A Friendly Open Letter
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Inaccurate Reporting on Hinduism in America Prompts Response to Christianity Today Article

For hundreds of years, immigrant religions have faced a variety of difficulties in being accepted by the existing American society. For Hindus, our biggest problem has been the substantial misunderstanding of our faith by Christians. A recent Christianity Today article has managed to touch on most of the common fallacies about Hinduism and its growing presence in America. A talk with the magazine's editor surprisingly revealed they meant no harm or Insult. Writing to their own Christian audience, they simply did not consider the Hindu's reaction. They truly want "peaceful co-existence" with Hindus. Presented with this unique opportunity for increased Christian/Hindu understanding, we've composed this open letter stating - sometimes frankly - our Hindu point of view on the article. By such exchange of views, we hope to further the growing tolerance between devout Christians and Hindus.

To: Terry Muck, Executive Editor Christianity Today

Regarding: Your February 19th cover article, "The Mosque Next Door, How do we speak the truth in love to Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists?"

Dear Terry:

We were moved by your sincere and conciliatory tone during our phone conversation regarding your magazine's recent article on the growth of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism in America. The article's bleak picture of a "Christian" America being overrun by "alien" religions was quite a shock to us. As both the article's author and Christianity Today's editor, you made your personal and editorial position on religious freedom clear when you stated on the phone, "We

live in an [increasingly] pluralistic society. All the religions need to develop strategies for peaceful co-existence."

We heartily agree with you, but we find the article contains a number of the typical misperceptions, inaccuracies and unjustified fears regarding Hinduism that create disharmony. For the benefit of our readers and yours, we will explain our objections and clarify our feelings point by point.

Do Hindus Belong Here?

The article begins with a description of America's largest Hindu temple (the Sri Venkateswara Swami [Balaji] Temple, located in Aurora, Illinois). You write, "This pastoral calm [of Aurora] is rudely violated [by] a massive Hindu temple with spires that dwarf a Congregational church's white steeple two pastures away." The choice of words conveys not just an "out-of-place" temple, but an "intrusive, wrong, threatening" temple. After our talk, we trust it is accurate to say the temple is no more a "violation" of Aurora's bucolic beauty than the nearby church.

Misinformation on Hinduism

In a very revealing statement, you say, "We learned about [Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam] through missionary reports." Terry, we receive those same reports regularly, and we know that a kind word or accurate statement about our religion in them is as rare as, well, a Hindu temple in an Illinois pasture.

Here are some typical samples: "Millions in India live in fear of offending the gods, gods of idols, animals, five million different gods in all. But pantheistic Hinduism offers no God to love them, no Savior to save them. Hindus go into a temple, bow to an idol, give an offering, get a colored finger mark on their foreheads and that's it. They leave the temple with their souls as empty as when they came." (AMG News). "What Hinduism is teaching as utmost purity is, in the eyes of the Bible, utmost impurity. I had never heard in Hinduism that God is a God of love." (Death of a Guru, by Rabi Maharaj).

Hinduism is a family of religions as different from each other as Christianity, Judaism and Islam. As those three have their common bond is the Old Testament, so do all Hindus accept the sanctity of the Vedas. For most Hindus, God is the Creator, He is both transcendent and immanent. Some Hindus are strict monotheists, acknowledging one Supreme God and no others. Most are properly called henotheists, holding that one God is supreme, but accepting the existence of other, lesser Gods (similar to your Christian angels and archangels). Very few Hindus could be called pantheistic. Nearly all Hindu sects teach that God is a God of love and that devotion is the most effective approach for the masses. Many, but not all, Hindus use divine images of both the Supreme God and the lesser Gods. These images are a means of worship and not the object of worship.

By picking and choosing from obscure practices and beliefs, then adding distortions and lies, missionary reports have painted a picture of a Hinduism which simply does not exist. Those who have explored it with an open mind have found Hindu thought and scripture rich, subtle and profound.

Your Facts Were Wrong

The article proceeds to focus again on the Aurora temple. The section begins, "Consider the reaction of the Aurora community when they first heard in 1982 of the plans to build a Hindu temple. The city council, which had to give approval for a building permit, was deluged with calls and letters from fearful citizens. Letters protesting the temple poured into the Aurora Beacon-News, outnumbering supporting letters by an estimated 20 to 1." Local pastor John Riggs is quoted as saying, "Biblically-oriented Christians in this community were naturally afraid of the propagation of a polytheistic faith in their community." Riggs' wife wrote to the newspaper saying, "Violation of Deuteronomy 20's [actually Deut. 5:8] prohibition of worshiping idols put the whole community in danger of God's judgement."

This section is both inaccurate and misleading. Joe Gillette, editorial page editor of the Aurora Beacon-News, told us that 25 letters were sent to his newspaper regarding the temple, 15 in favor and 10 against. It is true, Gillette said, that there was initially a very vocal protest, but the protest was from a handful of people. The article conveys a larger protest, and fails to mention that the local council of Christian ministers endorsed the temple, or that several ministers, including Rev. Emery Percell of the Westley United Methodist Church in Aurora, spoke in the temple's favor at the hearings. No mention is made that all city permits were

granted without a single dissenting vote. Nor does the article note the current, widespread acceptance of the temple by the non-Hindu residents of Aurora. The article's selective reporting conveys the false impression that this temple was built - and remains - against the wishes of the community.

Second, by quoting Pastor Riggs without comment, the article tacitly endorses his point of view. We asked Pastor Riggs in an interview how he looked at freedom of religion. He said, "I do believe in freedom of religion, but shall not give any quarter to non-Christians." If the people opposed to Hinduism had enough votes, he told Hinduism Today, they could and should stop a temple from being built. We believe this approach is not merely unenlightened, it's patently unconstitutional. A city cannot deny permits solely on the basis of religious beliefs. Such religious discrimination is contrary to America's Bill of Rights.

In our conversation, you offered this explanation, "We are not endorsing what happened in Aurora by any means, and I'm sorry it came through this way. We intended self-criticism."

What Is the Threat From Other Religions?

Let's now put together several quotes from the balance of the article. "In short, the religions are coming, and our spiritual defenses are vulnerable. What is it we are to do?" "Does it make sense to apply a love ethic to the very people who live by philosophies we feel are threatening our way of life?"

We recently were invited to participate in an extraordinary event in Oxford, England. Seventy politicians and seventy spiritual leaders of all faiths gathered to face critical issues of human survival. There were Christians there who are truly tolerant of mankind's other spiritual traditions. And there were a few, sadly, who overtly exemplified the old imperious Christian consciousness of "one-wayism." No Hindu expressed such a narrow dogmatism. Nor did any Buddhist, Jew, Muslim or African priest. We urge all Christians to join us in loving our forefather's faith, while honoring (and not merely tolerating) the faith of others. As you rightly note, the world will continue to be religiously pluralistic.

Some may wonder if we are over-reacting to the article. We did get two "outside" reactions, so you can judge for yourself. Joe Gillette said he thought the message was, "Hey, Christians, we are going to be on the defensive and fighting for our lives and better start digging trenches now." Pastor Riggs said the article "reflected my point of view," that is, his belief "to give no quarter to non-Christians."

An Appeal For Harmony

In conclusion, we ask your magazine's staff and readers to take the time to study these "foreign religions" you are so concerned about. You have read and been told many things which are not true. We, like you, are religious people - your brothers, not your enemies.