

BEING A GOOD NEIGHBOR

Our Hindu Neighbors

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Exodus 20:1 – 4

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

A little bit more than fifteen years ago now, well before Steve and I began preparing for this “Being a Good Neighbor” series, the idea of people of different faiths living as good neighbors was poignantly portrayed in an evening television drama – The Simpsons. On September 4th, 1992 an episode of the Simpson’s aired during which the Simpson’s house caught on fire and Homer’s life was put in danger. In response to the fire Springfield’s volunteer fire department was called and came to Homer’s rescue. Helping save Homer’s life that day were Ned Flanders a Christian, Krusty the Clown a Jew, and Apu a Hindu. Following the fire Homer blamed God for the tragedy that had struck and the following conversation unfolded.

Homer’s ultra-Christian neighbor Ned replied, “Homer, God didn’t set your house on fire.”

Rev. Lovejoy agreed saying, “No, but He was working in the hearts of your friends and neighbors when they came to your aid, be they Christian, Jew, or... miscellaneous.”

“Hindu!” Apu interjects quickly – adding, “there are 700 million of us.”

While this exchange is humorous it illustrates a reality that I think remains true in the world today. In general, as a culture, we are familiar with Christianity and Judaism.

And over these last five to ten years we have become increasingly familiar with Islam, or at least certain media portrayals of Islam. However, our general religious understanding of other faiths like Hinduism remains relatively limited.

Rev. Lovejoy could only think to refer to Apu's religious background as miscellaneous, but Hinduism has become the world's third largest religion behind Christianity and Islam. In fact, according to numbers from 2004, there are approximately 837 million Hindus worldwide – approximately 13% of the world's population. However, it seems that very little is still known about Hinduism by the majority of the population, especially in the American Midwest.

While many Americans remain relatively ignorant about Hinduism, the Hindu population in our country continues to grow at a remarkable rate. The *American Religious Identification Survey* estimates that in 2001 there were approximately 776,000 Hindus in the United States. This is nearly a 334% increase from only a decade before when there were an estimated 227,000 Hindus in the United States in 1990. In Munster and throughout Northwest Indiana there is a substantially above average Hindu population. Hindu students are enrolled in schools throughout the region and if we don't personally know a Hindu, we're likely not very far removed from people in the community who are Hindu.

So, this morning as we continue through our Being a Good Neighbor sermon series, I want to spend a little bit of time looking at the history, sacred texts, and worship practices of Hinduism. We'll then spend some time addressing one of the greatest misconceptions about Hindus and looking at ways in which we can clear up that misconception as we continue seeking to be good neighbors to people of the Hindu faith.

What we know of as Hinduism today evolved from a culture in the Indus River Valley on the subcontinent of India sometime between 3500 and 1800 BCE. Hinduism is as much a philosophy or a way of life as it is an organized religion. Within Hinduism there are at least six different major schools of thought or divisions. All of these schools of thought originate from the same roots out of which Jainism and Buddhism ultimately grew.

There is not once centralized Sacred Book in Hinduism as the Bible is within Christianity, but Hinduism does have a number of sacred texts. The oldest of these are known as the Vedas and they originate from a time period of about 1500 to 900 BCE. The Upanishads are philosophical texts or commentaries that draw conclusions from the Vedas. Finally, the Mahabharata is a group of sacred books that were composed somewhere between 540 and 300 BCE. The Bhagavad Gita is the sixth book of the Mahabharata. It is an epic poem that has come to be the main sacred text for much of Hinduism.

For Hindus communal worship does not play the same centralized role that it does for other faith traditions. Many of the ways that Hindus relate to God deal more with meditation and inner reflection. The primary aim of Hinduism is to practice good dharma, to live righteously in all aspects of their life. This is done by focusing on the positive energies of the world and seeking to harness those energies so that one can respond positively to the things that life and the world throw their way.

While communal worship might not be an every week occurrence for Hindus, they do go to the temple to worship, especially on major religious holidays. While at the

temple they will offer gifts to the deities, they will hear portions of the sacred texts recited, and they will at times see skits commemorating the stories of different deities...

During my senior year of college I had the opportunity to work with my advisor on a project for the Harvard Pluralism Project. We were mapping the Religious Diversity of Lincoln and Omaha, NE – don't laugh. Part of the point of the project was to illustrate that our country was becoming increasingly religiously diverse and that if you could show religious diversity in Nebraska you could probably find it in many unlikely places.

As I visited the Hindu community and conducted interviews with members of the community I was amazed by their hospitality, by their passion for service, and by their devotion to worship. As a lifelong United Methodist in the midst of my senior year of college, preparing to go to seminary, there was one thing that I could not fully wrap my brain around regarding Hinduism. I had been taught that there were more than 300 million gods in Hinduism and I didn't get how a Hindu could even begin to remember the names or attributes of all 300 million, let alone show them devotion. I struggled with the idea of polytheism, the belief in many Gods, and even though I was amazed by the faith of these Hindus I was getting to know, I was struggling to reconcile my belief in one Creator God with my understanding of their polytheism.

As I began to encounter Hindus through my work in 2001-2002 one of the biggest stumbling blocks for me was the first of the Ten Commandments. In the first verses of Exodus 20 we find the following words, *“Then God spoke all these words: ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether*

in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”

Observing the worship and the devotion of Hindus bowing before a variety of statues I found myself thinking that they must surely be in violation of the first commandment. They were gracious, loving, caring people of faith, but I couldn't stop wondering if their worship of God was too far removed from what God would hope for us as humans. I was conflicted to say the least.

Fortunately, during my first year of Seminary I had another opportunity to encounter Hindus in conversation and I came to see differently how Hindus understand and relate to the Divine. During January of 2003 I had the opportunity to participate in a program called Encounter World Religions. This two week program was hosted in Toronto, one of the most religiously diverse cities in the world, and consisted of lecture time where we would learn about a faith and then a time of going and visiting or worshipping with that faith.

As we visited the Hindu Temple the priest that was serving as our guide talked eloquently about the different statues and the different deities that they represent being representative of different aspects of the one supreme God. As he talked he emphasized the oneness of God, and said repeatedly that the different Gods taught different things about the nature of that one true God. As he talked I came to the realization that the devotion Hindus show to these different statues is very similar to the way in which Orthodox Christians use Icons and Roman Catholics use Saints as a way of connecting to and understanding God. The oneness of God is something that was really emphasized a

couple of weeks ago when I had the opportunity to visit with Swamiji, a priest from the Chinmaya Mission in Chicago (video).

Nonetheless, one of the greatest misconceptions of Hinduism continues to be that they worship many different Gods. This misconception often causes many Christians, as well as Muslims and Jews, to critique, judge, and even condemn Hindus for what they perceive to be idolatry. The reality I have come to learn is that Hindus are monotheistic at their core, but that through their history and culture they have come to learn about the different attributes of God through the work of these different deities.

Three of these deities are commonly found in Hindu Temples. I remember when I first learned about these three deities and the roles they play within Hinduism; I immediately saw parallels between these three representations of God and the three persons of our Christian Trinity. Two of the three attributes that are connected to these deities have some strong parallels within our Christian tradition. In Hinduism there is a Creator deity known as Brahma. There is also a deity who preserves known as Vishnu. Finally in Hinduism there is a deity named Shiva who is known as a destroyer.

Of course within the Christian tradition we understand God as creator and we understand the Holy Spirit as sustainer or preserver. The third person within our Christian Trinity is Christ, the redeemer. While the parallel in this case is not quite as obvious, it is there. In Hinduism Shiva is seen as a destroyer of evil and sin, much in the same way that it could be said Christ works to destroy sin and oppression.

While one of the greatest misconceptions about Hinduism, that it is polytheistic, has often created barriers to understanding between Christians and Hindus, when we begin to understand some of the history and practices of this ancient faith, when we begin

to understand the ways in which Hinduism is truly more of a monotheistic faith, when we take the time to learn more about the ways in which God might be working through the lives of people who connect to God through the Hindu tradition, we can begin to have a greater appreciation for our neighbors who are Hindu.

Of course as Christians we will never believe in God exactly the way Hindus do. As Christians we are called to claim and grow in those things that are unique about our ways of relating to God. However, it is my hope that the more we learn about our Hindu brothers and sisters, the more we will be able to appreciate the vastness of God's work in this world and in the lives of all people.

In closing I want to share another video clip, a brief blessing from the priest I interviewed recently for this series. He is hoping to be here with us on Wednesday night, but I wanted to share this greeting anyway. (clip) Please plan to come out on Wednesday evening to continue this conversation and to have a chance to ask questions of some of the leaders of Northwest Indiana's Hindu community.