



honouring the divine in each other

United Church–Hindu Relations Today

Please respond by December 31, 2016.

Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee
The United Church of Canada/L'Église Unie du Canada

Honouring the Divine in Each Other
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L'Église Unie du Canada

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contents

Proposed Statement	4
Introduction	6
History.....	7
Hinduism in Canada	15
Hindu Practice.....	25
Ritual	25
The Nature of Deity.....	27
Sacred Texts	30
Ethical Behaviour	32
Reincarnation	32
Social Duty.....	35
Personal Ethics	36
Theology in a Pluralistic World.....	38
The United Church of Canada	40
Conversations with Hindus.....	44
Glossary.....	49
Study Guide	50
Acknowledgements.....	63



A symbol of the eternal undefinable sound

proposed statement

Below is the formal statement on United Church–Hindu relations that accompanies this study resource, *Honouring the Divine in Each Other*. The proposed statement, as revised following study in the church, will be presented to the 43rd General Council for adoption.

Proposed Statement on United Church–Hindu Relations Today

The United Church of Canada is called continually to bear witness to Jesus Christ in the midst of our neighbours and in the world. In accordance with that call, the 36th General Council in 1997 authorized for study across the church a document on United Church–Jewish relations and asked that similar studies be undertaken with other faith traditions. Following studies on Islam and on Aboriginal spirituality, in 2009 the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee agreed to develop a resource and policy statement on the relationship of The United Church of Canada to Hinduism in the Canadian context.

The Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee invites people across the United Church into a process of exploration of this relationship. This proposed statement is accompanied by the document *Honouring the Divine in Each Other*, which is intended for study and discussion, to aid individuals, congregations, and other ministries in this process of exploration. The committee invites comments on the following components of a proposed statement to be brought before General Council. A study guide and response form can be found at the end of the document.

The United Church, in previous studies of other faiths, has made the following affirmation:

We believe the church can continue to affirm its own distinctive self-identity while affirming that other faiths and traditions have their own self-understanding. The Bible teaches that the Word and Wisdom of God are not limited to Christians, and the Spirit of God is free and faithful. We therefore affirm and cherish the differences between traditions as gifts of God, which can be life-giving and transformative. (*That We May Know Each Other Final Statement*)

We believe that the church must continue to encourage its membership to grow in understanding Hindus as they would wish to be understood. At the same time, we must search for new ways of theologically understanding Hinduism and its relationship with Christianity. Through creating such understanding, it will be possible to sustain long-term mutual relationships of acceptance, respect, and mutual transformation for the sake of the world we all inhabit.

In continuity with these affirmations, and as an act of witness to the church's desire to find new ways of understanding and working with Hindu neighbours for the sake of the well-being of our world,

The United Church of Canada:

- Regrets the church's condemnation of Hindu worship practices that were part of missionary history
- Regrets the use of the language of idolatry to condemn Hindu theological traditions
- Regrets the church's complicity in the history of colonialism and the racist social patterns that evolved in the British Commonwealth
- Expresses a deep respect for the richness of the ancient philosophical traditions of Hinduism
- Recognizes the variety of expressions of divinity in Hinduism as not inconsistent with the church's understanding of the nature of God
- Recognizes that truth is embodied in the religious life of Hindu traditions around the world
- Recognizes that God's saving and liberating grace is at work in the religious life of Hinduism
- Rejoices in the prospects for mutual transformation in faith and action that arise in the emergent dialogue with Hindus
- Invites the people of the United Church to explore the many ways that Christians can deepen their faith and spiritual life through learning from Hindus
- Invites United Church congregations to engage with Hindu temple communities for the sake of the healing of the world
- Encourages all people of the United Church to continue conversations with Hindus that show a growing pattern of acceptance, respect, and a movement toward mutual transformation

introduction

For some time now, The United Church of Canada has been involved with studies of its engagement with interfaith partners. In 2003 the study *Bearing Faithful Witness* examined the church's relationship with the Jewish community in Canada. In 2006 a second study called *That We May Know Each Other* examined the relationship with Muslims in Canada. As well, the *Circle and Cross* study has examined the relationship of Indigenous and non-Indigenous spiritualities in the United Church. The study being undertaken here is intended to examine the church's engagement with the rapidly expanding number of Hindus now in Canada.

Hindu immigrants began arriving in Canada in significant numbers in the 1960s when the earlier immigrant quotas based on country of origin were lifted and a worldwide recruitment of professors and doctors was undertaken. By 1967 when a "points" system for judging immigrant applications based on their knowledge of English or French and their possession of an employable skill was developed, an even wider stream of Hindu immigrants began to arrive from places such as Guyana, East Africa, and Britain, as well as from India. Soon after this new pattern of immigration began, Hindu temple communities sprang up in every area of the country.

It must be acknowledged that Hindus, like other racialized minorities, have arrived in a society shaped by assumptions of White, largely Christian, domination. Inevitably, Hindu–United Church relations are affected by this history of racism and the ways it continues to be acted out in our communities and interpersonal relationships. At the same time, members of the United Church have also been involved in welcoming Hindus to Canada and helping to arrange for legally recognized Hindu weddings and the establishment of worshipping communities in Canada.

It is the second generation from this initial immigration that is now taking over the leadership of the temple communities. In many places, the early contacts between Hindus and Christians continue and there are invitations to visit one another's place of worship, to join in interfaith activity, and in some cases to work out the logistics of interfaith marriage and shared responsibility for raising children. The church is sometimes asked to provide guidance in regard to these relationships, and this study is intended to assist the church and the General Council in this area.

The study will begin with a history of Hindu practice and will describe some of the tragic misunderstandings that characterized the first contacts between Hindus and Christians during the colonial era. It will then deal with the arrival of Hindus in Canada and the new patterns of Hindu life in this setting. Finally, the study will examine the opportunities that now arise for mutual understanding between members of the United Church and their Hindu neighbours.

"Namaste"

The greeting of a slight bow, with hands pressed together, palms touching and fingers pointing upward in front of the chest, is commonly used by Hindus and others with an Indian background. Its origin is ancient and is generally understood to mean acknowledging the divine presence in each other. While similar to the common Western greeting of "good-day," it carries a deeper religious significance.

history

Because the subcontinent of India is somewhat isolated geographically, its religious traditions developed largely on their own. The climate was ideal for agricultural production; gradually, portions of the tropical forest were cleared and a number of the more fertile areas were developed into distinct civilizations with their own political and religious forms. Political rivalries often led to a change in the boundaries of the different regions, but there was a general respect for the different religious traditions.

The Indian religious scene continues to have a great deal of regional diversity. It was outsiders, who were often unaware of that diversity, who began to use the term “Hinduism” as a label for all the religious forms they found east of the Indus River.

By about 2000 BCE, the diversity of tradition began to be modified when a group of sages from the northwest came to be recognized for their use of the Sanskrit language. Soon their itinerant teaching methods provided the different Indian regions with a core set of hymns, rituals, and philosophical teachings known as the *Vedas*. It was, for instance, when the Sanskrit-knowing sages moved into the heavily populated regions along the Ganges River to the east, that many Sanskrit works came into being, including the two epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.



MAJOR REGIONAL LANGUAGE GROUPS OF INDIA

Important Dates

c. 4000 BCE:	archaeological evidence for Harappan (Indus) Civilization
c. 3000 BCE:	legendary time of Bharata War
2000 BCE:	estimated dating for the beginning of Vedic influence
c. 483 BCE:	death of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha
c. 468 BCE:	death of Vardhamana Mahavira, the Jain teacher
325 BCE:	invasion of northwest India by Alexander the Great
322–185 BCE:	Mauryan Empire
185 BCE–1000 CE:	regional kingdoms
300–900 CE:	temple building thrives
800 CE on:	theologians living in temples and mathas (Sankara, 788–820 CE)
700–1600 CE:	regional hymn singers of <i>bhakti</i> thrive
1000 CE:	invaders from Afghanistan
1192–1526 CE:	Delhi Sultanate rule
1526–1757 CE:	Mughal rule
1757–1947 CE:	British colonial rule
1869–1948 CE:	M.K. Gandhi
1947:	partition and independence of India

These epics provide heroic accounts of how people in those regions struggled to establish a righteous or *dharma*-filled society. These stories continue to be two of the foundation stones of Indian culture. In subsequent centuries, some of the more distinctly religious stories were also written up in Sanskrit texts called *puranas* (or “ancient times”), but those texts are not as widely known or as influential as the two epics.

Indians generally consider Sanskrit part of their local heritage. But when linguistic similarities were discovered between Sanskrit and Western languages such as Greek and German, people began to realize that there had been some very early cultural links between India and Europe.

By the sixth century BCE, trade had expanded so much that there were major cities in the heavily populated Ganges River region. In that context, a number of new religious ideas arose. The most important of these new ideas were those of Mahavira (d. 468 BCE), the founder of the Jain monastic order, and Siddhartha Gautama (d. 483 BCE), the founder of the Buddhist order.

Not long after the emergence of these new religious teachings, political ambition also took on an expansionist dimension and the first efforts at empire were set in place. When Chandragupta conquered far and wide and established the Mauryan Empire (322–185 BCE), he linked himself with the popular Jain religious order; when his grandson Asoka later gave the empire a wider vision and a pacifist stance, he claimed inspiration from the order of Buddhists.

These new religious teachings focused on reincarnation and the sickness, suffering, and sorrow associated with death. They proposed different ways to break the ties of *karma* that link one birth to another and to seek out some form of enlightenment that would transcend reincarnation. In India, the spread of these two religious orders was limited by the decline in urban development and the return to older political arrangements when the Mauryan Empire collapsed in 185 BCE. Nevertheless, they continued as vibrant religious communities. In the case of the Buddhist order, their efforts meant that very successful Buddhist orders were established in Southeast Asia and in East Asia.

In India after 185 BCE, many local rulers invited Vedic teachers into their territory and introduced systems of law, ritual, and philosophy that could be linked up with the local religious practices. The philosophical teachings reintroduced in this context were in treatises called *Upanisads* (or “sitting down beside”), where the teacher again started with the issue of reincarnation and a quest for the transcending reality or *Brahman*. In this case, however, the students were householders with established religious practices, and the teacher explained that the deity figures they were devoted to were symbolic forms (*sa-guna* “with form and attributes”) of the transcending (*nir-guna* “without form or attributes”) *Brahman*.

In practice this meant that most Indians continued to worship the local deity images of their region, even though they were continually exposed to religious teachings from outside their area. When kings and landlords built new temples, they often introduced new ritual forms as well. Most worshippers continued to worship at the local shrines, even though they attended the newer temples in large numbers.

The local religious forms that changed the least over time were the rituals associated with goddesses. In most cases, these goddesses are associated with a river (such as Ganga or Yamuna—the Ganges and the Jumna) or other features of the local geography and are symbols of fertility. The yearly festivals in their honour remind people of the bounty they provide and of the necessity that they be appeased on a regular basis in order to ward off disease.

While many of the goddesses retain their local name and are worshipped with local ritual forms, a regional mythology developed in some places, and goddesses such as Mariyamman in Tamilnadu and Bhagavati in Kerala are considered very powerful and have major temples dedicated to them. Goddesses such as Durga and Kali have elaborate mythologies interwoven with those of a deity such as Siva, and are worshipped wherever Hindus are found.

Generally, the medieval kings and landlords who built new temples dedicated them to one or another form of the male deities Siva and Vishnu. But they usually tried to include the goddesses within the temple compound by building them a separate altar.

Siva took a wide variety of forms. The *puranas* describe him as an ascetic generally resident in the Himalaya mountain of Kailasa; as Nataraja, dancing the cosmic dance; and as a family man with his wife Parvati and sons Ganesha and Skanda. Temples dedicated to Siva can have an anthropomorphic image at the centre, but often have the more abstract *linga* (phallus) symbol that reminds the worshipper of primordial power and a *nir-guna* or undefinable reality. Although centred on the *linga* as the highest symbol, these temples were designed to encourage extensive preliminary ritual directed to Ganesha, the beloved elephant-headed eldest son of Siva, and in many cases to a local goddess figure reinterpreted as the wife or consort of Siva.



Nataraja, the Lord of the Dance

In Hindu mythology, Siva is also portrayed as Nataraja, the Lord of the Dance. Here Siva, as Nataraja, dances within a circle of fire to end the current age and to begin the birth of a new one.

Siva in the form of Nataraja is the primary deity of the famous Chidambaram temple. Sidney Carter's well-known hymn “Lord of the Dance” was inspired both by Jesus and by the image of Nataraja.

Vishnu was generally portrayed in a royal form and expressed his power through special weapons such as a discus, but he also sometimes appeared in his cosmic form asleep on the primeval waters. In Vishnu

temples, ritual was often directed to one of a number of *avatars* or incarnations that he took in order to address specific crises in the world. While there were a number of animal *avatars*, the two human *avatars*, Krishna and Rama, became the most popular. They are often thought of as deities in their own right.

Krishna grew from a playful baby, through the stage of lover, and on to that of warrior. He is often worshipped with rituals appropriate to one of these roles. In a chapter of the *Mahabharata* known as the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna is portrayed in a battle scene where the warrior Arjuna gradually discovers that Krishna is divine and becomes attached to him in a bond of *bhakti*, or devotion. Rama is pictured as the righteous prince at the centre of the *Ramayana* epic, and the stories of his care for his bride Sita and his defeat of the forces of evil are given ritual form in his worship. For many devotees, however, he is worshipped as the supreme deity who will once again enable righteousness to reign (*ramrajya*) in our world.



Krishna disguised as a charioteer
instructing the warrior Arjuna

A worshipper in a temple setting such as those described here would think of their worship as monotheistic. Because of the rich variety of ritual traditions, outside observers sometimes confuse this pattern of worship with the patterns of ancient Greece or Egypt, where groups of deities were given honour at the same time. In India, however, a worshipper goes to the temple or the prayer room of the house to offer reverence to one deity, even when there are other deity forms involved in preliminary parts of the ritual.

In families where different deity forms are worshipped by different members of the family, people tend to speak of their *ishta-devata* or “chosen deity form” to describe the particular ritual they follow. Most people also explain the plurality of ritual styles by indicating that for those trained in meditation, it is possible to show reverence to *Brahman* without the assistance of images (in a *nir-guna* or “formless” way), but that most people like the ritual of the temple or prayer room with their favourite image form (*saguna* “with form”). Starting in the eighth century with Sankara, theologians were available in temples and monasteries to explain how temple worship fit with the Upanisadic teaching on meditation and *Brahman*.

By the eighth century CE, the developing sophistication of the regional cultures of India was such that literary traditions began to emerge in as many as a dozen separate regions. In the south, for instance, some literature emerged in the courts even before the beginning of the Common Era; by the seventh century, literary endeavours were widespread and many temples hosted hymn singers who recorded their reaction to the deity in the form of a song. Collections of these hymns were made, and a tradition of 4,000 Tamil hymns was assembled for use in temples of Vishnu and a similar collection for use in temples of Siva. These hymns emphasized the simplicity of a *bhakti* or devotional relationship with the deity involved and tended to downplay the role of ritual. When, at a later date, Muslim armies began destroying temples in the north of India, these devotional hymns provided a helpful way of continuing the tradition even when the temples were not available.

By 1000 CE, north India was being invaded by the armies of Muslim rulers based in Afghanistan. Most Indians were able to continue with their regular temple worship, but some important temples were destroyed. In two areas, Muslim majorities developed. One area was the remote eastern part of Bengal where some rulers insisted that their people convert to Islam. The other was Punjab, in the northwest, where significant numbers of Afghan migrants moved into the area. Itinerant Muslim *sufi* (mystic) teachers were popular in a few places; they often joined with travelling *bhakti* singers to bring an eclectic religious style to the villages.

One of the *bhakti* singers who tried to blend themes from the *sufis* into his songs was Nanak (1469–1538), who would later on become the founding Guru of the Sikhs. Nanak had been much influenced by an earlier singer named Kabir (1440–1518), who delighted in the purity of mystic devotion. But Nanak lived near Delhi and was regularly troubled by the Muslim rulers. He attempted to give his disciples strength by bringing them together into a distinct community, and before he died, he appointed a successor Guru to lead them. It was the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh (1675–1708), who changed the system and allowed the scripture, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, to serve as the Guru of the future. He also reorganized the community into a symbolic army or *khalsa* distinguished by the wearing of the five Ks that include uncut hair, comb, bangle, shorts, and dagger.

In the 16th century, Akbar founded a new dynasty of Muslim rulers (the Mughals) who portrayed themselves as part of the Indian heritage. Some took Hindu brides and they built beautiful architectural forms, such as the Taj Mahal. Generally the long period of Muslim rule did not alter in a major way the traditional cultural and religious forms of India.

The European colonial era reached India in waves. The first wave began when Vasco da Gama arrived on the southwest coast in 1498; the Portuguese soon followed and established trading posts along that coast. One immediate and profound effect of this early contact was on the Christian community in Kerala on the southwest tip of India. That community had probably been there since the first century CE and was the dominant trading community in the region. It had for centuries followed its ancient ritual traditions, but the Portuguese urged it to adopt the Roman liturgy. It eventually split into a number of different liturgical streams.

Indian Christians

According to the World Council of Churches' *Handbook of Churches and Councils* (2006), there are about 56 million Christians in India. That makes them an estimated 3–6 percent of the Indian population, the third-largest religious group after Hindus at 75 percent and Muslims at 12 percent. While Christians make up less than 1 percent in much of the country, they constitute sizeable communities in half a dozen different places.

Historically the most important Christian community in India is the St. Thomas Orthodox community that has been in the southwest state of Kerala since the first century. Tradition holds that the apostle Thomas himself started churches there; more substantial records from the third century indicate that Thomas of Cana brought some leading families of traders there from West Asia. They were welcomed by the local rulers and fit in socially with the high-caste Namboodri Brahmans and Nairs. They have maintained contact with church leaders in Syria and Iraq over the centuries since. Orthodox churches continue to offer strong leadership in the Christian community in India.

Christians now number 6 million, or 28 percent of the Kerala population. When the Portuguese came, they urged the Kerala Christians to join with the Roman Catholic Church, and at a later date, British officials urged them to work with the Protestant churches. As a result, St. Thomas Christians are now divided into half a dozen different church communities, although they often still refer to themselves sociologically as one community of "Syrian Christians."

While maintaining close ties with Kerala, many now live and work in the Persian Gulf countries and in North America. Wherever they go, they have established their own church communities. Clergy from four or five of the churches are active in Canada; a number of them have bishops here as well. Significant numbers of St. Thomas Christians also worship with United Church congregations in different parts of the country. The name most familiar to Canadians may be that of the Mar Thoma church, which has been active ecumenically and has joined the Canadian Council of Churches.

A second important Christian community developed in and around Goa when the Portuguese developed their settlement there in the 16th century. Many of the Roman Catholic clergy serving throughout India, and to some extent throughout the world, come out of this community. Mass conversions were associated with the name of Francis Xavier (1506–1552) all along the coastal areas of southern India and Sri Lanka, and the Roman Catholic church members continue to constitute about a quarter to a third of the population in many of these areas today.

Protestant missions and schools started in every corner of India during British rule in the 19th century. In Tamilnattu on the southeast coast and the Tamil-speaking parts of Sri Lanka, there are now 5 million Protestant Christians, or around 6 percent of the population.

In these areas, a number of denominations came together to form the Church of South India in 1947. Both its churches and schools continue to prosper. There were significant numbers of Christians among the Sri Lankan refugees that arrived in Canada in recent years and they have started a number of congregations (some affiliated with The United Church of Canada) in the Scarborough area of Toronto.

The situation in north India was more complex. Among tribal groups such as the Khasis, Mizos, and Nagas in the northeast, Christians number almost 90 percent, while in large sections of north India they are less than 1 percent. In 1970 most Protestants joined together in the Church of North India, which has over 3,000 congregations and almost 2 million members.

A second wave of colonial activity began when the British government granted the East India Company a trade monopoly in 1600 CE and the major trading posts of Calcutta (Kolkata), Bombay (Mumbai), and Madras (Chennai) were developed. It was in defence of those trading rights that the British naval forces and then the army became directly involved in India. They controlled much of the country by the beginning of the 19th century.

A third wave of colonialism developed when the British government decided to take over direct rule of India early in the 19th century. Before taking over direct rule, the British parliament debated what kind of rule it wished to establish in India. In what came to be called Macauley's "Minute on Education," the parliament decided to replace Indian culture with a hybrid creation of its own by providing English education to an elite group through whom it would rule. Although this kind of racist policy was tried in a whole host of British colonies, it took form first in India. As a direct attack on a long-established and complex culture, it had a far-reaching impact.

The alliance that pushed this colonial policy through the British parliament was made up of three groups. First there were the free traders, who wanted to see the East India Company's monopoly set aside. Second were the adherents of the philosophical school of Utilitarians, who felt that the rationality of British rule was superior to all other forms of government. And third were the missionary supporters, who felt they had a divine mandate to convert others to their faith. In many ways, this was a strange alliance. These three groups had not been allied on other issues, but at the time, each of them interpreted their self-interest in such a way that they became enthusiastic supporters of the colonial plan for the rule of India.

The missionary part of the colonial plan called for churches and mission agencies to develop a network of English-medium schools. They also became deeply involved in the larger agenda of colonial rule and played major roles in advocating for legislative regulation of traditional customs and general condemnation of Indian religion and culture. An earlier generation of Western scholars had been sympathetic toward traditional Indian culture and had especially been impressed by the great body of religious literature found in India. But the colonial plan worked out at the beginning of the 19th century involved a sweeping condemnation of Indian culture and the introduction of British rule.

One way the missionary supporters sought to condemn Indian culture was to call for legislation banning traditional customs such as the ritual dancing performed in the temples by a class of women (*devadasis*) who generally lived in the temples, and the ritual act (*sati*) in which in certain circumstances a widow would heroically mount the funeral pyre of her husband. Missionaries regularly condemned what they assumed to be the poor education levels of the priests in the local temples and insisted on interpreting the ritual worship of image forms as "idolatry." Very few missionaries even met the learned theologians whom we now know were teaching in the *mathas* and temples throughout this period.

The missionary role in establishing this negative colonial attitude toward Hindu religious practice was widely resented in India. Most of the students in the educational institutions the missions established continued to be practising Hindus and to worship in their local temple. At the same time, some observers would wish to recognize missionary contributions to work in health care, education, and on behalf of the human rights of those most marginalized in Indian society, particularly women and Dalits, and to acknowledge the tension between these positive elements and the fundamental collusion with colonialism.

By the end of the 19th century, the educated elite created by the colonial system began to be restless. In 1875 they formed the Indian National Congress to push for the end of the colonial system, but they initially tended to imitate the colonial style and call for social and political reforms of their own or a militant new style of Hinduism.

M.K. Gandhi argued against both of these ways of imitating colonial policy and urged that postcolonial India allow its traditional cultural forms to evolve on their own as if the colonial “masters” had never been there. After a long push by the Congress, the colonial era was finally brought to an end in 1947.

Before leaving, the colonial rulers insisted on creating a separate nation for the Muslim majority areas in the north, establishing the state of Pakistan. In 1971, the eastern area created by this partition gained independence to become the state of Bangladesh. The rest of India developed a “secular” constitutional government that has sought to allow religious and cultural forms to develop in accord with their best traditions.

While the process of rebuilding a nation-state that reflects democratic values and a just social order has been a struggle, most people would affirm the restoration of traditional religious patterns that came with the end of colonialism. However, the question of the impact of the colonial era on Indian cultural identity remains to be answered. Some 80 percent of Indians continue to be practising Hindus, but regional diversity remains strong and other religious communities are carefully protected by the state.

hinduism in canada

Traditionally, Hindu practice was found only within the subcontinent of India. It was an important development when significant numbers of Hindus began to leave India and settle in different parts of the world.

The initial movement of population was engineered by the colonial authorities in the 19th century. Indentured or contract workers were taken, often by trickery or against their will, to faraway places such as Mauritius, Guyana, and Trinidad, and encouraged to form new social structures in those places.

In Guyana especially, the circumstances were such that new religious practices and a new sense of identity as Hindus had to be developed immediately in order to distinguish themselves culturally from the Afro-Guyanese with whom they lived and worked. In Mauritius and Trinidad, and later in South Africa and Fiji, the indentured workers lived in exclusively Indian villages for a couple of generations so that the process of re-identification and the re-creation of a pattern of Hindu practice could take place over a longer period of time.

More recently, a second wave of emigration brought significant numbers of Hindu migrants to Europe and North America. In this case, the migrants chose to move, and the sense of displacement or diaspora was not as strong. But again, a new sense of community developed and new religious practices appropriate to the new settings are emerging.

In Canada, the government did away with immigration quotas based on race and national origin in 1962, which quickly led to an influx of doctors and professors from South Asia. As the immigration system was opened further, a steady stream of South Asian immigrants began to arrive. By the first decade of the 21st century, there were approximately a million and a half South Asians in Canada.

Studies of this community show that it contains roughly equal numbers of Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus, and that the minority communities of Christians, Jains, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians are also well represented. Sikhs are especially notable, because a tiny community of them has existed in Vancouver since 1905. Their Canadian leaders have been eager to increase their numbers, and have insisted on strict adherence to the traditional dress code in order to establish themselves as a distinctive religious community.

South Asian Muslim doctors who immigrated to Canada gave their community a very positive reputation. After the events of September 11, 2001, South Asian Muslims sometimes found themselves included in public controversies surrounding Islam. Hindus and Hindu religious practice have rarely been featured in the Canadian press, even though a few hundred temples have been operating in Canada since the 1980s.

The welcome Canada offered to the early Hindu immigrants in the 1960s was influenced by the national excitement associated with re-examining the nation's bilingual and bicultural identity in the buildup to the 1967 centennial celebration. Pierre Trudeau's election as prime minister in 1967 drew attention to his writings on the federal nature of the Constitution and the way the Constitution recognized the pluralism inherent in the early development of Canadian culture. Trudeau had these multicultural rights, embedded in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, attached to the Constitution in 1982. Sikh and Hindu leaders at the time were especially thrilled.

A Hindu Nobel Laureate in Canada

During the summer of 2012, the McMichael Gallery in Kleinburg, Ontario, sponsored a showing of the creative work of Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. One of the most inspiring poems from his world-famous publication *Gitanjali* is the following:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
 by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary
 desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into everwidening thought and action—
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

Canadian artist Bertram Brooker's copy of this 1913 edition has been retained by the University of Manitoba's Brooker collection. The Indian poet, playwright, novelist, and painter influenced and strengthened the aesthetic expression of members of the Group of Seven artists. As visionary painters, they were drawn to Tagore's understanding of Hindu mysticism, which was cosmic in its reach, unifying in its understandings, and deeply spiritual in its encounter with nature.

Recognizing these transcendent qualities, Frederick Varley shared insights from Hindu nature mysticism with his students, and savoured the reading of Tagore's *Song Offerings*, which he purchased in 1918. Varley's search for depth and breadth led him to read other non-Western publications, providing him with an intercultural perspective toward art and for his teaching.

Acknowledging Tagore's creative brilliance, members of the Group of Seven extended to him an invitation to The Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts. Tagore arrived as Nobel Laureate lecturer in June 1929 to share his quest for harmony and balance in art and spirituality, insights from the *Upanisads* supporting his view of the interrelatedness of all human beings, and the concept of "divinity in the individual." Varley sought to portray the human and mystical search for the Divine in his 1932 painting titled *Dharana*. Viewing the canvas, one hears echoes of Tagore's words "the infinite became defined in humanity."

Scholars have acknowledged Rabindranath Tagore's originality as rooted in "nature mysticism." His experience of Hindu *bhakti* (devotion) tradition, balanced with intellect and will, provided momentum for his writings in English and Bengali as well as for his paintings.

Might Tagore's discussions with the Group of Seven have influenced Varley's remarks to *Maclean's* magazine in 1959 in connection with his 1936–37 canvas? Varley is quoted as saying, "I don't know yet whether I believe in the Divinity of Christ, so instead of the Resurrection, I call it the Liberation." *Moksa* is Hinduism's word for "liberation" from the cycle of death and rebirth.

Sikh leaders assumed that the constitutional rights were in effect communal rights, and they have on a number of occasions tested their right to wear a turban and carry a kirpan in the courts. Hindus took the welcome in the name of multiculturalism to mean that their culture already had equal status with all others, and they quickly proceeded with the building of temples and deciding on the worship traditions they wanted in the new setting.

For the first few years in Canada, Hindus had generally worshipped at home altars and in informal gatherings in schools and universities. When, however, the question arose as to how they could provide a legal avenue for proper Hindu weddings, provincial government officials helpfully pointed out that any person could be designated “clergy” and be given a licence to marry if a small group of persons declared that they wanted to worship together. Before long, in all sorts of places around the country, groups of Hindus with different backgrounds banded together and submitted their membership list to the officials, becoming a temple community with a charitable trust number and an opportunity to develop a worship tradition together. An early example is the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in Vancouver, which opened a multi-use temple in 1974.

For a short time, some of these temple communities were led by the doctors and university professors among the earliest immigrants. But the democratic nature of the membership requirement gave leadership opportunities to everyone, and most Hindus soon felt involved in helping decide on their worship traditions. As a result of this democratic process, Hindu temples in Canada are each different, and people take great pride in the local traditions they had a hand in developing. Multi-use facilities serving people from various backgrounds now exist in a number of locations, including Victoria, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Hamilton, Ottawa, and St. John’s.

While, in a few places, early temple communities experimented with minimizing the role of image worship and used a theology that emphasized meditation on the unknowable *Brahman*, that idea was not popular with the immigrant communities. In most cases, the organizers of the temple communities arranged to have images prepared in one of the traditional centres in India and dedicated in an elaborate ceremony after their arrival in Canada.

Because of the democratic nature of the temple boards, the debates on the number of deity images and ritual traditions the temple community wanted to include in worship were often protracted. But the tradition, once decided upon, usually became a source of considerable local pride. Some of the early temple traditions included both granite images from the south of India and marble ones from the north, and used quite a bit of English and Sanskrit in the ritual. As numbers increased and it became more common for temple communities to be made up of members from one linguistic region of India, deity images were brought from that region and the ritual became increasingly in the regional language.

Some Major Temples in Canada

Hindu Society of Alberta, 1967, **Edmonton**

Vedanta Ashram Society, 1970s, **Halifax**

Hindu Mission of Canada Temple, 1970s, **Montreal**

Vishwa Hindu Parishad, 1974, **Vancouver**

Hindu Samaj, 1976, **Hamilton**, burned 2001,

North Indian and South Indian styles of worship

Vishnu Mandir, 1984, **Richmond Hill**, primarily Caribbean style of worship

Ganesha Temple, 1984, **Richmond Hill**, elaborate South Indian style of worship

Lakshmi Narayan Temple, 1985, **Saskatoon**

MahaGanapathy Temple, 1987, **Edmonton**, South Indian style of worship

Temple of **Ottawa-Carleton**, 1989, North Indian and South Indian styles of worship

Sree Mahalaksmi, 1990, Mount Pleasant, **Vancouver**

Hindu Society of Calgary, 1991, **Calgary**

Vaishno Devi Mandir, 1991, **Oakville**, North Indian style of worship

Durka Temple, 1994, **Scarborough**, South Indian style of worship

Hindu Sabha, 1995, **Brampton**, North Indian style of worship

Sanatana Mandir, 1995, **Markham**, Gujarat style of worship

Murukan Temple, 2000, **Montreal**, South Indian style of worship

Adhi Parasakthi Temple, 2000, **Scarborough**, informal South Indian style of worship

Shri Maha Kali Amman Mandir, 2001, **Brampton**, Caribbean style Kali worship

BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, 2004, **Toronto**, Gujarat style of worship

Dr. Raj Pandey Hindu Centre, 2005, **Winnipeg**

Ayyappan Temple, 2007, **Scarborough**, South Indian style of worship

Hindus understand themselves to have adapted to the Canadian situation on their own terms, and do not often self-consciously refer to the changes in Hindu practice that have occurred in the Canadian context. There are, however, important changes that people recognize when they are pointed out.

The organization of the temple community, for instance, is totally new. In Canada the temple community is defined by its membership list, and there is democratic participation in decisions about worship. In India traditional temples were mysterious institutions with resident priests of unknown lineage, and most worshippers visited the temple at a time of their own choosing and had little sense of a local religious community.

In Canada the deity images are still cared for at regular intervals throughout the day, but most worshippers visit the temple on Sunday. In many temples the worship on Sunday takes a congregational form and involves music, scripture reading, and a reflection by the priest or a visiting guru, in addition to the ritual associated with the images. Hindus in Canada proudly take responsibility for their temple community, and in addition to recounting the story of its origin are now eager to discuss how it can develop programs for the youth, institutions for the care of the elderly, or a way to integrate their priests into the management of a Canadian religious community.

Hindu Community Outreach in Canadian Society: Some Examples

Ever since the speeches of Swami Vivekananda to the first Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893, the Vivekananda Ramakrishna Mission, or Vedanta Society, has been in the forefront of bringing a public face to Hinduism in North America. In Canada, branches of the Vedanta Society were established in the 1960s and 1970s.

Vedanta communities have been open to participation by members of other faith traditions, sharing teachings and practice without requiring anyone to relinquish their own religion. Vedanta has also had a practice of service that extends to the wider community (for example, the Vedanta Society of Toronto has a twice weekly soup kitchen and contributes to the Daily Bread Food Bank.)

In Edmonton, Hindus have been part of the city's lively interfaith expression that has made space for faith communities to share their traditions in a variety of public fora, including a display space at city hall that communities use on a rotating basis. In contrast, a recent study tracing the public face of Hinduism in a number of Canadian cities suggests that in Victoria and Calgary, public engagement in Canadian society is dominated by broader Indo-Canadian business and cultural activities.

A more public face of Hindus as faith communities emerges in some other cities. Saskatoon's Lakshmi Narayan Temple makes links to both politicians and the general public beyond the Hindu community, with both cultural events and charitable activities. In Winnipeg public engagement also has both cultural and political dimensions, including support for candidates, a TV channel, and a dance academy. Dance and music have been an important means of outreach in Montreal; also significant for public engagement has been the endowed Chair of Hindu Studies at Concordia University. Education is a focus in Ottawa, with outreach to high school and university students, and efforts underway to endow a Chair of Hindu Studies at Carleton. The Ottawa Hindu community is also active in arts and social service work in the city.

A unique example of public engagement has occurred in St. John's, Newfoundland, where members of the Hindu community are leaders in the Religious Social Action Coalition. Formed after September 11, 2001, the group is focused on the elimination of poverty, and has involved members of the St. John's Hindu Temple in meetings with local politicians and media. As well, the temple participates with other faith communities in charitable responses and disaster relief as needed.

(See Harold Coward, "Religions in Canada in the Twenty-First Century" in *Penguin Handbook of the World's Living Religions* (2010), pp. 880–84)

Because of the democratic way in which temple communities were formed in Canada and the great diversity in the backgrounds of the Hindus of Canada, no two temples in the country are much alike. As early as the 1960s, significant numbers of Hindus arrived from Guyana, where they had for over a century practised a kind of Sunday morning congregational worship with strong musical traditions and a major *katha* or sermon from the *pandit* or priest. Some Guyanese Hindus joined in the formation of the multi-background temple communities in Canada and encouraged the use of English in those settings. But in a number of places *pandits* from Guyana undertook the leadership of temple communities; those temples use a congregational style, remaining primarily Caribbean in character.

Also arriving from the Caribbean, as well as from East Africa, have been Arya Samaj followers, who reject the use of images and practise a Vedic fire ritual. Canadian Arya Samaj communities include those in Calgary, London, Windsor, and Toronto; they are part of a North American network covering over 70 cities.

North Indians were the most numerous single group among the Indian immigrants to Canada. Whether they spoke Punjabi or Hindi at home, they were often the dominant group within the multi-background temple community. In the multi-background temples, English is normally used along with the Sanskrit prayers, but in a few places temple communities with North Indian leadership have begun using Hindi in the worship setting, even though the style of worship is largely designed locally.

Tamil Hindu refugees from Sri Lanka have experienced Canada somewhat differently from other Hindus. They started to arrive in large numbers only in the 1990s, and many settled in Scarborough in the eastern end of Toronto, far away from the earlier Indian settlements concentrated to the west of Toronto, or in Montreal or elsewhere. Because of this settlement pattern, they did not participate in the earlier temple communities with their rich cultural diversity. Most Tamil temples reflect their ethnic heritage more strongly than other temples do, and they usually use Tamil rather than English along with the standard Sanskrit ritual prayers.

When refugees from Sri Lanka began to arrive in the 1990s, they discovered the elaborate Ganesha Temple already operating in the Richmond Hill area of Toronto with Tamil-speaking priests from South India. In some ways this provided them with an early temple home, but the ritual traditions were not exactly what they were familiar with from Sri Lanka. With Sri Lankans now in a majority on the Ganesha Temple board, some modifications of the ritual have been undertaken there, and, in the meantime, a host of other Tamil-style temples have been built in both Toronto and Montreal.

By the turn of the 21st century, Hindus for the most part had established their identity within the Canadian religious landscape. Significant numbers in the second generation had married partners from another faith tradition and were beginning to give thought to how to raise their children. Some in the second generation felt that their parents had been overly involved in the creation of the early temple communities, but they themselves were proud to report that they continued to worship at the temple their parents had helped organize, even if they were regular in their worship only at festival time.

In addition, some in this and the next generation have been involved in Hindu students' associations at universities including Toronto, McMaster, McGill, and Carleton. As well as religious and social activities, these associations have offered space for reflection on Hindu identity through interfaith engagement.

Can a Christian participate in Hindu worship?

From a Hindu perspective, there is generally little difficulty for a Christian to participate in Hindu rituals. In visiting a Hindu temple, it is always wise to ask when entering if it is okay to stay and observe and where to do so. Usually there will be a warm reception and an invitation to join in the rituals.

As always, follow the lead of others. Take off your shoes where others remove theirs. Follow the traditions of the temple in sitting where others sit, standing when others stand, and so on. Wear loose-fitting clothing that makes it possible to sit on the floor comfortably.

This is the simple answer, which presumes an attitude of respect and a desire to honour and appreciate the faith of Hindus.

There are, however, deeper questions that can be asked. Should a Christian take part in the ritual actions surrounding an image of a deity? What about eating the *prasad*—food that is first offered to a deity and then distributed for everyone to take home and consume? Is there a line that a Christian should not cross?

Some Christians participate in Hindu rituals out of a deep respect for the faith of Hindus. In doing so, they will participate in all rituals to which they are invited, including gratefully and reverently receiving the *prasad*. The desire here is to show reverence for reverence. Those who think scripturally will note Paul's advice in response to the question: What about food offered to idols? (1 Corinthians 8:4–13). Paul insists that the issue is not the worship of other gods, since there is only one God. In that view, it would seem that one might participate in Hindu rituals, seeing those rituals as another expression of worship of the one God.

Others will reverently observe Hindu rituals, but will refrain from participating in direct blessing of the images or in receiving the *prasad*. (When presented with the *prasad*, they will instead make a *namaste* gesture of respect.) Again the attitude of reverence is central, but the concern is misappropriation of another's tradition. In other words, for these people respect for Hinduism means not participating in the rituals that so deeply define the beliefs of another.

Most, however, will want to take into consideration the expectations of the host community; that is, how the Hindu community itself wishes to host visitors. Seen in this light, it is sometimes clear that it is best not to offend by refusing to receive a gift of food.

While the *prasad* carries a different meaning, a Christian approach to this question might mirror approaches to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Very few Christian communities would restrict a Hindu from being present at a service of worship. The United Church has a tradition of an open table expressed in many different ways throughout the church. Some United Church ministers would not restrict anyone from receiving the sacrament if they approach the table with reverence. Reflection on this openness might help in resolving the question of whether to reverently observe or to fully participate in Hindu rituals and worship.

Perhaps it will be the third generation of Hindus that will turn out to be ardent reformers of their faith tradition in Canada. Will Herberg's 1960 study of Jewish immigrants in the United States ("Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology") identified the third generation as the one that developed a strong interest in the rediscovery and reform of their faith tradition.

In a general sense, it is possible to read the settlement of Hindu immigrants in Canada as following the initial steps in that pattern, in that the first generation engaged in the enthusiastic building of temples and the second became involved in a careful move in the direction of integration into Canadian society. On the other hand, it is unclear what would constitute evidence of a renewed interest in the Hindu heritage among third-generation Hindus in Canada.

Unlike Jews and Sikhs, who have unmistakable ways of demonstrating their orthodoxy to the general public, Hindus tend to keep their manifold ritual regimens to themselves. While studies of private ritual practices, such as the keeping of fast-vows or *vratas*, are difficult to pass on to the next generation in a new social setting, the more colourful festival celebrations take on a new, more public, meaning as they are shared with the general public in a new society. There is no doubt that the fireworks display of Diwali and the all-night prayers of Sivaratri are becoming more popular as time goes on in Canada, and they may constitute the indication of a new willingness to invite non-Hindus to participate in Hindu ritual life.

Hindu Celebrations in Canada

Hindu festivals celebrate individual or community life and may be observed as acts of worship, rituals, or celebrations.

Among the many festivals celebrated in India, Canada, or wherever Hindus have settled, the most popular is Diwali or Deepavali (Festival of Lights). It means rows of lights; one of its legends, among many others, is celebrating the return of Rama and Sita to the kingdom of Ayodhya after 14 years of exile. Hundreds of little diyas (clay pots), filled with oil and a wick, are placed in rows and lit. The atmosphere is festive with family gatherings, fireworks, strings of electric lights, sharing of food and sweets, and worship to Lakshmi. It is usually celebrated in October or November.



Ramanavami celebrates the birthday of Rama. During the previous eight days, Hindus read the *Ramayana*, the Hindu epic that tells the story of Rama.

Less well known festivals include Holi or Phagwah (Festival of Colours), a festival that welcomes the arrival of spring with bright colours; Vaisakhi, the first day of the solar year; Mahashivaratri, a night dedicated to Shiva; and Ganesh Chaturthi, which celebrates the birth of Ganesh.

Is there any similar willingness to invite non-Hindus to participate in theological discussions growing out of temple worship? The first generation of immigrants were clearly alarmed by what they heard about ISKCON (the Hare Krishnas) and other guru-led movements some non-Indian Canadians were interested in. They made clear that their temples were very different. The continuing popularity of yoga has the potential to reopen older discussions of meditation and philosophy as ways for all human beings to approach God or *Brahman*, but few of those involved in yoga classes today appear to have had the opportunity or guidance to make those connections.

Many of the homilies one hears in the temples these days point to this kind of dialogical interfaith theology. But up to now, no one in the Hindu community of Canada has ventured to write much on this matter and bring it into the wider theological discussions one finds in this country.

Misappropriation of Hindu Traditions

The thoughts and experience of one of the members of the writing team.

According to Hindu tradition, knowledge of yoga was given to the *rishis* (seers) of India approximately 5,000 years ago, as a gift from the Divine. Because yoga was given to us to bring us closer to God by raising our level of consciousness, it was intended to be shared.

When Europeans invaded India, they were more intent on teaching the Indians (whom they considered to be uncivilized) their ways than on learning from them. Yoga and many other practices associated with Hinduism were ridiculed; those who practised were often mocked or not taken seriously. In some cases, the practice of yoga was labelled as evil or dangerous and Christians were advised against engaging in it. (There are those who still believe this today.)

Recently yoga has begun to be appreciated in the Western world. Most of this interest is related to its physical benefits. A positive transformation is taking place in Western culture through yoga that no one would want to stop. Many people who begin practising purely for physical benefit end up opening themselves to a deeper spiritual life as a result. Those people, naturally, develop a great respect for yoga.

So what is the problem? Unfortunately, the wounds of centuries of ridicule do not simply disappear on their own, just because the oppressor has found benefit in that once deemed useless or evil. The only hope of beginning to heal the wounds of the colonial attitude of superiority has to involve acknowledging the value and the gifts to the world of the culture that was oppressed. Simply adopting yoga as a Western or even Christian practice is like rubbing salt in the wounds.

In keeping with North American culture, yoga has become highly commercialized, with yoga studios springing up everywhere. Some Hindus feel that there is even a deliberate attempt to appropriate yoga as a Western commodity, severing yoga from Hinduism in a way that disenfranchises Hindus from their spiritual heritage. For those who have a deeper understanding of this ancient and richly spiritual way of life, magazine covers offering buyers the secret to getting a “yoga butt” can seem quite offensive.

There is also an increasing tendency for yoga to be transformed into a Christian practice. Simply reading from the Bible before beginning one’s routine does not make yoga Christian, and yet the term “Christian yoga” can be heard more and more.

The danger that many Hindus see in these developments is not only that their deep connection to yoga is being denied, but that this fundamental aspect of their culture is being appropriated to the point that, as it is treated as a Western commodity, they will no longer be free to practise it except under regulation imposed upon them by the West.

For example, as yoga became more popular, it was necessary to put some boundaries on who could teach and who could not. As a young girl, I began practising yoga with my mother. I learned from her and through her books. Chanting “om” was as much a part of our prayer life as it was a part of our yoga practice. In short, yoga has been a part of who I am for as long as I can remember.

However, after years of practising yoga, I was put in the position of needing to attend classes taught by a non-Hindu in order to receive a certificate to teach it. Of course, it added insult to injury to have this part of my culture “taught” to me by someone who’d only been introduced to it a year or two before. This was the sting of appropriation at its worst. Perhaps in trying to regulate this gift of Spirit, if yoga’s Hindu roots were recognized, an exception might have been made in this case.

In summary, I think it is fair to say that one need not be a Hindu in order to practise yoga, and that most Hindus have no problem with that. If Christians could simply respect yoga’s Hindu roots and practise it *without needing to make it something different than what it is*, a peaceful coexistence would be possible. This would help to retain the integrity of this rich and ancient spiritual tradition while still sharing it with the rest of the world.

hindu practice

Ritual

Because Hindu practice developed slowly within a secure cultural environment, it is not focused on the teachings of a founder or a later reformer, but on ritual practices that evolved over time. Time and space are generally imagined as a grid onto which auspicious moments are marked off and auspicious places are identified. In India, temples are crowded in the morning and evening, but are empty during the inauspicious early afternoon hours.

Each person has their own specific times for daily, weekly, and yearly worship. Traditionally these ritual routines were based on calculations done by an astrologer, but in Canada they are more often based on a person's own calculations using an elaborate calendar called a *pancanga*. In India, temples are imagined as part of a sacred geography and are described as near some river or some other deity, or facing a mountain or in a certain direction.

In North America almost all these considerations are thrown off and the ritual structure has to be reconsidered. In this new setting, social considerations tend to become more central. Ritual vows are followed by a small group of women at their convenience, and the temple community determines where the temple should be placed and what the worship routines will be. Although astrological considerations are still important for the timing of festivals and weddings, even there the question of social convenience enters in and sometimes times are modified.

What can Christians learn from Hindus? Attention to Spiritual Practice

It is not uncommon for a Hindu to ask, "What is your *sadhana*, or practice?" Hinduism is far more about spiritual practice than belief, more about ritual than what Christians would traditionally understand as doctrine. It is through a *sadhana* that a Hindu moves toward spiritual awareness, liberation, and perfection.

A discipline of *sadhana* might be meditation, chanting, or other forms of ritual behaviour. It might be done for personal purposes, for example, to gain something deeply desired or for the purpose of one's own enlightenment. But the highest form of *sadhana* is done for the spiritual benefit of the cosmos.

Hindus might helpfully ask Christians, "What is your practice?" This would be a familiar question to the great mystics of Christianity. We have long had traditions of meditation, centring prayer, and spiritual exercises. But the Hindu would ask this question of all of us. How is it possible to be faithful without a practice? What rituals bring meaning and purpose to your daily life?

We may be nearing the end of the Reformation's overemphasis on words. There is a growing desire for spirituality that both nurtures life within and blesses and heals the world. Hindus can help Christians see the importance of a daily spiritual life at the centre of faith.

The elaborate and family-specific funeral rituals are among those most difficult to carry forward satisfactorily in a new setting. Basic purificatory behaviour such as making an offering only with the right hand or moving about a temple clockwise so that one's right hand faces the deity images as one passes are so ingrained in childhood that they last. The purificatory ritual that was challenged forcefully as people moved out of India was the one restricting the activity of women during menstruation. It is safe to say that practices defined in those terms are becoming a thing of the past.

In the past, ritual considerations were thought of as part of a moral code called *dharma*. The moral code for any individual was built around that person's role in society and the duties they had to other individuals who might be their teacher, employer, or servant. British colonial observers made much of the fact that these roles tended to change very little in traditional India and the group one belonged to at birth (one's *jati* or "caste") would tend to be the same one throughout one's life. That is, of course, rapidly changing in the India of today and has virtually no role in the social interaction of people after they emigrate from India.

The other consideration in defining the moral code for an individual in traditional India was one's evolving place in a family structure. Traditionally there were four stages, or *ashramas*, starting, for males, with the "student" (*brahmacharya*), who was dependent on and respectful of the adults; then the all-important "householder" (*grihasta*), who brought in the income for all and made the major decisions; then the "retiree" (*vanaprasta*), who travelled with his wife and kept the wider family linked together; and finally the lonely "withdrawn" one (*sanyasin*), focused on a life of prayer.

Traditionally there were specific rituals initiating each of these stages, and daily rituals characteristic of those in a given stage. But, with the exception of marriage, which serves as the ritual initiation of the householder stage, much of that ritual behaviour has disappeared. Females participated with their spouses in many of the "householder" and "retiree" rituals, but also took vows to perform many additional rituals that defined their place in society.

Marriage was always a major ritual event in India, and it has become an even more central event in the life of an Indian outside of India. Traditionally marriage partners were chosen by the parents and uncles and aunts, who knew a wider range of possible partners than the individuals involved. But in North America, the nature of the student experience has reversed that social pattern; the individuals themselves have the wider base of experience, and generally choose their own marriage partners.

Traditional India was largely an agricultural society. Both women and men worked on the land in various capacities. In the oldest Vedic literature, there are also instructions on how the tasks were to be shared in the various household rituals.

There are examples of both women and men becoming renowned teachers. In the south of India and in Hindu parts of Sri Lanka, that is still the general pattern, but in much of north India, Muslim rule influenced a bit of the public perception and women continued to lead most ritual in the home but not in the temples. Because of the democratic nature of decision-making in the temples in Canada, that pattern is reversing again. Hindu women in Canada are once again taking a prominent role in temple organization and, in some cases, in the ritual leadership of the temples.

The Nature of Deity

One of the most awkward aspects of the conversations between Hindus and Christians is how to initiate the discussion of the nature of deity. Many Christians recall hymns written during the colonial (missionary) era that referred to “idol worship.” While they know that that kind of language is offensive to Hindus, they are often unsure of how Hindus do speak about deity. Because of the Christian’s hesitation, this part of the conversation is often initiated by the Hindu friend, but they too have to guess which aspect of this complex topic might be the best to start with.

To simplify the options a bit, most Canadian Hindus would initiate a discussion of deity by starting with either ritual or philosophy, depending on the setting of the conversation. On a tour of their home temple, they would be likely to refer to the ritual “care of the deities,” describing how often the priest sets food before the images, bathes and adorns the images, and holds the camphor lights before the images. On the other hand, in a seminar setting, they would be more likely to begin philosophically by describing how through meditation they seek to understand all reality as One or *Brahman*.

If they begin in this latter way, they would probably quickly explain that they themselves have not yet achieved this mysterious knowledge of the One and that there are various philosophical schools that describe it in differing ways. Then they would head back toward the ritual discussion by explaining that people follow a variety of spiritual paths as they seek the ultimate experience of “knowing” God as *Brahman*.

For those who want to cut the discussion short at this point, these two differing ways that Hindus speak about God are often tied together by using the distinction between conceiving of deity as *nir-guna* (without form or attributes) *Brahman*, the one pursued in meditation, and *sa-guna* (with form and attributes) *Brahman*, the one addressed in prayer at the temple or home altar.

“Bring Many Names”: Hinduism as a Monotheistic Religion

Monotheism—worship of one god—has generally been understood to characterize the Abrahamic religions, including Christianity, while the multiple images of the Divine in Hinduism have been interpreted as worship of many gods. The use of these images in devotion has further led to accusations of idolatry.

Most Hindus will point out that all worship is directed toward one ultimate reality, *Brahman*, given particular form in the spirituality of the worshipper. Each form or image expresses different attributes of the one divine power; devotion to one of these images is an expression of devotion to the ultimate.

The multiplicity reflected in the gods and goddesses of Hinduism is rooted in an understanding that the ultimate/*Brahman* is a mystery far more deep and complex than can be represented in a single image of divinity. Thus while individual Hindus will worship the deity that expresses their relationship to the Divine, most would acknowledge that their particular deity is one manifestation of the absolute or ultimate reality.

Followers of other traditions can find in Hinduism connections to their own understanding of monotheism in affirmations that the God who is One is indeed portrayed in multiple images and called by many names throughout scripture

and tradition. Muslims speak of the thousand and one names for Allah; Jews and Christians both are rediscovering a metaphorical theology that celebrates the multiple ways God's presence is known in the lives of believers.

For some Christians, the use of icons as a focus for devotion may be not unlike the role that images of deity play in Hindu worship, which offers another challenge to the way that claims of "idolatry" have been used to denigrate different faiths and their particular revelations of the Divine.

That God is indeed both one and many may be an affirmation that Christians and Hindus can find ways to share.

For both the Christians and the Hindus who work themselves past this first awkwardness in learning how to talk about their experience of God, the potential for deep and extended conversation is great. Hindus generally take great delight in describing their devotion and joy in attending to the images in their home altars or temples. These are *ishtha-devatas* or deities of "choice," and conversations about them generally take the form of a sharing of personal experience. Details of why a number of different images are worshipped and how the experience of reverence or transcendence breaks through at a certain part of the ritual routine can provide revealing pictures of an individual's understanding of the nature of deity.

On the other hand, when a Hindu explains why they do yoga or some other form of meditation and tries to put some of the more mysterious experiences of transcendence into words, theological dialogue can reach a high point of shared understanding. Looked at from the other side, Hindus generally find the Christian's effort to explain the divine and human aspects of the Christ figure fascinating, and are often more eager than their Christian friend to hear about the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit.

The one aspect of these conversations about deity that has created difficulty in the diaspora setting of North America is the thoughtless use of the term "monotheism." Hindus think of *Brahman* as One by definition, and children grow up praying to "God." So they are shocked when they are sometimes told in school that they believe in "many gods."

In conversations with Jewish and Muslim friends, the anxiety those communities feel about even acknowledging the existence of any other "form" of deity can remind Hindus how nervous people can get discussing their understanding of deity. On the other hand, Christians who have tried to explain the nature of the triune God in settings that include those from other faith traditions are familiar with the sudden realization that comes over one of how complex the topic of divinity can be.

For Hindus, as for Christians, one grows up learning about the nature of deity within a variety of different ritual settings, and the topic seems relatively uncomplicated. But in the differently structured environments of a pluralistic society, it is sometimes difficult to find the language in which deity can be spoken of in a simple and direct way.

Christians who have for some time struggled to explain their understanding of the triune nature of God to friends will be aware of the initial hesitation Hindus have in the pluralistic setting of Canada with wide-open discussions of the nature of deity. On the other hand, as non-Hindus learn about yoga or some other form of meditation, or join in their neighbours' festival celebrations, the questions about deity will flow more naturally and new forms of theological conversation will start to take place.

Can a Christian also be a Hindu?

The answer to the question “Can a Christian also be a Hindu?” or its reverse, “Can a Hindu also be a Christian?” is complicated.

For Hindus, the Christian story is not part of the Hindu *dharma*, or tradition. While it would seem that Jesus might be seen within Hinduism as an *avatara* or manifestation of the Divine, it is not possible to ignore the history of colonialism and its connection to Christian mission. While some Hindus do incorporate Jesus into a Hindu pantheon, for most, Jesus belongs to the Western world and is too closely connected to colonial history.

Nevertheless, there are Hindus who self-identify as Christians, and there are Hindus who have asked to be received into the membership of the United Church—as Hindus. The Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee, in being asked to reflect on this, has suggested that the policy that guides responses to these requests is the same for all who seek to be members of the church. The same questions of faith must be asked, and the board or session has responsibility for determining the faithfulness of the responses and for recording the membership. In other words, being Hindu does not, in and of itself, exclude someone from membership in the church.

For Christians, the answer is complicated as well. Hinduism offers a very different understanding of the world and of faith than does Christianity. However, increasing numbers of Christians today define themselves through dual practice, such as being a Christian/Buddhist or Christian/Hindu. For some, this comes from growing up in two traditions, through a mixed faith marriage or home. For others, it comes from a desire to know another path because of what it offers, perhaps as a way of knowing one’s first path more deeply.

From a Hindu perspective, a Christian can practise Hinduism, and do everything a Hindu does, while still remaining a Christian. For the Christian, if this means primarily a ritual practice such as meditation, then maintaining a Christian philosophical world view might easily be possible. But what if the individual with a dual practice wishes to go deeper into the teachings of both traditions? Is there ultimately a contradiction in beliefs or faith that requires someone to choose one or the other? Is it really possible, with integrity and depth, to be a believer of both?

Traditionally the church has approached this question by defining faith as consent to a comprehensive set of beliefs, doctrine, and language; and it has spoken of faith as the total giving of one’s heart and soul. In other words, there is no room for another allegiance, a dual loyalty.

It is possible, however, to take other approaches. Some lift up the importance of story and meaning over beliefs. Jesus, they say, taught through stories and in parables, and therefore always encouraged a focus on relationships, respect, and meaning. To take this approach means freedom to hold multiple stories in relationship to each other. It means not judging a story as being true or false, but rather asking whether it gives meaning and purpose. It means, for example, loving deeply the stories and the personifications of both Jesus and Krishna.

Others have adopted an internal pluralistic approach in which several paths are held side by side with each other. Each tradition is held in a separate internal space, and movement takes place internally between each space and tradition depending on the circumstances and context. There is no attempt to achieve consistency, but rather an acceptance that just as the divine reality is complex, so too is personal belief.

Others compare the experience of multiple faith paths to belonging to several cultural communities, and point out that in today's world, many move in and out of different cultures and languages.

In each of these choices, the simple reality is that there are Christians who speak most sincerely of being both Christian and Hindu. Perhaps the only answer to the question of whether a Christian can be a Hindu is to listen to those who say they are.

Sacred Texts

Hindus have a number of different sacred texts. The most revered in theory are the *Vedas*. The core of the *Vedas* are ancient hymns memorized by families of itinerant teachers. They also include some ritual instructions, and the philosophical teachings derived from those hymns are collected in a number of *Upanisads*. Although all of these sections of the *Veda* were eventually written down, they are still spoken of as *sruti* or “that which is heard,” a kind of revelation.

Few Hindus recite the hymns, but most are familiar with one or more of the *Upanisads*. And all would hold the general position that sacred truth is *Veda-anta* (*Vedanta*)—“end of the Veda” or “derived from the Veda.”

In daily devotion, a variety of other texts are more commonly used than the *Veda* itself. The epic texts of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are used in a variety of ways, and the *Puranas*, which contain hymns and ritual instructions appropriate for specific deities, are also used. These two groups of texts are called *smriti*—“that which is remembered”—to distinguish them from the more sacred *sruti*, but parts of them are often read in a person's daily devotion.

By far the best-known sub-text is the *Bhagavad Gita* (often called just the *Gita*), which is a short chapter of the *Mahabharata*. In it, the warrior Arjuna is trying to figure out how to reconcile his daily duties with his religious understanding and comes to realize that he is in dialogue with God. Many of the verses from this text are memorized by people and are often quoted in conversation. In *diaspora* settings, verses from the *Gita* are sometimes read as “scripture” where there are congregational-style services.

In addition to the sacred texts described above, which were originally written in Sanskrit, there are also large collections of hymns and stories of saints' lives found in most regional languages of India. Many individuals choose to use the more familiar language in these collections in their worship at home. In some cases, later renderings of the *smriti* texts such as the *Ramcaritmanas* (the Tulsidas version of the *Ramayana*) are used extensively in devotional settings and sometimes even as a kind of “scripture” in congregational-style services.

What can Christians learn from Hindus? Recovering the Value of Mysticism

Since its earliest days, Christianity was a religion that valued and respected its mystical traditions. Over time, Western Christians have largely lost the ability to embrace the unexplainable, and our Sunday services often reflect this. Practices such as chanting, contemplation, or *lectio divina* are seldom part of modern worship. And yet, if we believe what the mystics of the ages have told us, these practices have the potential to greatly deepen our walk with God.

In the East, generally speaking, the mystic is still a highly respected person in society, whose counsel is often sought out. Meditation and chanting are common practice and resulting visions or other sensory perceptions are widely accepted and respected as divine guidance.

Matthew Fox, in *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (1988), writes that our culture has taught us to deny the “mystical dimension of our psyches” rather than honour it. Perhaps it is time for us here in the West to revisit our Christian mystical roots. We could begin simply with slowing things down and leaving more room for silence during Sunday services.

ethical behaviour

Because until recently Hindus all lived within the Indian subcontinent, they had no reason to link their traditional understanding of the moral order or *dharma* with the specific features of their religious practice. They were therefore surprised to find that in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, “ethics” are tied in one way or another to law codes revealed by divinity.

In either case, the instruction of a child takes much the same form, in that rituals and customary rules are inculcated from infancy. But in the Indian case, the early training is gradually explained to the child not in terms of revealed law but in terms of certain traditional ideas Indian culture holds about the nature of the universe.

Reincarnation

The Sanskrit word for the general concept of reincarnation is *sam-sara* or the “flowing together” of life. In some ways this refers to the links that join all plant and animal life forms, but it also refers to the linking together of one human life with the stream of other life forms. In ancient Egypt and Greece, as well as in India, it was assumed that the human spirit went through a number of incarnations; such an idea was also held by some early Christians.

In India many discussions in religious texts offer both descriptions of and arguments for rebirth. People do not look for scientific proof that reincarnation occurs, but it is a basic assumption that influences a wide range of ethical questions.

Can a Christian believe in reincarnation?

Early Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras and Plato, and the later neoplatonists such as Plotinus (c. 205 CE) taught the concept of reincarnation. There are suggestions that, in particular, Plotinus’s concept of ethical reincarnation was influenced by Indian thought.

As Christian theology began to take shape in the third century, Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–254 CE), one of Christianity’s most famous early theologians, actively engaged Greek concepts, including the idea of the pre-existence of the soul. Origen suggested that conduct in a life or in lives before birth might explain suffering. Scholars differ on whether Origen believed in and taught reincarnation. His concept of pre-existence was debated for the next several centuries and only finally rejected in the sixth century.

Teachings about reincarnation, or the “transmigration of souls,” that emerged through the next millennia were aggressively repressed by the Roman Catholic Church, but continued in various ways and factions. By the late 16th century, references to reincarnation by European poets and philosophers were quite common.

In 1851, the German philosopher Schopenhauer was able to write: “Were an Asiatic to ask me for a definition of Europe I should be forced to answer him; It is that part of the world completely dominated by the outrageous and incredible delusion that

a man's birth is his beginning and that he is created out of nothing" (quoted in Ian Stevenson, *European Cases of the Reincarnation Type* (2001), p. 8).

Today, surveys show that about 25 percent of the population of Europe and North America believe in reincarnation. The Barna Group, a Christian research organization, has found that, consistent with the overall population, about a quarter of U.S. Christians, including 10 percent of all those who self-identify as born-again Christians, embrace the idea.

So, many Christians clearly do believe in reincarnation. But should they? The answer to this question in part lies in the interpretation of scripture and the significance of the major church councils in defining the Christian faith.

At the time Origen was writing, the church was still debating many aspects of its faith. Origen clearly struggled with articulating a faith consistent with scripture. For him the critical concern was an understanding that history was moving toward a goal or conclusion. In other words, he rejected concepts of an eternally continuing cycle of death and rebirth. Nevertheless, he did find it possible to speak of the pre-existence of the soul being part of God's movement in history toward a final conclusion.

What might a Christian understanding of reincarnation look like? Such a question invites speculation and openness to pushing the boundaries of tradition. But perhaps it is God's way of inviting us into greater openness to a world of diversity.

For a Christian, it could mean affirming the clear significance of Christ in an ongoing movement toward completion. It would mean affirming that it is the grace of Christ that leads and accompanies the journey, through each incarnation, toward perfection. That it is not human goodness alone that manifests itself in a Christian understanding of rebirth, but that at every stage, the grace of God in Christ is active to bring new possibilities and hope.

Such an understanding would lift up an infinitely longer evolutionary period in which we become the people we are meant to be. And rather than a brief moment in time being the full complement of our life experience and defining us for an eternity, the opportunity to reach our full moral and spiritual potential is accomplished in ways that we cannot imagine through the unfathomable mercy and love of God in Jesus.

Of course, all of this is familiar language to the Christian. It reflects the challenges of faith that led the Roman Catholic Church to begin speaking of purgatory, an opportunity after death to continue to learn and grow toward full salvation. And it also reflects the language of eschatology, in which we are reunited with a physical body as part of the final consummation of history.

Many theologians categorically reject the concept of reincarnation as inconsistent with Christian belief. But there are also those who argue that it does not need to be so. In the same way that Christian faith changed dramatically in its contact with Greek thought in the first and second centuries, perhaps we might be seeing the emergence of new understandings through renewed contact of Christian faith with Hinduism.

The most talked about ethical implication of the assumption of reincarnation is that through the operation of *karma*, one has some responsibility for the condition of one's life. *Karma* means both "action" and "the result of action," and it is assumed that one's actions in past lives have some bearing on the present, in much the same way that my action today will have a bearing on my life next week.

There are debates in texts about how this *karma* process works, but most schools of thought in India see some causal process at work here and prefer not to think that the circumstances of one's life are either totally random or easily explained in terms of divine providence. While the operations of *karma* are generally thought to create a healthy link with one's past and one's future, in some popular stories, *karma* is portrayed as a kind of fate that the subject is trying to work through.

Because the "flowing together" aspect of a person's life experience links them so closely with other life forms, Hindus tend to see their life as a part of the environment around them. Children are taught to care for plant and animal life forms, and are familiar with birth and death in that context from infancy. In some schools of thought this close contact with the environment has led to rigid rules on preserving all life forms and showing no violence even to insects. For most Hindus, it raises questions about whether they should practise full vegetarianism or at least respect the cow that was tethered to the backdoor of most rural homes.

For Hindus in Canada, who have largely moved from settings where these rural questions are the first ones on a child's mind, the "flowing together" feature of the environment is discussed more in terms of the implications of new medical practices or the large-scale human interventions in the environment that affect all life forms.

While for a Hindu a sense of personal responsibility arises from the operations of *karma*, and the natural rhythms of life are learned from all the life forms around us, a longing for "release" or *moksa* characterizes much of life. The biological laws that govern the life forms around us are to be accepted, and the ethical implications of those patterns are extended backward and forward through the law of *karma*. But the individual still wants to move beyond the limits of those laws to an imagined form of unchanging bliss or *nirvana*.

From the philosophical perspective, it is possible to develop ways of speaking about this state as a "realization" of the eternal *Brahman*, but from the ethical perspective it is experienced as a longing for "release" (*moksa*). In an ethical sense, this longing for "release" defines the larger purpose of life.

During their own lifetime, individuals choose the religious rituals they practise as they cultivate what they think of as the early stages in the fulfillment of that longing. But at the beginning and end of this phase of their life, they are dependent on the community around them to perform the rituals that link them with the life forms that have preceded this one and, even more important, those that are to come. It is in this latter sense that, for a Hindu, a "family" is not just a social form that links them to the political world around, but the essential tie that enables them to pass on to the next life.

Social Duty

A Hindu naturally comes to understand the general condition of human experience in terms of reincarnation and *karma*, and is introduced to ethical behaviour through the complex interactions one has within the family and society. As a set, these relations introduce one to a “social order” or *dharma* that defines all human relationships. Some rituals are introduced early in life, with the naming ceremony or the cutting of the hair ceremony. Hindus also traditionally came to understand four major stages or *ashramas* through which one’s life passes, and four major groups or *varnas* into which society is organized and that define their social identity.

In the case of the life stages (*ashramas*), the traditional family of India included three generations living in the same house, and the set of social duties was clear. In Canada this ideal situation is harder to achieve. In the case of the four major groups (*varnas*), an ideal unit of society was expected to include Brahmans, or teachers; Kshatriyas, or rulers; Vaisyas, or merchants; and Shudras, or labourers. But even in traditional India, this situation was seldom achieved in a balanced way. In practice, labourers who took on what were considered ritually polluting jobs such as working with skins and washing others’ clothes were not even included in the fourfold system and were kept at the margin of society.

In the settings where the fourfold scheme of *varna* had become so confused as to be unrecognizable, people tended to speak primarily of “their community,” or *jati*, and its ritual expectations. It is often that inward-looking sense of social duty that has come to be associated with the English word “caste.”

The term “caste” as it is generally used in describing Indian society refers to a social class system that is hereditary and highly unequal. The colonial authorities were especially concerned with the extreme examples associated with the ritually polluting tasks some labourers performed that led to customs calling for them to be “untouchable” to members of some other groups. Official colonial attempts to ameliorate the conditions in which these groups lived were not very successful. Gandhi’s effort to erase the whole concept of ritual pollution by relabelling these groups as *Harijans* or “people of God” was a dramatic gesture of good will. Later, B.R. Ambedkar, a *Harijan* leader who served as law minister in Jawaharlal Nehru’s government, drafted the Indian Constitution and included sections on justice for the “scheduled castes” and for other minority groups.

In spite of these efforts at reform, some leaders in these communities feel that the disabling social attitudes remain, and they have once again redefined the groups concerned with the new label *Dalit* or “the oppressed” (see box below). Generally, when Hindus moved to other parts of the world, this whole stigma of ritual pollution diminished, as everyone of necessity took up a totally new set of occupations. In these settings, once the concept of ritual pollution has lost meaning, the concept of “caste” as it has been used in the last couple of centuries will likely disappear as well.

Nevertheless, Dalits continue to point to the realities of oppression and racism that persevere in spite of the social and occupational contexts of the life in these new world communities, including Canada.

Who are the Dalits?

While the caste system has been abolished by the Indian Constitution and caste is no longer recorded in the Indian census, it is still regarded as a social fact in India and elsewhere. Centuries-old social, religious, and political constraints create two main components of Indian society: caste communities and outcaste communities.

The outcaste communities consist of about 16 percent of the Indian population, some 160–180 million people. They self-identify as “Dalits” or “broken people.” Human Rights Watch’s 1999 report *Broken People* says that “Dalits are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions, and routinely abused at the hands of the police and higher-caste groups that enjoy the State’s protection” (www.hrw.org). India has established significant affirmative action programs for what the government calls the “scheduled castes,” but Dalits argue that the old cultural patterns persist.

Many Dalits have found a source of strength and liberation within the Christian community. The membership of the Church of North India, a current partner of the United Church and a successor of much of its historic mission work (beginning from 1890), is largely of Dalit background. About 9 percent of the total Dalit population of India is Christian.

From the 1980s, paralleling the development of Dalit movements and Dalit political parties, Dalit Christians have sought to develop a Dalit theology. In the early stages of Dalit theology, identity was seen within the framework of pain and suffering, and the images were of a suffering God coming to the rescue of a suffering people. More recent development has focused on the consciousness of brokenness and resistance to all that breaks another.

Dalit theology continues to make an important contribution to Christian theological discussion, both in India and around the world. In solidarity with other Indigenous communities around the world, some Dalit theologians have rejected the term Dalit altogether in favour of terms like “original inhabitants.” Dalit theology has also argued that the denominational history of Christianity is an outdated European phenomenon and that Christianity needs a new postdenominational identity.

Personal Ethics

Indian schools of thought pictured the human psyche as made up of a number of different components arranged in a kind of hierarchy. Traditionally, a child was taught early about the “body” (*rupa*), “emotions” (*vedana*), and “mind” (*manas*), and instructed in how to use self-discipline in each of those areas. Of somewhat more interest to the family was discerning what the *samskaras* or “personality traits” brought over from the previous birth of the child were like. These were often harder to discipline or alter, but they were important in determining the role the child would play in society.

For a mature human being, ethical behaviour would potentially also go on to entail “universal consciousness or reason” (*buddhi*), “self-understanding or I-sense” (*ahamkara*), and *atman*, or a “divine consciousness.” It was Gandhi who recognized how this traditional way of understanding the psyche and the discipline needed to bring it to full maturity could be used to encourage participation in political activity. The colonial authorities were stunned by the self-discipline Gandhi’s followers showed when they used non-violent methods to pursue political ends.

In bringing traditional methods of self-discipline into the political arena, Gandhi in a sense created an interface between traditional Hindu ethics and ethics that had developed out of the Christian concern with social justice. Gandhi was aware of this dimension of his way of arguing, and to make the point explicit, he frequently quoted from the Sermon on the Mount. One gets a much clearer understanding of his argument for expanding the range of Hindu ethical thinking, however, when one follows his

interpretation of the message of the *Bhagavad Gita*. As he understood it, the *Gita* linked the basic training in self-discipline with divine purpose when the individual involved learned to act without attachment. When this kind of action was made habitual and turned into a life-purpose, it became a *sva-dharma*, or “spiritual pathway,” that put one in harmony with the divine purpose.

During the colonial era, the Hindu way of understanding ethical behaviour was not well understood. Missionaries and others sometimes mocked the behaviour they saw and almost never made serious inquiries as to how Hindus understood concepts such as reincarnation, *dharma*, or the forms of self-discipline that included things like vegetarianism. Gandhi’s insistent use of traditional methods to address contemporary problems opened many eyes. By the time Hindus began to arrive in Canada in the 1960s, most people were prepared to recognize that Hindus were a peace-loving people and probably had reasonable standards of ethical behaviour.

Looked at from the other side, Hindus worried that Canadians might be like the worst of the colonial rulers and would show little self-discipline with regard to the three basic areas of diet, emotion, and mind. Thus, fear of the other and the legacies of colonialism have often made integration into Canadian society a painful process.

However, as attitudes gradually change, space may be opened to consider together the implications of different traditions for life in Canadian society. Discussions might begin on the background ideas such as reincarnation, underlying social order, and discipline of the psyche, precisely because Hindus and their neighbours are now dealing with a shared ethical environment.

theology in a pluralistic world

History includes many different examples of how religious traditions understood their encounter with others. The ancient Hebrews sometimes married people from neighbouring tribes and learned about the veneration of *baals*, or fertility spirits. In their exile they encountered monotheism and began to rethink their understanding of deity in a way that included creation stories. In a later period, the early Christians struggled to figure out how to express their faith in Greek terms such as *logos*.

Because they shared a common heritage, the early Christians and the Jewish synagogues were aware of one another; later on, the leaders of the rising Islamic faith were aware of the traditions of the Jews and Christians living nearby. With the arrival of the colonial era, these older patterns that involved understanding a neighbour were overridden in a major way when civilizations that had little or no earlier contact met for the first time. Some of the worst damage of the colonial era occurred when major European settlements displaced the Indigenous traditions of the Americas without even making an effort to understand their religious practices.

The story of India is somewhat similar, in that colonial Europeans were inclined to reject the local traditions. But in this case, the Indians were able to push back because of their complex traditions followed by huge populations, and because in the end European settlement was not destined to be permanent. The theological questions raised for Christians by their encounter with Hindus are essentially new ones. But in some ways, they grow out of the long history of interaction with Jewish and Muslim neighbours, and it is important that we think carefully about what the relevant issues are and identify the theological questions carefully.

In a theological discussion of this sort, it is often the case that a position taken by the Roman Catholic Church centuries ago looms in the background. During medieval times, it was considered natural to hold that salvation was possible only through the ritual of the church, and it was thought that both those on the fringes of European civilization and certainly those beyond had no hope of salvation.

This position has even made ecumenical discussions with the eastern Orthodox churches and the wide array of Protestant churches difficult, and it forces Catholic theologians to make very positive statements about the quest for salvation in other churches and religious settings without wavering on this one ritual requirement. Probably the most quoted theological voice in this regard is that of Karl Rahner, who spoke of “anonymous Christians” who might be included in God’s purpose because their trust in God made them “Christian” even though in their historical circumstances they had no contact with the church. This kind of thinking is sometimes called “inclusivism.”

While many Protestant theologians were eager to appear less exclusivist than the Catholic position, they were often influenced by the colonial-era critique of non-European civilizations and used the rhetoric of “heathen darkness” and “idol worship” in their hymns. In the 1930s, Hendrick Kraemer restated the exclusivism of this kind of civilizational critique in a study prepared for the meeting of the International Missionary Council entitled *The Christian Faith and Non-Christian Religion*. By distinguishing Christian “faith” and non-Christian “religion,” Kraemer tried to find a simple way to distinguish what he considered two different kinds of civilizational forms and clearly state that salvation was possible only within a Christian context. His basic theological position is still influential in some Protestant circles.

Is Jesus the only way?

This report proposes acceptance, respect, and openness to mutual transformation as the orientation that the United Church brings to our relationship with Hinduism. This is consistent with long-established United Church practices and beliefs toward other faiths. A recent internal survey of United Church beliefs showed that as many as 90 percent of members believe that there are many paths to salvation, a pattern that likely distinguishes the United Church from many other denominations. So it would seem that a United Church report would answer this question by affirming that Jesus is not the only way to salvation.

However, answering this question with greater care and depth is critically important for Christians. Even in a church where so many believe in multiple paths to salvation, many theological approaches can be considered.

There are many within the church who believe that Jesus is God's full, complete, and final revelation. While for them there would be no doubt about treating a neighbour with respect, understanding Hinduism as part of God's plan of salvation raises serious questions. Yet, from this viewpoint, it is still possible to be open to and surprised by God's radical love. Christians can relate to Hindus with firmness about beliefs without being arrogant, without for example comparing the best of Christianity with the worst of Hinduism. It is possible, in other words, to listen to what Hindus say about their experiences of the Divine and learn something deeply true about God.

There are also those in the church who believe that, in the end, all paths of faith find their completion in Jesus. Yet here it is possible to see God's spirit at work in the lives of Hindus and to value ways that dialogue and contact help us as Christians to see God's work more clearly. Hindus, in other words, can help us be better Christians, as we hope we might help Hindus be better Hindus. One possible approach is to see Jesus as revealing what God has already accomplished. Rather than serving as a bridge to be crossed, or a means of satisfaction for God's judgment, Jesus is a sacrament of God's love.

Many in the church see the differences between faiths as a given part of God's creation. For them it is simply a reality that the world is made up of different faiths, and differences between traditions become as revealing or more revealing of the nature of God than the similarities between faiths.

In all of these approaches, there need be no question of the unique witness of Jesus in the midst of the world's faiths. So, while acknowledging the uniqueness of Jesus, the question is whether it is possible to set aside questions of final truth while we allow Hindus and Christians to learn from each other. In other words, can we acknowledge that theological debates on salvation are not likely to be resolved? Can we be open to the possibility that deeper relationships with Hindus will truly reveal something new and helpful to us about the nature of God?

As the postcolonial era began, Wilfred Cantwell Smith (who was also a minister of the United Church) produced a pioneering study of the nature of religion entitled *The Meaning and End of Religion*. In this study, he demonstrated that the use of the word "religion" to refer to a specific package of ritual practices and ideas was a relatively new use developed as part of the European Enlightenment and the ensuing colonial era. So, for instance, uses such as "the Hindu religion" or "Hinduism" developed for the first time in this Enlightenment environment, but so did uses such as "the Christian religion" or "Christianity."

By imagining religious practice as taking place within these water-tight compartments, an Enlightenment observer could ask which was true and which was false, or at least which was superior. While that kind of blanket judgment made things simpler for an essentially skeptical observer or historian, it was not a good way for someone to understand the religious thinking and practices of either themselves or their neighbours. Smith suggested that the study of religion become the study of persons. By studying the religious thinking and practices of persons, including ourselves, we should be able to gradually understand what God's purpose is in the religious life of humankind. In many ways, the current study is an attempt to continue this exploration of the religious life of persons.

The United Church of Canada

During the early decades of the 20th century, when discussions leading up to the Basis of Union for The United Church of Canada were taking place, Canada had not yet become a multicultural country. Even in British Columbia, where the Aboriginal population was substantial and Chinese workers and Japanese fishers and merchants were numerous, it had not yet been decided which groups would be permanent citizens. In 1907, soon after 5,000 Hindu/Sikh workers arrived to work in the lumber industry, anti-Asian riots broke out.

By the time a shipload of Sikhs arrived on the *Komagata Maru* in 1914, local authorities had scrambled to put in place a rule that said no one could land unless they had a "continuous journey ticket" from their birthplace, even though no such tickets were available for an Indian. This blatantly racist action has been described in Canadian school textbooks ever since as a matter of shame, and in many ways has marked the end of the colonial era and the beginning of a new discussion of postcolonial multiculturalism.

The statement about God's purposes in human history that found its way into the Basis of Union of the United Church is a generous one:

We believe that God has revealed Himself in nature, in history, and in the heart of man [humankind]; that he has been graciously pleased to make clearer revelation of Himself to men of God [persons] who spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit; and that in the fullness of time He has perfectly revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, who is the brightness of the Father's glory and the express image of His person. (Article II)

Rather than echoing the colonial-era racism and general pessimism about human nature that was still in the air in British Columbia in 1914, the Basis of Union in 1925 reflected the confident belief that God had been and was continuing to be revealed in the life of humankind.

The references to "the heart of man" and to "men of God who spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" suggest the affirmation that persons of other than Christian faith were being included in God's wider revelatory purposes. Although the First World War had dealt a crippling blow to the kind of confident hope expressed here, and colonial attitudes lingered in the racist policies of the residential schools and the anti-Jewish racism that was soon to convulse the heart of Europe, the theology of the United Church had positioned it to be part of the more hopeful discussion that was just starting about a shared future for all humankind.

Early United Church Perspectives on Other Faith Traditions

Statements leading up to church union largely disparaged other religions, with such references as “the menace of Mohammedanism” and Hinduism as “a formidable foe” (The Joint Committee on Church Union, pp. 5, 6). Relationships with other religious communities within Canada over the next decade continued to be antagonistic. The United Church believed that salvation could only come through Jesus Christ and because of this, evangelism was a driving force for mission work at home and abroad.

At the same time, the United Church attempted to honour the values and truths expressed through other religions. The doctrinal section of the United Church’s Basis of Union, finalized in 1908, reflected a liberal, evangelical theology of the late 19th century that recognized general revelation in other religions and philosophies, and particularly in the prophetic tradition of Judaism. This theological perspective was based upon a comparative study of world religions that identified values within these “ethnic faiths” that could be held in common with Christianity. These values were evidence of the general revelatory work of the Holy Spirit through “men of God” who followed other religious traditions. Still, the writers of the doctrinal section claimed the perfect revelation of God through Jesus Christ as the unique and sole source of redemption. As per comparative studies of religion of the time, they believed that only Christianity was of universal import and therefore the pinnacle of religious development.

The 1936 United Church Foreign Mission Policy tried to retain this respect for world religions and the supremacy of Christ. It stated that the “correct attitude of Christianity to non-Christian religions” was to fulfill and not destroy them. “While maintaining the supremacy of Christ, the Christian should exhibit toleration, a genuine desire to understand and appreciate and a willingness to co-operate, where co-operation is possible, with sincere men and women of other faiths.”

However, this acknowledgement of general revelation and noble values within world religions was not extended to the “primitive, animistic” beliefs of Indigenous people throughout the world, such as the folk religions in China, the Bantu in Africa, and the Aboriginal traditions in North America. These beliefs were understood only as pagan superstition that needed to be destroyed.

This theological stance was congruent with that of the International Missionary Council. Its meeting in Jerusalem in 1928 was particularly influential, and it was frequently cited in subsequent General Council foreign mission reports over the next few years. Within this overall conviction of the supremacy of Christianity, the Jerusalem meeting urged missionaries throughout the world to work humbly with followers of other religions and to recognize all that was noble and beautiful in their religion. It even suggested that other world religions might help Western Christians understand more fully the revelation of God.

Soon after the end of the Second World War, the colonial era came to an end and Canada became deeply involved in the United Nations and the beginning of a postcolonial world order. In 1960 Canada adopted a Declaration on Human Rights, and in 1962 removed the racially defined country-of-origin restrictions from the immigration policy. It was in this context that the Report of the Commission on World Mission was offered to General Council in 1966. This report noted the importance of the new pattern of immigration and the new sense of a world civilization, and asked how, in this context, mutual respect can be achieved.

Beginning with a historical perspective, the report argued that “the major encounter of the twentieth century between the church and the other great religious communities is...more profitably to be thought of in relation to the earlier major encounter between the church and Greek rationality.”

Using the idea of Wilfred Cantwell Smith (a member of the commission), referred to above, that religion is a characteristic of persons, the report then argued that what is needed in the present situation is another example of an intimate, continuous, and creative encounter between the knowledge of Jesus Christ and the thinking of people who have come through neither the Hebraic nor the Greco-Roman traditions. Because this new encounter takes place within the context of a “one world” culture, we cannot help but be aware of the growing involvement of each of us in the religious life of the other. In this context, we must assume “that Hindus will be Hindus, not in any past sense, but in some future one.”

In this rapidly changing world, the report concludes, the religious communities are challenged to develop a new sense of compatibility. For the first time, the world’s religious communities are facing joint problems:

Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and others are being called upon to collaborate in building a common world...not merely a world of which we can severally approve, but also one to the building of which the faith of each can inspire.

In summary, the report argued:

The church should recognize that God is creatively and redemptively at work in the religious life of all mankind [humankind]. Christians have much to learn as well as to contribute, through dialogue with people of other faiths. Their special responsibility is to present the knowledge of God in Christ Jesus in ways which will respect each other’s integrity.

In 1997 a report specifically committed to redefining the church’s approach to other religious traditions was prepared by the Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee of the General Council. This report, titled *Mending the World*, developed the concept “whole world ecumenism” to define the new idea of interfaith teamwork in addressing the issues of the day.

From its beginnings, The United Church of Canada has demonstrated a sizeable and sustained commitment...to overcome the fragmentation within Christ’s Church. While continuing our efforts to strengthen and deepen our ties to other churches, endeavouring to make visible the vision of Christian unity in one Spirit and in common action, we recognize that the precarious time in which we and the world live calls us to broaden our understanding of “ecumenical” commitment and activity. The context in which we live might be called “the wilderness of the world” and the understanding might be called “whole world ecumenism.”

Whereas traditional ecumenical activity has been church-centred, placing emphasis on the churches as they relate to one another both in matters of faith and service, the broader ecumenism is world-centred, placing emphasis on churches relating to the world beyond themselves, to persons involved in other religious traditions, ideologies, and secular agencies. In this understanding of “whole world ecumenism” the churches are called to make common cause with individuals and institutions of good will who are committed to compassion, peace and justice in the world.

Approaching other religious traditions with this newer understanding of the ecumenical task, the United Church began a study of its relationship with Jewish neighbours that was shared with the members of the church and accepted by the 37th General Council as an official statement entitled *Bearing Faithful Witness: United Church–Jewish Relations Today*. One of the critical issues addressed in the document was Christology. To the question of whether Jesus was the Messiah, the report suggested that, while for many Christians the answer might be “yes,” for Jews the answer remains “no.” The document rejected the longstanding Christian theology of replacement and supersessionism, and affirmed that God’s covenant and calling to the Jewish people is irrevocable and continuing. In the end, the document might be said to have adopted an orientation of covenantal pluralism. God’s older covenant with the Jewish people continues side by side with the newer covenant of the gospel.

While this document was considered groundbreaking by the Jewish observers with whom it was shared, it has been criticized in some quarters for not addressing more directly the question of the legitimacy of the relation between the Jewish people and the land. Nevertheless, it did provide a vivid example of the central theological issue of pluralism and the need to recognize that God’s desire for diverse relationships and God’s faithfulness to them is evident in the religious experience of humankind.

As work on *Bearing Faithful Witness* was winding up, a study of United Church relations with Islam was begun, just as international peace was disrupted by initiatives taken in the name of Islam. This study was called *That We May Know Each Other: United Church–Muslim Relations Today*. Affirming the core religious life of Muslims, the final statement (2006):

Affirms that we share with Muslims a belief in one God and a common heritage through Abraham.

Affirms that God is creatively at work in the religious life of Muslims and Christians.

Affirms that God, whose love we have experienced in Jesus Christ as boundless and resourceful, works creatively and redemptively in us and in others.

Acknowledges the prophetic witness of Muhammad, and that the mercy, compassion, and justice of God are expressed in the Qur’an, which is regarded by Muslims as the Word of God.

While the studies of United Church relationships with Jews and with Muslims involved finding careful ways of using shared language in order to define respectful understandings of older ties, the studies of how to link United Church theology with Indigenous forms of spirituality ended up proving more complex for a number of reasons.

One reason is that they attempt to link United Church theology with a world view forged in a very different setting. A second is that the damaging effects of the missionary era and the residential schools impact are still being felt. The third is that many of those expressing themselves in terms of Indigenous spirituality do so within the context of the church and feel assured that links established within their own experience are the ones that tie these two traditions of spirituality together.

The *Circle and Cross* study developed a dialogue planning tool for engaging Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in conversations about spirituality in the context of the search for healing and reconciliation. This has been followed by *Living into Right Relations*, a process inviting people in the United Church to continue exploring these challenges and working toward justice in our life together in Canada.

Conversations with Hindus

In trying to think through the theological implications of the conversations now going on between members of the United Church and their Hindu neighbours, a number of considerations must be kept in mind. The documents of the church clearly indicate that the church's position is a pluralist one. From the *Basis of Union*, which spoke of the varied ways in which God has revealed Godself, to *That We May Know Each Other*, where the prophetic office of Muhammad was recognized, the church has recognized that in a variety of historical situations God has been revealed in diverse ways.

The church's conversations with Hindus have been somewhat like those with Indigenous forms of spirituality, in that they are rooted in very different world views and were at one point badly tangled in colonial-era mission strategy. They are, however, in some ways deeply theological conversations, in that they do not bear the burden of communal and political interest, and individuals are free to engage in the conversations while following their own religious inclination. We see these conversations as a special test of any theology of pluralism.

In our evaluation of these conversations, we have identified three theological watersheds or stages that mark the growing understanding that one sees between Hindus and Christians. We have called these watersheds *acceptance*, *respect*, and *mutual transformation*.

Acceptance

The term "acceptance" already has wide currency in both political and theological circles where the plurality of religious traditions is being discussed. In Canada, for instance, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, included in the 1982 Constitution, speaks of the Right to Freedom of Religion. The detailed meaning of this right has been tested in a significant number of cases before the Supreme Court, and the consensus of public opinion in Canada is that it is a right that is well established in our society.

What has not been as thoroughly discussed is what this political right implies about the spiritual foundations of our society. George Grant (in *Lament for a Nation*, 1965) argued that the foundations of Canadian society were rooted in the experience of religious plurality, and that the guarantees of human rights, first formulated in 1960, grew out of that plurality. By the 1980s, provincial authorities were actively encouraging Hindus to form temple communities that would have government-recognized clergy and tax-exempt status. By accepting this government recognition, the new immigrant religious traditions took their place within a Canadian tradition that recognizes the plurality of religious traditions.

Surveys show that an overwhelming majority of United Church members, and Canadians generally, accept the fact that their fellow citizens seek salvation in a variety of different ways. The acceptance of this plurality of religious traditions does not imply that all traditions are the same, but it does imply that the conversations among them take place in a context built upon shared values.

While the term “acceptance” is essentially a social or political term, within the domain of theology it sometimes takes on more specific meanings. One of the much-debated uses of the term in theology these days was first introduced in 1984 by George Lindbeck. He introduced the postmodern idea that all thought is conditioned by the social filter through which we develop that thought. In his view, religious traditions were among the thickest of all filters, and like totally different languages, they were distinct from one another and, he argued, even essentially incoherent one to another. As brave as this theory was in its logical consistency, it flies in the face of historical experience where neighbouring religious traditions have grown closer over time, and a nation such as Canada has built a plurality of religious forms into its basic sense of identity.

The model Jesus established for dealing with cultural and religious difference was clear in the conversations he had with and about Samaritans, as well as in the way he carefully dealt with the hostility of the Pharisees. Nationalist struggles and imperialist ambitions have sometimes interfered with the natural pattern of religious discourse, but more and more we live in one world and the conversations among the religious traditions are becoming richer and more complex all the time. Accepting the plurality entailed in these conversations is only a first step, but, as the Basis of Union of the United Church said, our understanding of God’s revelation includes the fact “that he has been...pleased to make clearer revelation of Himself to men [persons] of God who spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” The fact that this continuing revelation now leads us to a pursuit of “whole world ecumenism” means that, especially here in Canada, we need to find forms of justice that include persons from a wide range of religious backgrounds.

Accepting the diversity of our religious backgrounds does not mean that we are reduced to quietly tolerating the customs of others while we live most of the time in an essentially secular world. Quebec’s various efforts to define a boundary line called “reasonable accommodation” and determine how far the public should go in accepting the religious practices of particular groups have not been very successful because they attempt to initiate a new kind of conversation about the realms of religion and politics. On the other hand, when the various provincial governments invited groups of new immigrants to define themselves as religious communities and develop their own definitions of their worship traditions, Hindu immigrants found the presentation of that opportunity helpful. Hundreds of groups were able to define their worship traditions and appoint clergy in this way; this arrangement respectfully honoured the fact that when religion is defined as belonging to people, a rich diversity of traditions is likely. Importantly, these many traditions now participate in a shared discussion that respects the religious heritage of each while looking for divine guidance as we together participate in “mending the world.”

By describing the experience of the inter-religious conversation as one that starts in “acceptance,” we hope to describe a conversation that begins with trust established in law and at the same time remains open to whatever religious vision awaits us. In the colourful phrase used by Prime Minister Nehru to describe Indian differences at the time of independence, “these are interconnected differences.” It is healthy and appropriate to recognize our differences, provided we have a basis for accepting them that is rooted in a set of common values established both in law and in theology.

Respect

“Acceptance” of the plurality of religious traditions is a state of mind that is socially defined. It defines both a constitutional right available to all citizens, and a joyful recognition of the rich diversity that makes up the religious life of our society. On the other hand, “respect” as we use it here is rooted in theology from beginning to end. Respect in a conversation between two religious traditions is the awareness of one that God is at work in the life of the other.

In the experience of The United Church of Canada, we discovered this use of the term first from conversations on Indigenous spirituality. In those conversations, we learned that it was not even possible to begin the discussion until the Circle was established. In the Circle everyone sits or stands at a slight angle from the one next to them, but they are exposed in a major way to the truth that emanates from the centre. Unlike “dialogue,” where each of two parties frontally confronts the other with its version of truth, in a situation of “respect,” people are positioned in such a way that while they stand on their traditional ground, they expose themselves in a major way to the truth they are hearing through the other.

In a conversation characterized by “respect,” all parties stand on holy ground. Each participant needs to find in their faith experience the grounds for believing that God is revealed in diverse ways, and needs to hear others describe how they heard the word of God and how their practice of reverence developed. For the Imam asked by a Muslim university student if there could be truth in other religious traditions, the issue was simply one of omnipotence, for, as he said: “God is all powerful. There would not be other religious traditions unless He allowed it.” For the Christian student hesitantly wondering about reincarnation, the question arose because events within her present life did not seem to be adequately explained in any other way.

These are theological questions that lead to holy curiosity and what some have called “holy envy.” The term “respect,” as we use it here, is not a secular value imposed from outside on all religious persons. It is rather an invitation addressed to any person to describe the faith experience that gives them meaning and the practices they follow in trying to sustain that faith. In the conversational setting, those statements of faith are not judged as “truth” in some pseudo-scientific way that removes them from the conversational setting, but they are treated with the kind of dialogical reverence that characterizes serious conversation between persons.

In the discussions leading up to the United Church’s approval of *Bearing Faithful Witness*, the issue was all about “respect.” Jewish friends had endured centuries of abuse from Christians primarily because they had remained faithful to the covenant their ancestors had made with God. Those who participated in the study recognized that the God revealed in Jesus Christ would have honoured that faithfulness and would most certainly not have condoned the abusive relationships toward Jews that developed over the centuries. Repenting the abuse and trying to find a basis for mutual respect going forward were the theological challenges the church took on in making the statement it did.

In standing respectfully together with our Hindu friends, the challenges are a bit different. Because we come from different world views and sometimes still hear the mocking voice of the colonial missionary in our ears, we need to listen carefully to the voice of our Hindu friends. When they carefully explain to us that *Brahman* or God seems to them beyond human understanding, and therefore they respect those who want to perform rituals for images, we pause before jumping to the conclusion that this is a justification for the “idolatry” the Hebrews of old so hated.

If carefully expressed, Hindus and Christians have a potentially long list of interesting theological issues to talk over, precisely because they are religious traditions arising out of different world views. What is important is that each respects the theological foundations of the other and that people feel free to speak from deep within their tradition of theological experience. Although conversations in this respectful mode generally begin with what might be called comparative religion questions, as each one shows their friend what their ritual practices are and explains something of their history, if the conversations take place on the foundations of theology, they have an open future.

Mutual Transformation

Respectful theological conversations between friends and neighbours have an open character. These conversations are not limited by the hope of one communal group to convert a friend to a new religious identity, nor by the need of communal groups to secure their political rights in the secular society. Theological discussions among persons often do not even identify the communal label attached to the idea under discussion, and leave open the question of whether the tai chi or yoga forms of meditation feel totally comfortable being practised in a Christian setting.

For Hindus and Christians, this openness is particularly important because of the large numbers of intermarriages involving these two communities and the need for children of the next generation to be able to understand the plurality of religious options they are confronted with. At the time of marriage, the full religious heritage each party brings to the marriage is usually not fully understood and people move forward in faith, so that the theological conversations that occur later on come as a bit of a surprise. While the element of surprise may lead to a moment of confusion at first, serious theological conversation generally leads to a new openness and a joyful awareness that God is at work in the deeper levels of one's consciousness.

By recognizing that conversations between religious traditions may lead to "mutual transformation," we do not agree with those who hold that there is a mystical domain out beyond all religious life or those that hold that "all religions are the same." Religious experience is a profound and embedded part of human experience, and there is no easy way to conclude what the ultimate forms of religious experience will look like. At the same time, there is also no way to put a limit on religious experience and say that every example of genuine religious experience must be labelled in a certain way or have a number of predefined characteristics.

The concept of revelation allows for the possibility that God can continue to be part of the religious conversation. We enter the conversation because there are specific issues in our lives that make us uneasy. We then hear from others that they share some of that unease, but that they have found religious practices that have taken them down a somewhat different road. What none of us can say for certain is where any of those roads end. We want to affirm that the conversations leave us with a kind of openness that needs to be carefully examined. By recognizing that, for some, inter-religious conversation has led to a sense of mutual transformation, we affirm that God is at work in these conversations and that the openness we experience is a longing for God's further leading in this context.

For many, theological reflection on the plurality of religious traditions involved the development of propositional statements on the limits the church as an institution should set in opening itself up to a conversation with others. We have tried to propose here a theological reflection on where the conversations are at the present time, and what the nature of the dialogical reverence one senses in those

conversations entails. By describing that sense of reverence as involving the three levels of *acceptance*, *respect*, and *mutual transformation*, we have tried to find terms that readers might recognize in their own experience of inter-religious conversation, and offer some theological reflection on what that experience might entail.

This kind of theological reflection is, of course, an “in process” one and is intended to describe the inter-religious conversations currently characteristic of Hindu-Christian friendships in Canada. These characteristics of the conversation would be different in a different social setting, and they will almost certainly change even further in another generation. A theological analysis of the contemporary situation enables us to enter into the conversations with a reverence that respects our several religious backgrounds, even as it allows us to embrace the different threads of conversation that currently characterize our society.

glossary

avatāra: a deity that took a particular form in order to deal with a crisis situation. Vishnu was especially known for taking a number of such forms.

bhakti: a Sanskrit term meaning “devotion.” The term refers to the bonding that occurs between a person and a deity, but the emotional tone of the term is sometimes noted and contrasted with those who have a “knowing” (*j na*) or an “action-based” (*karma*) relationship with the Divine. The period between the 8th and the 16th centuries, when hymn singers using their local languages went about composing popular songs for the deities, is sometimes referred to as the “bhakti period” in Hindu history.

Brahman: transcendent reality; God. Ultimately unknowable in its *nir-gu a* (without attributes) form but active in the world in its *sa-gu a* (with attributes) form. An “active in the world” form of a God or Goddess is called an *vara* (“deity” or “lord”), and in a ritual setting it takes on a particular material form and is called a *m rti* or “image.”

dharmā: a Sanskrit word from the root *dh* meaning “to uphold” that describes the cosmic and moral order. It is unusually difficult to translate into English and is even used in North America sometimes to refer to the religious life of the people from India.

ishta-devata: “chosen deity”

mūrti: “image” or material form of the deity

karma: a Sanskrit word meaning “action.” The word includes both the intention of the action and the consequences of the action. Used in connection with the belief in reincarnation, the term often refers to the consequences in this life of actions in a previous life.

mathas: monastic institutions in which celibate monks or nuns follow a ritual routine and teach theological texts. Sometimes attached to major temples.

namaste: a form of everyday greeting in India. It is usually done with hands folded at one’s chest and with the head slightly bowed. Taken literally it means “I bow to the spirit in you.” It is normally done by the younger person approaching the elder, and then reciprocated by the elder greeting the younger.

samsāra: a Sanskrit word made up of the verb root *sr* meaning “flow” and the adverbial prefix *sam* meaning “together.” The term is usually used to refer to the setting in which the experience of life takes place. The emphasis is on the connectedness of everything, including the events of one’s previous lives.

sādhana: a Sanskrit term referring to an individual’s established spiritual practice, usually taken up by making a vow

sat: a Sanskrit term that in English translation means “the real,” “being,” or “truth”

Vedas: The body of texts considered most holy, or *ruti* (“that which is heard”), by the Hindus. There are three sections consisting of hymns (*sa hitas*), ritual instructions (*br hmanas*), and philosophical teachings (*upani ads*), and there are a number of different versions memorized and passed on for centuries by given families of priests.

vratas: vows taken, often at festival time, promising to perform a special ritual routine

Study guide

Notes for the Leader

The following study guide provides suggestions for a four-session exploration of the material in *Honouring the Divine in Each Other: United Church–Hindu Relations Today*. Each participant will need a copy of the document, and it is helpful if participants can begin reading before the first session. Each session has suggested reading from the Bible and Hindu scriptures as well. Participants may want to browse the text boxes ahead of time, as these are covered in a different order than they appear.

Sessions are designed to be approximately two hours in length, but adjust the time according to the needs of your group and note that Session 2 may take longer. Don't panic if you don't get through everything. Discussion topics are suggestions to get the conversation going, and there may be times when you decide to go with the flow of the group's interest and concerns rather than finishing every item. Feel free to adapt questions and activities to suit your group.

There is a response form at the end of this study guide. The responses relate to the proposed statement found on pages 4–5. Both group and individual responses are welcome. Responses will be especially helpful to guiding the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee in confirming, altering, or refining the particulars of the proposed statement. Group leaders might reflect ahead of time on the best way for their group to complete the response form. This study guide calls for it to be completed during Session 4.

Please return the response form on completion of your study, by **December 31, 2016**, to:

Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee
Church in Mission Unit
The United Church of Canada
3250 Bloor St. West, Suite 300
Toronto, ON M8X 2Y4

Session 1

Prior to the session, distribute *Honouring the Divine in Each Other* and ask participants to read pages 6–24: Introduction, History, and Hinduism in Canada.

Introductions

Opening Prayer

Bringing Our Experience

If the group is large, break into smaller groups of 3–5 to discuss these questions:

What experience have you had of meeting Hindus and of Hinduism? What have you learned through these experiences?

Out of those experiences, what questions do you bring to this study? (*Record questions to report back to whole group*).

As a whole group, list the questions participants bring. If group is large, begin with one question from each small group; add additional questions in a second round.

Discussion of Document

Assign small groups a section of the text to read and discuss, from Introduction, History, and Hinduism in Canada (pp. 6–24). Omit text boxes in this reading; they will be discussed separately. Depending on your group, you may want to break each of History and Hinduism in Canada into two shorter sections for this task.

Read together your section and discuss: What is new? What is familiar? What surprised you?

Share with the whole group a sentence or two about what you learned and what you would like to learn more about.

Scripture Reflection

Share the following introduction with the group: As the study continues, we will explore options for theological and scriptural understanding of our relationship to different religious traditions in our pluralistic context. In each session, we will spend some time in reflection on texts from both Christian and Hindu traditions.

Read and discuss in small groups:

Psalm 104 (or Psalm 148)

Micah 4:3–4:

He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.

Revelation 22:2:

On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

How do these visions of justice and peace speak to your experience of interfaith relationships? What challenges do these passages present for life in a pluralistic world today?

In what ways could these affirmations of the diversity of God's creation offer support as you engage in this study? Are there other passages that you would want to reflect on as you begin?

Text Box Discussion

Ask participants to choose one of the following text boxes to read: *Can a Christian participate in Hindu worship?* (p. 21) or *Misappropriation of Hindu Traditions* (pp. 23–24).

What did you find challenging in this material? What created doubt? What created concern? What did you find affirming or exciting?

How might you have a discussion on this topic with a Hindu neighbour? What would you ask? How would you, as a Christian, describe your own understanding of or relationship to this topic?

If you have a Hindu friend or colleague, consider inviting them into a conversation on this topic in the coming week.

Closing Reflection: Learning from Hindu Traditions

Text for discussion: Brihadaranyaka Upanisad I.3.(part of) verse 28

From Untruth lead us to Truth
from Darkness lead us to Light
from Death lead us to Immortality

Background: The Upanisads are the fourth and last portion of the Vedas, the most sacred texts of Hindus. They are thought of as philosophical texts in that they record teachings of sages who sit with pupils and explain the meaning of the ritual involved in the three earlier portions of the Veda. In this instance the priest is busy arranging a ritual of sacrifice and asks the pupil to chant this ancient verse while he arranges other aspects of the ceremony. This is presumably already a familiar way for the pupil to express their longing for salvation.

Have you heard of this verse before?

In what ways does it sound familiar? In what ways does it sound unfamiliar?

Preparation and Action in the Week to Come

Have more questions come up that should be added to the list?

For next session, read the sections Hindu Practice and Ethical Behaviour (pp. 25–37), and prepare to discuss them with a Hindu guest.

Pay attention to whether and how you see Canadian Hindus represented in Canadian media, or elsewhere in your community, in the coming week.

Session 2

For this session, try to find someone from the Hindu community who can participate as a resource person. Give them an opportunity to make a presentation on their practice and their perspectives on Hinduism in Canada, and to answer questions from the group, based on the readings to date. If it is possible to precede or follow this session with a visit to a Hindu temple, that would be a valuable learning opportunity and a potential opening to the neighbour. Note that if you have a guest, this could be a long session; you may want to split it into two. If you need assistance finding a resource person, contact the Coordinator, Inter-Church Inter-Faith Relations, at the General Council Office.

Opening Prayer

Bringing Our Experience

Are there any insights arising from your reflection on last session that you want to share? Are there new questions to add to the list?

Share any experiences of conversation with Hindu friends or colleagues in the past week, especially about the “text box” topics.

Discussion of Document

In small groups, share from the reading of the sections on Hindu Practice and Ethical Behaviour (pp. 25–37):

What surprised, confused, or affirmed your understandings?

Small groups bring back one or two questions for the Hindu resource person.

Presentation and Discussion with Resource Person

Scripture Reflection—Acceptance

In small groups, read and discuss the following:

Read Amos 9:7. *This passage suggests that the God of Israel also builds relationships with other peoples.*

Discuss this passage from Walter Brueggemann:

There is to Yahweh, in this imaginative reading, an identifiable core of coherence. Yahweh’s self-presentation is everywhere as an exodus God. That is who Yahweh is, and that is what Yahweh does. “History” is a series of exodus narratives of which Israel’s is one, but not the only one.

Beyond that powerful mark of coherence as a subject, everything else about Yahweh, in this brief utterance, may take many forms, so that Yahweh may be a character in Philistine history or in Syrian history, surely a treasonable shock to those in the mono-ideology that Amos subverts. Moreover, this action of Yahweh, from what we have in this utterance, did not convert these people to Yahwehism, did not require them to speak Hebrew, and did not submerge their histories as subsets of Israel’s history. The liberation wrought by Yahweh left each of these peoples, so much as we know, free to live out and develop their own sense of cultural identity and of freedom. Thus it is fair to imagine that

Yahweh, as the exodus God who generated the Philistines, came to be known, if at all, in Philistine modes. And Yahweh, as the exodus God who evoked the Syrians to freedom, came to be known, if at all, in Syrian modes. Beyond the coherent, pervading mark of exodus intentionality, we may as a consequence imagine that Yahweh is enormously pliable and supple as a participant in the histories of many peoples, not all of which are exact replicas of Israel's narrative of subsets of Israel's self-discernment.

(Walter Brueggemann and George Stroup, eds., *Many Voices, One God: Being Faithful in a Pluralistic World*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, pp. 25–26)

Read *Matthew 22:36–40*. *Jesus teaches that from Jewish tradition and from scripture, the laws of God can be summed up in the two great commandments: love of God (Deuteronomy 6:4–5) and love for neighbour (Leviticus 19:18). On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Both laws expand the horizons of Christian concern beyond our own community of faith. In loving God we must love and respect the world God loves, including all its peoples and creatures.*

Does this love of God and love of neighbour imply an acceptance of the world's cultural and religious diversity?

Read *the first three paragraphs of the section on Acceptance in this document (pp. 44–45).*

What are the shared values that call us into acceptance of the religious traditions of our neighbours? How are these values reflected or challenged in the scripture passages you just read? Where do you see signs in your community of this acceptance and of these values? Are there places where these values are not lived out?

Text Box Discussion

Ask participants to choose one of the following text boxes to read: "Bring Many Names": Hinduism as a Monotheistic Religion (pp. 27–28) or Can a Christian also be a Hindu? (pp. 29–30).

What did you find challenging in this material? What created doubt? What created concern? What did you find affirming or exciting?

How might you have a discussion on this topic with a Hindu neighbour? What would you ask? How would you, as a Christian, describe your own understanding of or relationship to this topic?

If you have a Hindu friend or colleague, consider inviting them into a conversation on this topic in the coming week.

Closing Reflection: Learning from Hindu Traditions

Text for discussion: Bhagavad Gita 2.11–22

You grieve for those beyond grief,
and you speak words of insight;
but learned men do not grieve
for the dead or the living.

Never have I not existed,
nor you, nor these kings;
and never in the future
shall we cease to exist.

Just as the embodied self
enters childhood, youth, and old age,
so does it enter another body;
this does not confound a steadfast man.

Contacts with matter make us feel
heat and cold, pleasure and pain.
Arjuna, you must learn to endure
fleeting things—they come and go!

When these cannot torment a man,
when suffering and joy are equal
for him and he has courage,
he is fit for immortality.

Nothing of nonbeing comes to be,
nor does being cease to exist;
the boundary between these two
is seen by men who see reality.

Indestructible is the presence
that pervades all this;
no one can destroy
this unchanging reality.

Our bodies are known to end,
but the embodied self is enduring,
indestructible, and immeasurable;
therefore, Arjuna, fight the battle!

He who thinks this self a killer
and he who thinks it killed,
both fail to understand;
it does not kill, nor is it killed.

It is not born,
it does not die;
having been,
it will never not be;
unborn, enduring,
constant, and primordial,
it is not killed
when the body is killed.

Arjuna, when a man knows the self
to be indestructible, enduring, unborn,
unchanging, how does he kill
or cause anyone to kill?

As a man discards
worn-out clothes
to put on new
and different ones,
so the embodied self
discards
its worn-out bodies
to take on other new ones.

(Excerpt from *THE BHAGAVAD-GITA*
by Barbara Miller, translation copyright
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Background: The Bhagavad Gita is a chapter in the account of the great epic war known as the Mahabharata. At that moment of the war, the young hero Arjuna is depressed because he does not want to go to war against his relatives.

His charioteer Krishna, who is really God in disguise, explains to him that he should do his warrior duty, but then goes on to give some background and explain that the true self never really dies but goes on to be reincarnated in a new body.

Have you heard this kind of argument for reincarnation in other contexts?

Is reincarnation in some form something your own experience of life has made you wonder about?

Is the teaching about resurrection in some ways similar to this argument for reincarnation?

Preparation and Action in the Week to Come

If it is possible in your community, plan to visit a Hindu temple or other Hindu community site.

For next session, read the section on Theology in a Pluralistic World (pp. 38–48).

Session 3

Opening Prayer

Bringing Our Experience

Report on visits: What did you learn? What were some challenges, surprises, new perspectives, or new questions?

Report on conversations: Share any conversations you have had on the “text box” topics this week.

Scripture Reflection—Respect

In small groups, read and discuss the following:

Read *Ephesians 4:14–16.* Paul writes to the church about growing into a mature faith. Instead of being tossed around by different beliefs and practices, we are to grow into the fullness of Christ.

What does it mean to be a mature Christian? What does it mean to grow to be like Christ? What stories do you know of Jesus speaking truth in love? What qualities do you see in his examples?

Read *Acts 17:16–34.* In this famous speech, Paul is in Athens, speaking to the intellectual leaders of the city. He sees around him many images and says that through them, he can see that the Athenians are very religious.

Is Paul’s speech just a clever way of introducing his own beliefs? Does he respect the beliefs of the people of Athens? We know that many of the philosophical constructs of Greek thought were incorporated into early Christian theology. Would Christianity have been different if the early church had had nothing to do with Greek thought?

Read the first four paragraphs of the section on *Respect* in this document (p. 46).

Describe any experiences you have had of dialogue building respect. What characteristics have made such a dialogue possible? How have experiences of building respect differed from those you would identify as experiences of acceptance? How might you promote such dialogical encounters in your community?

Discussion of Document

The text (p. 40) suggests that the roots of a theology of pluralism have been present in the United Church from its beginnings. What evidence of this theology has been part of your experience or the experience of your congregation? Are there times when the United Church has failed to reflect this attitude?

What, for you, is the meaning of the Report on World Mission’s declaration that “God is creatively and redemptively at work in the religious life of humankind”? What would it look like to live in a world where this was affirmed?

Mending the World commits the church to “whole world ecumenism” in which work with all persons of good will for compassion, peace, and justice is made a priority. Where do you see evidence of whole world ecumenism in the work of the church today? In what new ways might we engage in this task, particularly in relation to the Hindu community in Canada?

Text Box Discussion

Ask participants to choose one of the following text boxes to read: *Can a Christian believe in reincarnation?* (pp. 32–33) or *Is Jesus the only way?* (p. 39).

What did you find challenging in this material? What created doubt? What created concern? What did you find affirming or exciting?

How might you have a discussion on this topic with a Hindu neighbour? What would you ask? How would you, as a Christian, describe your own understanding of or relationship to this topic?

If you have a Hindu friend or colleague, consider inviting them into a conversation on this topic in the coming week.

Closing Reflection: Learning from Hindu Traditions

Text for discussion: Tiruvacakam, Chapter 20 (selections)

Tis Dawn—

I invoke thee by my altar flowers at thy flowery Feet,
So that thy Grace might flower in my heart.

Thou Rock of Joy

Freely give unto me from thy treasure of Grace.

Thou who art beyond

The wisdom of the wisest and the friend of the lowly,
Arise, come from thy repose.

That I too may continue

To feel the warmth of thy love,
My Lord, will Thou not arise?

Besides singing and dancing in praise of Thee

We do not know of any one who has seen Thee.
Thou who are beyond human thought, come before us
And steady us from our trials by thy loving Grace.

Thou art the object of Life, the essence of the world,
Come with thy beauteous Grace.

In what way will thou deign to get our service?

Thou who art the apple of the Eye, radiating joy,
Arise from thy repose and illumine me thy bondsman.

Therefore Come, Come Thou and Thy Goddess

And illumine us all by thy Light.

(Translated by Ratna Navaratnam. Used by permission of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Kulapati K.M. Munshi Marg, Mumbai;–400007, India)

Background: During medieval times, saints sang their hymns to the local deity images at famous temples. These hymns were in the regional language but many became famous, and collections of thousands are still recited in most regions. In this case, the saint is Manikkavacakar, who sings to the image of Siva. He sings in Tamil, the local language of the southeast of India. The hymn, entitled Tiru-palli-eluchi (“O Holy One, arise from your bed”), celebrates the tender moment when the priests bring the image from the small bedchamber beside the altar as the early morning devotees sing. The relationship with the deity in these settings is described as bhakti, or devotion, and is warm and emotional.

Does this hymn remind you of any favourites in your own hymnbook?

Can you think of Christian traditions in which stories of saints’ lives are as prominent as they are for Hindus?

What do you think about the intimate (wake up!) style of language used here when talking of the Divine?

Preparation and Action in the Week to Come

Review and reflect on what you have read and learned in preparation for the final session, when you will discuss the proposed statement and provide feedback to the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee.

Session 4

Opening Prayer

Bringing Our Experience

What, if any, changes have you experienced in the process of this study? How will you continue the learning begun in the study?

Share any conversations you have had on the “text box” topics this week.

Scripture Reflection—Mutual Transformation

In small groups, read and discuss the following:

Read *Matthew 15:21–28. Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman who has heard of his miraculous healings. This passage is often seen as the record of Jesus’ own transformation. He comes to see that his message and purpose extend beyond the people of Israel to the gentiles and indeed even to those who are culturally despised.*

When have you experienced transformation in your life? What about you changed? Did it affect your beliefs? How did Jesus change in this encounter?

The Commission on World Mission report (written almost 50 years ago) argues that the church has been deeply affected by a whole array of religious ideas, such as the notion of angels, a devil, and a heaven and hell, that appear to come from Iran rather than the Hebrew Scriptures. Similarly, much of early church theology was framed out of the encounter with Greek philosophy. Because of this, the report argues that all faiths continue to experience growth and transformation.

Hindus will be Hindus, not in any past sense, but in some future one; the future of Buddhists will be Buddhist, in a way yet to be created; the future of the Muslim world will be the next chapter in the ongoing evolution of an Islamic history now vigorously in process.

Read *the third and fourth paragraphs of the section on Mutual Transformation in this document (p. 47).*

How has Christian belief changed in your own experience? How might Christianity change in its encounter with Hinduism? Have you discovered possibilities for transformation in this study?

Closing Reflection: Learning from Hindu Traditions
Surya Namaskar (Honouring the Sun)



Background: Some of the earliest Vedic hymns were in honour of the Sun (Surya), and in particular the rising sun (Savitar), and Hindus have long had personal routines that include greeting the sunrise. During the 19th century, a variety of different teachers began urging the use of a 12-step yoga routine called Surya Namaskar in this context; it is now widely practised.

The Internet offers many different versions of how best to perform this act of reverence.

What routines of worship do you generally follow?

Should body posture (bowing, kneeling, standing) be a central part of worship?

Do you think of the cycles of the cosmos as a helpful way of being in touch with the divine order of things?

Feedback on Proposed Statement

Discuss and fill out this response form. Return to Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee by **December 31, 2016.**

Response Form

The following questions refer only to the Proposed Statement on United Church–Hindu Relations Today on pages 4–5 of *Honouring the Divine in Each Other*.

Please go through the proposed statement and, using the process you wish, answer these questions.

1. Which parts of the statement do you agree with?
2. Does anything need clarification? If so, what?
3. a. What, if anything, in this statement do you disagree with?
b. Supply alternative wording that you would find acceptable.
4. Is there anything you would add to this statement?
5. What else would you like to tell the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee about your experience of this study?

Name of congregation/mission unit/chaplaincy _____

Presbytery/District _____ Conference _____

Location: rural/village town small city urban centre other

If not a congregation/mission unit/chaplaincy, please indicate

presbytery/district group Conference group theological school

Is this the response of the Session or equivalent? yes no

Is this the response of another group? yes no

If yes, please specify: _____

Approximate number in study group _____

Ages of participants (check all that apply): under 30 30–55 over 55

Is this the response of an individual? yes no

In dealing with the topic of United Church–Hindu relations, this study document and the process were on the whole very helpful helpful not helpful

Additional comments: _____

Please return on completion of your study, by **December 31, 2016**, to:

Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee
Church in Mission Unit
The United Church of Canada
3250 Bloor St. West, Suite 300
Toronto, ON M8X 2Y4

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The contents of *Honouring the Divine in Each Other* are the responsibility of the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee of The United Church of Canada.

Participation of members of the task group and those who have been consulted does not imply agreement with the final content or theological direction of the document.

Every attempt has been made to ensure that the contents of this document relating to an interpretation of Hinduism and Hindu practices are accurate and faithful to Hindu self-understanding. The TICIF Committee welcomes any assistance in ensuring that errors in this regard are noted and corrected.

honouring
the divine in
each other

