

Is Swaroopanand A Hindu?

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The oldest surviving religion in the world is, arguably, the Sanatan Dharma, now popularly called Hinduism. Its offshoots are Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, all of which share common Vedic roots and have a similar view of Divinity. What marks out the Sanatan from the revealed religions with Semitic origins, Judaism, Christianity and Islam is that it is a totally inclusive religion in which there is no concept of “the other”. The revealed religions, on the other hand, have a Book, the Old Testament of the Bible for the Jews, the Old and New Testaments for the Christians and the Koran for the Muslims, which contains the only, the eternal truth which may not be questioned. Anyone who does not believe in the Book is outside the pale and every non-believer is denied salvation in perpetuity. The Sanatan, on the other hand, holds that everyone has a right to ‘moksha’ or salvation and unlimited chances will be given to redeem oneself through birth and rebirth. Redemption is through karma and dharma, or pure thought, not through a professed faith. In fact Sanskrit, the language of the Vedas, has no equivalent of religion and, therefore, your faith is as good as mine.

A Semitic religion can be dogmatic because the Book is the source of dogma. It can, therefore, be judgemental between believer and heretic. Fatwas, Papal Bulls, excommunication are hallmarks of revealed religions. But the Sanatan has no Book, it has no dogma, it has to tolerate different streams of thought because there is no absolute, divinely ordained, one and only truth. The Sanatan encourages dissent, debate, even denunciation, but it does not allow anyone to be judgemental, dividing society between ‘momin and “kafir”. Tolerance rather than bigotry is the hallmark of Hinduism. Or is it?

When Brahmanical ritual and orthodoxy overwhelmed Hinduism there was the birth of Buddhism, a faith liberal in thought, wedded to ‘ahimsa’, which attracted kings like Ashok and Brahmanical orthodoxy beat a retreat. The reform came from within the Hindu fold and was not an alien superimposition, which shows the innate resilience of a religion which has self-corrective capabilities. Then came Adi Sankara, whose philosophy of “advaita”, or the indivisible, revived Hinduism to such an extent that Buddhism virtually disappeared from the land of its birth. It is to one of Adi Sankara’s four ‘maths’, to wit Dwarka, that Swaroopanand of Gotegaon became heir.

Swaroopanand has always been politically active and during the previous regime he was often referred to as “Sarkari Sankaracharya”. In the process he sometimes forgets that he is neither kazi nor maulvi and that the issue of diktats, edicts and fatwas is not within his powers. As heir to Sanatan’s greatest reformer, the Adi Sankara and of Vivekanand and Dayanand Saraswati, Swaroopanand is required to promote the inclusiveness, the tolerance, the liberalism of the Sanatan, not to be judgemental and condemnatory of others. Unfortunately he has both judged and condemned, the target being Sai Baba of Sirdi. Swaroopanand has pronounced him not to be God, has condemned his worship, ordered Hindus to shun the Sai Baba, not to pray to him and certainly not to make to him any offering. According to Swaroopanand the Sai Baba was a Muslim mendicant and to worship him was to commit heresy.

The origin of the Sai Baba of Sirdi is somewhat obscure. Some refer to him as a Muslim faqir, others as a Hindu saint from the lower caste, but all recognise that he was a man of great simplicity, who never promoted himself and who only gave a message of love, brotherhood and peace. He never referred to himself as having any qualities of divinity, he performed no miracles, he built no math or temple, he asked for no offerings and during his lifetime he continued to stress the need for universal brotherhood. The sage nearest to him in these

qualities that I can think of was Kabir, who lived four centuries earlier. I am no believer in ritual, I attribute no divinity to any living individual, but I am deeply impressed by the folksy philosophy of Kabir. Those who follow the Sai Baba say that he had the same earthy commonsense about him and this marked him out from others who claim sainthood. Anyway, the question here is not whether the Sai Baba had achieved the level of a saint. The question rather is that his philosophy has attracted ever increasing numbers of followers to an extent where today he is worshipped almost like a God. That does not make him the Parmatma but for those who believe in him he seems to have achieved a status in which he is the instrument through which one can reach Godhead. In Islam and Christianity this would tantamount to heresy and as such be liable to religious punishment. But in the Sanatan Dharma, that is Hinduism there is no concept of heresy and a person who is different does not thereby become a heretic. Even excommunication is really a matter of expulsion from the caste because a Hindu cannot be expelled from his religion. Excommunication for heresy, therefore, is an entirely Jewish, Christian, or Muslim concept. This point is made because Swaroopanand has virtually accused Sai Baba of heresy and called for what amounts to excommunication of those who follow Sai Baba.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad has, in the name of protecting the Hindu faith, tried to make it rigid and cast it in a mould which tends to make it an exclusive religion. But how can a religion which has evolved over millennia through the thoughts expressed in the four Vedas, themselves a collection of the wisdom of sages, poets, philosophers and the observers of nature, be cast into a mould of orthodoxy? The Chambers Twenty-first Century Dictionary defines ‘orthodoxy’ as “believing in, living according to or conforming to established or generally accepted opinions, especially in religion or morals”. The word ‘bigot’ is defined by the same dictionary as “someone who is persistently prejudiced, especially about religion or politics and refuses to tolerate the opinions of others” Bigotry is a product of orthodoxy. But Hinduism cannot be orthodox because it does not have one single set of immutable beliefs. Therefore, it has to be the opposite of orthodoxy and bigotry, that is, liberal and tolerant. The campaign launched by Swaroopanand against Sai Baba is neither liberal nor tolerant. This makes one wonder whether Swaroopanand is at all a Hindu, leave alone heir to the Adi Sankara. One uncharitable comment is that with the growing popularity of the Sai cult the offerings made at Sirdi are much greater than those made at Gotegaon or Dwarka. Swaroopanand has condemned the making of such offerings at Sirdi. Is it then a case of jealousy about the direction in which the money is flowing rather than a matter relating to fundamentals of religion?
