

Moving from Fear and Hatred to Acceptance and Mutual Respect: Identifying and Combating Hinduphobia

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Abstract: This paper offers an overview of Hinduphobia, exploring its historical roots and contemporary forms in North America. Despite debates on its validity, this paper argues that Hinduphobia is a real and distinct form of prejudice combining racism and religious bigotry, fueled by fear and ignorance. Using historical analysis and a scholar-practitioner perspective, it traces anti-Hindu sentiment from colonial times to recent incidents like temple vandalism and digital extremism. To counter this intolerance, it bases its framework on Swami Vivekananda's pluralistic philosophy, especially his critique of sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism. The study proposes six strategies, including education, interfaith work, and reconciliation efforts, to promote acceptance, respect, and peaceful coexistence.

Keywords: acceptance; Hinduphobia; Vivekananda, Swami; racism; religious bigotry

This paper provides a broad overview of Hinduphobia, specifically as it has manifested historically and continues to manifest in North America.¹ The term *Hinduphobia* is not new, but it has come into wider usage (and attracted criticism) in recent years. This term refers to irrational prejudice against Hindu persons and communities, as well as against Hindu beliefs and practices (or often, against *perceived* Hindu beliefs and practices, given that Hindu thought and practice are often poorly understood). While it shares many similarities with Islamophobia and Antisemitism, Hinduphobia also has unique features related to the specific incidents of bias to which it gives rise.

Though there is debate about the suitability of the term *Hinduphobia* to describe anti-Hindu sentiments (the criticism mentioned parenthetically in the preceding paragraph), this paper will argue that Hinduphobia is real and that it encompasses both racist and religious aspects, driven by ignorance and fear. Far from being a new phenomenon, it has existed for well over a century, with the term *Hinduphobia* first being deployed in 1866.² Additionally, this paper suggests strategies to counter rising anti-Hindu sentiment in the West and promote acceptance and mutual respect among people of all traditions and backgrounds.

To What Do the Terms *Hindu* and *Hinduism* Refer?

It is important to note at the outset that neither Hindus nor Hinduism is monolithic. Like all ancient religious traditions with a widespread following – traditions like Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam – the Hindu tradition has (or Hindu traditions have) many variations. Arguably even more than other traditions, Hinduism is highly internally diverse and decentralized. Indeed, as scholars frequently point out, the term *Hinduism* is relatively new, first appearing in 1787 (with the spelling *Hindooism*).³ The term was adopted

1. Hinduphobia is not unique to North America. But that is the geographical focus I have chosen for this study.

2. By Sir Edward Sullivan, in his book *The Conquerors, Warriors, and Statesmen of India* (John Murray, 1866).

3. See Will Sweetman, *Mapping Hinduism: Hinduism and the Study of Indian Religions 1600–1776* (Verlag der Franckeschen Stiftung zu Halle, 2003), 56n12.

by the Hindu reformer Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), with its current spelling, *Hinduism*.⁴ It was in wide use by the start of the twentieth century.

Hinduism is generally understood to encompass a family of traditions that regard an ancient collection of Sanskrit texts, known as the *Vedas* (or collectively as the *Veda*), as authoritative and revelatory of the nature of reality. Mainstream scholarship dates the earliest Vedic texts to roughly 1500 to 1000 BCE, with the later Vedic literature – the *Upaniṣads* – dating to the first millennium BCE.⁵

The word *Hindu* originally did not refer to a religious identity. It simply meant *Indian*. It is a Persian word, and its first attested use comes from “about 515 BCE, when the Persian king Darius the Great annexed the Indus Valley to his empire.”⁶

Hinduism is, of course, no more or less “constructed” than any other religious tradition. In other words, all traditions arise from and are sustained by human activity.⁷ The definition of terms, the designation of texts, places, or persons as sacred, the politics involved in the legitimation of a particular worldview, concepts of what it means to be “inside” or “outside” of the community: all of these play a role in the origins and ongoing existence of any religious tradition one might name.

What has been, perhaps, unusual about Hinduism is the extent to which people who have not identified as part of the tradition have been involved in its definition and delineation. Much of the early knowledge in the Western world about Hinduism, taken as a unified whole, came from scholars who were involved in the colonial administration of India under British rule.⁸

This fact is significant because it implicates early scholarship on Hinduism – scholarship often involved in the definition of the tradition – in Hinduphobia, given that many early Western scholars of this tradition expressed hostility towards it in various ways. Indeed, the first usage of the term *Hinduphobia* by Sir Edward Sullivan in 1866 was in response to what he took to be the excessive antagonism toward the tradition exhibited in the work of James Mill: an antagonism that Sullivan claimed to undermine the objectivity of Mill’s work.⁹

It is also important to note that many Hindu thinkers, such as Ram Mohan Roy, and subsequent leaders in the tradition, like Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), often contested how Hinduism was defined in colonial writings and played a role in defining Hinduism for later generations. To date, there are Hindus who see much of the modern scholarship on Hinduism as either explicitly Hinduphobic or at least somewhat distorting of the tradition, failing to grasp its subtleties in the way that insiders might. Some of the tension between academic scholars of Hinduism and Hindu practitioners is typical of the relationship between scholars of any tradition and the adherents of that tradition, given that scholars are trained to think critically

4. Sweetman, *Mapping Hinduism*, 56n12.

5. See Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 3rd ed. (State University of New York Press, 2007), and Thomas Hopkins, *The Hindu Religion: A New Historical, Anthropological, and Philological Approach* (Routledge, 2025).

6. Asko Parpola, *The Roots of Hinduism: The Early Aryans and the Indus Civilization* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 3.

7. Even if one holds a religious tradition to be divinely revealed or guided, this revelation and this guidance inevitably involve the cooperation of human agency: those to whom the tradition was revealed, who shared it with others, and who continue to ensure its transmission to future generations.

8. Excellent studies of this process include Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2005), Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (University of California Press, 1997), and Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and the “Mystic East”* (Routledge, 1999).

9. See Sullivan, *The Conquerors*.

and to ask questions practitioners might not find appropriate. But in the case of Hinduism, the spectre of colonialism is also part of the equation.¹⁰

Swami Vivekananda: Our Touchstone for Combating Hinduphobia

I come to the topic of Hinduphobia as a scholar-practitioner in a Hindu *saṃpradāya* – that is, a Hindu tradition, denomination, or teaching lineage. Specifically, I am rooted in the tradition of Vedānta, which Swami Vivekananda brought to the Western world, and who is best known for his lectures at the first World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. Vivekananda was the preeminent Hindu representative at this event – the first of its kind held in the modern world. After the Parliament, he attained somewhat of a celebrity status in the United States, starting the first Vedanta Society in New York in 1894.¹¹ He continued teaching Vedānta philosophy in both the United States and India (as well as Europe) for the rest of his short life, passing away in 1902. In addition to the Vedanta Societies in America, he established the Ramakrishna Order and the Ramakrishna Mission in India – the former being a monastic order dedicated to promulgating the ideals of Vivekananda’s teacher, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886), and the latter being a relief organization dedicated to translating those ideals into concrete acts of service by establishing and operating hospitals, schools, orphanages, and related institutions dedicated to the alleviation of human suffering.

Swami Vivekananda himself experienced Hinduphobia during his two multi-year stays in America, encountering both racism – as an Indian person at a time when India was still very much part of the British Empire, traveling in America at a time when the Civil War and slavery were still living memories – and religious bigotry, as a “heathen” teacher promoting the harmony of religions at a time when Christian supremacy was still the dominant religious ideology in the West.¹²

Swami Vivekananda’s philosophy is rich with resources for identifying and combating bias of various kinds – particularly with regard to religion but extending to identity more broadly as well. One of the central ideals of the Hindu tradition that he represents is *dharma-samanvaya*, or the “harmony of religions.” This ideal encompasses harmony at both the conceptual level and the level of human interactions. At the conceptual level, Vedānta, as taught by both Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, affirms that all religions are paths to the highest realization: namely, the realization of the inherent divinity and dignity not only of human beings, but of all beings. Rooted in the philosophy of the *Upaniṣads*, the esoteric portion of the ancient Vedic scriptures, Vedānta teaches that all of existence is a manifestation of *Brahman*, the ground of all being, characterized by infinite being, consciousness, and bliss (*anantaram sat-chit-ānandam*). For Vivekananda, this is the basis for an ethic of, in his words, “universal acceptance.”¹³ Conceptually, in Vivekananda’s words, “we accept all religions as true.”¹⁴ This is an extension of the ancient

10. One text which takes modern scholarship on Hinduism to task is Krishnan Ramaswamy, Antonio de Nicolas, and Aditi Banerjee’s *Invading the Sacred: An Analysis of Hinduism Studies in America* (Rupa & Co., 2007).

11. The Vedanta Society does not use diacritical marks in its name. When referring formally to the Vedanta Society, I will follow this convention, but when referring to Vedānta as a system of Hindu philosophy, I will use the scholarly convention of including diacritical marks when rendering words in Indic languages to depict their pronunciation most accurately. When I refer to modern Hindu figures, I also use the conventional spelling: Swami Vivekananda, not Svāmī Vivekānanda, and Sri Ramakrishna, not Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa.

12. This is arguably the case even today. See Khyati Joshi, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* (NYU Press, 2020).

13. Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, vol. 1 (Advaita Ashrama, 1979), 3.

14. Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, 3.

teaching of the *Rg Veda* that “Reality is one; the wise speak of it in various ways.”¹⁵ Though reality does ultimately have a singular character, it is nevertheless rightly perceived in many ways by the wise teachers of the world’s religions and philosophies. Reality is singular, but multifaceted.

This interpretation of Vedic teaching is typical of the form of Vedānta that Vivekananda taught. The term *Vedānta* encompasses a variety of schools of thought, such as the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkarācārya and the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta of Rāmānuja, among others. The distinctive element of Vivekananda’s Vedānta, following his teacher Ramakrishna, is precisely the idea that seeing reality as ultimately singular (as is emphasized in the non-dualistic Advaita school) or as containing multiplicity (as in other forms of Vedānta) are both valid approaches to truth.

In terms of how people who practice varied religions should be treated, Vivekananda says that “We believe in [...] universal toleration,”¹⁶ although he later clarifies that in fact acceptance and not mere tolerance is the authentic Vedāntic ideal:

Our watchword, then, will be acceptance, and not exclusion. Not only toleration, for so-called toleration is often blasphemy, and I do not believe in it. I believe in acceptance. Why should I tolerate? Toleration means that I think that you are wrong and I am just allowing you to live. Is it not a blasphemy to think that you and I are allowing others to live?¹⁷

Swami Vivekananda’s Three Enemies of Humanity

In the closing lines of his celebrated welcome address at the World Parliament of Religions, delivered on September 11th, 1893, Swami Vivekananda makes the following striking statement:

Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now.¹⁸

Nonetheless, he concludes on a note of hope, stating:

But their time is come; and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honor of this convention [the 1893 Parliament of the World’s Religions] may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.¹⁹

In this address, Swami Vivekananda identifies the three enemies of humanity: 1) sectarianism (our human tendency to divide up into opposing tribal groups based on certain affinities, including but not limited to religious identification), 2) bigotry (bias against a person or group based on the fact that they are part of a different group than the one with which we identify), and 3) fanaticism (intense and irrational commitment

15. *Rg Veda* 1.164.46. The translations are mine.

16. *Rg Veda* 1.164.46.

17. *Rg Veda*, Vol. 2, 373–374.

18. *Rg Veda*, Vol. 1. 4.

19. *Rg Veda*, Vol. 1. 4.

to a way of thinking regardless of any arguments or evidence to the contrary, refusing to engage in reasoned discussion but resorting instead to atavistic emotions).

It is significant that the three enemies Vivekananda identifies do not include any particular religion or philosophy. He does not, as a Hindu, say that Christianity is a destructive force – despite the fact that India was under the heel of the British Empire throughout his lifetime, and that the existence of this empire, and of European colonialism in general, was often justified on the basis of Christianity and its imperative to “make disciples of all nations.”²⁰ Nor does he demonize Islam as responsible for the invasions India suffered in past centuries.²¹

Sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism are not the unique preserve of any one tradition. They are rather states of being to which all persons are subject – even those of no religion, who might be fanatical about, for example, a political ideology. Being committed to the ideal of the harmony of religions, Vivekananda does not lay the blame for the violence committed so often historically in the name of religion on any specific religion. He does not say that any one religion is “the problem.” He lays the blame, rather, on the “horrible demons” of sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism – three dispositions which cut across religious, cultural, and national boundaries, to which any of us may be subject.

A fair-minded evaluation of the world’s religions reveals that Vivekananda’s approach is correct. At their best, each religion teaches peace, love, and compassion for our fellow beings. The universal presence of some version of the famous “Golden Rule” – the ethical principle that we should treat others as we wish to be treated – is widely attested, with variants of this principle found in the texts of many traditions.

Additionally, each religion has served as a catalyst for some of humanity’s greatest intellectual, moral, and artistic achievements. Among the most celebrated works of literature, art, and music worldwide are works generated to express and evoke religious devotion.

One could indeed argue that the promotion of the true, the good, and the beautiful is the ideal of religion – the ideal to which all religions aspire. Their visions of the true, the good, and the beautiful differ. This exemplifies the Vedic principle that reality is one, although the wise speak of it in various ways. Of course, the differing visions expressed by many religions could lead one to conclude that they are not talking about the same reality at all, but about different things. From Vivekananda’s perspective, whatever different realities the religions describe are nevertheless all part of the one reality we all inhabit. We do not all live in different worlds, at least not literally. We live in one world which we interpret differently, and which has many aspects, some of which might be the central focus of one tradition and others of which might be the central focus of others. “Each religion, as it were, takes up one part of the great universal truth, and spends its whole force embodying and typifying that part of the great truth.”²²

When religious differences become occasions for violent conflict, the results are tragic. But when allowed simply to flourish, they contribute boundlessly to the richness and depth of human experiences, providing inspiration for further contributions.

At the same time, due to its intrinsic connection with both individual and collective identities, and owing to the profound intensity of the sentiments it evokes, religion is highly vulnerable to the forces of sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism.

20. Matthew 28:19. *New International Version Bible* (Zondervan, 2011).

21. See Swami Medhananda, “Was Swami Vivekananda a Hindu Supremacist? Revisiting a Long-Standing Debate,” *Religions* 11, no. 7 (2020), 368, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11070368>.

22. Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, vol. 2 (Advaita Ashrama, 1979), 365.

In our contemporary period, one might expect the rapid pace of global communication to make it increasingly difficult for religious adherents to withdraw into enclaves of like-minded people. Tragically, however, the opposite has happened. Even when communicating online, there is a tendency to take in only information that supports the views one already holds. Unsurprisingly, this has fueled a rise in violence across religious boundaries, fueled by the insecurities that arise when one's values are constantly – one feels – being assailed by those with other views of reality, as communicating within a “bubble” tends to fuel paranoia about the perceived other, with whom one has little real interaction. This has created the current situation, in which answers are desperately needed to address the question of how we can all learn to co-exist peacefully and productively together. This will not occur through dismissing religiosity or wishing it away. It requires serious engagement across religious boundaries, and the boundaries of worldviews both religious and non-religious. This is necessary for the deeper values that inform all religions (and secular worldviews) to come to the forefront. Thus, we can hope that sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism might be abated. In the words of religion scholar Mark Juergensmeyer:

Perhaps understandably [...] in the wake of secularism, and after years of waiting in history's wings, religion has made its reappearance as an ideology of social order in a dramatic fashion: violently [...]. Religion gives spirit to public life and provides a beacon for moral order. At the same time, it needs the temper of rationality and fair play that Enlightenment values give to civil society. Thus, religious violence cannot end until some accommodation can be forged between the two – some assertion of moderation in religion's passion, and some acknowledgment of religion in elevating the spiritual and moral values of public life [...]. [T]he cure for religious violence may ultimately lie in a renewed appreciation for religion itself.²³

Swami Vivekananda would undoubtedly agree. Seeing religion as a fount of wisdom and a source of hope for all humanity, he would want to differentiate the impulse toward violence from religion itself. It is, again, not religion, but sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism that are the real problem.

It is these tendencies which must be resisted wherever they emerge: whether this be in the religions of others, in our own religious community, and even – and I would argue *especially* – within ourselves at the individual level. We all have the capacity to be sectarian, bigoted, and fanatical. And we all have the capacity to cultivate acceptance and mutual respect. Understanding this fact and humbly acknowledging it is an important first step toward a more peaceful, habitable world.

Whenever we find these tendencies in other religious communities, they need to be called out without resorting to attacking the religions themselves. In fact, such a reaction is likely only to reinforce those very same destructive forces that we are trying to resist. Calling attention, rather, to the ways in which hatred and violence *contradict* the essential teachings of the other religion, and doing so in a respectful way, is more likely to bear positive fruit. Similarly, when we find these tendencies in our communities, we need to point out how incompatible they are with our highest-professed ideals. And of course, when we find these tendencies arising within ourselves, we also need to contrast them with the ideals to which we aspire. And we need to ask ourselves what kind of a world we want to inhabit. A world of constant bloodshed and conflict? Or a world where we are all able to learn from and have our lives enriched by one another? Hindus can be an important part of this conversation, rather than being treated as objects of fear and derision and “othering.”

23. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2003), 243.

Who Am I to Talk about Hinduphobia?

As mentioned at the outset of this paper, I identify as a Hindu scholar-practitioner in the Vedānta tradition of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. I am, however, a rather unusual Hindu. First, I was not born into the tradition. I am not what scholar Amanda Lucia would call an *inheritor* of the tradition, but rather an *adopter* of the tradition.²⁴ Ethnically, I am not South Asian, nor did I grow up in India. I was born and raised in an Irish American Roman Catholic family in the Midwestern United States.

When I was ten years old, my father was in a horrific accident which led to his death two years later. In the wake of this tragedy, I undertook an exploration of the world's religions and philosophies in a search for satisfactory answers to the great questions of life, death, suffering, and meaning. Over the next few years, I found myself increasingly drawn to Hindu thought and practice. The philosophy of Vedānta made great sense to me, resonating with both my reason and my intuition. I also had a strong reaction to the aesthetic elements of Hindu traditions – their artwork, their music, their sacred chants, the sounds of Sanskrit words, and so on. During my undergraduate years, I became affiliated with a Hindu tradition – Siddha Yoga. Later, in graduate school, I found myself drawn to the Vedanta Society, which eventually became my home tradition. I was initiated into Vedanta over twenty years ago, and it remains my spiritual home to this day. I also married into the tradition and became formally affiliated with Hindu Dharma over thirty years ago.²⁵

I have therefore experienced Hinduphobia, one could say, from the inside out. Being Euro-American (or “white”), I have not had direct experiences of racism that were directed at me; but I have faced the prejudice that has sometimes been directed at my wife (who is Indian). As I was at the outset of my journey, in my teenage years and in college, I encountered the biases against the Hindu tradition as a “heathen” religion, or a form of “idol worship.” Ironically, I found many of the same biased tropes directed against Hinduism as I had found directed against Catholicism as I was growing up in a small, highly conservative, and predominantly Evangelical Christian town on the edges of the Bible Belt.²⁶ I had many arguments with people who wanted to dissuade me from my deep interest in Hinduism and encountered many misconceptions about it.

Moving on to graduate school and becoming more firmly established in my Hindu practice and religious identity, I encountered a different kind of anti-Hindu bias: a generalized bias against all religiosity that is not uncommon in the academy (though not as all-pervasive as it is sometimes presented to be in the popular media). In terms of how this anti-religious bias manifested within Hindu traditions specifically, it often came across in the form of critiques of Hindu practices perceived as issuing in violence against women and Dalits. The fact that countless Hindu teachers, including Swami Vivekananda, have been prominent critics of these same practices – basing their critiques not in modern human rights discourse but in the Vedāntic doctrine of the divinity and dignity of all beings – is often brushed aside.

24. Amanda Lucia, *Reflections of Amma: Devotees in a Global Embrace* (University of California Press, 2014), 187, 195.

25. I have narrated my journey to the tradition of Sri Ramakrishna more fully in Jeffery D. Long, “‘Never Was There a Time...’ Crossing Over to Hinduism through the *Bhagavad Gita*,” in *My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interfaith Encounter*, ed. Or N. Rose, Jennifer Howe, Peace, and Gregory Mobley (Orbis Books, 2012), 93–99; Jeffery D. Long, “Prologue: A Personal Journey,” in *Hinduism in America: A Convergence of Worlds* (Bloomsbury, 2020), xiii–xviii.

26. The “Bible Belt” is a popular term in the United States used to refer to those states where Evangelical versions of Christianity are predominant and exercise considerable political and social influence. These states are mostly in the southern part of the country that were part of the Confederacy during the American Civil War, but also include states on the margins of this region, such as Missouri, Kentucky, and West Virginia.

In my professional life, since graduate school, working as a scholar in my field while also teaching at a college in a small rural community in Pennsylvania, not unlike the town where I grew up, I have encountered both forms of Hinduphobia – that emerging from Christian conservatism and that emerging from the secular academy. Given the privileges I enjoy, however, I have to say that these experiences have largely been muted. They are not, as I often say, anything that I can't handle. They are nevertheless real. I point this out because the reality of Hinduphobia has been denied by some. I have often spoken with Hindu students in my professional life who have had far more difficult experiences than I have had. The denial of Hinduphobia is itself, one could say, an expression of Hinduphobia: a form of gaslighting which seeks to dismiss the real experiences people have had with bias directed against them because of their religious identity, ethnicity, or both. To be sure, not every unpleasant social experience that a Hindu has is a result of Hinduphobia. Within every religious community, there are voices which exaggerate the extent to which the community is an object of bias and hatred. But to deny such bias entirely is an overreaction.²⁷

Hinduphobia: The Problem and its Possible Solution

Hinduphobia, an irrational fear and hatred of Hindus and Hinduism, is more widespread and more deeply embedded in Western society than is commonly acknowledged. As mentioned above, there are even respected scholars who have denied its existence.

This particular prejudice is rooted in a mix of racism and religious bigotry and is also tied to and found in tandem with Islamophobia and fear and hatred of members of the Sikh faith. It is bound up closely with bias against Indian, South Asian, and broader Asian cultures and religions, which are often not differentiated from one another in the minds of those with bigoted attitudes against them.

It is not well known, but many ideals and practices that have come to be cherished in the contemporary West have roots in the Hindu tradition of which most people are unaware. As scholar Vasudha Narayanan noted, “Americans may not know it, but they’ve long been embracing Hindu philosophy.”²⁸ Drawing attention to these ideals and practices and their manifestations in Western popular culture is an important strategy for combating Hinduphobia in contemporary Western society. As more people become aware that beloved science fiction franchises, such as *Star Wars*, as well as popular musical artists, such as the Beatles, are deeply indebted to Hinduism and Indian culture, one can hope that attitudes toward Hindus will shift in a more positive direction.

Hinduphobia: Its Contemporary Character

Contemporary Hinduphobia is of two basic kinds, which are quite distinct from each other, though this distinction is blurring as Indian immigrant communities bring the communal politics of India into the West.

First, there is Hinduphobia originating from within broader Western society. This form of Hinduphobia has historically persisted in Western society and has posed challenges for Hindus in the United States and Canada, being rooted in racism and religious bigotry.

27. This topic is so charged that I am deliberately not citing any examples of what are clearly exaggerated claims of Hinduphobia or denials of its very existence. I do not wish to contribute to either of these toxic discourses.

28. Vasudha Narayanan, “Americans May Not Know It, but They’ve Long Been Embracing Hindu Philosophy,” *Quartz*, February 6, 2018, <https://qz.com/india/1199543/americas-long-and-complex-relationship-with-hinduism/>.

Secondly and importantly, there is Hinduphobia in the context of conflicts within the Indian and broader South Asian immigrant communities. There are lines of conflict between Hindus and other religious communities which have immigrated to the West – such as conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, or between Hindus and Sikhs – as well as conflicts internal to the Hindu community over issues such as caste. These complex issues are beyond the scope of this paper, and are not simply a matter of religious phobia, but rather involve substantive historical and political concerns and grievances. These expressions can, however, easily slide into religious phobia (Hinduphobia, Islamophobia, etc.).

The distinction between a legitimate grievance against any religious community – such as when one’s human rights have been violated repeatedly by members of that specific community – and religious phobia is easy to conceptualize, but extremely difficult to discern and act upon in practice. It is easy to say that historical misbehaviour by a particular religious group must be distinguished from the authentic and highest teachings of their religion – the religion at its best, as mentioned earlier; but this can be complicated when the offending group cites its religious texts to justify its maltreatment of other human beings. Naturally, the perception of what constitutes a misuse of a tradition versus its “authentic and highest teaching” is highly subjective without any universally accepted criteria to make such distinctions.

Most importantly, it is crucial not to retraumatize members of the aggrieved community by blaming them for the mistreatment, particularly by suggesting they should not blame the religion of those who harmed them. The best response, it seems, to any human suffering is simply empathy, rather than defensively insisting that the fault does not lie with any particular religion.

In the case of Hinduphobia originating within Western society, this phenomenon does not stem from any historical grievance that the West has harboured against Hindus. Rather, it constitutes merely bias, fundamentally rooted in both racism and religious anxieties.

Hinduphobia in the West: Historical Character

The Hinduphobia historically experienced by South Asian immigrants in the United States and Canada has been a blend of racism and religious bigotry. Racist attacks, ranging in severity from microaggressions to murder, have been directed against Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. Indiscriminate attacks have arisen because of xenophobia.

Religious bigotry, on the other hand, manifests as coercion on the individual level, such as urging Hindus to convert to the majority religion (Christianity), as well as vandalism of Hindu places of worship, sexualizing and casting moral aspersions on Hindu teachers, characterizing Hindu and Hindu-based organizations as “cults,” stereotyping and ridiculing Hindu practices and beliefs, and so on.

Indians in the United States, of all religious affiliations, have suffered from racism since immigration from India first began in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The attacks on Indian Americans, mainly Sikhs and Muslims in the American Northwest, culminated in the Bellingham Riots of 1907 and the passage of the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924.²⁹

Again, these attacks were indiscriminate, taking place in the absence of any understanding of the religious traditions of the victims, or even the fact that these traditions were distinct.

The profound ignorance that accompanied this intense xenophobia is well illustrated by a snippet of congressional testimony given as the United States government deliberated on what would eventually become the Asian Exclusion Act. The Chairman of the congressional committee investigating the issue of

29. Jeffery D. Long, *Hinduism in America: A Convergence of Worlds* (Bloomsbury, 2020), 110–118.

Asian immigrants is interviewing Denver S. Church, a leader of the Asiatic Exclusion League, the mission of which is well explained by its name – to keep Asians out of America:

Denver S. Church: “They have their religion; in fact, it seems to be about all there is to a Hindu, is his religion.”

The Chairman: “Is that the Mohammedan [*sic*] religion?”

Denver S. Church: “As I understand.”³⁰

Denver S. Church uses the word “Hindu” to refer to a group of people composed, religiously, of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, conflates them into one group, and then identifies that group with Islam.³¹ If it were not so terrifying, with such profound implications for generations of Indian Americans, it would be comical. The Asian Exclusion Act would end up passing in 1924 and would not be lifted until 1965 – a development precipitated, interestingly, by the passage in 1964 of the Civil Rights Act, an event that would not have occurred without the activism of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was himself deeply inspired by the example and teaching of an Indian Hindu leader: Mohandas K. Gandhi.

Indiscriminate attacks on adherents of various Indian religious traditions, in which diverse religions are conflated by those who fail to recognize the differences amongst them, continue even to the present day. In the twenty-first century, such attacks have more often involved a conflation of Hindu and Sikh traditions with Islam. They are, in short, cases of Islamophobia.

In September of 2013, for example, Dr. Prabhjot Singh, a professor of Communications at Columbia University in New York, who is a Sikh, was attacked while he was walking home from work by a group of young men who repeatedly called him “Osama” as they kicked and beat him.³² This is of course a reference to Osama bin Laden, the mastermind behind the devastating terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Dr. Singh’s turban and beard – typical characteristics of Sikh men which bear religious significance – caused him to be mistaken for a Muslim by his assailants. Of course, had Dr. Singh been Muslim, the attack against him would still have been as unjustified as it was in fact. The “mistaken identity” aspect of this attack gives it a tragicomic element which underscores the ignorance that lies at the heart of all forms of bigotry.

One year before the attack on Dr. Singh, a more devastating attack was perpetrated against the Sikh American community by a gunman who targeted a gurdwara, or a Sikh place of worship, under the mistaken belief that he was attacking a mosque. This event took place at the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin, located in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. During his rampage, the gunman tragically murdered ten people.³³

In February 2015, Sureshbhai Patel, a Hindu from India visiting his son in the United States, took a walk in his son’s neighbourhood and encountered three policemen. The police regarded him as

30. Cited in Sanjoy Chakravorty, Devesh Kapur, and Nirvikar Singh, *The Other One Percent: Indians in America* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 10.

31. Church does not mention the Sikh faith specifically, probably because he is unaware of it. But if we are attentive to the larger discourse of the Asiatic Exclusion League, it is clear that many of the people it targeted as “Hindoos” were, in fact, Sikh.

32. NBC News, “Sikh Professor Survives Attack, ‘This not the Harlem I Know,’” September 3, 2013, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna53087068>.

33. Robert Mentzer, “Wisconsin’s Sikh Community a Decade after Temple Shooting,” July 8, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/28/1114335390/wisconsins-sikh-community-a-decade-after-fatal-temple-shooting>.

“suspicious” (an elderly, brown-skinned man taking a stroll through the neighbourhood) and stopped him for questioning. Mr. Patel spoke Gujarati and Hindi and knew very little English. His inability to respond or communicate with the police and his decision to continue walking when they commanded him to stop prompted them to beat him so seriously that he had to be hospitalized for his injuries.³⁴

The attacks on Sikhs, accused of being Muslims, and the suspicion surrounding Sureshbhai Patel based on his ethnicity exemplify a broader xenophobia. This prejudice conflates ethnicity (South Asian/Indian) with religion (mainly Islam), reflecting hostility toward any non-white, non-Christian “other.”

Such cases are arguably only tangentially related to Hinduphobia, because they do not consciously target Hindus or Hinduism, although Hindus like Sureshbhai Patel can become victims. They do, however, place Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims into a shared category of an “other” that is feared and hated by the oppressor, who often lives in ignorance of the reality of these groups’ lives. As mentioned earlier, ignorance leads to fear, which in turn fosters hatred and violence. The key connection between these cases is that they are primarily motivated by racism, rather than specific theological disagreement with any particular tradition.

There exists, however, a more blatant form of Hinduphobia manifesting in violence within the Western world. These Hinduphobic attacks, consisting largely of vandalism targeting Hindu temples, are motivated by religious hostility. Such incidents include an attack on a Swaminarayan temple, where the words “Jesus is the only Lord” were spray-painted on a temple wall, along with black marks inscribed on many of the sacred images, or *murtis*, housed within the temple. Much of this violence is fueled by vitriolic online discourse that harbours deep-seated hatred towards Hindus and draws upon stereotypes and mischaracterizations of Hinduism that date back to colonial narratives mentioned earlier.³⁵ This discourse includes claims made on evangelical Christian websites asserting that Hinduism is demonic and that Hindus worship the devil.³⁶

Conclusion: A Possible Way Forward

Is it possible to move beyond a world in which prejudices like Hinduphobia continue to motivate hatred and violence? I would like to suggest that multiple strategies need to be employed to move us all collectively beyond sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism, and towards acceptance and mutual respect. I will mention six of these strategies here.

First, there is education. As we have seen, many of the attacks against Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims in America have stemmed from profound ignorance of these traditions – and even ignorance of the fact that they are distinct traditions in the first place. If the empathetic, non-proselytizing study of religion were incorporated into the curricula of public schools from the very start of a child’s education, this ignorance could be effectively combated. However, there are reasons to believe that education alone is insufficient to combat religious phobias. It is, one could say, a necessary but not sufficient condition for eliminating such biases.

34. BBC News, “Police Officer Acquitted in ‘Assault’ on Indian Grandfather Sureshbhai Patel,” January 14, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-35309224>.

35. See Hindu American Foundation, “Hinduphobia: Online Hatred, Extremism, and Bigotry against Hindus,” Hindu American Foundation, accessed July 24, 2026, <https://www.hinduamerican.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/hate-report-2007.pdf>.

36. Hindu American Foundation, “Hinduphobia.”

Beyond formal education, the cultivation of interfaith friendships and cooperation is a second essential element in building a society based on acceptance and mutual respect. There is a growing body of literature demonstrating that close contact between people across religious boundaries can do a great deal to alleviate interreligious tensions.³⁷

Thirdly, it is important to recognize that we are not simply our religious identities. There are many issues of common concern (such as climate change) around which people with diverse religious backgrounds can converge. Coalitions can be formed that cross religious borders, or that disregard them altogether, to work toward a common good that will benefit all. From the direct experience of working alongside religious others for a shared goal, it will become more evident to many that the religious other shares certain common human values with them. These three strategies are mostly aimed at looking beyond differences.

Fourthly, spaces need to be created where people from different religious traditions can listen closely to one another and truly hear one another's concerns and perspectives, even if this is an uncomfortable experience. We can only move beyond polarization if we are willing to venture beyond our warring groups and engage with others on their own terms. This is difficult because it can involve vulnerability and willingness to hear things that might be hard to hear. But it is an essential step forward.

A fifth way to go beyond religious tribalism is to work toward finding common ground, and even an authentic core within the religious traditions, as Vivekananda believed existed, including areas of shared truth and experience such as the "Golden Rule," mentioned earlier. This also connects with education about religion because, in order to be truly effective, such education cannot be entirely "neutral" or "value-free."

It must be religiously neutral, certainly, to avoid proselytization. But it also needs to be infused with a sense that there is something deeply valuable in all of our religious traditions: that they are not simply interesting artifacts with no real relevance to our lives. This is part of what Juergensmeyer means when he says that "the cure for religious violence may ultimately lie in a renewed appreciation for religion itself."³⁸

Finally, it is essential to address the trauma resulting from religious bias: how communities and the individuals within them have been harmed by Hinduphobia, anti-semitism, Islamophobia, and so on. Something along the lines of a religious commission for truth and reconciliation needs to be established to bring the hurts of the past to light without nurturing them or turning them into justifications for future violence, and to ensure that those who perpetrate such hurt come to realize the error of their ways.

What would a world without Hinduphobia, or any religious phobias, look like? How might the future of my country, the United States of America, be different if it could divest itself of such fear and hatred? I believe this vision is beautifully captured by the poet Rabindranath Tagore, who saw himself not simply as Hindu but as part of a universal humanity:

Where the mind is without fear and the head 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 arm towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;

37. See, for example, Lori G. Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

38. Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind*, 243.

Where the mind is led forward by Thee into ever-widening thought and action;
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.³⁹

39. Rabindranath Tagore, "Let My Country Awake," *Elise.com*, accessed February 9, 2026, https://www.elise.com/quotes/rabindranath_tagore_-_let_my_country_awake.

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