

## [Dialogue Down Under](#)

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# Dialogue Down Under

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## Maverick Interfaith Group Boosts Morale and Stature of Australian Hindus

Jeff Drake, retired teacher and unofficial chairman of a maverick interfaith dialogue group in Adelaide, South Australia, explains as I attend one of the group's meetings, "It seemed urgent that we have some forum to discuss religious matters, to resolve problems before they arise, to make some small contribution to religious harmony."

They are called rather plainly Interfaith Dialogue, started in 1987 with a number of Hindus, several Christians and a Sufi Muslim. Since that time the group has attracted Buddhists, Sikhs, Jews and members of other minority religions. Organizers believes it is unique within the Australian setting. Fundamentalists cock a suspicious eye toward it, with occasional accusations that Christians who "fraternize" with members of other faiths are abandoning their own. At the meeting attended by HINDUISM TODAY, several people were concerned to preserve their anonymity, requesting no photos be taken.

The group meets monthly, usually in private homes, but also holds open meetings. Official meetings are confined to a core membership and invited speakers. Drake observes, "Large meetings, involving extensive discussions, generally prove unproductive, and tend to become acrimonious. Smaller meetings seem to allow greater flexibility." Working forums have been difficult to create: "Examining another religion means a reinvestigation of one's own beliefs, of challenging one's own convictions. There are tensions and misunderstandings, especially where theological precepts meet head on."

There are about 80 people present at the open meeting attended by HINDUISM TODAY. About a quarter of the audience is Hindu. Discussion centers on the nature of God as perceived by various religious traditions, and each strikes at the very heart of theology. The presentations are those of committed devotees; there is no place for that clinical anthropological detachment which seems to denude religion of all vitality.

Dr. R. Ravindran, a foundation member of the Hindu Society of South Australia, is the first speaker. His exposition leads to several questions, mainly from other Hindus. Dr. Ravindran is followed by a Muslim imam and a Catholic teacher. There is some debate between the imam and several Christians in the audience, and the Catholic teacher's commentary, which seems rather uncompromising for such a gathering, invites skeptical comments from liberal Christians. However, order is maintained by the tactful intervention of the chairman. By the time the last speaker, a Buddhist, takes the podium, the essential good humor of the meeting is restored.

Drake closes the meeting with the comment that the fact that members of various religions can discuss their differences as well as their similarities is a symbol of the possibilities of multi-faith harmony. His sentiments are echoed by the Hindus at the gathering. Dr. Ravindran says, "It is important that the Hindu view be put. This is a chance to explain our religion to others, to clear up misconceptions." Another Hindu, who asks not to be named, comments, "The western press would have us as a lot of idolaters and superstitious fanatics. Yet here are Christians and others, who are prepared to treat our beliefs and rituals seriously."

But are there real benefits in such meetings? Dr. Ravindran believes there are. "We have a chance to meet in goodwill. We are a minority religion and must be accepted in this country. This is a useful step." Another Hindu says, "By discussing my own understanding of my own religion. The fact that we are talking to each other, rather than about each other, is a cause for optimism."

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