

# KUMBHAMELA 2025

## OR THE FESTIVAL OF ENCOUNTERS

BY VIGYANANAND (DR JACQUES VIGNE)

The Mahakumbhamela is the largest pilgrimage in the world, with around 450 million pilgrims expected according to official sources. In the traditional explanation, the Kumbhamela is linked to taking a bath at the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna on the right day at the right time, and this confers what is known as *krama murti*, progressive liberation, i.e. the fact that after death, you will continue to work on the subtle planes to progress, without having to be reincarnated. We went to the Kumbhamela with about ten French people, accompanied by an Indian travel agent and guide friend, who was a great help in getting us out of all sorts of problematic situations during our stay there.

From the yogic point of view, bathing in the *Sangam*, the confluence corresponds to meditation on the 3<sup>rd</sup> eye: the Ganges represents *ida*, the left channel, the Yamouna represents *pingala*, the right channel, and the Saraswati, the secret river symbolizes *sushumna*, the central axis. This one is discreet, secret, because it is not easy to awaken; it usually is once we have stabilized the lateral channels which are easier to perceive—as are the Ganges and the Yamuna.

A more material interpretation of the confluence of this Kumbhamela is that it is the confluence of two rivers, that of the teachers and that of the taught. At that point, teaching can take place under the right conditions. It's these encounters between teachers and taught that we'll be talking about in this article, in particular those we had with the small group of French people I accompanied as a meditation teacher. If you're interested in mathematics, you could calculate the combinatorics of a group of 400 or 450 million people where everyone can meet everyone else: that would be an astronomical figure, hard to imagine. Behind all this, the real desirable encounter is with oneself, with one's own Self, peaceful and luminous, beyond all the chaotic chaos of the mind. Mâ Anandamayî compared the Kumbhamela to the flag of Hinduism: in fact, within a radius of about 20 km, you can find almost all the schools of this faith. Here you can

verify what his French disciple, Vijayananda, who was also my teacher for 25 years, said: "Wherever devotion is sincere, it's the same".

The founding story of the Kumbhamela is the story of a vase of the nectar of immortality that the gods and demons were fighting over, which was hastily carried up into the sky and four drops of which fell in the four directions. This gave rise to the four sites of the Kumbhamelas, Hardwar, Prayagraj, Nashik and Ujjain. From a yogic point of view, this can be compared to the Buddha's meditations on the four Immeasurable, which Patanjali reiterated in his sutras, and which are recommended to be done in the four directions of space. When compassion, empathic joy and benevolence join equanimity to occupy all space, they manifest both their true nature and their true power. It reminds us also of this strange custom of the Digvijay Yatra of Vedic times: when a horse was freed by a king after a big sacrifice, all the places where he ran had to become the property of the king).

It is said that this Kumbhamela is particularly great, because it returns after 144 years due to the alignment of the stars. Let's take this with a grain of salt, because in 2013, at the same Mahakumbhamela, I heard exactly the same thing... By the way, Kumbhamela is criticized for being too gigantic, too commercial, and too ritualistic. Of course, this is not untrue, but the outer side of religion represents the bark of the tree, inert but still protecting the sap that rises within.

Coming regularly to the Kumbhamela is also a way of finding yourself in time and taking stock of your life. As far as I'm concerned, I've been to four Kumbhamelas in Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad), in 1989, 2001 and 2013, as well as the one I'm attending now. In 2013, I took part in a documentary by Rebecca Boulanger and Philippe Charlier for Arte *Enquête d'ailleurs, le bain de l'immortalité*, which can be viewed free of charge on the Internet.<sup>ii</sup> In this 26-minute film, I explained Hinduism and its traditions as they appear during the Kumbhamela. The structure of the great pilgrimage of 2013 and 2025 has not changed, but the estimated number of participants has increased considerably if we are to believe the figures in the press: around 30 million pilgrims in 2013, over 450 million expected in 2025, according to official figures. As I write these lines on 6 February, 420 million have already come<sup>iii</sup>, although some estimates may be much lower. In fact, 450 million would represent one third of India, and wherever I go, I don't see one third of the village or of the town area went to the event.

In the Kumbhamela tradition up until around 1950, religious dignitaries rode in processions on elephants. This was a symbol of royal power, but also of spiritual advancement. For example, in Sri Lanka's main pilgrimage, *Perahera*, which takes place every August in Kandy, the former capital of the Ceylonese kings, there is an impressive parade of elephants, accompanied by groups of musicians and dancers. The largest, which stands majestically in the middle of the queue, carries the relics of a disciple of the Buddha, who was brought out of the Temple of the Tooth just for this occasion. The size of the Mahakumbh makes it an elephant among

pilgrimages. Let's hope that it will be accompanied by spiritual advancement, at least for those who come here for a spiritual quest and not simply for tourism.

Historically speaking, the first Kumbhamela appeared in Hardwar, where the Ganges flows out of the Himalayas, around the 7th century. It was inspired by Buddhist councils, which enabled the organization of groups of monks, often itinerant or sedentary, but very far apart. Prayagraj, literally "The Queen of Confluences", already had a *Magh-mela*, a pilgrimage or festival, every January from the same period. However, it was only in 1867 that this pilgrimage became a major Kumbhamela every 12 years. This came just 10 years after India's First War of Independence. This event gave concrete expression to the aspirations for an India and a Hinduism independent of colonial rule, be it Christian or Muslim. We'll come back to the link between today's Kumbhamela and politics at the end of this article.

## Rambhadracharya, the master who is blind from birth and captivates the crowds with his singing.

This 74-year-old sage is one of the best-known masters of Vaishnavism, and in particular of one of its four main branches, the *Ramanandis*. For the record, the founder of this school, Ramananda, lived in Benares in the 15th century, and was the guru of one of India's greatest mystics and poets, Kabir. We stayed in the rather large camp of the Acharya (a title given to a high-level teacher, often the head of a lineage). He is blind from birth, and has learnt by heart many of the great texts relating to Vaishnavism, the *Bhagavad-gita* at the age of 5 and the *Ramayana* of Tulsidas at the age of 7, not to mention a profound knowledge of the *Bhagavata Puranam*, the story of Krishna. Before becoming one of the main masters of Vaishnavism, Rambhadracharya is a human phenomenon: blind from birth, he managed to write more than thirty books and was a preacher who could hold crowds spellbound for hours, all of course without notes.

In 2016, he was awarded India's second highest civilian honour, the *Padmabhushan* ('Lotus Decoration'). On the evening of one of the biggest baths of the six-week festival, *Mauni Amavasya*, the "New Moon of the Silent Ones", on 29 January, we were treated to more than three hours of his teaching on the *Bhagavata Puranam*, one of the founding texts of the Krishna cult. He was going to comment on the text over five days. He followed a style that is very popular in Hinduism in general, and at the Kumbhamela in particular, that of *Katha*, literally "saying". The speaker frequently alternates singing with spoken explanations. Not only that, but the group of musicians can finish the verses he starts, because like him, they know the quotations by heart. From a technical point of view, these musicians would immediately catch the key in which Rambhadracharya had begun the chant, continue and finish the verse with the accompaniment of the harmonium, in a sort of impressive volleyball of sound. This required both

mnemonic and musical virtuosity, and created a clear and joyful atmosphere, where the island of words was regularly covered by the rising tide of song. Moreover, in his teachings during these three hours, the Acharya insisted on the fruitfulness of memorizing the sacred texts. This enabled him, for example, to deliver his teachings without any notes, since he was blind. This reminded me of the reflections of a Baul, a traditional mystical singer from Bengal, who did not use books and sang his entire repertoire by heart. He basically explained that books were made for library shelves, where they remained more or less inert, whereas memorized songs lived and developed deep in the heart. Swami Rambhadracharya was a good illustration of this inner law. Even though we could sense that his health was not good and that he was coughing between chanting moments, when he intoned a verse, we had the clear sensation that he was becoming the channel of a higher source, and that he was completely forgetting his 74 years and his large, sick body. Before leaving the *Mela*, we were able to meet him in his room when he returned from his many obligations. We had the opportunity to talk to him a little in a simple way as he sat on his bed, and began to offer him two ritual scarves. Then he comically rolled over on his bed and, laughing like a child, said to everyone: "Don't bother me anymore, I'm tired!" And then we, Indians and Westerners, left his room. It's understandable that there was a certain amount of tension in a man who has been blind since birth, having captivated the attention of around 1,500 people for more than three hours the day before, and having to prepare for the same during the four coming days. Although there were a few people coming and going at the back of the hall, the vast majority remained seated during this time listening to him, captivated by his constant shifts between singing and speaking, punctuated every three minutes by tears for God. These were linked to a capacity for inner vision that was probably greatly intensified by his blindness from birth. Some in the crowd would sing along to the verses of the text he was launching, because they knew them by heart too.

As we have said, these mnemonic and musical abilities are certainly virtuosic, but they also lead us to understand that memory is more than memory. In this context, it is above all spiritual work. Already two and a half millennia ago, during the half-century he spent teaching, the Buddha insisted on true refuge, which was none other than *sati*, attention. This is a Pali term that corresponds to the Sanskrit *smriti*, meaning memory. The two are basically like two sides of the same coin. This is also recognized in current neuroscience, where some researchers maintain that studies on memory cannot be separated from those on attention. Indeed, it is hardly possible to remember without paying attention to the images or words memorized, and conversely, it is impossible to pay attention without remembering at some point the fact that you need to pay attention. This insistence on the link between memory and attention can also be found in other monastic traditions, even beyond the context of the oral tradition. For example, Christian mystical writers, particularly monastics, express their spiritual experiences through the filter of the words of the psalms they recite five times a day. We are at the opposite end of the spectrum from artificial intelligence, which is a great help in practical matters, but in the long run represents a crutch that prevents us from maintaining or even developing our 'memory muscles'.

We become as weak as the quadriceps of someone who has had a fractured femur and has been in plaster for a few weeks. The work of deep memory mirrors that of right attention, which leads to right thought, right speech and right action. It can be a bad strategy to try to gain time at all costs. With this in mind, we might reflect on the following paradox: "He who wants to gain time loses it".

Swamiji not only sings and dictates an impressive number of books without complaining about his birth handicap, but he also acts on behalf of his peers. He has founded a university for the disabled near his main ashram in Chitrakut, a Ram pilgrimage Centre in Uttar Pradesh, not far from Ayodhya. Now, I heard that he donated it to the Uttar Pradesh Government. In the bookshop at his camp, there are about 35 titles of books that he had dictated, some of which were large books of 400 or 500 pages. The religious atmosphere of our camp was largely sustained every morning by the *yajña*, the fire sacrifice. This was carried out on a grand scale, with 108 fireplaces lighted up every morning during the month of *Magh*, which this year fell between 13 January and 12 February. Walking around this large temporary temple, bathed in the resonance of the mantras, you could soak up the energy of a very ancient tradition, since the fire sacrifice is common to all Indo-European religions and the Vedic chants that accompany it represent some of the oldest Indo-European texts that are still alive today, i.e. sung.

Next to the Rambhadracharya camp where we were staying was the camp of Balaji, organized by a large temple for healing, mainly mental illness, located in Rajasthan just east of Agra. When we arrived there, the *kirtan* (repetitive religious chanting) at dusk was in full swing, and there was an assembly of perhaps 200 or 300 people who were on the verge of trance, but with a playful, joyful and good-natured side. The word 'trance' in our modern West is frightening, a little or a lot, but in Hinduism, even if most devotees approach trance without entering it completely, it is a known practice, respected and integrated into the culture.

To come back to Ramabhadracharya, I remember that at the end of my last interview with Tenzin Palmo in mid-January in her convent in Himachal-Pradesh, she asked me where I was going to continue my peregrinations in India. I told her I was going to the Kumbhamela with a group, and she laughed and wished me good luck with the crowd, but added at the end, in a much more intense tone: "I hope you meet someone really nice!" I don't know if Rambhadracharya is really good - I'd have to spend a few years as his disciple to be able to say, but I can at least testify that he's really impressive.

## Sumer Mouni: from a bourgeois-Luxemburgish childhood to half a century of barefoot sadhu life on the dusty roads of India.

Sumer and I have known each other for over 25 years. He came to take part in the Hardwar Kumbhamela in 1998, when I was living there and finishing a period of nine almost continuous years with my spiritual master, Swami Vijayânanda, who was staying at the ashram of Mâ

Anandamayî in Kankhal. The pun I use in the title of this section about a 'bourgeois-Luxembourgish' childhood is no accident. He came from a good family at Luxembourg, his sister had worked for a time as secretary to the Grand Duke, and it's easy to understand why his father reacted so strongly when he said he wanted to go and make a life for himself in India. He told us, in a tent in the Udasin swami camp, that it had been obvious to him since he was a teenager that he had to go to India and live his spiritual life there. This is what he did when he was just 18 years old, and he remained there in the simple, not to say poor, conditions of an itinerant sadhu. In particular, he made the great pilgrimage around the Narmada twice, the *pradakshina*, mainly barefoot. This loop represents around 3,000 km. You go from one stage to the next, usually with food and lodging, but not always. Then, you have to fast and sleep under the stars. Even though we didn't spend the whole of our stay at the Kumbhamela with Sumer, not least because of the real difficulties of crossing the site and getting through the crowds around the dates of the big baths, we were impressed, along with the group, by his sincerity and his experience of the world of the sadhus. After half a century in this milieu, he stressed the need for humility in both directions: at first, you may be impressed by monks who present themselves well, if only by their attire with their large braids or the ashes covering them, but in the end you may be disappointed. On the other hand, you may have a poor impression of a sadhu at first, but then, as you get to know him much better, realise that he was a wise man. He told us that he had had many experiences in both these senses during his half-century as a member of the sadhu society.

## Mathieu and "his" pilgrims' village for a month.

What we call here the "one-month pilgrims" are in fact the real participants in this *Mela*, along with the sadhus Nagas who are more visible. They are called *kalpavasis*, those who remain *vasis*, at the Mela with a vow, *kalpa*. For the present version of the Mela, their number was estimated at one and a half million. They resolve to stay for the whole month of *Magh*, in a tented village, and to follow a strict monastic discipline, although they generally come with their wives, and sometimes in the company of a few children or grandchildren. The latter usually visit, but do not stay. They bathe in the Ganges twice a day, including the first time before sunrise in a chilly climate where the temperature can be between 5° and 10°. It's a veritable yoga of the cold<sup>iv</sup>. For more details on this subject, see the book by Carole Dalmas, for which I wrote the afterword. Then, during the day, they study and chant the sacred texts. They provide for their own needs and prepare their own food. Most of the time, these are peasant Brahmins from a given region of Uttarpradesh, in the case of the camp we visited, Pratapgarh, a "small" town of 1.2 million inhabitants 160 km from Prayagraj. The *kalpavasis* who spend the month at Kumbhamela come from Uttar Pradesh, where Prayagraj is located, or from neighboring states. Different tented villages correspond to different regions. They are welcomed by priests who perform this service year after year, organizing the pilgrims' village from both a material and religious point of view for the rituals. This is a fine example of transgenerational loyalty, as families from the same region come to meet the same family of priests for centuries. Some

*kalpavasis* make a vow to come not just for one month, but for one month every year for 12 years. It is understandable that with this investment of time and effort, a real transformation takes place. That's why we honor them as the most authentic pilgrims of the *Mela*.

I mentioned Mathieu and 'his' *kalpavasis* in the title of this section. Mathieu Boisvert is a professor of religion and anthropologist at UQAM, the Université du Québec à Montréal. He is encouraged by his university to engage in extended periods of fieldwork in India, which enables him to spend around five months of the year in the country. In particular, for over twenty years he has regularly spent the month of January in this *kalpavasi* camp, where he talks to the residents in Hindi, as if to say that he does his anthropological work in depth. He did his doctorate on the subject of *Theravada* Buddhism and, while still quite young, coordinated a work on the history of religions. He has also worked on other pilgrimages, in particular the huge gathering at Sabarimala in Kerala, which attracts people from all over southern India.

### Little Shambhavi, aged 10 and 21: the same and not the same.

When I think of her, the first expression that comes to mind is: "Shambhavi, that's quite a poem! Indeed, right from the start, she was no ordinary child. I talked about this in my book *Opening our energy channels through meditation*, in the section on Nagarjuna<sup>v</sup>. Some people think she may have had a link in a previous life with this great sage who taught in Andhra-Pradesh, the state from which she herself comes. Around the age of 6, she began refusing to eat, explaining that she wanted to perform a *poûja*, a ritual for the Dalai Lama's health and his return to Tibet. Finally, she and her mother made the long journey from southern India to Dharamshala in the Himalayas, where His Holiness' residence is located, and asked for an appointment without knowing whether it would be granted, although it soon was. The great hero of Tibetan independence and Nobel Peace Prize winner promptly received this unknown 6-year-old girl and agreed to come to the *poûja* she had arranged 10 km down in the main city. He implied that they had had a connection in a previous life. Not only that, but he installed the mother and daughter in his residence for 6 months and then continued to guide her by giving her advice on her education. When she was just 10 years old, he recommended her to study classical Tibetan texts that are usually only studied as part of a master's degree in philosophy or Tibetology. He also asked her to take part in the great Kalachakra initiation event at Bodhgaya, and I was in a small group that accompanied her there in 2013, when she was ten years old, and then we went to the Kumbhamela at Prayagraj just afterwards.

While we're on the subject of the Dalai Lama and the Kumbhamela, it's worth pointing out that in 2001 the Dalai Lama came to take part in the great pilgrimage to Prayagraj, formerly Allahabad, and performed a *poûja*, a ritual with the Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram, one of the most eminent figures in Hinduism. It was the first time this kind of meeting had taken place in the history of the Indian subcontinent. A couple of friends who founded the Italian Yoga

Federation were present, and they told me about the intensity of this ritual. The Kumbhamela is truly a festival of encounters, sometimes even between Hinduism and Buddhism.

At the same time, from the age of 7 or 8, Shambhavi answered questions from audiences of several thousand people on religious and spiritual subjects. This was in her home state of Andhra Pradesh. We accompanied her and a few friends to meet Tenzin Palmo and a great yogi from the *Drugpa Kagyu* tradition near Dharamshala. Both advised her to be less involved in public teaching events and more in study. Indeed, at the age of 10, she was benefiting from the 'child prodigy' effect, but this effect would fade as she reached adulthood, and she would have to become a real teacher who had really studied. She followed this advice, even made a retreat of one or two months at the DGL convent with Tenzin Palmo, and obtained the title of *acharya*, i.e. religious teacher of Sanskrit at a fairly high level, even though she was only 21 years old. She wore the monastic habit. During the *Mela*, Shambhavi sent me a WhatsApp recommending that we go and see "Peaceful Sun", which is the meaning of this priest's Sanskrit name, *Ravi*, sun, *Shankar*, peaceful. He was serving a place near our camp that contained a reproduction of the Tirupati temple. Tirupati, the "Holy Master", is the name of the largest permanent Hindu pilgrimage. It is located in the south of Andhra Pradesh. It was the only temple I saw in the Mela that had a solid part in the form of granite columns. All the others were made of wood, bamboo and cloth. All in all, this immense Kumbhamela camp was reminiscent of a mandala in Tibetan rituals. Time is spent composing it, sometimes a whole week in the case of the Tibetans, with coloured powders, then it is swept away and what remains is collected in sachets which are distributed to the faithful as a souvenir of the ritual. In this sense, the Mahakumbh camps are like an immense mandala centred on the confluence, destined to be swept away by the sacred time, by the sacred Ganges. Shambhavi liked this interpretation when I spoke to her about it. She considers, as His Holiness advised, that Hinduism has very different schools, and that we need to be clear about which school we want to bring Tibetan Buddhism closer to, in order to be precise. She is preparing a book on mudras.

## The big bath: "Good morning, I'm getting up bright and early in Beaulieu-sur-Gange!"

Well before dawn on 29 January, activity was at its peak in the camps. I wouldn't go so far as to say that we were on a war footing, but rather on a peace footing... The loudspeakers were urging us to go and bathe in the Ganges as close as possible to our camp, and thus avoid heading towards the confluence, which was overcrowded with people. It was anyway what we had already decided. So, we set off for a half-hour walk down to the river. In fact, before we plunged into the physical Ganges, we were already swept along by a human river, which could be described as disciplined and collected. Even though there was a bit of a rush at one crossroads, the stream of people flowed steadily. At first it was dark, then the sun came out just as we were about to take our bath. We were in the right place at the right time, and there was something



magical about the effects of fog and dawn on the campsites with their thousands of flags fluttering in the wind. It really was 'Beaulieu-sur-Gange'. Although there was a certain amount of tension in our group for this new experience for most of us, above all we were very attentive. Everything went well, and paradoxically, the water of the Ganges, compared to the cold outside, seemed slightly warm. Of course, you could say that this gathering was based solely on a belief, but when tens of millions of people are doing the same thing at the same time, it's also a very concrete reality. So, at the start of this morning, we were immersed in this very physical reality. What's more, this experience is also humbling, because when you meditate alone in your room, you might imagine that you're the first person in the world to understand certain things. However, when you are immersed, like a drop in the river, in the human flow of the Mahakumbh, you realize that probably, not.

## The festival of sharing

A Hindi saying about the Kumbhamela explains that it is the place par excellence for the triad of *snan*, *dan* and *mundan*, the bath, the gift and the shaving of the hair. In the crowds that converge there, there may be few true saints, but there is clearly a certain level of commitment: the journey to get there, which becomes more and more complicated the closer you get to the camps, the plunge into the chilly Ganges in the early morning, the shaving of the hair that makes you feel like a temporary renunciate during your stay, and the donation for the poor that takes you out of your ego, all of this requires real determination. Even if you have a lot of faults, even if you're a bit or a lot of a rascal, these gestures point you in the right direction, which is to overcome greed and egocentricity. I remember that at the 2013 Kumbhamela, at the same place, in Prayagraj, I was with about ten people in Sidhi Ma's tent, who had succeeded a colorful guru who was much loved by the public, Nimkaroli Baba. His presence did not leave anyone indifferent, as half the group was crying. A French friend who ran a large company employing around a thousand people in the Paris suburbs gave her a tidy sum. She immediately exclaimed: "No problem, tomorrow we'll have a big *bandhara*, a collective meal for 300 people!" And indeed, the next morning, we spent some time with the CEO and many others sitting on the floor preparing chapatis for everyone, and the whole donation went up not in smoke, but in flour to feed the 300 people who turned up, whether monks, poor people or visitors who just happened to be passing by. The Adani group, one of India's largest, has financed, I've heard, a million free meals a day, organised in practice by a series of ashrams. This is part of a commitment by the Gautam Adani Foundation and his family to donate 600 billion rupees, or 6.7 billion euros, for social works. This donation is one of the largest by a philanthropic foundation in India.

For the rather poor vendors, of whom there were many, the Kumbhamela could also be a godsend, even a goose that lays golden eggs. For example, the media told the story of a teenager who, like thousands of others, was trying to get a little job in the crowd to make ends meet. He sold a colored paste at around 20 rupees a piece to spread on the foreheads of pilgrims after their

rituals. He is said to have earned 65,000 Rps in a day, about six months' basic salary for a cleaning lady. The big crowds are a good thing, in the sense that every shopkeeper has a chance to make a big sale...

## Animal feast

It's not that the animals have been honored with special rituals, which can happen in Hinduism, or that they've been given better food, but simply that they haven't been killed to feed the crowds. The Kumbhamela is always completely vegetarian, though not vegan, because a lot of dairy products are consumed. On the other hand, there are no eggs, so these 450 million people are fed for six weeks without killing a single animal: a first of its kind in the history of humanity, I might add. Without wishing to draw comparisons, we can contrast this with the Christmas and New Year celebrations, when millions of animals are killed, especially if we include what is wrongly called "seafood", which is, after all, a living creature and would like, in its own way, to continue to live. Christianity is happy to celebrate the birth of its Savior, and why not, they have every right to do so. However, for millions of animals, exactly the opposite is true: the birth of a Savior two millennia ago is causing their deaths by the tens of millions today, year after year. Even though a number of Christians are now vegetarians, there is little official questioning of meat consumption in Christianity, and virtually none in Islam. This is a fact. This is probably because they believe without further questioning that their founders ate meat—which is in fact difficult to prove—and so the habit cannot be questioned.

## Hinduism and Islam

I read a bit of the press in Hindi and listened to speeches in Hindi during the Kumbhamela. I didn't hear any anti-Muslim preaching, even though it's well known that there are tensions between the two communities. Nor did I see any visitors in Muslim garb who were there, perhaps believers in the Prophets came to see out of curiosity, but in that case, they must have been in ordinary garb. It seemed that the pilgrims were too busy with their survival, their religious duties to perform and meeting the teachers they were looking for to have even a free minute to attend to other matters, including Muslims. However, I am not God, nor am I the Chinese police intelligence service, to record and analyse everything that was said by a mass of 450 million people... To put this in perspective, the central pilgrimage of Islam, the largest religion in the world, brings together around 6 million people in Mecca in the month of *Dhûl-Hijjah*, and 11 million over the whole year<sup>vi</sup>.

In the Catholic world, one very large pilgrimage is to Lourdes, which attracted a record number of people in 2023, a sort of backlash after COVID, but the number over the year still remained limited to 3 million. In Rome, there are around thirty million tourists a year, but it's not

clear what proportion of them are driven by a clearly religious reason for going on pilgrimage, to attend a public audience with the Pope, for example.

## Problems

With so many people coming together, we obviously have a long list of problems to deal with:

### The figures

The Mahakumbh required an investment of 743 million dollars and generated a turnover of 23 billion dollars.<sup>vii</sup> Very good business, indeed! 150,000 tents have been installed, 150,000 toilets and 10,000 workers to maintain them. For the fire brigade, the investment was 15 million dollars, and 40,000 police officers were deployed.

There was a trampling of people near the confluence on the day of the biggest bath on 29 January, *Mauni Amavasya*. The government announced 30 deaths, but an independent verification site, *Newslaundry*, after investigation, put the figure at 59 and others were much higher<sup>viii</sup> As for the number of pilgrims, figures of 400 to 450 million are expected between 12 January and 26 February, the date of the *Shivaratri*. Even if this is less, it still makes this event the biggest pilgrimage in the world.

### Corrupt gurus

From a critical point of view, the processions, which began even on days when there were no big baths, created a bit of a circus or even carnival atmosphere. Things were less amusing, however, when you knew about the corruption of certain gurus who tried to get a foothold by appearing on floats in the middle of a crowd of disciples. Our group saw a parade of perhaps 1,500 people around a guru who does a lot of work in the Himalayas. He does a certain amount of social work, as is often the case with ashrams, and he has gone into politics, he has been a minister, and there are serious accusations of embezzlement against him. I was also surprised to see large posters of Asharam Bapou along the avenues. He was sentenced to life imprisonment for raping a minor of tribal origin, and for serious land offences. He was still able to go out during the Kumbhamela period, citing the need for medical care, although he was banned from preaching. However, large posters of him were there. I haven't had a chance to explore the issue further.

Amritanandamayi had his camp on a large avenue, in the midst of hundreds of other *shivirs* and ashram camps. Her honesty has been called into serious question, particularly by the recent book by the founder of her movement in Europe, Jacques Albohair, *The Amma Empire*<sup>ix</sup>. They had put an ambulance van in front of the camp to underline their social work: it was supposed to be used to carry out mammograms, but every time I passed it, it seemed to be completely unused. This brings to mind what Albohair argues very precisely, with figures to back it up, in his book.

It's true that some social work is done, but it's a showcase for activities that are frankly commercial and serve the rich, such as luxury hospitals and schools. The organization begs, particularly in the West, for the poor of India, but uses the funds raised to serve the rich, which brings in substantial profits. In all this empire of business, true spirituality has vanished, like blood drained from the body after a hemorrhage. A certain number of senior disciples half-heartedly acknowledge this, but they continue with it, because they don't know where to go, and above all, they don't want to admit that they've been sadly mistaken for 10, 20 or 30 years. This is an important point to grasp.

I myself wrote a book back in 2014 <sup>x</sup> that psychologically analyses the relationship she had with her personal assistant, Gail Tredwell. This book was re-read by Gail herself, and she wrote to me that it helped her to understand much better why, psychologically, she had been able to remain under this lady's sway for 22 years. In short, she gives numerous examples of 'this' guru's astonishing ability to lie on a daily basis, whenever it suits her. This is clearly not at all in keeping with a true spiritual master in whom we can have deep trust. These points have been taken up and summarized in two studies and an interview <sup>xi</sup> by Be Scoffield, an American journalist specializing in cults who makes much-watched documentaries on the subject on HBO and Netflix. We can assume that there will be one coming out soon on Amritanandamayi and her movement. Better late than never.

To come back to the figures, Amritanandamayi's camp represented five or six tents out of the 150,000 in the Kumbhamela. This hardly confirms what some of her disciples, whom I know personally, claim, namely that she was the greatest Hindu guru of all time.

We must not make the mistake of taking the corruption of certain teachers or religious systems as an excuse for doing nothing: this is an attitude assumed by far too many people. In this sense, let's quote an anecdote from the life of Ajahn Chah which is highly instructive. As a young monk, he was so disturbed by the corruption of some of Thailand's best-known Buddhist teachers that he went into a kind of delirium, but in himself, he heard a voice say: "If there is to be only one true Buddhist practitioner in Thailand, let it be you! He began to work intensely towards this goal, and he was quite successful. Similarly, when the Dalai Lama was asked about corruption in Tibetan Buddhism, he acknowledged that it existed, but added, referring the question back to his interlocutor: "If you yourself practice like Milarepa, you will become Milarepa".

**Recuperation: is it politics encroaching on religion, or religion encroaching on politics?**

I don't have time to read the Hindi press regularly, but I found an interesting article during the Mahakumbh, I think it was from *Amar Ujala*, a daily newspaper with a circulation of millions. It

was about a Shankaracharya, who are a bit like cardinals in Hinduism, except that there are only about ten of them. He explained that, contrary to well-established custom, he had not been invited to a major meeting on Hindu dharma in the Kumbhamela, whereas usually it is the *acharyas*, the great teachings of Hinduism that are given pride of place and listened to at this kind of gathering. Politics had taken over from religion," he explained. Alvaro Enterría also agrees. Originally from Madrid, he lived in Benares for 40 years and runs an excellent Indology publishing house, *Indica Books*. He explained to us, when we visited him with our group during the Mahakumbh in his house on the banks of the Ganges, that certain gurus like Karpatriji in the second half of the twentieth century had succeeded to a certain extent in putting politics at the service of religion, but he had the distinct impression that at present it was just the opposite that was happening, with religion being co-opted by politics. This is not the place to go into detail on this vast subject, but it is certain that during the Mahakumbh, large posters of Prime Minister Modi alongside the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, were seen everywhere. Many believe that he will be Modi's successor, if the next elections give the BJP a majority. He represents a combative Hinduism, is a monk and head of the lineage of Gorakshnath, the founder of hatha-yoga, in Gorakhpur. Despite much criticism, particularly in the Western press, the fact is that he is very popular in India. For more thoughts on the link between religion and politics in India in the 20th century, see the work of Konraad Elst. He studied at about the same time as me at the Hindu University of Benares and then became professor of religion at the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve. He has been working on these delicate subjects for 30 years, and the documentation in his books is really interesting. We met at the European Yoga Congress in Zinal. In addition to this subject, he has translated a small book from Dutch into English, *Psychology of Prophetism*, which is remarkable.<sup>(xii)</sup> He himself admits that some of the ideas in his translation need to be qualified, but the fact remains that it is a work that really makes you think, especially for those who, in increasing numbers, are taking the modern psychological approach seriously, including in relation to religions. A French version is available<sup>xiii</sup>.

### **Our group's experience of practical problems during the Mahakumbh.**

Getting there by plane or train was difficult, our flight which was supposed to be direct was rerouted and we waited 6 hours at Delhi airport. We assumed that the plane had made a round trip to Prayagraj to pick up last-minute clients, as prices had risen rapidly from 10,000 to 60,000 rupees or from €110 to around €650. Around the big bath at *Mauna Amasya* on January 29, where we were, transport was virtually blocked to get into the central camps. We heard that the guests of the "Tent City", built by the government and sold at a very high price per night, were unable to get into the main camps, as the police cut off the entrances. The same was true for a group of around twenty French people brought by a well-known travel agent, who were stuck in a camp 20 km from the confluence, unable to get into the party at all. Frustrating.

The media kept saying that 40,000 police had been mobilized, but when we walked 3 km on the big day to get to the bath, carried by a veritable river of people, we saw maybe three policemen at a major crossroads, and then nothing, not even on the banks of the Ganges, where crowd was dense.

From what we could see, toilets appeared to be grossly inadequate and poorly maintained for the public on the streets, although they did exist in the ashram camps and were then normally cleaned. This seems to have been due more to indiscipline and inefficiency on the part of rank-and-file employees, whether in the public or private sector, rather than a lack of funding from the government.

Drinking water was a serious problem, and from time to time there were dispensers that asked you to use a QR code. I tried, but gave up because I couldn't get the device to work - you wonder how the countless peasants arriving from the countryside managed. There were no running water taps on the street corners despite the millions of people who moved around. They simply existed in the ashram camps, which were only partially open to the general public.

## **An Australian's Plunge into Monastic Life at the Maha Kumbh Mela**

*William was born Australian, in his late twenties and took the Hindu monastic vows (sannyasa) during the Maha Kumbh, along with a few thousand others. I received his testimony at Ma Anandamayi Ashram in Indore as the Maha Kumbh drew to a close. I found it concrete and moving, however, those who want just a general understanding of the Kumbh Mela can skip it.*

*Q. How did you come to embark on a spiritual quest in India?*

I was a very ordinary teenager, who was engaged in video games a lot, alongside various physical sports. However, crippling anxiety attacks around the age of nineteen woke me up from my inner torpor: I went to see government psychologists who attempted various techniques which, though comforting still had no clear improvement in symptoms. However, around the ninth month (was only permitted ten months in total), my case worker taught me Buddhist mindfulness as a last-ditch attempt. There, I felt a real improvement, and after 1 month I was completely stabilized and feeling immune to the previous triggers which I suffered so

horrendously from. I immersed myself in Buddhism, read sutras and learning awareness mediation. Following this I travelled to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand for a total time of three months, where I met many monks. Basically, they seemed happier than any people I'd ever seen. This was the case even for the naughty monks (smoking, socializing, and other traits judged as unsavory). In Australia, I felt that spirituality is as good as dead, it has no solid base. As for the spiritual or religious teachers who come to Australia from the East, they are often commercial, and it's rare to meet a genuine one. I've since met innumerable genuine spiritual practitioners and elevated souls in India. For a period of about two and a half years, I went back and forth between the Australia and India, going to my native country to see family and friends and earn a living (also to take a break from the intensity of India), but this has lost more and more meaning to me, and I am now dedicated to moving as fast as possible on the spiritual path, which for me involves staying in India permanently (or for the foreseeable future).

Let's go back to the early days (a few months after recovering from the mental health saga), the tangible beginning of my inner journey: one day, I was with two old friends, just hanging out. One of them had his father teaching meditation (his father had been to India roughly 43 times). Randomly it was suggested to have a smoothie at his house, where I met his father Mark and told him about myself and my previous psychological problems. We had an intense eye-gazing meditation for a few minutes, where I felt a power, I hadn't experienced before. He invited me to his meditation class with the statement; "You're One of Us, A Mystic". I attended henceforth religiously, never skipping, Tuesday nights and for a few years Wednesday half days as well. In Mark's association I learnt and grew devotion to Ma Anandamayi (the tradition to which he belonged to). We also read notes from Krishnamurti, Adyashanti, Gurdjieff and often from Osho. I should mention that, later on, when Swami Kedarnath Baba (the Master of Ma's Indore Ashram) learnt that I was doing the latter's meditations, reading his books, and frequenting the local centre, he advised me to stop, which I did. I learnt a lot in Mark's association, who had been a disciple of Swami Ashishananda [with whom Jacques Vigne worked for three months when he was first at the Kankhal ashram in 1985]. Swami Ashish was a disciple of Ramana Maharshi for four years, who then moved into Ma's path for the rest of his days.

Mark and I came to India first in October 2022 only for one month, just the two of us. He took me to meet some elevated souls and sadhus, and we stayed in many of Ma's ashrams. I especially liked Ma's ashram in Vrindavan; there was a disciple of Ma there who was very good. I revisited after 9 weeks of wandering. One day he said to me: "I've been in this ashram for fifteen years without taking a vacation, and now all of a sudden I have four days free. I will take you to some good places for sadhana." On this tour, he took me to Ujjain, Omkarweshwar and to Indore to have darshan of Swami Kedarnath Baba. Baba eventually initiated me as a brahmachari, a novice monk, under the name of William Chaitanya, William being my civil name in February 2023.

*Q. Attending an ashram regularly is already a commitment, but taking sannyasa goes much further. How did this deepening take place?*

In the ashram here, certain people sensed that I was ripe for *sannyasa*, and they hinted either directly or indirectly that I might take it. What's more, four times Swamiji suggested I take these vows. Finally, all this got to me, and towards the end of January this year 2025, I asked him if it was a good idea. He told me, "What could the harm in it be, but let's not make an immediate decision." He then had me read a lot of Ma's words and articles on the meaning of *sannyasa*. Ma stated many times, for example, that it was better to die with the sannyasa garment than to abandon it. For his part, Swamiji insisted that it was a commitment for life, and that it came with simple but important rules of behavior: avoid intoxication, bad company, reduce relations with family. I was already very independent of my family; however, he asked me to write to my parents for permission. I contacted them, but diluted for them what the *sannyasi* really meant, so as not to panic them. They replied with a rather limp letter, and so I contacted them again, speaking more clearly. On the phone, my father started sobbing, but I argued that it was better to be unhappy for a short time and happy for a long time, rather than the other way round. What made me no longer want to go back to Australia was the fact that either my family or my friends were all caught up in repeating the same kind of mistakes (of course I too, and essentially every regular human falls prey to this). Every now and then, they'd finish an event, only to fall back into another of the same kind under a different garment. They didn't get to the heart of their difficulties and so, couldn't find a fundamental solution. I was less and less interested in being in that kind of life, as I wanted permanent peace.

Soon after replying that he felt I was ready for the *sannyasa*, Baba received an invitation from Swami Gopaldas to go to his camp at the Kumbha Mela, which he accepted. He thought it was the right time for me to take my monastic vows there. The journey was very hectic, with tens of millions of people coming and going. On the eve of the initiation, we met a lot of "saints" [not in the Catholic sense of the word, but rather Hindu: monks confirmed in their practices and with a stable spirit] that Swamiji knew in the camps.

On my destiny day, February 8, we quickly made our way to the *Sangam*, the confluence for bathing where the water was clean, more towards the middle of river (we were roughly 8 in number). On the boat only Baba, Didi (sannyasi from Indore Ashram), myself, the driver and a police official were present.

Swamiji recited Sanskrit invocations which I repeated back to him, and he also whispered my initiation mantra into my ear and made me repeat it for correct pronunciation. I don't know Sanskrit/Hindi and I have a poor memory, so several times I went back to him to check if I was pronouncing it correctly. I then removed my clothes one by one and put them in the water while saying, "Swaha". Symbology is important, especially on this occasion. I put a *longi* around my loins and threw my underwear in as well. Baba then suggested I splash some water from the



Ganges on my head, explaining that this would be the equivalent of a full bath, as getting into the water was dangerous in this deep, fast-flowing place. I replied that I was a good swimmer, being an Australian, so I could dive in. No sooner said than done. I went pretty far underwater, and when I came up, I was able to hang on to the boat and get back on it. It was February 8, the 11th day of the moon which is particularly favorable for spiritual practices, just five days after one of the great Kumbha Mela baths, that of *Sarasvati Puja*.

In the evening, I was in such an intense state of seemingly heightened perception. I had hardly slept at all the night before as well. I observed many people coughing at the Kumbh as well, maybe due to heavy mosquito spraying and/or contagious illnesses.

Following the initiation, my mind began to play tricks on me, fabricating numerous constructs: for example, it wanted to know whether I should renew my visa to India or, if not, to be in complete detachment and not worry about these passport and residence permit issues anymore (as being a renunciate, maybe I don't have to adhere to social conventions anymore). I was impressed by a contradiction: I had shared a room with someone for several days on my first trip to India in 2022. He had a sadhu visa, yet was a serious mobile video game addict, since he spent 15 or 16 hours a day just tapping away in his ashram room. A poor example of a renouncer. On the other hand, I knew another sadhu who had given up his passport and visa complications decades ago, and who seemed to be of an above-the-norm level of awareness. I concluded that I should give up my visa. However, I mentioned this to Swamiji, who told me that I should keep my feet on the ground and renew my visa regularly.

What I like here in the ashram is that there is a vast network of friends and we see very different people pass by, each with their own point of view on things. For example, I have heard varying opinions regarding the recent Israel/Gaza conflict by many Israeli visitors, this has influenced me to attempt to steer clear of news and political affairs, as one never really knows the entire truth about any issue, and there is almost always propaganda at play.

It's very useful to have a guide who warns you of the pitfalls of the ego on the spiritual path. We see many spiritual seekers come through here who have been practicing for 20, 30, 40 years and yet stagnate. One of the big reasons for this is that they don't seek guidance at all, or don't find the right guidance. At the beginning we must make personal effort and see the need for spiritual growth (to be free from suffering), and then when we are ripe, we can come under the shelter of a Guru/Teacher/Master. Swamiji often presents us with choices suddenly, and we have to decide very quickly, this builds intuition and ingrains a good sense of alertness. In fact, we all have many opportunities to progress in life, but we often make the wrong choices, due to habit, a low intelligence, or selfish ambition and this delays our eventual freedom. Often spiritual progress isn't necessarily spectacular or even visible, but it grows from deep roots. No effort is ever wasted, it is always accumulated. Spiritual growth is the only real thing in this flux of phenomena.

## Kumbhamela as seen by the Hindi press

When it comes to religious issues, I find it interesting to read the press in Hindi, because we're closer to the pulse of living Hinduism. You get a better sense of how Hindus feel about themselves. Take, for example, a full-page spread from *Dainik Jagaran*, "The Daily Awakening", which in 2019 was India's leading Hindi-language daily, with a circulation of 69 million. His team has organized a colloquium on the very site of the Mela with well-known religious teachers, most of them swamis; now is the time to let these teachers have their say, as this will form what might be called a significant sample what Hinduism thinks of itself in general, and of this world's greatest pilgrimage in particular

An interesting fact is that Yogi Adityanath, Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, a state of 240 million inhabitants, is briefly referred to as "Yogi" in Hindi newspapers. For example, he is already stressing the positive economic spin-offs of the Kumbhamela: the equivalent of 83 billion euros has been invested by the Indian government, and it is estimated that the increase in UP's GNP in return will be 360 billion euros. What's more, the number of visitors has grown significantly over the last few years: in 2013, 120 million, for the 2019 half-Kumbh, 240 million, and for the current one, 660 million up to the day of its conclusion on February 26, according to official sources.<sup>i</sup>

The special page dedicated to the event<sup>ii</sup> featured the following trailer at the top of the page: *The confluence of spirituality: truth, intense practice and dialogue* [which in Hindi is 4 S: *Sangam*, confluence, *satya*, truth, *sâdhanâ*, intense practice, *sanvâd*, dialogue]. This special page first introduced Swami Chidananda of Paramarth Niketan in Rishikesh. I know him; we spoke at the same 600-strong congress in Italy of an International Yoga Association, Sarvayoga International. The title of the article about him was: "Devotees are like the shells in a necklace of faith that links the country in a thread". He gave the inaugural speech at the *Dainik Jagaran* gathering, explaining that the event represented a celebration of a truly positive experience, *sadbhâv*, of equanimity, *samarastâ*, and of traditional, eternal culture. *Samarastâ* is an interesting term from Hindu and Buddhist devotional mysticism, meaning "the quality of a single taste": the devotee learns to see the whole world in the same light corresponding to the divine or Buddha nature. Adapted to the context of society, this means that the citizen begins to see society in the fundamental light of equality.

The meeting organized by the *Dainik Jagaran* was entitled "Spiritual Dialogue", not religious. The commentary on his talk stated that the Swami gave inspiration for "meditation on the Self within, *atmachintan*, and love of country". He explains that Ram is present here, he does not represent contention, *vivâd*, but dialogue, *sanvad*, he is the solution for the country, and he is not victory, *vijay*, but humility, *vinay*." We can see that Chidananda is trying to show that an interpretation of Hinduism based on dispute and obsession with victory is not the right one. He reminds us of the right understanding, that is, one based on dialogue and humility. He further explained that there was no contradiction between *sanatana dharma* (literally, "law, eternal

rightness", the term by which Hinduism designates itself) and well-understood secularism, and that it is India's profound vocation to be able to prove this: "At the end of his speech, he pledged to have trees planted near the confluence in memory of those who died in a crowd trampling at the time of the big bath on January 29.

Swami Vasudevanand, a Shankaracharya, delivered the concluding speech: "Thanks to the omnipresent Self, there is a thread of unity running between all beings", and the title given to the article on his speech was "Our spirituality is strong". I was also surprised to find an article about a former actress and documentary filmmaker. Dr. Lakshminrayanan Tripathi not only became a transgender advocate, but was also appointed *Mahamandaleshwar*, a kind of abbess general for a group of ashrams. When she stepped forward to make her speech, she was applauded by the room. She emphasized the shift from rejection and neglect of this group to its respect and integration. She also stressed that the transgender community needs to be more accepted by Hinduism, otherwise its members risk converting to other religions. She cites a landmark decision by India's Supreme Court to officially recognize this community. The name of the community in Hindi is interesting in itself: *Kinnar akhara*, akhara, "the religious order (a priori monastic, but with a not insignificant aspect of militant, even military defense of Hinduism) of celestial beings" (*kinnara* are a particular type of celestial spirits).

The symposium also praised the *Nâgas*, whose military intervention thwarted Akbar's and the Mughals' attempts to stop the Kumbhamela by force. In this context, it's fitting that they should be given pride of place in the Mahakumbh, by going to bathe first on *Mauni Amavasya* day, for example.

Another teacher speaks of the refoundation of the Dharma through "universal Mahakumbh, based on equality-equanimity in society". We have seen that the word *samarasta*, "which tastes the same", is used in the path of *bhakti* devotion, as well as in that of Tibetan Buddhism. It is a stage considered almost as the state of realization. "Society manifests itself as united in a sense of oneness at the *Sangam*, the Confluence. No one asks the other what caste or clan he belongs to. The feeling of discrimination is erased. This is a miracle, it's wonderful. Without invitation, an ocean of people comes. For the present tradition, this is no less than immortality...Ram, when he left his capital of Ayodhya to retire into solitude first made a stop at the Confluence; moreover, he welcomed a wounded eagle by placing the bird's head on his lap, in this sense, he is a model of compassion and equanimity to better manage relations between members of society."

Finally, let's return to the participants in Kumbhamela, the *Kalpavasis*, "those who live there as a result of a vow". We interviewed one of them, who is typical of their group in that he has been coming for a month every year for the past 22 years to make the *kalpavas*. When asked about the underlying reasons for such a commitment, he replied with something that is fundamental to all the paths of India, the purification of the mind— and it is with this that we will conclude this section: "Recitation and intense practice, *jap-tap*, produce a purification of *vikar*,

defects, (literally deformations) of body and mind." It's a transmutation important enough to devote to it, one month a year for 22 years continuously.

## **The meaning of Kumbhamela in the current evolution of religions**

Whatever the logistical problems it has posed, the Mahakumbhamela 2025 represents a considerable religious and spiritual phenomenon. Whether we like it or not, this largest pilgrimage in the world marks the vitality of Hinduism. Let's hope that this great culture can continue to develop, not "in spite of" the challenges of modernity, but precisely because of them. How, moreover, can we situate this Mahakumbhamela within a more general framework of relations between religions?

The religions of the Bible have a tendency to claim that they are better because they are more recent: this argument, which is not at all obvious when you think about it reasonably, even makes you smile when you see that it was used by the Christians to dethrone the Jews, then by the Muslims to dethrone the Christians, then in the nineteenth century by the Baha'i faith to dethrone Islam. Unfortunately, each time, there were massacres to find out who was right, as if the law of the strongest was always the most divine. Is the new sect, who believes that humanity must urgently go into exile on comets to avoid total destruction, any better than all these religions, since it is more recent? It's rather naive to believe that what's new is automatically better than what's old. Nor is it because a group is more aggressive politically and militarily that it is better than those who are more peaceful; in fact, the opposite is generally true.

The critical point of view of Hindu polytheism on the three monotheisms could be summarized as follows: the Jews declared that their new religion was a simplification of the complexity of monotheism, but from a critical point of view, it was also an impoverishment. The same applies to the transition from Christianity to Judaism, then from Islam to Christianity, and finally to the new religion of the 20th century, Communism, in relation to Christianity. Marxists have replaced the term "Revelation" with "Revolution", but have retained the same Christian superiority complex of wanting to save the planet at all costs, including by violence. In our post-communist period of global capitalism, the materialistic tendency has increased again, as if we were reaching zero, basically the logical extension of the previous curve. These successive reductions bring to mind the expression used in philosophy *Reductio ad absurdum*, reduction to the absurd. Hinduism, with its Kumbhamela, peacefully but powerfully affirms that polytheism can and must continue, and will continue, to contribute to the psycho-spiritual equilibrium of humanity. He quietly maintains, even by his own numbers, that not only monotheism, but also materialism, are not the only compulsory answers to the problems facing humanity. Fortunately, this general point of view of "zero point" can be nuanced, and the spiritual question is expressed in many new movements, some of which are capable of acting effectively for the good of the

societies in which they exist. In this sense, read the works of Rafaël Liogier and Frédéric Lenoir.<sup>iii</sup>

It is repeated as a matter of course that monotheism is founded on the belief in a personal God, but there is another belief, more discreet and in this sense little questioned, which is just as profound, like the keystone in a church: it is that polytheism, being older than monotheism, is necessarily worse, and is condemned in the long term to disappear: this is in a way the unique direction of history according to the religions of the Bible.<sup>xiv</sup> The corollary of this idea is that the numerical and military expansion of monotheism represents proof of divine grace and its fundamental truth. If polytheism does not want to disappear, it will be helped by colonization or cultural genocide to do so, as happened in South and Central America. And yet, while the Middle East, the cradle of monotheism, is once again at war, with the ever-present risk of a fatal nuclear turn, some 450 million polytheists, often belonging to schools so different that they seem to be separate religions, can meet peacefully to exchange ideas and learn from each other. And all without killing any animals or even using eggs... as the saying goes: "you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs! However, in our case, the Hindu version of this proverb could be: "You don't make an omelet, so you don't break an egg!"... And this principle has been put into practice: as we said, they managed to feed 450 million people over 6 weeks without breaking an egg. While the Middle East has just used cannon batteries to kill each other with alacrity, Hinduism says no, even to battery hens...

Indeed, the real dividing line is between those who work on themselves and those who do not, or hardly at all. The latter group includes those who have only superficial practice of religion or psychotherapy, a ritual from time to time, a bit of zapping by attending a few personal development courses, and yet show few signs of inner change. Yet the best religion, like the best therapy, will be the one that makes us better. In this sense, we could read the Dalai Lama's *Beyond Religion*.<sup>iv</sup>

All this development is in fact removing the keystone of a superiority complex central to monotheistic belief. It's a rebalancing. Better late than never. Does the metaphysical unity of the one God promote the unity and peace of societies, or is it the other way round? The question has been revived by the enormous re-emergence of the Mahakumbhamela in the midst of modernity, like a whale showing its back in the middle of a tormented ocean. May this very real phenomenon make us think and touch us deeply.

*Jacques Vigne-Vigyananand, Dhaulchina hermitage,*

*14 February 2025*

i

Our group was organized by Ossmooz Voyages in France and Teerth Travels in India, and we would like to thank them for their efficient support.

ii Rebecca Boulanger and Philippe Charlier for Arte *Enquête d'ailleurs, le bain de l'immortalité*

<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3f5ery> running time 26 minutes

iii

iv Dalmas Carole and Lefief Alix *Le froid* Eyrolles, 2023.

v Vigne Jacques *Ouvrir nos canaux d'énergie par la méditation*, Le Relié, 2016.

vi <sup>vii</sup> "Mahakumbh 2025 FAQs". *Economic Times*. 13 January 2025.

viii *Kumar, Basant (5 February 2025). "Exclusive: Hospital, police records suggest at least 79 deaths in Kumbh stampede"*. *Newslandry*

<https://theammaempire.com/fr/>

x Vigne Jacques Amma's personality in the light of her relationship with her assistant Gail Tredwell <sup>xi</sup> <sup>xii</sup>

[https://archive.org/details/psychology-of-prophetism-a-secular-look-at-the-bible\\_or](https://archive.org/details/psychology-of-prophetism-a-secular-look-at-the-bible_or)

xiii <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1MAfNXsyYGe9ik5rThpKk3T3GMBwYITsQ?usp=sharing>

xiv See my book on the subject, with the whole of the first third devoted to the case of Christianity in India:

[http://jacquesvigne.com/JV/livres/illusion\\_missionnaire.pdf](http://jacquesvigne.com/JV/livres/illusion_missionnaire.pdf)

---

<sup>i</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025\\_Prayag\\_Maha\\_Kumbh\\_Mela](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025_Prayag_Maha_Kumbh_Mela), as well as Dainik Bhaskar and other Hindi dailies.

<sup>ii</sup> *Dainik Jagaran*, February 18, 2025, p.9.

<sup>iii</sup> Rafaël Liogier *Souci de soi, conscience du monde - Vers une religion globale?* and Frédéric Lenoir *Les métamorphoses de Dieu - La nouvelle spiritualité occidentale* Plon, 2003

<sup>iv</sup> The Dalai Lama *Beyond Religion*.<sup>iv</sup> Fayard, 2012 and *Beyond Religion*, 2011.