

American *Samaj*: Hinduism's Ascendancy and the Hinduization of the American Landscape as a  
Model "Religious" Minority Group

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## Introduction

The landscape of Hinduism in the United States has undergone a complex and dynamic transformation over the past century, evolving from a relatively obscure religious presence to a more visible and organized community within American society. The historiography of Hinduism in the United States has often been characterized by a dichotomous portrayal, framing the religion primarily as a foreign entity—an exotic, mysterious and marginalized belief system that has faced significant misunderstanding in a predominantly Christian landscape. Scholars have frequently emphasized the historical narratives of immigration, discrimination, and cultural estrangement, painting a picture of Hinduism as an outsider grappling for acceptance in a nation shaped by Eurocentric religious norms. This perspective, while grounded in valid historical experiences, tends to obscure the nuanced realities of Hinduism’s integration and influence within American society. In contrast to the prevailing narratives of victimization, this historiographical paper seeks to re-examine Hinduism’s role as a model “religious” minority, foregrounding its adaptive mechanisms and the ways in which it has mutually influenced and been influenced by American culture. By examining the osmotic exchange of Vedic principles into broader societal frameworks—such as yoga, meditation, and even elements of ethical thought—this study will argue that Hinduism has not only survived but thrived in the American context, contributing significantly to the pluralistic tapestry of the nation. Through a critical analysis of both historical and contemporary sources, this paper aims to illuminate the complexities of Hindu identity in the U.S., challenging reductive narratives and offering a more comprehensive understanding of how Hinduism has shaped, and been shaped by, American culture over time.

## Spatial Foundation and Influence of Hinduism in America

Data from the Pew Research Center, a reputable center that gathers data on religious topics, there are roughly two and a quarter million Hindus in the United States, that is, people who self-identify as Hindu.<sup>1</sup> They are asked their religious affiliation in the survey and they state “Hindu.” According to the survey, approximately 0.7% of the population of the United States.<sup>2</sup> It is a relatively small group. In 2010, Lisa Miller wrote an editorial in *Newsweek*, and it caused a stir in the social media world, called “We Are All Hindus Now.” The base premise of her piece was that if you look at the attitudes of Americans as measured by the Pew Research Center on several important issues, the attitudes and the beliefs that most Americans tend to hold seem to reflect more of a Hindu sensibility than one might expect, given that the identification of most Americans religiously is with Christianity.<sup>3</sup> There are a number of examples cited in the article. Sixty-five percent of Americans, according to the Pew Research Center, believe that many religions can lead to eternal life, or two out of three.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Americans that believe many religions can lead to eternal life is a significant percentage, and this is, of course, a widely held teaching in the Hindu tradition. It contrasts the doctrinal absolutism in the singular, exclusive truth in the Abrahamic religions. However, it is very central to the life and teaching of Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, the idea of many paths, many roads leading harmoniously to the ultimate goal of realization.<sup>5</sup> And yet, about two-third of Americans also hold this view, despite less than

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Wormald, “Hindus,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, April 2, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/04/02/hindus/>.

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, “Religious Landscape Study,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, 2014), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/database/>.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Miller, “U.S. Views on God and Life Are Turning Hindu,” *Newsweek*, August 14, 2009, <https://www.newsweek.com/us-views-god-and-life-are-turning-hindu-79073>.

<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center, “Many Americans Say Other Faiths Can Lead to Eternal Life,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, December 18, 2008), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2008/12/18/many-americans-say-other-faiths-can-lead-to-eternal-life/>.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Lombardo and Richard H. Davis, *Bhagavad Gita* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2019), 48–49.

one-percent of Americans actually identifying as Hindu. So this belief has become very widespread, and it is not the traditional teaching of Christianity about eternal life. There are Christians who believe this and have always believed this, but the dominant view has been that there is just one way and that people need to convert to Christianity to reach salvation. Given that eighty-percent of Americans identify as Christian by the time of the survey, it is quite a surprise, then, to see that two-third believe that many religions can lead to eternal life.<sup>6</sup> This includes thirty-seven percent more than one-third of white evangelical Christians.<sup>7</sup> The white evangelical Christian community is quite conservative about doctrinal issues. They are very active in evangelizing, which is why they are called evangelical, because they wish to convert people; they believe that that is essential to reaching the ultimate goal. Yet, over a third of them said in the survey that many paths can lead to eternal life and many religions can lead to the ultimate goal. Twenty-four percent of Americans, according to the survey, or one-in-four approximately, believes in reincarnation or rebirth.<sup>8</sup>

In another survey by Pew Research Center from 2023, one-quarter of adults believe the dead can be reincarnated or rebirthed.<sup>9</sup> The belief in reincarnation or rebirth among Americans is not a majority, but it is a significant number and quite substantial. While not entirely certain if it correlates directly, but a growing number of Americans are also opting for cremation at the end

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<sup>6</sup> Pew Research Center, “Many Americans Say Other Faiths Can Lead to Eternal Life,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, December 18, 2008), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2008/12/18/many-americans-say-other-faiths-can-lead-to-eternal-life/>.

<sup>7</sup> Pew Research Center, “Many Americans Say Other Faiths Can Lead to Eternal Life,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, December 18, 2008), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2008/12/18/many-americans-say-other-faiths-can-lead-to-eternal-life/>.

<sup>8</sup> Pew Research Center, “Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, December 9, 2009, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2009/12/09/many-americans-mix-multiple-faiths/>.

<sup>9</sup> Pew Research Center, “2. Spiritual Beliefs,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, December 7, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/spiritual-beliefs/>.

of life as the preferred means of disposing of the body.<sup>10</sup> For most of history, Christians, who most Americans identify as Christian, have buried their dead in the belief in a final resurrection.<sup>11</sup> Whereas in the Dharma traditions, in Hindu, Buddhist, Jain traditions, cremation, or *Antyesti*, has been the norm for thousands of years, because of the belief that once the soul has left the body, it is moving on to another body, to another form.<sup>12</sup> The soul, *Atman*, has discarded its vehicle, the physical body, *Annamaya Kosha*, which can now be efficiently disposed of through cremation. Roughly twenty-two percent of Americans identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious.”<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the vast majority identify themselves this way. They do not see themselves as tied down to one specific traditional identity. They want to be able to sample and draw from many different traditions, many paths, many sources, so they prefer this term “spiritual” because to them the term “religious” has this connotation of exclusive identification. The idea that any individual may draw from many traditions and participate in traditions is ancient in India, and, of course, also in China and Japan under parts of Asia where people have for a long time participated in many Asiatic traditions going to the holy places of many traditions. And so, this type of attitude is becoming more prominent in the United States as well.

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<sup>10</sup> Cremation Association of North America, “CANA’s Annual Statistics Report,” *Cremationist* 57, no. 2 (2021): 1–40, [https://www.wilbert.com/assets/1/7/2021\\_CANA\\_Statistical\\_Report.pdf](https://www.wilbert.com/assets/1/7/2021_CANA_Statistical_Report.pdf), 6–7.

<sup>11</sup> Derived from 1 Corinthians 15:42: “So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable.”

<sup>12</sup> Terje Oestigaard, “Cremations in Culture and Cosmology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Death and Burial*, ed. Sarah Tarlow and Liv Nilsson Stutz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 497–501.

<sup>13</sup> Pew Research Center, “5. Who Are ‘Spiritual but Not Religious’ Americans?,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, December 7, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/who-are-spiritual-but-not-religious-americans/>.

## Vedization in America

One of the earliest prominent Americans to express a genuine fascination with Hinduism was John Adams, the second president of the United States. In his insightful work, *American Veda*, author Phil Goldberg shares intriguing details from letters exchanged between Adams and Thomas Jefferson during a time when their friendship flourished. In this correspondence, Adams eloquently describes his anticipation upon receiving a shipment of books dedicated to the rich philosophical traditions of India.<sup>14</sup> He wrote to Jefferson: “I have been looking into Oriental History and Hindoo religion. I have read voyages and travels and everything I could collect.”<sup>15</sup> His enthusiasm and eagerness to delve into the profound concepts of Hindu thought reflect a remarkable curiosity about a belief system vastly different from his own.

## Transcendentalism

In the 19th century, the Transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, a famous Unitarian pastor and author, became profoundly influenced by Vedic texts.<sup>16</sup> He was also a poet and wrote a famous poem called “Brahma,” a translation of a portion of the second chapter of the Bhagavad Gita. In Emerson’s translation in his poetry, he writes, “If the red slayer think he slays, or if the slain think he is slain, they know not well the subtle ways I keep, and pass and turn again.”<sup>17</sup> It is almost a word-for-word quote from the Gita, chapter 2, verse 19, where Lord Krishna tells Arjuna if someone thinks that he kills or is killed, both are wrong because the soul never dies, it

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<sup>14</sup> Philip Goldberg, *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation—How Indian Spirituality Changed the West* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2013), 29.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas A. Tweed and Stephen R. Prothero, *Asian Religions in America* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1999), quoted in Philip Goldberg, *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation—How Indian Spirituality Changed the West* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Pankaj Jain, *Dharma in America* (Routledge, 2019), 12.

<sup>17</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Brahma,” Poetry Foundation, 1856, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45868/brhma-56d225936127b>.

only changes form.<sup>18</sup> Emerson continues in the second stanza: “Far or forgot to me is near; shadow and sunlight are the same; the vanished gods to me appear; and one to me are shame and fame,” in other words, being alike in joy and sorrow alike, regardless of external circumstances, maintaining equanimity.<sup>19</sup> Emerson continues in the third stanza: “They reckon ill who leaves me out; when me they fly, I am the wings; I am the doubter and the doubt, I am the hymn the Brahmins sings.”<sup>20</sup> This stanza evokes chapter 10 in the Gita where Lord Krishna is giving litany of various ways in which he manifests in the world.<sup>21</sup> Emerson concludes in the final stanza: “The strong gods pine for my abode, and pine and vain the sacred seven; But thou, meek lover of the good! Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.”<sup>22</sup> Very powerful words, especially for the 19th century. The sacred seven here referred to the seven *Saptarshis* who received the Vedas.<sup>23</sup> When Emerson writes, “turned my back on heaven,” this seems akin to a blasphemous act of recusant for a Christian pastor to be writing. But he is thinking of the celestial abodes, the *lokas*, that in the Hindu tradition are known as merely temporary cosmological stations. There are the celestial realms where one can be reborn, because of very good karma. There are also hellish abodes, or *Naraka*. There are the bad abodes of rebirth, but none of these are permanent. One is eventually reborn back in this world and continues one’s journey. The ultimate goal is *Moksha*, not heaven,

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<sup>18</sup> Stanley Lombardo and Richard H. Davis, *Bhagavad Gita* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2019), 20. Chapter 2, verse 19 from the Gita reads: “Whoever thinks this embodied Self/is either the slayer or the slain/simply has not comprehended/that it neither slays nor is slain.”

<sup>19</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Brahma,” Poetry Foundation, 1856, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45868/brhma-56d225936127b>.

<sup>20</sup> Emerson, “Brahma,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45868/brhma-56d225936127b>.

<sup>21</sup> Stanley Lombardo and Richard H Davis, *Bhagavad Gita* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2019), 59–62.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Brahma,” Poetry Foundation, 1856, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45868/brhma-56d225936127b>.

<sup>23</sup> Stanley Lombardo and Richard H. Davis, *Bhagavad Gita* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2019), 59; Bibek Debroy, *The Bhagavata Purana (Set of 3 Volumes)* (Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2019), 14.



per se, but to become free from the entire cycle of time, space and causation.<sup>24</sup> This is what Emerson is referring to: find me, find Krishna, find the infinite, and turn their back on heaven.

Henry David Thoreau, another Transcendentalist, was strongly influenced by the Gita. He wrote a very famous book called *Walden*. Thoreau experimented with a *Sanyasi*-type lifestyle, where he withdrew from society.<sup>25</sup> All he took were his clothes and a copy of the Gita. He talks about how he sits by the side of the pond. He reads the Gita and reflects on how the water in the pond is the same as the water in the Ganges, the river nearby, through which so many sages have achieved enlightenment.<sup>26</sup> He also wrote a very famous essay called “Civil Disobedience.” He believed in nonviolence and nonviolently resisting evil. He famously went to jail for refusing to pay the tax to fund the war between the United States and Mexico in the 19th century. Thoreau is an interesting case because, just as the Bhagavad Gita influenced him, as he attests in *Walden*, he also influenced Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi read *Civil Disobedience* and, inspired by it, adopted Thoreau’s ideas in his struggle for independence against British rule.<sup>27</sup> The influence often seen between India and the West is mutual, with people reading each other’s works and being shaped by them.

Another great transcendentalist, Walt Whitman, is famous for many of his great poems. However, his epic, his magnum opus, is called “Song of Myself.” If someone does not know Vedanta, they might believe this is an ode to narcissism and the ego. However, he is not talking

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<sup>24</sup> Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*. (San Francisco, Calif.: Harpersanfrancisco; London, 1991), 21.

<sup>25</sup> A *sanyasi* is a Hindu ascetic who has renounced worldly pursuits to dedicate their life to spiritual practices. They are often associated with the fourth stage of life in Hinduism, known as *Sannyasa*, which involves complete detachment from material possessions and family ties.

<sup>26</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers; Walden, Or, Life in the Woods; the Maine Woods; Cape Cod*, ed. Robert F. Sayre (New York, N.Y.: Literary Classics Of The United States, [New York, N.Y., 1985), 167, 254.

<sup>27</sup> George Hendrick, “The Influence of Thoreau’s ‘Civil Disobedience’ on Gandhi’s Satyagraha,” *The New England Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (December 1956): 462, <https://doi.org/10.2307/362139>, 462–63.

about himself. He is talking about the universal self that is in all. Just like Emerson and Thoreau before him, he was inspired by Hinduism. A famous verse from Song of Myself, “I celebrate myself and sing myself, and what I assume you shall assume, for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, humanity is all one, humanity is all interconnected, humanity is part of one cosmic itself. The harmonious interconnectedness was a prominent theme of the Transcendentalist writing, and they found divinity in nature and in reflecting on nature and on the self.

### Theosophical Society

A few years after the height of the Transcendentalist movement, another organization was started in New York after the Civil War called the Theosophical Society. The Theosophists were very drawn to India, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Some of their early members became involved in the Indian independence movement. The Theosophists, especially Henry Olcott, acted practically as counter-missionaries.<sup>29</sup> Just as Western missionaries traveled to India to try to convert people to Christianity, the Theosophist traveled to India and said to the Indians, “No, we are on your side; you have great wisdom that we need to learn from.” They helped both Hindus and Buddhists and countered some of the arguments of the Christian missionaries.

### Transnational Gurus, Pandits, Acharyas, Swamis, and Yogis

Then, of course, we come upon Swami, the preeminent disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. The first charismatic teacher to spread Hindu thought and practice in the Western world. He did have a predecessor, Majumdar, who was from the Brahmos Samaj, whom he preceded by a few months. Swami was not technically the first, but he was the first to accumulate a large following.

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<sup>28</sup> Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself (1892 Version),” Poetry Foundation, 1892, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version>.

<sup>29</sup> Stephen R Prothero, *The White Buddhist : The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 100.

The Brahmo Samaj never gathered much interest among Americans, but Swami's teaching did. He is known in India for inspiring national pride and promoting service to the poor Karma yoga. However, he is known more in the West for promoting the interfaith movement and paving the way for later Indian teachers.<sup>30</sup> He, of course, established the first Vedanta societies. The Vedanta societies played a significant role, especially in the first half of the 20th century, laying the foundation for the more widespread American interest and fascination with Hinduism. His message was revolutionary for its time. Many Americans in the late 19th century saw themselves as, in the words of a Puritan author of a century before, Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."<sup>31</sup> That is the title of the famous sermon given by Edwards, meant to strike terror into the hearts of believers who hear it. Edwards' idea is that humanity is sinful, and God's wrath is about to be poured upon humanity, and it needs to pray for God's mercy. Contrast that with Swami's message of the inherent divinity of all beings. Imagine generic Christians coming from a very conservative Christian context; the words of Jonathan Edwards are still ringing in their ears: sinners in the hands of an angry God. Swami travels from India and declares, "Children of immortal bliss—what is sweet, what a hopeful name! Allow me to call you brethren, by that sweet name—heirs of immortal bliss—yea, the Hindu refuses to call you sinners. Ye are the Children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings. Ye divinities on earth—sinners! It is a sin to call a man so."<sup>32</sup> His message was quite revolutionary at its time, and Swami Vivekananda was a very polarizing figure because many Americans were not ready for this. They were excited to hear this message, and the foundation had already been laid by the Transcendentalists and the Theosophists, by the Unitarians, several movements were

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<sup>30</sup> Prema A. Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2007), 41.

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. (S.L.: Digireads Com, 1741).

<sup>32</sup> Swami Vivekananda, "Paper on Hinduism," In-person (The Parliament of Religions, September 19, 1893).

very open to this way of thinking. When Swami Vivekananda came, he crystallized this into an unequivocal message of Vedanta to an Anglo-Saxon audience. When he finished “‘scores of women’ walked over their benches to get near the young swami [...].”<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, more conservative forces of resistance labeled this as heathen, blasphemous, and sinful.<sup>34</sup> Swami was one of the early indicators of a cultural split in America. Contemporary Americans have seen this, of course, right up to the present day. Americans experienced a highly divisive election November 2024. On one side, there is a party that argues against immigration and very much more for what they interpret as traditional American values. Then the other party is very much about diversity and several pluralistic paths. This cultural split is not new; the split dates way back to the 1890s. As it is today, Swami Vivekananda was a lightning rod for this controversy. Nevertheless, he moved enough people; enough people were drawn to his teaching that several other gurus came from India and found America, in many ways, a friendly, tolerable place for their teaching. They found a following: people who are receptive to their message and faced resistance to varying degrees.

The first, beyond the other disciples of Shivram Krishna who came in Vivekananda’s footsteps, other teachers who came the first prominent was Paramahansa Yogananda, the famous author of *Autobiography of A Yogi*, who came in 1920. His career parallels that of Swami Vivekananda. He came to speak at a significant interreligious event, the Parliament of Religious Liberals, somewhat identical to the Parliament of World Religions twenty-seven years prior.<sup>35</sup> He established the Self-Realization Fellowship and developed a considerable following in the

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<sup>33</sup> Michael J Altman, *Heathens, Hindoos, Hindus* (Oxford University Press, 2017), xv.

<sup>34</sup> Pankaj Jain, *Dharma in America* (Routledge, 2019), 12.

<sup>35</sup> Prema A Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table : The Development of an American Hinduism* (New Brunswick, Nj: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2007), 41–42.

United States.<sup>36</sup> Another guru was Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of Transcendental Meditation, who brought that particular practice to the United States and other parts of the Western world. Of course, he was the teacher of The Beatles when they first learned meditation, and they stayed with him in 1968 at his *ashram* in Rishikesh.<sup>37</sup> A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, mentioned earlier, is the founder of ISKCON, more of a devotional *bhakti*-oriented Hindu path.<sup>38</sup> Swami Satchidananda, another yoga teacher who came to America, spoke at the famous Woodstock festival in 1969.<sup>39</sup> Sri Chinmoy, based in New York, also brought Vedantic teachings into the United States and his followers included the English guitarist John McLaughlin.<sup>40</sup> Swami Muktananda, the founder of Siddha Yoga, embarking on tours throughout the United States to propagate his Siddha Yoga path.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, in many ways, in the 21st century, things are coming full circle, as the Vedanta Society cemented itself as a prominent center for promulgating Hinduism and Vedic practices into the American social and cultural life.

### Celebrity Shishyas

Many celebrities have found themselves captivated by the rich tapestry of Hindu traditions, often exploring its spiritual practices and philosophies. This fascination can be seen in their participation in various rituals, yoga, and meditation, as they seek a deeper understanding of

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<sup>36</sup> Prema A. Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2007), 42.

<sup>37</sup> Philip Goldberg, *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation—How Indian Spirituality Changed the West* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2013), 152.

<sup>38</sup> Prema A. Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2007), 42; Bhakti is a central concept in Hinduism that refers to a path of devotion and love towards a personal god or divine being. In the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) context, bhakti is the core practice dedicated to worshipping Lord Krishna, the *Svayam-Bhāgavan* (Supreme God) in Vaishnavism.

<sup>39</sup> Alistair Shearer, *The Story of Yoga: From Ancient India to the Modern West* (London Hurst Et Company, 2020), 209–10.

<sup>40</sup> Pankaj Jain, *Dharma in America* (Routledge, 2019), 48.

<sup>41</sup> Alistair Shearer, *The Story of Yoga: From Ancient India to the Modern West* (London Hurst Et Company, 2020), 211, 296.

mindfulness and inner peace. Some figures inducted themselves as student-disciples, or *shishyas*, and are guided by gurus. From adopting vegetarian lifestyles to celebrating significant Hindu festivals, these public figures often share their experiences with their fans, bringing greater exposure to the beauty and depth of Hindu culture. Their engagement not only highlights the universality of these traditions but also encourages a broader appreciation for the diverse ways in which Vedic spirituality can be expressed and experienced in modern life.

Some individuals might be familiar with George Harrison from The Beatles. His song, “My Sweet Lord,” became the biggest hit in 1970, and one of his first solo records after The Beatles disbanded. It prominently contains the Hari Krishna mantra. George Harrison was very close to A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, or ISKCON, and was a devout deputy of Lord Krishna. He says “Hallelujah” in the background, which is, of course, the traditional Christian prayer, almost like a mantra, and then it merges into it becomes the Hari Krishna mantra. In this sense, these paths are the same, according to George Harrison; the paths lead to the same ultimate goal. They are singing to the same Lord he calls out to in the song.

Much more recently, this is an international supergroup called SuperHeavy. The group included Mick Jagger from The Rolling Stones, and A.R. Rahman, a famous Hindi composer and singer. Their first big hit song was called “Satyameva Jayate.” It is the national motto of India: “Truth alone triumphs.” The album’s songs blend rock’n’roll, blues, and Hindi songs. There is hip-hop that says like an international blend, and these Hindu themes are prominent in it.

While not widely known, actress Julia Roberts practices Hinduism. Though she has kept this aspect of her life private, her role in the film *Eat, Pray, Love* offers a glimpse into her spiritual journey. Based on the true story of Elizabeth Gilbert, the film explores her journey to

Siddha yoga, where she spent time at an *ashram* and learned to meditate, a practice that became central to her life. When interviewed about the film afterward, Roberts announced, “I’m definitely a practicing Hindu.”<sup>42</sup> That was the first time it became known, but she had been seriously practicing for many years.

### Vedanta Society and Osmosis of Hinduism in American Popular Culture

The Vedanta society spread Hindu thought in America in its early years. It continues to be the case, but particularly in the early 20th century, it was a magnet for intellectuals, scholars, and artists. It was not only ordinary folks drawn to Vedanta but also people who could shape culture, including literary figures like Christopher Isherwood, Aldous Huxley, J.D. Salinger, and scholars like Houston Smith and Joseph Campbell.<sup>43</sup> Isherwood, a famous follower of Vedanta, wrote *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, one of the best books apart from the Gospels found on Ramakrishna. He was a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda from the Vedanta Society of Southern California and the founder of that Vedanta society.<sup>44</sup> Isherwood co-authored translations of the Gita and the Yoga Sutra with Swami Prabhavananda and wrote Rama Krishna and his disciples. Aldous Huxley, another Swami Prabhavananda disciple, is eminently known as the author of *Brave New World*. Huxley’s perennial philosophy and book about consciousness called the “Doors of Perception” inspired and became the basis of the name of the rock band The Doors in the 1960s. The Doors were trying to evoke this idea of expanding consciousness as well.<sup>45</sup> Coming to the East Coast, J.D. Salinger was a disciple of Swami Nikhilananda of the New York

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<sup>42</sup> Subhamoy Das, “Why Julia Roberts Is Now a Hindu,” Learn Religions, 2010, <https://www.learnreligions.com/why-julia-roberts-became-a-hindu-1769989>.

<sup>43</sup> Kyle Garton-Gundling, *Enlightened Individualism : Buddhism and Hinduism in American Literature from the Beats to the Present* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2019), 62–63; Pankaj Jain, *Dharma in America* (Routledge, 2019), 14.

<sup>44</sup> Dana Sawyer, *Aldous Huxley: A Biography* (NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 111.

<sup>45</sup> Jeremy Simmonds, *The Encyclopedia of Dead Rock Stars* (Chicago Review Press, 2008), 45.

Vedanta Center.<sup>46</sup> He was another literary figure, the author of most famously, *The Catcher in the Rye*, who also wrote a less famous work called *Franny and Zooey*. The novel is full of Vedantic and Buddhist concepts.<sup>47</sup> He withdrew from public life in the 60s to pursue his spirituality. Houston Smith was strongly influenced by Vedanta society, popularized the study of world religions and became closely associated with the Vedanta Society of St. Louis, Missouri. Joseph Campbell, another scholar, popularized the comparative study of religion and world mythologies. He wrote a book called *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and co-authored a book with Bill Lawry called *The Power of Myth*. His work on mythology was a direct inspiration for George Lucas, the director of George Lucas, who tried to create American mythology in the classic mold using the archetypes that Campbell talked about and, of course, referring to the *Star Wars* films.<sup>48</sup>

Other important Hindu masters that were influential in the United States never came to the United States. However, both have significant followings and have done a lot to shape academic fields such as consciousness studies. Mahatma Gandhi, of course, had considerable influence in nonviolence and using nonviolent resistance in the political realm. He inspired Martin Luther King Junior and the nonviolent struggle for equal rights for African Americans. These influences had multi-generational effects, such as the election of President Barack Obama, which indeed would not have occurred had it not been for the work done by Martin Luther King. George Harrison, mentioned earlier, coming in the 1960s, his fascination, and that of the other Beatles, with Transcendental Meditation under Maharishi Mahesh Yogi; Harrison later embraced

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<sup>46</sup> Timothy Miller, *America's Alternative Religions* (Albany: State Univ. Of New York Press, 1995), 177.

<sup>47</sup> Kyle Garton-Gundling, *Enlightened Individualism: Buddhism and Hinduism in American Literature from the Beats to the Present* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2019), 62, 67, 68–75.

<sup>48</sup> Stephen Larsen and Robin Larsen, *Joseph Campbell: A Fire in the Mind* (Simon and Schuster, 2002), 541; Joseph Campbell, Phil Cousineau, and Stuart L. Brown, *The Hero's Journey Joseph Campbell on His Life and Work* (Novato, Calif. New World Library, 2003), 186–87.



ISKCON, and serious engagement with spirituality throughout his life has influenced in terms of sheer numbers. He is comparable to Swami Vivekananda and Gandhi because he has reached many people. The Beatles were rather like Star Wars, and they were such a powerful cultural force. Something that so many people enjoyed when they would show interest in something. Everyone would show interest in it, so quite a few people were drawn to meditation and Indian spirituality through George Harrison. Though Indian music had long appealed to a small group of connoisseurs in the West, like Indian cinema today, the famous friendship of George Harrison and Ravi Shankar brought Indian music and spirituality closer to the American mainstream.

## The American Samaj

Hinduism spread in America, in part, because of the increasing number of Indian Hindu immigrants. In 1965, the U.S. lifted the Asian Exclusion Act, which had been imposed in 1924. This change allowed people from India, many of them practicing Hindus, to come to the United States. Prior to this, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there were a small number of Hindus, Sikhs, and a few Indian Muslims in the United States. The love affair between America and Hindu ideas and practices, such as yoga, grew, but it coexisted with deep racism—a racism that still persists today. In the early 20th century, for instance, the first Indian man to gain American citizenship had his citizenship stripped and was deported back to India. Then, in 1924, the Exclusion Act was imposed, effectively barring most Indians from coming to the U.S, and excluded influx immigration from Buddhist countries such as Japan, China, and Thailand.<sup>49</sup> However, the lifting of this Exclusion Act in 1965, following the passage of the Civil Rights Act

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<sup>49</sup> Prema A. Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2007), 249.

and the activism of Dr. Martin Luther King (who, of course, was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi), marked a significant shift.<sup>50</sup>

## Model “Religious” Minority in America

### Educational and Socio-Economic Success

A defining characteristic of the model minority narrative is socio-economic success, often measured through education, income, and professional achievement. Hindus in America have consistently demonstrated high levels of educational attainment. Hindus in America are one of the most materially successful religious groups in the United States, with the highest levels of educational achievement and among the highest household incomes of any religious group.<sup>51</sup> The Hindu community and the Jewish community vie for the number one and number two positions in terms of material prosperity from year to year.<sup>52</sup> It varies yearly, but the community has succeeded because the Hindus have come to America with educated, high-achieving people. Seventy-seven percent of Hindu Americans hold a college degree compared to twenty-nine percent of Christians.<sup>53</sup> The remarkable educational attainment of Hindu Americans stands in contrast to the global Hindu population, with ten-percent attaining higher education, according to a Pew Research Center’s “Religion and Education Around the World” survey.<sup>54</sup> Many Hindu families instill the value of education from a young age, viewing it as a pathway to social

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<sup>50</sup> Prema A. Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2007), 44.

<sup>51</sup> Arvind Rajagopal, “Hindu Diaspora in the United States,” in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures around the World*, ed. Melvin Ember, Carol R. Ember, and Ian Skoggard (Boston, MA: Springer, 2005), 445–54, 449.

<sup>52</sup> David Masci, “How Income Varies among U.S. Religious Groups,” Pew Research Center, October 11, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/10/11/how-income-varies-among-u-s-religious-groups/>.

<sup>53</sup> Caryle Murphy, “The Most and Least Educated U.S. Religious Groups,” Pew Research Center, November 4, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/11/04/the-most-and-least-educated-u-s-religious-groups/>.

<sup>54</sup> Travis Mitchell, “Religion and Education around the World,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, December 13, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2016/12/13/religion-and-education-around-the-world/>.

mobility and stability. This cultural inclination aligns with the broader American ethos of hard work leading to success, reinforcing the model minority stereotype.

### Political Dynamics and Representation

As the next generation of Hindus is growing up in the United States, Hindu Americans have also begun to speak up for their rights and the rights of others. The political landscape in the United States has also evolved, with increasing representation of Hindu Americans in public office and civic engagement. In 2012, the first Hindu was elected to Congress, Tulsi Gabbard, a former Democrat from Hawaii and an Iraq War veteran was raised Hindu, though not of Indian descent.<sup>55</sup> Her mother is part of the Vaishnava tradition, akin to ISKCON, and she grew up in the tradition.<sup>56</sup> She ran for president in 2020 for the Democratic nomination and now is the presumptive nominee for Director of National Intelligence under President-elect Donald Trump. In 2016, three more Hindu Americans were elected to Congress: Ro Khanna from California, Raja Krishnamoorthi from Chicago, and Pramila Jayapal from Washington. All three were reelected in 2020 and 2024. Vivek Ramaswamy, a monotheistic Hindu, ran for president in 2024 for the Republican nomination.<sup>57</sup> The mother of Vice President Kamala Harris was also a Hindu immigrant from India, born in Chennai.<sup>58</sup> The Second Lady of the United States and wife of Vice President-elect J.D. Vance, Usha Chilukuri Vance, is a practicing Hindu.<sup>59</sup> From the Asian

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<sup>55</sup> Jawahar Malhotra, "Tulsi Gabbard's Run for Congress Carries with It Many Hindu Hearts | ...," archive.ph, November 5, 2012, <https://archive.ph/20121105052532/http://www.indoamerican-news.com/archives/12109>; Kyle Garton-Gundling, *Enlightened Individualism: Buddhism and Hinduism in American Literature from the Beats to the Present* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2019), 1.

<sup>56</sup> Jaweed Kaleem, "Congresswomen Speaks about Using Sacred Hindu Text in Swearing-In," HuffPost, January 4, 2013, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/tulsi-gabbard-hindu-bhagavad-gita-swearing-in\\_n\\_2410078](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/tulsi-gabbard-hindu-bhagavad-gita-swearing-in_n_2410078).

<sup>57</sup> Ruth Graham, "Vivek Ramaswamy Leans into His Hindu Faith to Court Christian Voters," *The New York Times*, July 9, 2023, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/09/us/vivek-ramaswamy-hindu-republican-christianj.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Shashank Bengali and Melanie Mason, "The Progressive Indian Grandfather Who Inspired Kamala Harris," *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2019-10-25/how-kamala-harris-indian-family-shaped-her-political-career>.

<sup>59</sup> Shireen Bhatia, "Christian Today," *Christiantoday.co.in*, December 2, 2024, <https://www.christiantoday.co.in/news/ohio-senator-jd-vance-reveals-hindu-wifes-support-for-his-christian->

Exclusion Act, kept out of the country to now the soon-to-be Second Lady, there has been progress in terms of acceptance and openness to Hindus. And, of course, Americans have long been interested in Hindu thought and practice.

### Visibility and Sacralizing

Hindus in the United States are experiencing a variety of cultural, social, and religious accommodations that reflect the growing recognition of their beliefs and practices. The growth of Hindu temples and cultural centers across the United States provides spaces for worship, religious education, and community gatherings. Inaugurated on October 8, 2023, the Swaminarayan Akshardham is the second largest Hindu mandir in the world.<sup>60</sup> Hinduism encompasses only about one-percent of the total population in the United States. The sheer scale of the Swaminarayan Akshardham, which ranks as the second-largest Hindu temple in the world, stands in stark contrast to the marginal size of Hindus in the country. Indeed, it is unusual for such a significant religious and cultural structure to be built in a country where the faith's adherents represent such a small portion of the population. However, separating materiality from Hindu spiritualism, Kurien states, "Several scholars have pointed out that the construction of temples in the United States began the process of sacralizing the American landscape for Hindus."<sup>61</sup> In 2023, Georgia became the first state in the United States to pass a resolution condemning Hinduphobia.<sup>62</sup> That same year, Georgia also declared October as Hindu Heritage

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[faith.html](#); Nik Popli, "Who Is Usha Vance, J.D. Vance's Wife?," TIME (Time, July 17, 2024), <https://time.com/6999385/usha-vance-jd-wife-indian-american-yale-law-hindu/>.

<sup>60</sup> Kalpesh Bhatt, "Beyond Dichotomies: The Secular and Religious Interplay at the Swaminarayan Hindu Temple Inauguration in the USA | PAPERS," Aarweb.org, 2023, <https://papers.aarweb.org/paper/beyond-dichotomies-secular-and-religious-interplay-swaminarayan-hindu-temple-inauguration-usa>.

<sup>61</sup> Prema A. Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2007), 49.

<sup>62</sup> CoHNA, "Georgia State Legislature Passes the First Ever County Resolution Condemning Hinduphobia and Anti-Hindu Hate - Coalition of Hindus of North America," Coalition of Hindus of North America, April 21, 2023, <https://cohna.org/georgia-state-legislature-passes-the-first-ever-county-resolution-condemning-hinduphobia-and-anti-hindu-hate/>.

Month. Georgia is a Southern state that, like many others in the region, situated deep in the Bible Belt traditionally aligned with evangelicalism. While there has been significant growth in the South of South Asian populations, including Hindus, the region has not historically been seen as a center of advocacy around issues of religious minorities like Hinduism. Therefore, Georgia's proactive stance on condemning Hinduphobia is notable because it challenges stereotypes about which states or regions are likely to take up such causes. This representation not only challenges traditional notions of minority status but also serves as a testament to the Hindu community's increasing involvement in shaping policy and discourse.

## Conclusion

The convoluted narrative of Hinduism in America transcends the traditional frameworks of otherness and victimhood often imposed by historiographical accounts. By examining the historical trajectory and cultural contributions of Hindu communities, this paper illustrates how Hinduism has not only adapted to but has also actively shaped the American religious landscape. The significant intellectual and spiritual exchanges initiated by figures such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Vivekananda, along with the ongoing engagement of contemporary Hindu Americans in political, cultural, and social spheres, underscore a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. As Hinduism continues to establish its presence in the United States, the recognition of its contributions fosters a deeper understanding of America's pluralistic identity. The recent legislative milestones and the growing visibility of Hindu cultural practices reflect an evolving landscape where diversity is increasingly celebrated rather than merely tolerated. Thus, rather than viewing Hinduism as a foreign entity, it is crucial to recognize it as an integral and enriching component of the American religious landscape, one that invites a broader appreciation of the nation's diverse spiritual heritage.



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