his superiors, the non-Hindu visitors to the temple haven't got a clue and can therefore be treated with contempt, as happened on the occasion I am about to describe.

Mr Nitwit has read a few bad books about Hinduism written by smart-ass authors. He doesn't even understand these.

MISINFORMATION ABOUT HINDUISM

The most recent display of Mr Nitwit's ignorance and incompetence was given in September 2004 when about 50 Christians, 10 Hindus, two Muslims and two Jews visited his Leicester mandir.

He started his talk about Hinduism by explaining that the term Hindu is a name given to Hindus by non-Hindus, that it derived from the Indus valley. So far so good. But he then rambled on for eight minutes about all the people from all over the world who immigrated into ancient India from a great many different countries and cultures. So far not a word had been said about modern Hindus, in which the visitors were really interested, and not a word about the Hindu way of life.

'Are there any further questions about the Hindu way of life?' asked Mr Nitwit.

'You have been speaking for ten minutes about who is **not** a Hindu. You have said nothing about the Hindu way of life. Please tell us about the Hindu way of life, perhaps then we can ask some questions.'

DISTORTIONS OF HINDU ETHICS AND LIFESTYLE

Nitwit did not explain what is typical about the Hindu way of life:

- that marriage is sacred,
- that vegetarianism is the ideal to which everybody aspires even if not everybody and not every caste and every region manages to reach this ideal.

Instead, Mr Nitwit went out of his way to emphasise the exceptions, the deviations. He said that there is absolutely nothing restraining a Hindu from doing absolutely anything he likes:

- Hindus do not need to get married,
- it makes no difference whether a Hindu is a vegetarian or not
- Hindus smoke
- Hindus get drunk,

in brief, they are just as immoral as everyone else in this country, but somewhat worse, inasmuch as they don't even have any ideals to aspire to. Our English visitors will have been gratified.

A gori (white woman) felt compelled to ask: 'Do Hindus have something similar to the ten commandments, and what are they?'

An important and easy question if ever there was one. One doesn't have to be a theologian to answer it. Hindu ethics and its realism, cogency and systematicity is one of the greatest things about Hinduism.

Nitwit could not answer this question. Another visitor tried to help him by reminding him of the five yamas and the five niyamas listed in the Yoga Sutras.

1. Ahimsa: non-violence (do not harm any human being, not even any animal, any plant, ...)
2. Satya: truthfulness
3. Asteya: non-stealing (do not take what is not happily given to you)
4. Brahmacharya: Chastity, control of the senses
5. Aparigraha: Abstention from greed
6. Saucha: Purity and cleanliness
7. Santosha: Contentment
8. Tapas: Practice of austerities, fasting, ...
9. Swadyaya: Self-education, study
10. Ishwara Pranidhana: Surrender to God

These Hindu commandments start with Ahimsa (non-violence). The duty of ahimsa overrides all other duties, including alleged duties towards God. You must not kill in the name of god, as some terrorists believe, and as some Christians have believed in past centuries.

This contrasts strongly with the Christian commandments, which start with the duties towards God and especially with the duty not to worship any God except the one Christian (or Muslim) God, and have therefore over the centuries been a great recipe for, and justification of, violence.

More about this in connection with the war against terrorism on the web:

http://www.tudo.co.uk/journalism_ashutosh_vardhana/shell/contents/doubt/doubt_english/doubt_en.html

Create up-to-date link to "A call to doubt"

A great opportunity missed to say something of significance to the non-Hindu visitors.

Mr Nitwit could also have quoted the Gita which says that there are three sins which are the worst of all and lead straight to hell: desire, fear and anger.

the sage who has controlled the senses, mind and understanding, who is intent on liberation, who has cast away **desire, fear and anger**, he is ever freed. (Gita 5:28)

The gateway of this hell leading to the ruin of the soul is threefold, **lust, anger and greed**. Therefore these three, one should abandon. (Gita 16:21)

This is a list which is significantly different from, and much more practical than, the Christian concept of sin, which are punished by God because they are offences against God, whereas the Hindu sins have their own punishment inherent in them as a natural and inevitable consequence. Hindu sins need not be punished by god, the sinner punishes (= harms) himself.

THE HINDU SUNDAYS

An English visitor asked whether Hindus have a special day, like the Christian Sunday and the Muslim Friday. Nitwit said they haven't. But did he not know that different days of the week are dedicated to different devatas? Devotees of Lord Shiva and Durga Devi fast on Mondays, devotees of Lord Krishna and Lord Rama on Wednesdays, and so on for all days of the week. Every day of the week is sacred, and every day of the year is a festival.

SOME CUSTOMARY FASTING DAYS

- Sunday: Lord Surya
- Monday: Lord Shiva
- Tuesday: Durga Devi, Kali Devi, Lord Hanuman, Lord Ganesha
- Thursday: Lord Vishnu, Krishna, Rama
- Saturday: Lord Hanuman

The customary days for fasting vary from different parts of India; Gujarati customs are different from Bengali or South Indian (Kerala, Uttar Pradesh) ones.

FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF HINDU BELIEF IGNORED

Why did Mr Nitwit not speak about the fundamental ideas of Hinduism: karma, reincarnation, and moksha?

Why did he not explain the relationship between Brahman, the Absolute, and the Atman, the Self in every sentient being?

Why did he not explain the relationship between Brahman, the Absolute, and Ishwara, the personal god, and its manifestations in innumerable personal devatas (deities)?

THE GITA DISTORTED

Mr Nitwit quoted a beautiful verse from the Gita (chapter 2):

'Weapons do not cleave this Self, fire cannot burn it, water cannot wet it, wind cannot dry it. It remains unmoved. It cannot be slain. It does not change. It is the same forever.'

This is something that, without explanation, no non-Hindu could possibly understand.

If our visitors had learnt nothing during this afternoon but a glimpse of the concept of the Atman, of the Self, their visit would not have been wasted.

Mr Nitwit, however, intent only on showing off, did not make the slightest attempt to explain what is meant by 'the Self'. The Self is the Atman, the divine in every sentient being, that which survives when the body dies, and that will ultimately be liberated. Ko ham (who am I)? I am the Self, I am the Atman. A hugely important Hindu concept.

Instead, this halfwit, eager to impress, stated that this verse obviously fitted the definition of an imaginary number, namely the square root of minus one (or some similar postmodernist nonsense). This is something that Nitwit does not remotely understand, and yet he dares spout it at his audience?

NO INFORMATION ABOUT THE IMAGES

All he had to say about the images of the devatas was that they were profound and had stories with deep meaning associated with them, but he did not give a single example of such a story and of its significance.

What the visitor was left with was a gross distortion of Hinduism, but perhaps confirming all the worst prejudices they had previously held:

1. an exotic religion ('exotic' = mad, confused, impossible to understand, but romantically attractive)
2. people praying to animals,
3. gods and heroes in strange clothes,
4. statues (murtis) which are treated like human beings, have a siesta and must not be disturbed (with no explanation of why this is done),
5. idolaters,
6. no priest available who speaks English and who can give intelligible explanations (why is it not possible to find a priest in this country?),
7. the best person who can be found to talk about Hinduism is a half-wit who is entirely ignorant of his own religion.

Conclusion of the visitors: Thank God that I am white, English and a Christian and was not brought up with this nonsense and this general ignorance and immorality - as the Victorian missionaries (peace be upon them) proclaimed long ago.

OWN GOALS THROUGH INSTITUTIONALISED IGNORANCE

As I said above, I do not blame Mr Nitwit. I blame his superiors who are more concerned with lottery money, bricks and mortar, showing off the splendour of a building (bereft of God), with classes and communal events which have nothing to do with Hinduism, nothing to do with religion, and who are unable to see what harm they and Mr Nitwit does to the image of Hinduism in this country.

*****IF***** our youngsters are educated by similarly ignorant people, it is no wonder that they turn away from the religion of their parents and become materialists and atheists. I have heard it said often enough: 'No intelligent and competent youngster has time for religion.' These are our bright computer programmers and successful business-women. How many of them, after such education, have time for Saraswati and Lakshmi Devi? They leave that to their parents.

This is, of course, not a one-off experience. This temple is regularly visited by school classes from the region who want to learn about Hinduism. If Mr Nitwit offers his grotesque distortions of Hinduism to all of these, he systematically undermines the standing of Hinduism in this country.

After all, Christians already have the prejudice that Hindus are ignorant and need to be enlightened by them. Mr Nitwit confirms this prejudice.

LACK OF HOSPITALITY

Now comes the miserable hospitality which was offered. The Gita has something to say about hospitality and the spirit in which it ought to be given (in the chapter about the three gunas, chapter 17).

Three Kinds of Gifts

(20) That gift which is made to one from whom no return is expected, with the feeling that it is one's duty to give and which is given in proper place and time and to a worthy person, that gift is held to be "good."

(21) But that gift which is made with the hope of a return or with the expectation of future gain or when it hurts to give, is held to be "passionate".

(22) And that gift which is made at a wrong place or time or to an unworthy person, without proper ceremony or with contempt, that is declared to be "dull". (Gita, 17:20-222)

If I am invited to visit a family, I expect the family to be at home and to be given freshly made tea, with a welcoming smile. We do not expect to be led into a cold and empty house, with the family absent and not even the caterer present.

In this mandir (be it in Leicester or in London), the temple authorities had not arranged for the local devotees to be there to mingle with their guests - WHICH THEY SHOULD HAVE DONE. We did not meet a single one of them.

If the Interfaith Council in Leicester and London wants to promote understanding between religions, then the most important thing is that members of these religions meet each other, not that they learn

- how smart the Hindu community is in getting lottery money and putting up a god-free building
- how many Indian artists were employed
- or that the mandir provides services which any atheist could provide (what does that have to do with Hinduism?)

In this respect, like in every other, this excursion was a total failure, quite apart from the way in which it offended against the spirit of the Gita. The Gita says that a present (e.g. food) has to be given in the right spirit.

Is it not a wonderful Hindu custom that presents are given with both hands to indicate that they are given generously and come from the heart. On this occasion the food was not even given with one hand.

In this godless mandir (a mandir in whose walls Ishwara does not reside), the guests were ushered into a dismal room that looked worse than a railway waiting room or a dentist's waiting room. There they could help themselves to some stale pre-packed Indian sweets and savouries which had been banged on a table. No love, no spirit was in it. God may be everywhere, but she was not in that room. Why the heck didn't we go to Macdonald's!

So much for Hindu hospitality.

Our Muslim friends (peace be upon them) do these things so much better and with so much more heart and sincerity. When we visited their mosque a year ago, there they were all standing outside the mosque, with their flowing beards, to welcome their Hindu and Christian guests. Their food was freshly prepared, we sat on the floor and ate it together with them, an deeply symbolic act, an act of communion, like the breaking of the bread, for if you eat together with a person you may not attack him.

How meaningless and embarrassing by comparison was the farce in the Hindu temple.

If the shoe fits, put it in your pipe and smoke it.

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