

[Academy of Religion Gets Hindu President](#)

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WOMEN OF VISION

Academy of Religion Gets Hindu President

Only non-Christian in a century to hold top post

Lavina Melwani, New York

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We are the people who teach your children about religion," says Dr. Vasudha Narayanan, "and that's where we have the meeting between scholars of a particular tradition and the larger population. I think it's extremely important to maintain one's integrity and be responsible in the communication of any religious tradition. We are dealing with matters of faith, matters for which people have, over the centuries, lived and died."

It is fitting that Dr. Vasudha Narayanan, professor of religion at the University of Florida, was recently chosen as the President-elect of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), the world's largest organization of teachers and research scholars of religion. She becomes the first non-Christian to hold this office in the society's 92-year history. Narayanan's term is from November 2001-2002. The Atlanta-based organization has over 9,000 members who teach in 1,500 colleges, seminaries and schools in North America and abroad. As

president, she will preside over several committees that oversee 80 different programs which deal with the study and teaching of religion all over the world. Narayanan brings a great deal of academic expertise to her field. She has received grants and fellowships, including one from the Guggenheim Foundation and has written several books on Hinduism, including *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone: The Embodiment of Divinity in India*.

Although Narayanan grew up in Madras in a prestigious family, there was no indication that she would make religion her life's work. Her grandfather, who was a judge in the Madras High Court, was also a Sanskrit scholar and taught her Sanskrit slokas. This could have laid the building blocks for her interest in religion and philosophy. "All the Sanskrit texts on dharma deal a lot with everyday life," she reflects. "Therefore, even the most ordinary activity, like cooking, becomes sacred in its own way."

Vasudha met her husband, Ranga Narayanan, through an arranged match while he was doing his Ph.D. in Chicago. They married in India. When he became a professor of chemical engineering at the University of Florida, Vasudha followed him as what she cheerfully terms "a trailing spouse" and also became a professor there. The Narayanans have two children—Desika, 20, and Ramanujan, 15, both named after brilliant Vedanta philosophers.

Narayanan has positive suggestions to offer Hindu parents bringing up their children in America. "Religion is central to our lives, and it is important to pass on this heritage to our

children, especially in the diaspora," she says. "In India, we absorb it by osmosis: there is a temple at every turn, a story from every grandmother, a ritual every week and days of fasting and feasting. In the diaspora, we are left to our own devices." Yet she believes that although immigrants are not formally trained in the Hindu sampradayas, they do have knowledge of their tradition, even though they don't articulate it.

According to Narayanan, Hinduism can be taught in the US through temples, Sunday schools, the performing arts and academic courses. She finds second-generation Indian-Americans are very curious about their religion and ask many questions. She observes: "The textbooks on Hinduism used in classrooms place a lot of emphasis on karma, moksha and so on. But very little is said about the way Hindus live their lives. I try to cover both areas in my classes."

She points out, "Here, in our efforts to make sense of our sampradayas, we sometimes give just one meaning and miss out on the richness of the various traditions. Also, the line between the secular and the sacred is elusive in India. The line is there, but not the way the West draws it."

Is Narayanan herself a Hindu? "I am a Hindu and very happy to be one," she replies. She always wears a sari and bindi (spot on the forehead). She is a vegetarian, has a home shrine and visits the local Hindu temple. She taught her children prayers when they were two years old. On one sabbatical, she took her children to more than 50 temples in remote South Indian villages.

The President Reflects

Dr. Vasudha Narayananshared with Hinduism today some hopes and insights about her new job with the AAR.

In describing the American Academy of Religion (AAR) on our website, we say: "The study of religion is a tool for understanding and appreciating people whose beliefs and practices often seem strange and threatening. While religious studies helps make those who are different more familiar, it also helps us learn more about who we are." As the president of the AAR, I would like to participate in this vision and further it. The AAR is both a professional organization and a "learned society." As the latter, it encourages research in

various fields of religion. As a professional organization, it is committed to the member's professional development and organizes workshops in teaching, etc. These ventures are very important in advancing our knowledge about ourselves and others.

It is most difficult to say what I can personally accomplish during the year of my presidency. Although the organization is huge and is run in a democratic fashion, I hope to bring a different perspective to the issues. I will also have to make some appointments to committees and hope to perform this duty in a way that raises people's awareness of the religious pluralism that is present in America.

The AAR is committed to the academic study of religion. Although most religious people have a good working understanding of their own faith, they do not possess the same of others. There is a need to understand the history and cultures of other people, to reflect on the different traditions and values that a diversity of human beings have cherished over the last few millennia. In most of its 92-year history the AAR has centered on the Judaeo-Christian traditions with religious understanding based largely on Western models. It is only now that people from various other systems are entering the field. Speaking personally, I hope that scholars of the vast Hindu tradition can participate more in making a paradigm shift in the fuller understanding of religion.