

## INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

# Hindu dharma in interfaith conversations

**Note:** In 2012, *MLive.com* was a partner in the "Year of Interfaith Understanding" initiative. The success of that project led to an ongoing effort to build interfaith understanding in West Michigan. This column is one such effort. It is coordinated by Douglas Kindschi, director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University, and is written by Kindschi and others in the community.

By Fred Stella

Sometime in the waning years of the last century, the Episcopalian Bishop of California, William Swing, had a radical idea. Could an organization be formed resembling the U.N. that was faith-based? He decided on the name United Religions. He then sought out like-minded individuals from various traditions to join him in his quest to promote mutual understanding.

Among the various meetings he had with religious leaders was a meeting with a Hindu shankaracharya in India. Since there are only four in the world, you can imagine this is a rather auspicious position. During Bishop Swing's audience with the swami, he offered his proposal via an interpreter. The immediate reaction was a hale and hearty laugh. The good bishop assumed that was meant to indicate, "What? You kiddin' me?" Rather embarrassed, Swing attempted to excuse himself gracefully until it was explained to him that he misunderstood the shankaracharya's response. It just struck him so funny that people wouldn't want to embrace such a noble effort. So, it was more like, "What? You had to ask? Duh!"



Stella

While interfaith activity is commonplace now, most of us remember when it wasn't. For most of its history, Hindu India (and now the Hindu world) was and is a beacon of tolerance, appreciation and acceptance, as the Hindu concept of dharma bids. The Rig Veda, the oldest of all Hindu scriptures, asks us to understand that "Ekam sat vipra bahudra vandanti" — Truth is One, but the wise call it by many names.

While it would be simplistic to translate that to mean that all religions are exactly alike or that anything a scripture says must be God-given, it does leave the door open for various theological beliefs to be held without the threat of adhering to a faith the divine does not recognize. Over the centuries, India has made itself a hospitable home for many who faced persecution. The list includes Jews, Zoroastrians, Baha'is, Tibetan Buddhists and even minority Muslims who follow certain strains considered heretical by orthodox Muslims. According to some modern scholars, Christians from Persia escaping harassment in the fourth century most likely were the first followers of Jesus to be welcomed there. The story of the martyrdom of St. Thomas in India now is widely doubted.

The legacy of peaceful co-existence is not without its exceptions. Even

competing sects have clashed. But compared to many other societies, India has an impressive record. It is tragic there are serious tensions among Hindus, Muslims and Christians in certain areas. But it's important to note the reasons for this are clearly socio-political, not theological.

We at the West Michigan Hindu Temple take every opportunity to join interfaith efforts, be they dialogue-oriented, charitable or academic. In our short time here (we are six years old in June), we have hosted dozens of tours from various faith communities, schools and other groups. It has been most rewarding for them and us. If you have any desire to see one of the most colorful houses of worship you'll ever step foot in, please don't hesitate to contact us.

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