

DANAM CONFERENCE 2005

SESSION 2

Theme: Who is a Hindu?

Jeffrey D. Long, Elizabethtown College, *Presiding*

ABSTRACTS

Ramdas Lamb, University of Hawaii at Manoa
Casteless Hinduism: A View from Top and Bottom

It has long been an assumption of many Hindus and non-Hindus alike that without the caste system, the religion could not exist. The varnashramadharma system, the brahmanically defined socio-religious codification of hierarchy and goals, is said to be integral in the foundation of Hindu society. Without its foundation, the edifice will fall. However, there are several fundamental problems and shortcomings with this assumption, and they can be best seen in viewing two aspects of the Hindu world, the ascetics and the Untouchables, or Harijans. Members of both groups, for the most part, live outside the brahmanical edifice, the former by choice, the latter by prohibition. As a result, each has, in varying degrees, learned to function beyond the facade and fetters of the caste system. Additionally, with the creation of the Hindu Diaspora in the nineteenth century, another non-caste dimension was added to Hinduism, and its successes have been, in large part, due to its rejection of caste in forming Hindu identity. The focus of my paper, then, will be on these groups and how they define who is a Hindu and how this effects their understanding and practice of the tradition.

Pravrajika Gayatriprana, Vedanta Society
Hinduism and Universal Religion: Are Western Vedantists Hindus?

This paper shall argue from the premise that Vedanta is a universal philosophy, not restricted to any particular cultural location. Hinduism, on the other hand, is a tradition associated with the culture and people of India. There are therefore Hindu Vedantists and non-Hindu Vedantists. Specifically, this paper is concerned with the development of a specifically Western Vedanta: a Vedanta that Westerners can embrace wholeheartedly, coming from the background of Western cultural assumptions.

Frank G. Morales, Center for the Study of Religion and Civilization, Wisconsin
The Epistemological Foundations of Religious Affiliation in the Context of Hindu Identity

This paper will show that what distinguishes one religion from another is what the religion has chosen to accept as its source of revelatory authority. And further, what revelatory authority an individual accepts determines what their religion is. What makes a person a follower of x religion, in other words, is determined by whether the person accepts the scripture of x religion as authoritative. Thus, what has traditionally and historically differentiated a "Hindu" from a non-"Hindu" has been whether or not said individual accepts the authority of the Veda (in the broad sense of the Hindu scriptural canon) or not. Thus, the question of what constitutes a Hindu today is answered by the same criterion.

Rita D. Sherma, Binghamton University
The Gifts of Exile: On Being a Hindu in a Global Era

A Hindu is frequently thought of as a person of Indian descent who has been born into a Hindu family. Yet Hinduism is no longer solely a regional faith confined to the cultural mores and geographical boundaries of India. Many factors have thrust the Hindu ethos into the global arena over the last several decades—including the international proliferation of the Hindu Diaspora, the influence of the Diaspora on transnational Hindu organizations, guru-based movements, and the pervasive impact of Hindu thought on contemporary Western spirituality, consciousness movements, alternative medicine and New Age ideology. This paper argues that it is therefore not accurate to define Hinduism in a way that prioritizes the "Hindu way of life," nor is it just, as it effectively disenfranchises a significant number of non-Asian Hindus and Hindus born in the Diaspora.

Pandita Indrani, Arya Pratinidhi Sabha America
How the Arya Samaj Remained Hindu while Challenging Orthodoxy

This paper looks at the impact of the Arya Samaj on the socio-religious life of India, and how its founder, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, reclaimed the ancient identity of Hindus, while operating within the contemporary Hindu identity. In the context of political struggle from foreign rule, modernization, and the Abrahamic theology of monotheism, Swamiji, laid down 10 rules for guiding the moral community of Arya Samaj. He stressed the need for rationality. He reclaimed identities like the "Arya" (noble person), "Vedic," "Sathya Sanatana Dharma," "Vaidika Dharma," and the greeting of "Namaste." This paper also looks at how Swamiji de-linked social ills from religious sanction, started an infrastructure for educating Hindus in their ancient culture, met the challenge of conversion, uplifted the status of women, the downtrodden, and so on. In looking at the impact of the Arya Samaj on the Hindu identity, this paper will summarize their revolutionary work in re-integrating Hindus who had converted for one reason or the other, and their position in inducting non-Hindus, both Indian and non-Indian, into the Samaj.