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HINDUISM 101; Wherein We Continue A Brief Course On Indian and Hindu Studies in American Universities with Emphasis on Key Academics In the Humanities

Charles A. Ryerson can hardly believe that Princeton Theological Seminary actually pays him to do what he most loves in this world - teaching and researching Hinduism. As Associate Professor, History of Religions, he is single-handedly responsible for introducing Hindu studies to the current crop of students and 800 seminarians at the 240-years-old Presbyterian institution in New Jersey. His courses include religious experience, "Religion and Society in India" and basic Hinduism. How does he rate his charges? "I truly think today's students are more serious than 20 years ago. I see undergraduate students searching genuinely. Of course, they are not studying to become Hindus, but to discover if they can find truths for their personal development." And he's not indifferent about his job, "It's a terrific job! Really exciting! I am fascinated by teaching and by Hinduism itself...They give a free hand here. They didn't hire me to say 'This is what's wrong with Hinduism, so you should be a Christian.' Many students here are committed to a Christian life, but others were born in India or to Indian parents in the US. I tell you it's fascinating to teach young Hindu men and women their own religious background, as they try to find out who they are. So here we have two groups discovering themselves, one to uncover a past and the other to discover a future." How did this Hindu scholar whose framework is historical encounter things Indian? As he tells it, he "wasn't much involved in seeking the Self." From the time he was five years old he wanted to go to India. It was Gandhi's life and assassination during high school years which captured him intellectually. He studied at Oberlin and went to Madurai, South India, for three years (1955-57) on a fellowship. That set the direction for his life. Back in the US, he enrolled in a Christian seminary, not to become a minister but to sort out the East and West in himself and discover what Christianity and Western civilization are. Then it was back to India for three more years. Of those days he says, "I had so much experience with Hinduism. I got into Hindu life itself in a more disciplined manner." He has spent 10 years living in India. Today Professor Ryerson is often asked by East Coast Christian churches to help members understand their Hindu neighbors and "moderate fears...There are so many South Asians in this area that I can buy any of my favorite pickles and spices. Towns that were homogenous are now a mix of Protestant, Catholic, Jew, Hindu and Muslim. It's getting more and more pluralistic. This is a dramatic change. You see Indian flags flying outside of suburban homes. I often go to a church, and next door there

will be a mosque or a temple, maybe an old Baptist church converted by an Indian congregation. So people in this area don't just have an intellectual curiosity about Hinduism; it's become existential." In fact, it was he who told Hinduism Today about the Swami Narayana story in this issue. Ryerson considers himself a Christian, but one deeply immersed in a Hindu lifestyle. The 52-year-old bachelor urges others to enter other cultures in order to perceive their own more clearly. "I will always be an American, but my involvement with Hindu life, friends, pilgrimage and fasts is deep. I've had friends in India since I was 21". The professor's books include Encounter Inside India and the recently released Regionalism and Religion which examines major modern reform movements in Tamil Nadu.

Joan Erdman is an anthropologist with an abiding personal love of Indian culture and arts. Until recently she was at the University of Chicago, fame for its South Asian department; but today she teaches at Chicago's private Columbia College, a small but special place where she can work intimately with students who major only in communications - film, dance, arts, radio and other media. Why here? "These students are of great interest to me. They can affect South Asian culture immensely." Joan Erdman studied at Harvard in the early 1960's and chose the Parsees as a subject for her thesis. She had heard they were "the jews of India," and as a Jew herself was drawn to their culture and to the parallels of the Parsees' forceable removability from their Persian homelands and the Jewish Diaspora. Part way into the work she decided the effort was presumptuous since she had never met a Parsee in her life. So she did the natural thing, applied for a Fulbright fellowship and was off to India in 1962, working in Madras and Jaipur. She was captivated by India. Ten years later she returned to undertake a disciplined study of the tabla in Ahmanabad. "I fell for it, practicing 5 hours a day." Such effort made her one of the first Western women to master the difficult tabla. Along with the music she found herself imbibing much more, "I became one of my teacher's family." Ms. Erdman returned to the US and did graduate work in anthropology, writing her thesis on "Parsee Progress and Zoroastrian Preservation" and getting her degree in 1980. Today she is much involved in Indian performing arts, and it is clear that her heart aches at the terrible neglect, "In Delhi there are ten million people, but only five proper theaters! The largest of them only seats 2000, and that was built for the Asian Games. Can you imagine five theaters in New York? There are no agents, no impresarios. It's all done privately without any organization and littler training in management. The arts themselves are fantastic, but the sad truth is it's very difficult for Indian artists to make a living." But just maybe Joan Erdman will help turn this around, "One important thing I am learning at Columbia is how people do these things. There is a new Center for the Arts coming up in Delhi. The potential is tremendous! Indian performers wonder, 'Why can't I get an impresario like Udai Shankar had decades ago?'" She has written "Today and the Good Old Days: South Indian Arts in Chicago" and is now co-writing a biography of Zoro Siegal. She works to arrange gallery showings, dance performances, films and more. India's arts certainly has one enthused and competent ally in the West.