

[Hiding Behind the Cross](#)

Category : [October 1994](#)

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Hiding Behind the Cross

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In the days when the last century was approaching, Hindu swamis, Hawaiian kahunas, spiritualists (as new-agers were then called), African shamans, American Indian medicinemen and others in the West had to hide behind the cross. The church (which always meant Christian in those days) was a kind of city of refuge, a place where everyone gathered. Even non-Christians, if they were clever, could find sanctuary. Shortly after the turn of the century, many Hindu swamis came to the Americas, returning to India through Europe. Except for Swami Vivekananda, they all followed the same pattern, veiling their roots as they revealed their various philosophies. To avoid reprisals from the public and to fetch new followers they told little white lies: that Hinduism was not different at all from Christianity and that since religions were so similar, they were, in fact, Christians.

Some even went so far as to explain that they were also Muslims. One Buddhist monk had everyone confused in the early thirties. Metaphysical groups in San Francisco looked upon him as the savior they had been waiting for, and though he presented himself as a Buddhist, they took him for a Hindu. He complied. It turned out that he was a devout Methodist in his own country!

It's an ancient custom, minority faiths and their believers living sheepishly in the shadow of the majority. Hiding behind the cross became a way of life in metaphysical America and Europe as those on the "swami circuit," as their lecture itinerary was known, came one after another. No one could really deport them for bringing an alien religion into Christian nations, because-who knows?-they might really be Christian, as they claimed.

Out of this dynamic moment in history came several Hindu-based institutions. Among them is the famed Self Realization Fellowship which you will enjoy reading about in this issue (I had several deep conversations with Paramahansa Yogananda, and he was a Hindu then). The Vedanta Society and Ramakrishna Mission also emerged in this pattern. In early years I talked with their swamis quite often. While they all were Hindus, born and bred, their organizations were borderline. Why? Well, for one thing, they might have been deported if they did not hide behind the cross in one way or another. It is as simple as that. Even if that threat were absent, acceptance of yoga and Indian spirituality in the first half of this century in the West was roughly in the same state as acceptance of segregation, women's rights and environmental ethics. Then came the 60s, Woodstock, free love and breaking up of old conditions. Hindus began coming "out of the closet" along with gays, hippies, shamans and witches. But, many of the organizations they founded did not change when circumstances changed. Perhaps they had convinced themselves that they really were Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim and a little of everything else. All in all, it is not necessary to mislead the public these days. We are in the 90s now, and Western nations are becoming truly pluralistic. These are days of truth. They are days of correction of wrongdoing, days of Self Realization which cannot be hidden under a cloak of deception. Believe me, no Christian or Muslim looks at the Vedic-Agamic goal of atmajnana, Self Realization, in the same way Hindus do.

The days are gone when it is necessary to sing non-Hindu hymns at satsang. There was a time to hide the Vedic Truth beneath a basket and behind a cross, but now is a time to shout Self Realization from the rooftops.

Self Realization is, in fact, what all people on the planet have come to experience. Hindus do not have a claim on it-it is not copywrited. It is for all, and that is the spirit of a truly great new age. However, when the subconscious mind of followers is confused with conflicting belief patterns, not knowing what path or methodology it comes from, that itself belies the universalist's accomplishment. The great master Ramakrishna aptly said one may go into nondual samadhi a fool and come out a wise man. Others may go into meditation fools and come out fools.

This Self within all is the sustainer of all, yet It acts not in that sustaining and is itself unsustained. It sustains our thoughts, our emotions, our physical universe, yet It lies mysteriously beyond them all, perfectly obvious to the knower, perfectly invisible to most. It is and yet It is not. Hindus need nothing else to hide behind than this Paramatma. Certainly we no longer need to define ourselves in a Christian or a Muslim way, or any other way but our own. So, no need to send out Christmas cards this year or have a tree in the ashram, right?

