

AAR meeting, Sunday, 20 November, 3-5 p.m., 2016
Hilton Palacio del Rio-El Mirador C West (Conference Center-22nd Level)

Arvind Sharma, McGill University, Presiding
North American Hindu Association of Dharma Studies

Theme: Special Session: **“Does Hinduphobia Exist in the Academy?”**
Panelists: Gerald J. Larson, Pankaj Jain, Chris Chapple, Tanya Storch

Is there “Hinduphobia” at the University of California, Irvine, and Elsewhere?

Gerald James Larson

Tagore Professor Emeritus, Indiana University, Bloomington, and
Professor Emeritus, Religious Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara

Let me begin by reading the final paragraph of a letter sent by Dr. Ushakant Thakkar, Chairman of the Dharma Civilization Foundation, to the Dean of the School of Humanities at the University of California, Irvine, on the occasion of UCI’s rejection of the possibility of three endowed chairs for Hindu Studies, in the spring quarter of the 2015-16 academic year.

The overwhelming message that your faculty members have delivered through their public petitioning and open letters is that DCF and its officers like me are bad people and Hindus are not welcome to participate at the academic table. We have to wonder, what indeed is the academic freedom that these faculty members are defending? Is it the freedom to accuse, abuse, and slander law-abiding US citizens like me, so freely without any check? Why is there so much irrational hostility towards the Hindu community? It would be an understatement to say that the organized effort to defame DCF has unfortunately, irreparably harmed the Dharma Civilization Foundation and its public standing. The many hundreds of

donors and many community leaders, who came forward with support and contributions to make these chairs possible, did not deserve to be smeared in this way.

The reasons for rejection of the chairs are complicated and include the following:

- (a) Concerns by some UCI faculty (unfortunately not based on facts but only innuendo) that DCF is somehow directly linked with right-wing Hindu groups like the RSS and the HSS;
- (b) Concerns by some UCI faculty that the Dean of the SOH failed to consult properly with humanities faculty members in the process of negotiation for the various chairs; and
- (c) Failure by the DCF leadership and some Hindu donors to fully understand that it is not possible for donors to control the appointments of faculty to endowed chairs, which, of course, is prohibited by law for a public university like the University of California.

All of these considerations could easily have been resolved in careful consultation except for two unfortunate developments that followed the mutual misunderstandings:

- (a) First, a university review committee appointed to look over the controversy was constituted primarily by opponents to the proposed chairs, a review committee that declined to meet with any of the faculty or DCF members, supportive of the endowed chairs, even though supportive faculty and members of the DCF offered several times to meet with the committee; and
- (b) Second, the circulation nationally of a supposed “open letter” (to this day unsigned by its author(s)), filled with the worst kind of innuendo and guilt by association that the proposed chairs at UCI were being supported by right-wing groups of politically

motivated Hindus—an “open letter” that faculty all around the country unfortunately hastened to sign without ever asking who or why such a letter was being circulated.

In my view, blame can be assessed on all sides: the university faculty at UCI, the university administration, members of the academy around the county who didn’t take the time to ask about the source of the “open letter,” and the overly anxious attempts of certain Hindu community donors to attempt to control possible appointments.

Whether all of this amounts to “Hinduphobia”, I am not sure, although I am becoming increasingly concerned that the study of Hindu religious sensibilities are not being adequately addressed currently in the academic study of religion in the United States. Although there are endowed chairs in Christian Studies, Jewish Studies, Islamic Studies, Buddhist Studies, Sikh Studies, Jain Studies, Confucian Studies, and departments or programs in History of Religions and Religious Studies all around the United States, there appears to be a notable absence of chairs in Hindu Studies. There are, of course, South Asian Studies programs, India Studies programs and some programs in Indian Philosophy. Hindu Studies are sandwiched within all of these latter programs and areas, but hardly ever are salient aspects of these general area studies.

In any attempt to understand or to inquire about what appears to be the absence of the study of Hindu religious sensibilities in American education, two socio-cultural phenomena call for careful analysis and reflection, one a fairly recent socio-cultural phenomenon in India itself, and second, a long-standing mindset in American (and European) cultural life.

First, regarding the situation in India, in recent years there has been a decisive shift in Indian social reality from the older Gandhian-Nehruvian secular state ideology as

reflected in the leadership of the Indian National Congress to the revived and vigorous Hindu nationalist ideology as reflected in the emergence of the Narendra Modi government of the Bharatiya Janata Party (the BJP). This shift in orientation has deeply troubled intellectual elites in India still grounded in the older Gandhian-Nehrunvian mindset and has carried over to many American (and European) scholars of South Asia as well, creating a certain mindset of suspicion and even fear among elites in academic life in India, as well as in the United States, as to the motives of some of the more extreme militant Hindu attitudes—and not without some legitimate warrant considering what happened in Gujarat in 2002 and considering some of the unfortunate rhetorical attacks against folks like Doniger and Pollock by Rajiv Malhotra and his minions. My own view is that instead of engaging in spitting matches regarding these contentious matters, we would all do better by honestly discussing these issues more analytically for the sake of restoring a more balanced discourse that will encourage careful research and study of Hindu nationalist views as well as Hindu religious sensibilities.

Second, and I suspect much more relevant with respect to the issue of the possible presence of ‘Hinduphobia’ in the Academy is the following. There are deeply embedded discriminatory mindsets in American cultural life (and perhaps as well in European culture generally), that I would call the “big four”, namely, anti-Semitism (especially these days manifest in its Islamophobic variety), homophobia, misogyny and racism. These four have deep roots in Christian religious sensibility and are alive and well, as we have all rather clearly witnessed in our recent supposedly secular, sophisticated, modern (or even postmodern) democratic national elections. Our exceptionalist shining “city on the hill” has shown itself recently as having remarkable

neighborhoods of anti-Islamic, homophobic, anti-woman, and viciously racist sensibilities with Christian evangelicals all too often proudly in the lead! I am inclined to think that just as Islamophobia is a theme and variation of anti-Semitism, it may be the case that ‘Hinduphobia’ could become a theme and variation of racism. I am also inclined to think that just as we need to back off from engaging in spitting matches regarding these contentious matters among older Indic elites and emerging more assertive Hindu nationalists, we likewise would do well to back off from similar spitting matches between Islamophobics and/or Hinduphobics and so-called “secular progressives” for the sake of understanding and analyzing our respective ideologies in an appropriately academic manner.

In other words, what I am calling for is not a politics of religion, but, rather, critical, analytical and inclusive religious studies that maintains a salient place for analysis and research into the meaning and significance of Hindu religious sensibilities, whether these sensibilities manifest themselves in secular or nationalist political environments.