"Mr. President, Why Do You Exclude Us From Your Prayers?":
Hindus Challenge American Pluralism

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My title is taken from a petition from American Hindus sent by the umbrella organization, Hindu International Council Against Defamation (HICAD), and several hundred individual Hindus to President George W. Bush following the events of September 11, 2001. It refers to the fact that Bush included Muslim, Christian, and Jewish leaders in his national prayer service on September 16, 2001, but excluded Hindus. As you may recall, a number of interfaith services were organized in different parts of the country in the days following 9/11. These services, typically conducted by Protestant ministers, Catholic priests, and Jewish rabbis, also for the first time included Muslim clerics. Muslim spokespersons traveled around the country emphasizing that they were part of the same tradition as Christians and Jews, and proclaimed that "we worship the same God as you do." It appeared as though their lobbying yielded immediate results, most visibly in the attempt to enlarge the American "Judeo-Christian" sacred canopy into an "Abrahamic" one that includes Muslims.

The need to include Muslims, "the fastest growing religious group in the U.S.," within the fabric of American religions had been recognized several years earlier by the Clinton administration. But only in the wake of 9/11 did this effort begin to pay dividends, with the term "Abrahamic" religions entering public discourse.[1] Several newspapers and magazines carried reports on this development (I for one saw the term "Abrahamic" used publicly for the first time in an article in the *Los Angeles Times* in the post-9/11 period). Hindu Americans, however, viewed such a reconfiguration of American religion with alarm, fearing that it would further marginalize non-Abrahamic religions such as Hinduism.

The HICAD petition is a modified version of a post-9/11 letter written to President Bush by a Euro-American Hindu and posted on a Hindu Internet discussion group. The letter was subsequently circulated on several Indian American Internet sites and widely discussed in laudatory terms. Several Indian American newspapers also carried it. (For the text of the HICAD petition, see Appendix I.)

I want to draw your attention to three aspects of the petition. First and most obviously, it calls attention to the fact that practitioners of Hinduism are a numerically significant part of American society (see paragraph two and the last paragraph). Secondly, the petition describes Hindu Americans as model members of the U.S.:

> We are a hard working people who contribute to the American society, economy, education and quality of life, in a proportion much larger than our numbers. . . . Non-violence, pluralism, and respect (not just tolerance) of other traditions of worship to the One Almighty God, are integral parts of its [Hinduism's] basic tenets. We are a family oriented people, with very low divorce rates. We are frugal, save for our children's education, and support our elders and extended families. Because of these beliefs, Hindu-Americans are called ideal citizens.

Finally, it draws attention to the difference between Hinduism and Islam. While this is done subtly in the petition, the writer stresses in the original letter that Bush needs to help educate Americans to the fact that "Hinduism is very, very different from Islam . . . the opposite in fact, in many integral ways."[2] As I demonstrate, emphasizing the distinction between Hinduism and Islam becomes prominent in the post-9/11 public statements of many self-styled representatives of American Hindus.

For some years now, groups of Hindu Americans have challenged the portrayals of Hinduism prevalent in the wider society and have worked to ensure that the religion is recognized as an important contributor to the American religious mosaic. In this chapter, I will focus on these efforts, particularly the difference between such strategies in the pre-9/11 and immediate post-9/11 period. In

the pre-9/11 period, Hinduism was defended by focusing primarily on two issues: 1) the greatness of Hinduism: its antiquity, tolerance, pluralism, and non-violence (all characteristics enumerated in the petition), as well as its theological and scientific sophistication; and 2) the need to combat negative American stereotypes of the religion, such as polytheism (see the emphasis on the "traditions of worship to the One Almighty God" in the petition), idol worship, the caste system, and misogyny (hence the stress in the petition that "Hindus are a family oriented people with very low divorce rates").

Immediately following 9/11, however, many Hindu spokespersons publicly attacked Islam. They emphasized the differences between Hinduism and Islam and took a strong anti-Pakistan position. Furthermore, these spokespersons also criticized scholars of religion and organizations such as the Academy of American Religion for allegedly being anti-Hindu and pro-Islamic. This anti-Islamic, Hinducentric platform is not just a post-9/11 development. The two faces of American Hinduism, genteel multiculturalism and militant nationalism, have long coexisted. But in the past, Hindu nationalist attitudes were largely confined to intra-group discussions and presentations. Hindu American spokespersons, in contrast, publicly projected the kindly visage of genteel multiculturalism. After 9/11, however, anti-Islamic Hindu nationalism emerged publicly for the first time. In addition, many more members of the Hindu American community were galvanized to defend Hinduism and India in the post-9/11 period than before.

Most adults of Indian origin in the U.S. today are immigrants who arrived after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act. According to the 2000 census, there were 1,678,765 Asian Indians living in the U.S. They were also one of the fastest growing communities in the 1990s, with a growth rate of 105.87 percent. Key to this explosive growth has been the influx of computer

data programmers (on H-1B visas) and their families. In the past decade, Indians have become prominent in the field of information technology, and are now important players in the American computer industry. Although relatively small in terms of sheer numbers, Indian Americans often wield a disproportionate influence since they are among the wealthiest and most educated foreign-born groups in this country.[3]

There are no official figures on the religious distribution of Indians in the U.S. According to census figures, Hindus constitute more than 80 percent of the population in India.[4] It is likely that Hindus constitute a much smaller proportion of Indian Americans, since Indian religious minorities, particularly Sikhs and Christians, are present in much larger numbers in the U.S. John Fenton reports that 65 percent of the Indians he surveyed in Atlanta in the 1980s were from a Hindu background.[5] Min's survey of Indians found a similar proportion of Hindus in Queens, New York in the late 1990s.[6] According to the estimate of Hofrenning and Chiswick, however, the proportion of Hindus among Indian Americans was only 45 percent.[7] While "upper" castes form only around 25 percent of the Indian population, given the elite character of the immigration to the U.S., most Indian Americans tend to be drawn from this background.

My findings here draw on a seven-year study and book in progress on the new forms, practices, and interpretations of Hinduism in the United States. As part of this research, I studied twelve Hindu organizations representing the five major categories of Hindu organizations in the U.S.: *satsangs* (local worship groups), *bala vihars* (educational associations for children), temples, Hindu student organizations, and umbrella groups. Besides participating in the activities and programs of the organizations, I conducted detailed interviews with leaders and many of the members. I have also followed the activities of the Hindu Indian community around the country by

reading several Indian American newspapers (*India West*, *India Post*, *India Journal*) and the international magazine, *Hinduism Today*, published in Hawaii. This particular chapter, however, is based primarily on analysis of discussions posted by four Internet groups as well as articles and discussions on several websites and Internet magazines devoted to Indian or Hindu related topics.

Given the educational and occupational profile of Indian Americans, it is not surprising that they have such a large presence on the Internet. The Internet makes it possible for Indian Americans to disseminate information around the country and the world within a matter of minutes, and provides a forum for discussion, agenda planning, group mobilization, and the rapid formulation of responses. Through the Internet, even isolated individuals and small groups can be closely networked to provide support for people and issues outside of the mainstream. The four discussion groups I studied, Indian Civilization, Indic Traditions, Hindu Reform, and Indian Diaspora, consisted of 150 to 900 members each. Anywhere from five to fifty messages were posted daily. The postings include 1) news items and articles from a variety of sources (newspapers, magazines, other Internet sites, or books); 2) commentary and discussion about current events and events in the future; and 3) report on action that individuals and groups had taken or were going to take in support of Hindu and Indian causes (for example, copies of letters sent to newspapers, politicians and other organizations, speeches given or to be given, and meetings and conferences that were being organized).

As sociologist Stephen Warner points out, immigrants were able to hold onto their religious identity and practices even in the assimilationist era of American history, since Americans have traditionally viewed religion as the most acceptable and non-threatening basis for community formation and expression.[8] Reflecting on the patterns of European immigration to the U.S. at the turn of the century, Will Herberg in his now classic formulation, writes:

> Of the immigrant who came to this country it was expected that, sooner or later, either in his own person or through his children, he would give up virtually everything he had brought with him from the "old country"—his language, his nationality, his manner of life—and would adopt the ways of his new home. Within broad limits, however, his becoming an American did not involve his abandoning the old religion in favor of some native American substitute. Quite the contrary, not only was he expected to retain his old religion . . . but such was the shape of America that it was largely in and through his religion that he, or rather his children and grandchildren, found an identifiable place in American life.[9]

Writing about contemporary immigrants from India and Pakistan, Raymond Williams makes the same claim:

> In the United States, religion is the social category with clearest meaning and acceptance in the host society, so the emphasis on religious affiliation is one of the strategies that allows the immigrant to maintain self identity while simultaneously acquiring community acceptance.[10]

The literature on immigrant religion in the U.S. indicates that religious organizations become the means of maintaining and expressing ethnic identity not just for non-Christians like the Hindus, but also for groups such as Chinese Christians, Korean Christians, and Maya Catholics.[11]

Since religion in the U.S. defines and sustains immigrant ethnic life, religion and religious institutions come to be more important in the immigrant context than in the home country. Thus, Raymond Williams indicates, "Immigrants are religious—by all counts more religious than they were before they left home—because religion is one of the important identity markers that helps them preserve individual self-awareness and cohesion in a group."[12]

In a multicultural society, there is pressure on immigrants to create a "public" ethnic identity, as opposed to a purely private one. Because of the importance of religion and ethnicity in defining personal identity in the U.S., immigrants find that they are frequently forced to explain the meaning of their beliefs and practices to American friends and co-workers, and even sometimes to their own children. Thus, religious doctrines have to be recast to fit American culture and society. Often, non-

Christians find themselves having to legitimize their religion by drawing parallels to Christian concepts and practices. Religious beliefs also have to be simplified to be easily understandable and summarized to be presented in "sound bite" versions. In addition, immigrants have the burden of having to confront negative stereotypes and correct misrepresentations of their culture and religion that prevail in the wider society.

Thus, having to be the repository of ethnicity leads to profound transformations in immigrant religion.[13] Immigrant religions experience changes in organization and in interpretation. Since religious institutions generally become the primary ethnic and community centers for immigrants, they manifest increasing congregationalism and lay leadership.[14] As de facto ethnic institutions, most immigrant religious organizations also develop regional and national associations to unify the group, define their identity, and represent their interests.[15]

Armand Mauss points out that new religions in the U.S. have always had to maintain a delicate balancing act between assimilating to established American patterns of religious organization and expression (a strategy of accommodation) and maintaining their separateness and distinctiveness (a strategy of resistance).[16] If they accommodate too much, they jeopardize their distinctiveness and risk disappearing altogether. If they remain too distinctive or militant, however, they incur hostility and repression. According to James Davison Hunter, leaders of religious organizations have accomplished this dance between assimilation and resistance through a variety of internal (intra-group) and external negotiations.[17]

After briefly describing the types of internal negotiations taking place within the Hindu American community, this chapter focuses on the external negotiations that Hindu American leaders have been engaging in over the past few years. Now that the religious traditions of post-1965

immigrants have become institutionalized in the U.S., they are increasingly making public claims. In short, these new traditions demand both recognition and acceptance as *American* religions. Public acceptance of Judaism as an American religion (along with Christianity) around the middle of the twentieth century radically transformed the American religious landscape and, with it, the self-definition of the American nation. We seem to be at a similar historic point now. Following 9/11, there are attempts to refashion America's Judeo-Christian religious identity into a tripartite Abrahamic model inclusive of Muslims as well as Christians and Jews. This attempt is challenged by groups such as Hindus, who argue that it is too narrow; at the same time, conservative Christians criticize the Abrahamic model for being too inclusive.[18] While it is too early to gauge the relative success or failure of the Abrahamic model, the public arguments made by critics as well as supporters bear watching.

Religion seems to have become more important for Hindus as a marker of identity in the U.S. Many of the Hindu immigrants I interviewed mentioned that they had become more religious in this country. Generally, they took Hinduism and their identity as Hindus for granted in India, but in the U.S. they had to think about the meaning of their religion and religious identity for the first time. Other Hindu immigrants claimed that they were not especially religious, but nevertheless participated in Hindu organizations for social and cultural reasons, and "for the sake of the children."

Unlike many other established religions, Hinduism does not have a founder, a central authority, nor a single canonical text or commentary. Consequently, Hinduism in India consists of an extraordinary array of practices, deities, texts, and schools of thought. There are even those who question whether there is one unitary religion called "Hinduism" at all, arguing instead that "what we call 'Hinduism' is a geographically defined group of distinct but related religions."[19] Due to this

diversity, the nature and character of Hinduism varies greatly by region, caste, and historical period. Furthermore, it is a religion stressing orthopraxis over theological belief.

For all these reasons, the average Hindu immigrant is often unable to explain the "meaning" of Hinduism and its "central tenets," something that they are repeatedly asked to do in the American context. In the words of religion scholar Vasudha Narayanan, herself a Hindu, "[W]e are forced to articulate over and over again what it means to be a Hindu and an Indian to our friends and our children, and one feels ill-equipped for the task. . . [In India] one was never called upon to explain Deepavali or Sankaranti [festivals], and least of all, 'Hinduism'."[20] It is this need that Hindu American organizations seek to fill.

Leaders of Hindu American organizations have been trying to recast and reformulate Hinduism to make it a suitable vehicle for Hindu Americans to use for assimilating into multicultural America. They have taken upon themselves the task of simplifying, standardizing, and codifying the religion to make it easier to understand, articulate, and practice. Hindu websites summarize the "central beliefs" of Hinduism or the "basic principles of Hindu dharma." Speakers at Hindu student organizations give talks about the "essence of the Gita" (which is generally defined as the central Hindu text). In the process, a capsuled, intellectual Hinduism is created, far different from the diversity of ritual practices and caste observances that are the characteristic of everyday Hinduism in India.

Interpretations of Hinduism in the U.S. explicitly compare and contrast it with Abrahamic religions (the concept was being used in Internet discussion groups like Indic Traditions long before 9/11) Many Hindu American leaders are interested in transforming Hinduism into a global, universal religion, instead of an ethnic religion, one tied to India and to the Indian people. In this regard, there

have also been attempts to institutionalize conversion practices and ceremonies and to provide support to Western converts.

In short, when I refer to "the development of an American Hinduism," I mean the many modifications of Hinduism that have taken place as Hindu immigrants and their children develop an ethnic identity and community in the U.S. As Mauss points out, some of these modifications are the outcome of attempts to accommodate to the American environment by making Hinduism more compatible with American culture and society.[21] Others arise out of the struggles of being nonwhite immigrants and religious minorities in the U.S., and trying to resist assimilation by emphasizing the distinctness of Hinduism and Indian culture. The contradiction between these two intertwined strategies is embedded in the emerging American Hinduism. One manifestation of these contradictions can be seen in the two sides of what I call "official" American Hinduism, by which I mean the articulation of Hinduism by spokespersons of Hindu American umbrella organizations.[22] (This I contrast with "popular" Hinduism, or the beliefs and practices of the Hindu masses in the U.S.). These two sides are outlined below.

Hindu American leaders, on the one hand, promote a genteel multiculturalism that emphasizes the tolerance and pluralism of Hinduism, and its contribution to American society as well as toward the solving of global problems. Many of them, however, simultaneously support a militant Hindu nationalism replete with diatribes against Muslims, Christians, and secular Hindus. Several scholars have argued that Hindu nationalism obtains more support among Hindus in the U.S. than in India, since it resonates more in the diaspora where Hindus are a racial and religious minority.[23] Although the two sides seem very different, they are actually interlinked. Often the same people promote both facets, albeit in different contexts. Jews are used as a model in both cases. In

multiculturalist discourse, Jews are emulated as a highly successful group who has integrated into mainstream American society while maintaining their religious and cultural distinctness, close community ties, and connections with the home country. Militant nationalists, in contrast, emphasize a Hindu holocaust (at the hands of the Muslims) and the need for Hindus to have a religious homeland like Israel. There are links between right wing Hindu nationalist groups and extremist Jewish groups who make common cause against a common Muslim enemy.[24] I argue that the two different self-presentations grow out of the contradictions of being part of a professionally successful, but racialized minority group in a multicultural society. Both are strategies to obtain recognition and validation within American society: one drawing on a model minority discourse celebrating the achievements of Hindu culture and Hindu Indian Americans, and the other drawing on a oppressed minority discourse that highlights a history of victimization and the need for recompense and self-determination.[25]

There are several types of Hindu umbrella organizations in the U.S. Some, for example, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA), the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS), and the Overseas Friends of the Bharatiya Janata Party (OFBJP), are branches of Hindu organizations based in India. Others, such as the Southern California based Federation of Hindu Associations (FHA) and the New Jersey based Infinity Foundation, are independent, regional, American organizations. These latter organizations are sometimes interlinked with the former in a variety of informal ways. In 1970, the VHP of America (VHPA), a branch of the VHP in India, was founded in New York. It is the oldest Hindu American umbrella organization established in the U.S. According to its web site, the VHPA was founded in order to support the Hindu American family facing the challenges of living in the U.S.[26] Clearly, this organization is oriented primarily toward the Hindu American community. In

1987, however, the VHPA formed the Hindu Student Council, which regularly organizes campus events showcasing various facets of Hinduism directed toward the non-Hindu public.

At these and other public events, Hindu American leaders characterize Hinduism as the only world religion that is truly tolerant and pluralistic (in contrast to the Abrahamic religions). A verse from the Rig Veda, "truth is one, sages call it by different names" (1.164.46), is constantly reiterated in support of this claim. According to the Federation of Hindu Associations (FHA), Hinduism is the most suitable religion for the twenty-first century since the modern pluralistic world "requires all religions to affirm [the] truth of other traditions to ensure tranquility."[27] Only Hinduism fits the bill. Therefore, the FHA sees as its mission the safeguarding of Hinduism "for our children, for the world."[28] Many Hindu American leaders also refer to Hinduism as *sanatana dharma* (eternal faith), reinforcing the point that it is the most ancient and universalistic of all religions.

The content and meaning of a Hindu American identity are articulated by Hindu umbrella organizations. According to such leaders, Hindu Indian Americans are the proud descendants of the world's oldest living civilization and religion. Hindu Americans are also characterized as a group that has been able to maintain the balance between materialism and spirituality. Proof of this claim lies in the very success Hindu Americans have enjoyed in adapting to American life and drawing the best from it without losing their inner values and cultural integrity. These Hindu organizations also counter the negative American image of Hinduism as primitive by arguing that, contrary to American stereotypes, Hinduism is actually very sophisticated and scientific. Many examples are provided in Hindu American publications and web sites to make this point, such as the Hindu view that the universe is billions of years old, and the sophisticated level of ancient Indian knowledge regarding astronomy, mathematics, metallurgy, and physics.

Hindu American leaders explicitly appeal to the model minority label, as in the petition to George W. Bush. They attribute the success of Indians in the U.S. to their Hindu religious and cultural heritage which, they argue, gives Hindu Americans a special aptitude for science and math, and makes them adaptable, hard working, and family oriented. Community spokespersons indicate that these qualities, together with their professional expertise (particularly in the fields of computers, medicine and engineering) and affluence, make Hindu Indian Americans a group that has an important leadership role to play in twenty-first-century America.

A constantly heard refrain of community leaders is that Hindu Americans should emulate the model of Jewish Americans. As a highly successful group that is integrated into mainstream American society while maintaining its religious and cultural distinctness, close community ties, and connections with the home country, American Jews are viewed as a group that has been able to "fit in" while remaining different. This is the route to success that Hindu Americans also want to adopt in their quest to assume their own position in American society.

In 1997, the VHPA spawned the American Hindus Against Defamation (AHAD), perhaps the first Hindu umbrella group explicitly oriented toward American society at large. Its goal is the aggressive defense of Hinduism against defamation, commercialization, and misuse. According to Ajay Shah, the convener of the group, "In seeking the honor of Hindus and demanding they not be ridiculed, . . . we are being good Americans. In our fight for Hindu dignity, we are championing American pluralism."[29] The organization has helped organize several successful protest campaigns against the use of Hindu deities, icons, and texts by American businesses and the entertainment industry. For instance, along with other Hindu organizations, AHAD launched protest campaigns against the "Om" line of perfume marketed by the Gap, a CD cover released by Sony Music featuring

a distorted image of a Hindu deity, an episode of *The Simpsons* on the Fox network caricaturing the Hindu god Ganesh, a Xena episode in which Lord Krishna was a character, the use of a verse of the Gita as background music during an orgy scene in the film *Eyes Wide Shut*, and a shoe company and a company making toilet seats, both of which used pictures of Hindu deities on their products. In all of these cases, AHAD successfully persuaded the company in question to withdraw or modify the offending product or show. The success of AHAD was followed by the formation of several other anti-defamation groups around the country, including the Hindu International Council Against Defamation (HICAD) based in New Jersey, which organized the petition drive targeted at George W. Bush.

Other Hindu organizations have focused on the portrayal of Hinduism within academia. This is the central concern of the New Jersey-based Infinity Foundation. In 2000, Infinity founded the Educational Council of Indic Traditions (ECIT) and the associated Indic Traditions discussion group, and described its mission as follows:

> This Council . . . will be involved in the process of conducting independent research to a) document the contributions by India to world civilization and to b) ascertain the degree to which Indic traditions and their contributions are accurately and adequately portrayed in contemporary American society. Preliminary findings indicate that Indic traditions, which include Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism have been and continue to be misrepresented, stereotyped, or pigeon-holed both in academic institutions and by the mass media."[30]

The mission statement made clear that the term "Indic" excluded religions that were "imported" into India, such as Islam and Christianity. Furthermore, although the term "Indic traditions" was defined to include Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism, in practice the focus of the foundation has been largely on Hindu traditions and culture.

One of the first activities of the ECIT was to send a letter to the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), which had funded a project to train high school teachers to teach the Ramayana. The letter was to protest the inclusion of one lesson where the author, anthropologist Susan Wadley, had used a contemporary Dalit (lower caste) song critical of the Ramayana to make the point that the ideology of caste was contested in India.[31] Describing the Dalit author of the song as an "anti-Hindu activist," the letter makes the case that many Americans were Hindus and therefore it was the responsibility of teachers and scholars to be sensitive about how they were representing the religion in a multicultural classroom context:

> This complaint is on behalf of United States citizens and parents of school children. Hinduism and Sikhism are no longer merely about a far away exotic land that Americans have little to do with. We have Hindus and Sikhs right here in our classrooms today, amongst our office co-workers and as our neighbors. It is irresponsible for any multicultural school to introduce a protest song against Hindus and Sikhs that includes hate speech . . .What does this do to foster mutual respect and understanding among different ethnic and religious communities in America's sensitive tapestry, now represented in classrooms? Should Government funds be used to create such racially and religiously inflammatory teaching materials, denigrating to one's classmates sensitivities, ironically in the name of multiculturalism? . . . [S]uch bias about others' religions and religious ideals, others' sacred texts and spirituality. . . would lead to a warped understanding of others' history and religions and to unintended consequences, including stereotyping and hatred of minority groups.[32]

Before 9/11, the President of the foundation, Rajiv Malhotra, spoke and wrote publicly about the tolerance, pluralism, and dynamism of Hinduism.[33] He emphasized that many Hindu ideas had influenced important Western thinkers (such as Emerson, Thoreau and Jung). He also noted that Hindu concepts and practices had been incorporated into quantum mechanics, meditation, yoga, and herbal medicine, yet the contribution of Hinduism to these areas was not acknowledged.[34] Malhotra began contracting sympathetic scholars to write papers and books documenting ancient Indian

contributions to mathematics, science, technology, philosophy, and psychology, as well as organizing conferences to bring such scholars together.

Several other Hindu leaders around the country also spoke up against what they felt were fundamental misrepresentations of Hinduism within wider American society. These efforts focused on three central issues that Americans generally held negative views: Hindu conceptions of the divine, the nature of the caste system, and the position of women in Hindu society.

Many American Hindu spokespersons objected to their religion being characterized as "polytheistic" and "idol worshiping." They pointed out that, although the Hindu pantheon consisted of an array of deities, many Hindus believed that all of these deities are different forms manifested by one Supreme Being. They argued that most Hindus worshipped a primary deity, and that some traditions (such as Vaishnavism) only acknowledged the existence of that primary deity. On this basis, they claimed that Hinduism was in fact a monotheistic religion. Others maintained that essentially Western categories such as "monotheism" and "polytheism" were insufficient to describe Hindu notions of the divine. Similarly, most American Hindu leaders found the English term "idol" offensive, since it carried the negative connotation that the worshiper considered the graven image to be divine. They preferred the term "icon" or "image," and argued that these images were only to represent the idea of the divine and to provide the worshiper with a tangible mental focus.

Hindu Indian American leaders also maintained that the caste system was never religiously sanctioned by Hinduism and thus not central to Hindu practice.[35] The absence of immutable birth-based caste groups in the Rig Veda along with Lord Krishna's statement in the Bhagavad Gita, "The four orders of men arose from me, in justice to their natures and their works" (4:13), were often cited in support of the argument that the varna system described in Hindu scriptures was based on

occupation and individual qualities, not birth. They argued that manuals such as the "Laws of Manu," where caste prescriptions and proscriptions were emphasized, were not part of the *sruti* or the primary scriptural corpus of Hindus (which is believed to contain revealed wisdom), but were part of the *smriti* or secondary scriptures (which were not considered to be divinely ordained).

The position of women within Hinduism was another sensitive issue addressed by Hindu American leaders. They argued that Hinduism gave women and men the same rights and that gender equality and respect for women were therefore integral parts of the Hindu tradition. To support their arguments, they pointed to the presence of several powerful goddesses in the Hindu pantheon. Furthermore, they contended that women were held in great esteem in ancient Hindu India. Many of them claimed that the Muslim conquest of India was responsible for the subsequent decline in the status of women.

Other umbrella groups focused on attaining public acknowledgment at the national level of Hinduism as an American religion. In September 2000, despite some opposition from conservative Christians, Indian American lobby groups were successful in having a Hindu priest for the first time open a session of Congress (the occasion being an address by Indian Prime Minister to a joint session of Congress). This was an achievement reported with great pride in Indian American newspapers and websites. A second indication of Hindu Americans recognition by Washington came a month later, when President Bill Clinton issued a proclamation from the White House wishing Indian Americans a Happy Diwali (an important Hindu festival). In return for contributions from Silicon Valley to the Democratic party for the 2000 elections, Indian American computer professionals had requested that the festival be officially recognized by the White House. The Indian American paper *India Post* reported that Indian Americans were jubilant when Clinton issued the greeting, since this "is a

symbolic gesture that speaks volumes to the fact that Indian culture is accepted as part of America's overall fabric."[36]

As we will see below, the careful, tolerant, and pluralistic tones of the pre-9/11 public voice of Hindu Americans changed overnight with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Suddenly, the militant anti-Islamic, Hinducentric side, which had been previously hidden from public view, began to emerge. Many Hindu Indian Americans bombarded their politicians and the media with anti-Pakistani and anti-Islamic propaganda, filled with quotes from the Koran, and also called into radio and television talk shows to criticize Islam. (One Internet group even circulated "talking points" for Hindu Americans to use while calling into such shows). Others spoke up at town meetings to condemn the treatment of minorities in Muslim countries and to challenge the positive portrayals of Islam by Muslim speakers. Members of the Indic Traditions discussion group shot off letters to then-President of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), Vasudha Narayanan, demanding that the organization sponsor panels on Islamic fascism and on "Jihad: God as Weapon of Mass Destruction" in the upcoming annual meetings. Such gestures, they claimed, would serve to counterbalance the organization's excessive focus on Hindu fascism. Another member of Indic Traditions documented the alleged contempt for Hinduism and Hindus by Hinduism scholars by compiling a list from the Internet archives of Religions in South Asia (RISA-L) and from the Internet archives of the Society for Hindu-Christian studies. This putative evidence was then sent to the President of the AAR as well as several Internet discussion groups. Some Hindu Americans also sent e-mails and letters to "South Asian" groups to press a point that they had been making all along: India has nothing in common with Islamic countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh, and should therefore not be lumped together with them. Groups like the Global Organization of Persons of

Indian Origin (GOPIO) were also criticized for trying to create a pan-Indian platform including both "Indic" and "non-Indic" members.

In the weeks immediately following 9/11, Rajiv Malhotra of the Infinity Foundation was invited to several universities to speak about the unfolding events from a Hindu perspective. In his talks at American University and Princeton University, he took the offensive against Islam, criticizing its leadership of "duplicity" for projecting a face of peace and tolerance in the U.S. while promoting fundamentalism at home. In a presentation entitled "The Gita's perspective on the War against Terrorism" at American University, he rejected an anti-war stance and made the argument that the Gita supported "dharmic" or just wars to combat global evil, provided that they were not merely in self-interest and were carried out ethically, without colluding with evil.[37] Malhotra thus publically articulated a Hindu argument against American alliances with Pakistan or Saudi Arabia in its fight against the Taliban. He also took the opportunity to expound on some of his favorite themes, arguing that the post-9/11 situation should lead the U.S. to be "introspect about its chauvinism towards non-western cultures" more generally. He also promoted the idea that Indian traditions of debate would allow for "equal self-representation by all major civilizations in the modern discourse," instead of the reigning Eurocentric model.[38]

During a presentation made at the annual American Academy of Religion meetings in November 2001 (where he had again been invited as a representative of "practicing Hindus"), Malhotra criticized what he characterized as the "five asymmetries in the dialog of civilizations" and accused American scholars of Hinduism of "denying agency and rights to non-westerners," of "academic arson" or the "age-old 'plunder while you denigrate the source' process," and of

"intimidating name-calling to affect censorship," concluding with the demand that Hindus in the diaspora be included as "dialog representatives" in a joint study of the tradition.[39]

Hindu Americans were also more willing to mobilize in support of Indian and Hindu causes in the post 9/11 period. A petition charging CNN of pro-Pakistan and anti-Indian bias (based on an article by Rajiv Malhotra published on Sulekha.com alleging the same) obtained 55,000 signatures. Such an outpouring of support compelled CNN executives to meet with representatives of the Indian community in Atlanta during February 2002.[40] Several Hindu American groups also mobilized to protest the planned screening of two films critical of Hindu nationalism by the New York-based American Museum of Natural History in February 2002 as part of their exhibit, "Meeting God, Elements of Hindu Devotion."[41] A petition (sponsored by HICAD) sent to the authorities at the museum had an introduction similar to the Bush petition, pointing out that the numerous Hindus living in the U.S. comprise a visible and very productive American community. The petition continued:

> In the post 9-11 tragedy, we need to develop a greater understanding and appreciation for diversity in our society. We must educate the cosmopolitan population of the greater New York area and the rest of the USA to respect all our neighbors who might be following diverse religions and traditions. . . . The screening of these anti-Hindu movies will be considered by Hindus in the USA and all over the world as an insult to their faith. As an analogy, please consider if it would be appropriate to stage a documentary on Osama bin Laden and the destruction of the World Trade Center in an exhibit on the elements of Islamic devotion; or a documentary on slavery, colonialism, Christian crusades, white supremacy, Holocaust, Auswitcz, or killings of native Americans, in an exhibit on the Elements of Christian Devotion . . .

The petition concludes:

> We the undersigned, being practicing Hindus and a religious minority in the United States, fear that the screening of these anti-Hinduism movies . . . would promote disrespect, bias and hatred against our religion in the general American populace. We, therefore, urge the American museum of Natural History to drop these movies from the exhibition of 'Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion.[42]

The showing of the films was initially canceled, allegedly because of the threat of violence. Later, when the films were shown at a different venue, a large number of hostile Hindus reportedly turned out. Later in 2002, at the showing of another film critical of Hindu nationalism (this time at Barnard College at Columbia University), Hindu protesters apparently grew so violent that the police had to be called in and the organizers were escorted out under police protection and whisked away in a van.[43]

In this chapter, I have argued that although the genteel multiculturalism and the militant nationalism of Hindu American spokespersons appear to be very different, they are in fact intertwined. Both grow out of the contradictions of being part of a successful immigrant minority group in contemporary America, and are the outcome of a desire for recognition and validation within American society. Nazli Kibria argues that Asian Americans are a "transgressive" group insofar as their experiences merge those of European "ethnic" immigrants who were able to successfully assimilate into the mainstream and those of racialized minorities whose racial identities have hampered societal integration.[44] She points out, however, that it is "precisely this transgressive aspect" that makes their experience "valuable as a source of clues to the puzzle of new immigrant integration." I would similarly argue that it is the transgressive nature of the Hindu American experience that (when combined with the unique features of Hindu history) has given rise to the two contradictory sides of American Hinduism. As successful "ethnics," Hindu Americans embrace a genteel multiculturalism, while their racial and religious marginality pushes them toward militancy and ethnic nationalism.

What explains the turn toward militant mobilization strategies following 9/11? There are two explanations for expatriate nationalism in the literature: 1) It is a product of immigrant

marginalization; and 2) It is a strategic response to gain resources in multicultural host societies. The public emergence of Hindu nationalism in the post-9/11 period probably has to do with a combination of both factors: genuine fears about further marginalization of Hindus if Muslims were included under the American sacred canopy, combined with resentment and worry about the sudden U.S. rapprochement with Pakistan, coupled with an attempt to exploit the rise of anti-Islamic sentiments in the U.S. to obtain the recognition and support they craved.

James Davison Hunter seems to imply that the militancy of new religious groups in the U.S. is temporary until they have been "established" as American religions.[45] This leads to two questions: Will Hinduism be included within the American sacred canopy? If so, will Hindu American militancy then disappear? Only time can provide us with the answers.

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[1] See Stephen Prothero, "Love Bombs at Home: A New Holy Trinity Tradition: Judeo-Christian-Islamic," *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 December 2001.

[2] See the reference to the fact that "there is no world-wide Hindu network of terrorists" as well as the passage in paragraph six, "many Americans do not know the difference between Hinduism and Islam; they lump them together as foreign religions. Your help in bringing the recognition to Hindus as a peace-loving people who are an integral part of our society, would go a long way in educating Americans about Hinduism"

[3] According to the 1990 census, the median family income of Indians in the United States was $49,309, well above that for non-Hispanic whites ($37,630; see Mary Waters and Karl Eschbach, "Immigration and Ethnic and Racial Inequality in the U.S.," in *Majority and Minority: The Dynamics of Race and Ethicity in American Life*, 6th. ed., ed. Norman R. Yetman, 312–27. Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 1999, 315); 43.6 percent were employed either as professionals (mostly doctors and engineers) or as managers, and 58.4 percent had at least a Bachelor's degree. For discussion, see Larry Hajime Shinagawa, "The Impact of Immigration on the Demography of Asian Pacific Americans," in *The State of Asian Pacific America: Reframing the Immigration Debate, A Public Policy Report*, ed. Bill Ong Hing and Ronald Lee, 59–126. Los Angelos, Calf.: LEAP Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute and UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1996, 113, 119.

[4] This figure is based on Indian census reports that count Dalit groups (former "untouchable" groups) and tribals as Hindu. Many members of these groups, however, object to their inclusion within Hinduism.

[5] John Y. Fenton, *Transplanting Religious Traditions: Asian Indians in America* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 28.

[6] Pyong Gap Min, "Immigrants' Religion and Ethnicity: A Comparison of Korean Christians and Indian Hindu Immigrants." *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies*, 2.1 (2000): 121-40.

[7] S. K. Hofrenning and B. R. Chiswick, "A Method for Proxying a Respondent's Religious Background: An Application to School Choice Decisions," *Journal of Human Resources* 34 (1999): 193–207.

[8] R. Stephen Warner, "Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1993): 1058.

[9] Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, 2nd ed. (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1960), 27f.

[10] Raymond Williams, *Religions of Immigrants from India and Pakistan: New Threads in the American Tapestry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 29.

[11] For Chinese Christians, see Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive*

Identities (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State Press, 1999); for Korean Christians, see Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim, "Religious Participation of Korean Immigrants in the United States," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29.1 (1990): 19–34; and, for Maya Catholics, see Nancy J. Wellmeier, "Santa Eulalia's People in Exile: Maya Religion, Culture, and Identity in Los Angeles," in *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration*, ed. R. Stephen Warner and Judith Wittner, 97-122. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998.

[12] Williams, *Religions of Immigrants*, op cit., 11.

[13] Fenggang Yang and Helen Rose Ebaugh, "Transformations in New Immigrant Religions and their Global Implications," *American Sociological Review* 66 (2001): 269–88.

[14] Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptions in Immigrant Congregations* (Walnut Creek, Calf.: Altamira Press, 2000); Prema A. Kurien, "Becoming American by Becoming Hindu: Indian Americans Take their Place at the Multi-cultural Table," in *Gatherings in Diaspora*, op cit., 37-70; R. Stephen Warner, "Work in Progress," op cit., idem, "Immigration and Religious Communities in the United States," in *Gatherings in Diaspora*, op cit., 3–34; and Yang and Ebaugh, "Transformations in New Immigrant Religions," op cit.

[15] Prema A. Kurien, "Religion, Ethnicity, and Politics: Hindu and Muslim Indian Immigrants in the United States," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24.2 (2001): 263–93.

[16] Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

[17] James Davison Hunter, commentary ("Nation of Religions" workshop, Boston, Mass., June 2002).

[18] For discussion, see Prothero, "Love Bombs," op cit.

[19] Heinrich von Steitencron, "Hinduism: On the Proper Use of a Deceptive Term," in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, ed. Gunther Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke, 11-28. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1989.

[20] Vasudha Narayanan, "Creating the South Indian 'Hindu' Experience in the United States," in *A Sacred Thread: Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad*, ed. Raymond Williams, 147–76. Chambersburg, Pa.: Anima Press, 1992.

[21] Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive*, op cit.

[22] See Steven Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora: Comparative Patterns* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2000).

[23] For this argument, see Vinay Lal, "The Politics of History on the Internet: Cyber-Diasporic Hinduism and the North American Hindu Disapora," *Diaspora* 8.2 (1999): 137–72; Biju Mathew, "Byte-Sized Nationalism: Mapping the Hindu Right in the United States," *Rethinking Marxism* 12.3 (2000): 108–28; Biju Mathew and Vijay Prashad, "The Protean Forms of Yankee Hindutva," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23.3 (2000): 516–34.

[24] See Dean E. Murphy, "Two Unlikely Allies Come Together in Fight Against Muslims," *New York Times*, 2 June 2001, and Kurien, "Religion, Ethnicity, and Politics," op cit.

[25] For further discussion, see Prema A. Kurien, "Multiculturalism, Immigrant Religion and Diasporic Nationalism: The Development of an American Hindusim, (manuscript).

[26] See "History of VHPA" (http://www.vhp-america.org/whatvhpa/history.htm).

[27] Prithvi Raj Singh, "Discussing Religious Role Models," *India Post,* 14 March 1997.

[28] Prithvi Raj Singh, interview with my research assistant, Dipa Gupta, 9 February 1997.

[29] Arthur J. Pais, "A First Line of Defense," (http://www.beliefnet.com/story/57/story_5743.html). [2001]

[30] See "Mission Statement," (http:www.infinityfoundation.com/ECITmissionframe.htm).

[31] *The Ramayana Project,* chap. V, unit 25, lesson 2, 335-37; cited in "Complaint Against Anti-Rama Song in Secondary Schools" (http://www.infinityfoundation.com/ECITnehletterframe.htm).

[32] See "Complaint Against Anti-Rama Song in Secondary Schools," op cit.

[33] See, e.g., "The Hindu View of Others" (http://www.NorthJersey.com).

[34] For instance, the interview with Rajiv Malhotra on National Public Radio's *Tapestry*, October 22, 2000 (http://www.infinityfoundation.com/ECITnprinterviewframe.htm); see also Rajiv Malhotra and David Gray, "Global Renaissance and the Roots of Western Wisdom," *IONS Review* 56 (http://www.noetic.org/Ion/publications/r56Malhotra.htm).

[35] See, for instance, "Hindu Philosophy Has No Place for Caste System Says FHA," *India Post*, 17 March 1995.

[36] V. E. Krishnakumar and L. Prashanth, "Clinton Wishes Indians First Ever Diwali Greetings," *India Post*, 3 November 2000.

[37] In the aftermath of 9/11, for example, several Hindu Americans argued that emphasis on *ahimsa*, or non-violence, should be dropped in favor of various examples drawn from the Hindu epics showing the Hindu gods willing to go to war

when necessary.

[38] Material for this paragraph drew from the texts of talks by Malhotra posted by his discussion group, Indic Tradtions, on 25 September 2001 and 4 October 2001.

[39] Material for this paragraph was taken from an Internet report on the panel (including the papers presented), John Stratton Hawley, "Defamation/Anti/defamation: Hindus in Dialogue with the Western Academy," (http://www.web.barnard.columbia.edu/religion/hindu/malhotra_defamation/html).

[40] Reported at <http://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/s_es/s_es_rao-r_govt.htm>.

[41] One was on a Dalit critique of the Ramayana and the other a critical look at the Hindu nationalist movement in India.

[42] Posted on the Internet at <http://www.petitiononline.com/AMUSEUM.htm>.

[43] This information is based on reports by eyewitnesses who had attended the film showings.

[44] Nazli C. Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2002), 3.

[45] See Hunter, commentary, op cit.

Appendix I

A Petition from American Hindus to President Bush

Subject: Why do you exclude Hindus from your prayers?

Dear Mr. President,

Last Sunday, during the prayer for the victims of the horrific terrorist attacks, you included Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Many American Hindus lost their lives during these attacks. These citizens of Hindu faith were conspicuously omitted from your prayer services. Hindu Americans feel slighted and wonder: Why do you exclude Hindus from your prayers? Why didn't you ask a Pundit (Hindu priest) to join you, along with the Muslim cleric, the Priest, the Minister, and the Rabbi?

As our national leader, you have repeatedly urged respect for America's pluralistic and multi-cultural traditions. Yet, you have repeatedly excluded Hindu-Americans from your prayers and recognition. There are over 800 Hindu temples in North America, including every major city. All of them had organized prayers to mourn the loss of all those who perished or suffered in the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks and plane crashes.

Hindus are very much a part of our nation. We are hard working people who contribute to the American society, economy, education and quality of life, in a proportion much larger to our numbers. Hindus are highly visible in this country: in schools, colleges, universities and research institutions; hospitals and healthcare industry; computer, info-tech and telecom industries; banks, law, accounting and investment firms; hotels, motels and restaurants; small businesses, ...and many other walks of life. And yet, we are omitted from your prayers. Our temples of worship are excluded from your references to the religious traditions practiced in this country. Such conspicuous exclusions can easily be interpreted as a hidden code by the forces of bigotry and extremism. It is unfortunate that some tele-evangelists who thrive on defaming our all-inclusive Hindu faith in their TV and radio broadcasts, have already started their "sly evokings" (as William Safire puts it) by blaming the "pagans" as the cause of these terrorist acts. Please, Mr. President, there must be a Hindu Pundit beside a Protestant minister, a Catholic priest, a Rabbi and a Muslim cleric, when

Americans are asked to pray for peace.

Mr. President, Hindus are a peace-loving people. We never threaten violence against our host country. There is no worldwide Hindu network of terrorists. There are almost a billion Hindus living on Earth. They practice the world's oldest religion (over 8,000 years old.)

Non-violence, pluralism, and respect (not just tolerance) of other traditions of worship to the One Almighty God, are integral parts of its basic tenets. We are family oriented people, with very low divorce rates. We are frugal, save for our children's education, and support our elders and extended families. Because of these beliefs, Hindu-Americans are called ideal citizens. American Hindus are highly educated and skilled people, striving to make the US a better place to live for everyone. We deserve inclusion in your public prayers for the nation.

In the aftermath of the heinous terrorist attacks, Hindu-Americans and Hindu places of worship have become the target of xenophobic rage in some parts of North America. This is because many Americans do not know the difference between Hinduism and Islam; they lump them together as foreign religions. Your help in bringing the recognition to Hindus as a peace-loving people who are an integral part of our society, would go a long way in educating Americans about Hinduism. Please help Americans understand these issues by including Hindus in the fold of the President's well wishes and prayers.

In the U.S.A., there are two million people who identify themselves as Hindus, and another 20 million who practice Hindu traditions such as Yoga and Meditation. Lawmakers and officials in Washington do include Hindus when they pray. We urge you to henceforth include Hindus when you list the religiously pluralistic traditions of our country and include Hindu Temples to your list of places of worship in our great nation. God bless America!

Respectfully,

<http://www.hicad.org/bush/htm>