

[Alien Gods on American Turf; New Book Explores Christian Reaction To US Saturation by Eastern Faiths](#)

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Until recently Terry Muck was executive editor of Christianity Today, the leading magazine for evangelical Christians in the western world. He is now a professor of comparative religion at the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Texas. In 1976 he spent a year in Sri Lanka studying how closely Buddhist monks follow their ancient monastic rule. It was a brisk, rich cultural awakening and he "make a lot of good friends" as he told HINDUISM TODAY in an interview about his new book Alien Gods on American Turf. He returned to the US to find that Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam were establishing deep, widespread roots in what he assumed was essentially a Christian landscape.

This evolution disturbed and excited him. In his final two years at Christianity Today Muck wrote Alien Gods, an after-the-fact and prophetic warning to Christians about the orientalizing of America. The book's later chapters offer a policy agenda on how to live as good, loving Christians with Hindu or Buddhist or Islamic neighbors and, if possible, gently, intelligently talk them into converting to Protestant Christianity. Provocatively, the book's subheading reads "How world religions are evangelizing your neighborhood," and ironic twist of the fact that it is Christians (and Moslems) who do the lion's share of proselytizing in local and global neighborhoods. It is also blustery Christians who have fought tooth and nail to keep a lot of Hindu, Buddhist, or Sikh facilities from getting off the ground. But Muck agrees this is abhorrent. "one of the reasons I did the book was to get people to think well thought out positions rather than just throwing up their hands in horror. When that happens you get bad legislation and you get nasty incidents in neighborhoods and all kinds of things."

Muck illumines in fairly friendly tones what he calls the "invisible crisis" - Asian

religions are building halls that invite public attendance. A large number of Americans are shifting their spiritual allegiance to these institutions and views. Hindu/Buddhist philosophy and practices are vividly coloring American worldviews, culture and media. He also reflects on the reality that Christians have not only fallen far short in exporting their faith to foreign shores, but now find what they considered their God-given country awash in Taoist martial arts, Ganesha worship, vegetarianism, Buddhist movie stars, yoga instructors, Vedanta cosmology, a revival of the Pagan Wicwa (chiwh) religion and millions of people practicing oriental mediation techniques. Alien Gods being with a telling anecdote of a young American man, dissatisfied with Christianity, who meets a Hindu widow at a US hair salon (she is the hair stylist), marries her in India and converts of Hinduism.

As Muck acknowledges in Alien Gods, the Asian/Islam presence is growing toward even larger stature. He sees in ten to twenty years that non-Christian religions "will be fully established features of our religious terrain, gaining both political and economic influence." By the years 2050 one projection says Anglo-Saxon Americans will drop below the 50% level of population, making them the largest minority, no longer a majority.

Alien Gods was written for Christians. Talking to Terry Muck is quite a bit different from reading the book. The book has an alarmist tone, though it is softened by anecdotes of this excursions into alien houses of worship. Muck talks to us with a warm enthusiasm about multiple religions nestled on Main Street. The book also has some quirky mistakes: he calls Rajneesh a Hindu guru. Actually he was an eclectic Jain. And endearingly, Swami Vivekananda is described as speaking at the 1893 Parliament of Religions with flowing white hair. He really had short-cropped, black hair under an orange turban.

Muck is on a crusade the works to the benefit of Hindus, despite the fact that as an evangelical Baptist he is compelled to counsel conversion. "I wanted to write the book mainly to raise people's consciousness that we are living in a pluralistic society. That is not going to change. We need to think how to live in such a culture peacefully." Muck sees the process of dialogue as crucial, a time for similarities to surface and differences to diminish. He downplayed the fact that Christian belief systems (original sin, all other religions are Satan's work, Hell for those who don't accept Jesus) tend to make such talks uncomfortable. He also thinks that "conversion does not have to be a part of it."

Muck is a member of the Society for Buddhist/Christian Studies. He says he hoped that Hindus would read the book. "I would want it to be something they could read and not feel maligned, something that has ideas that can be discussed even if you don't agree with them. I didn't want it to be a mean book in any way. I hope I do get some feedback from Hindus and Buddhists." Muck's phone number is (512) 794-9260.

There is, of course, much to disagree with in this book. Fundamentalists hold to a myth that the US is a Christian nation. Muck openly laments at one point that the secular courts don't recognize Christian values - though he does avow full expression of freedom of religion. But America is Christian land is rather a selective notion. From the long view, America is a land of shamanism, the original spiritual path of the Indian tribes who were swindled and killed out of their nation by exploitive Christians. The American federal system did not come from Europe but from the sophisticated Indian tribal organizations. And the founding fathers of the United States, while ostensibly being Christians, belonged to secret metaphysical societies that were flavored by Asian thought. Most were Deists, who rejected the Christian tent to grace and divine intervention. The US was founded as a secular nation. In one document Thomas Jefferson mentioned the Hindus and Muslims as beneficiaries of American spiritual freedom.

Finally there is the quite of proselytizing. Muck articulates 3 positions that modern Christians have adopted. They are normative pluralism, which recognizes "that all religions are different ways are looking at the same thing." Many Christian academics hold this view. Then, inclusivism, which states that the work and redeeming death of Jesus Christ saved all humanity, and they need not know this or recognize it - thus Hindus and Buddhists go to heaven because of Jesus. The third position is exclusivism, which holds that to attain salvation, the only true vehicle is through accepting Jesus as one's savior. Muck argues for exclusivism, and itemizes a 9-point conversational evangelizing method that all Hindus should be warily aware of. Alien Gods is available at Christian book stores or can be ordered by phoning 1-800-323-9409. Or contact Christianity Today, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, ILL 60188.

Talking with Terry Muck

HT: At your lectures, what do you talk about on Alien Gods?

TM: The goals of my lectures are: 1. this [non-Christian permeation] is happening. 2. the first step to take in response is understanding. I present what Hindus and Buddhists believe. They are liable to be your neighbors. You need to intelligently discuss with them what they believe and you believe.

HT: From the book, you appear to be exclusivistic, that is propounding that Christianity is the only true religion.

TM: That is true in a sense. But when people say you are exclusivistic you not only get an approach to truth that says Jesus Christ is the one true way, but most people sense in a that a real fanatic, antagonistic spirit with which witnessing (testifying to the power of the Gospel) is done. That way is wrong. The whole triumphalistic "We're right, you're wrong" kind of thing is the wrong kind of attitude and the one that frightens me the most. I believe all religions, but being less than true.

HT: Would you evangelize while participating in an interfaith group? What situation would you evangelize in?

TM: No. It would be inappropriate to evangelize the interfaith group. I think that the most effective witness is what you are. If someone appeared to be spiritually searching I suppose I would use...persuasion. But the minute I sensed that it is not, then that is the time to shut up.

HT: How about the sometimes duplicitous and insulting missionary approach?

TM: I am afraid what happens is that the missionaries get so intent to their evangelizing that the people they are evangelizing cease to be the people, children of God, and become objects of conversion, which I think is wrong. There have been a lot of bad abuses.

HT: What is your current project?

TM: Another book that will be the ten most commonly asked questions that I think the average American Christian needs to know about Hindus or Buddhist neighbors: "Can I go and visit them at the temple?," "Should I let my Kids play with their kids?," "Are they going to Hell?"

HT: What is the answer to the last question on Hell?

TM: I don't know if I can give an answer on that. You will have to wait until I write the chapter.

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