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EDITORIAL

Cult Status Denied

An apocryphal letter we received, explaining why Hindus are discriminated against

the Editor

From the Office of Cult Regulation and Licensing
United States Department of Justice, Washington, DC
To Acharya Palaniswami, Editor, Hinduism Today

Greetings from a very high place. We are truly sorry that your application for recognition as a US-Approved cult, received last year, has been delayed. As you may know, almost everybody in this country either wants to start a cult or close one down, and this office (established by Bill Clinton to monitor and license cults) has been inundated with requests. When the 39 members of a Christian group in San Diego, California, left their "containers" prematurely on March 23 [story on page 22], the enormous outpouring of media awareness helped us to acquire new funding, and so we are able at last to process your application.

That said, we regret to inform you that your application has

been denied, and you will not qualify for special tax breaks available to our licensees. By law, you are entitled to an explanation of this decision.

The US government takes no position for or against cults. While cults have historically been viewed as dreadful, dangerous and even wicked, it is our view that, like pharmaceuticals and nuclear fuels, they can have a salubrious social impact if properly controlled by us, your trusted elected officials. After all, we run the military, arguably the most sophisticated, lethal and well-equipped cult (we mean that in the most positive sense of the term) in the world. As you know, the word cult is not inherently negative. It derives from the same linguistic root as culture and cultivate.

Our staff constantly counsels citizens who think cult is a four-letter word and hold the fallacy that freedom is protected by staying away from powerful people. To them, a cult controls one's life and guides one's thinking. It is an organization, with a central authority figure, that imposes strict rules on members and may restrict what one eats, when one sleeps, what entertainment one watches and what books one can read. It may even monitor members' sex life, forbid the free use of certain language, require that official clothes be worn and demand obedience while denying all challenges to leaders' authority.

Under that definition everyone's grandparents ran the original cult operation--the family. Families do all the above, and more. So do the Boy Scouts, the White House, boarding schools, the armies and prisons of every civilized nation, Olympic-bound

sports teams and virtually every religious order ever founded. In fact, a good argument can be made that the medical profession is the world's highest-paid professional cult, requiring blind obedience of neophytes (called interns), making them work 36 to 72 hours at a stretch without sleep, feeding them drugs and cafeteria food until they submit their weary wills to the leaders who live luxuriously on the donations of aspiring doctors. Clearly, if we think it's good to preserve human institutions which "brainwash" young minds with the persuasions we call culture, the science we call medicine and the rites we call religion, then we can no longer denigrate the institution of the cult. Before legislation was enacted, most cults were nothing but the other man's way of life. You can easily see why governmental control is so very needed.

Of course, some organizations, like some families, are harmful, so we have two designations: Grade A (for altruistic) and Grade B (for bad). Our manual defines a Grade B qualifier as "a malevolent group, often with a charismatic leader, which deceives and abuses members and causes real harm to the society in which it functions." Grade B licensees include dangerous groups that arm themselves with automatic rifles, preach fear and hate and stockpile cyanide. Grade A groups include churches and institutions. Indeed, most of our licensees are Christian. The reason behind this predominance is not governmental bias, but Congressional expert testimony that Christianity dwells on the End of the World, the Apocalypse and the Day of Judgment. Psychologists have concluded that when groups hold the idea that the end is near, coupled with the belief that their leader is the Chosen One (as with "Do" of the Heaven's Gate group), you have all the ingredients for being a legitimate cult.

We realize that the US press does sometimes ineptly brand Eastern religions as cultish, but their misjudgment will not help your group to receive recognition from this office. That brings us to your failed application. In your submissions, you have noted that we have not approved a single Hindu cult, and you have said this strikes you as unjust. Scholarly informants assure us that Hindus just don't qualify. They cite the Osho/Rajneesh phenomenon in the '80s, but note he was a renegade Jain, not a Hindu. Transcendental Meditation is high on many cult lists, but they make no claims of being Hindu, and the only danger they pose is a ruinous loss of followers' anxiety.

It may seem discriminatory, but there are no credible Hindu cults. We have concluded that this is your fault, not ours. Why? Hindus don't possess the narrowness that any resourceful cult nurtures in members. Hindus see God everywhere and in everyone. That belief renders them inept in the arrogant arts and the social and psychological antagonisms which are the bread and butter of reputable cults. Moreover, they are quite incompetent when it comes to the requisite skill of forcing their beliefs on others, thinking, as they do, that all paths are worthy and each soul will ultimately attain spiritual liberation, with none suffering eternally in Hell. They are, to put it quite plainly, too occult to be a cult.

If ever these shortcomings are rectified--and especially if you or your affiliated ashrams and temples could offer some verifiable proof of commitment to a Messiah or a millenarian worldview or if Hindus are ever implicated in a mass suicide or if your tradition ever mitigates its stubborn universalistic openness toward other paths--we will be pleased to reconsider

your application.