# Guest Editor: Cynthia Ann Humes, Claremont McKenna College

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In "Gurus, Swamis, and Others," my goal is to immerse my students in the academic study of Hindu religious leadership. This is challenging for several reasons. First, my students have been exposed to varying impressions of many of the Hindu leaders who have come to America in recent times. Each of these gurus, swamis, and others has brought his or her own conceptual and cultural matrix, and that matrix has become interfaced with a dominant American cultural matrix. In doing so, fascinating cultural transformations have occurred. Many of my students thus come to the subject with very firm opinions about some of these gurus, swamis, and others, and what "true" religious leadership should be. Simultaneously they rarely have an awareness of historical antecedents to this new wave of spiritual migration. The topic of Hindu religious leadership is difficult, too, because although there are excellent resources for the study of early Hindu models of religious leadership, there is a relative dearth of scholarly materials in English on modern examples. Finally, this topic is difficult for me personally, because it forces me to confront the unusual path I have taken in my own research and teaching.

## The True Guru

In the most recent class, about half of the students had experiences with guru movements and the other half fell into the category of those curious about but almost completely unfamiliar with the subject. "Insider" students posed a challenge in that their gurus taught them the "correct" interpretation of Hindu thought, leading to difficulties in appreciating historical and regional

nuances. However, I discovered that on balance, they had a clear advantage because of their familiarity with many shared (albeit contested) cultural terms and concepts, in comparison to their curious but not yet “enlightened” peers.

Students coming to the topic with little background are primarily disadvantaged because of their exposure to popular literature and prevailing wisdom on gurus and other Hindu leaders in the West — particularly on the Internet. These sources are often times extremely biased or simply wrong. For example, on the Internet especially, purportedly informational sites blend haphazardly the many varieties of practice and meditation in Hindu leadership into a one-size-fits-all frame, leaving me with little recourse but to warn students initially “just don’t go there” so as to forestall utter confusion. Such sites belie the complex philosophical and historical origins of Hindu forms of leadership I seek them to learn.

Students less versed in the topic often question the propriety of Hindu religious authority. The idea of “surrender” to a guru is often considered to be a cardinal signal of a “cult.” I find the common use of the term “cult” to describe guru movements revealing, demonstrating the success of “Anti-Cult” action groups in successfully stigmatizing certain models of Hindu leadership and discipleship. For example, leaders who taught mantric recitation were cast as instilling brainwashing or “mind control,” such that “victims” who had been duped into joining these “cults” were best “deprogrammed.” Transcendental Meditation (TM) led by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, for example, became the specific target of the Cult Awareness Network, the largest and most successful of the Anti-Cult groups (and which was eventually found guilty of conspiracy to kidnap in a “deprogramming” case involving a member of the Life Tabernacle Church).

Each guru or tradition of Hindu leadership has sought to instill a new, privileged worldview, often using the same terms, but in markedly different ways. I, too, sought to teach them a new language, that of academia. Accordingly, one of the assignments is to have the students prepare for a lengthy vocabulary quiz that introduces this problem endemic to teaching about gurus: students must gain mastery over the discipline of religious studies as well as the disciplines introduced by the teachers we were studying. I do not provide static definitions. Students are each assigned a set of words and are required to create the definitions and send them to class members for their input via a course Web site. Once the definition is thoroughly vetted through thinking together in a team environment, I post the terms online in a shared glossary. Concepts are often updated as we progress in the course, reflecting the specific nuances different leaders bring to a contested term. I have invariably found that if I introduce this step, students are better prepared to work with the materials, willing to trust in the collective intelligence of the class and the value of team learning, and able to fathom better the historical development and context of key concepts.

I ask specific comparative questions throughout the course, seeking ever-more-complex analysis. Students new to the concepts of the course are able to stabilize, through repeated use, certain appropriate mental connections to academic reasoning, and deepen those connections through intellectual hooks to facts and evidence to support their theses. This comparative method allows students to develop a deeper understanding of ideas and material, and it improves their complex thinking skills even as it fosters greater confidence in their abilities to understand complex new thought systems. For each model of leadership, we develop the intellectual world that makes it intelligible to willing followers. By constructing together the terms and warrants each believer is expected to accept, we fill out all major structures in each system, thus providing students entry into a worldview understandable on its own terms. At the same time, the very process of isolating the specific terms and warrants, and not asking students to accept their veracity but to understand how they support the system, aptly addresses the challenge posed by students' incredulity that people would take these religious leaders seriously.

## Building the Course

There are excellent resources for studying early patterns of religious leadership. For example, there are many studies of the roles of religious functionaries in Vedism, Brahmanism, and especially in the Upanishads. One can find detailed studies of bhakti leaders, philosophers and movements associated with them, and early gurus, swamis, and others. There are excellent materials, too, on religious leaders of the Hindu Renaissance, for example, Ram Mohan Roy, Keshub Chandra Sen, Dayananda Saraswati, Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, and others.

My interest in religious leadership, however, extended to current movements, and I found it difficult to counter the embarrassment of not-so-riches of the Internet with corresponding academic materials on recent gurus. There also seemed to be a relative dearth of academic venues to present in if I were to embark on preparing appropriate materials for teaching and research in the study of such gurus and Hindu leaders.

To some degree, the respective wealth and absence of materials reflected the American Academy of Religion. For several decades, work on Hinduism was largely presented within the single section called "Religion in South Asia" or RISA. Until recently, the field has thus been predominately regionally based, allowing focused treatment of Hindu subjects as well as how traditions within the South Asian subcontinent interrelate, but the field did not extend to global phenomena. I began to reach out to others inside and outside of RISA to form a Hinduism Group unit at the AAR, creating in 1997 a new venue not locked in geography and in which American and global forms of Hinduism, for example, could readily be studied. In 2001, I put

together a panel on great gurus, out of which eventually came a 2005 book, which I now use as a major textbook in this course. *Gurus in America* (Forsthoefel and Humes, 2005) brings together the work of ten scholars, focusing on nine important Hindu gurus. Each contributor addressed the religious and cultural interaction, translation, and transplantation that occur when gurus offer their teachings in America. The chapters also discuss the characteristics of each guru's teachings, the history of each movement, and the particular construction of Hinduism each guru offers. The American Academy of Religion continues to serve as a critical support network and avenue to invigorate and expand our research and our teaching.

## The Long and Winding Road

In December 2004 I attended a conference, organized by Jeffrey Kripal among others, at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur. This gathering underscored profound changes in our field. "Exploring the Nature of Our Offense: A Symposium on the Study of Hinduism In a World of Identity Politics and Religious Intolerance" brought together scholars of India whose work had been subject to an increasing number of censorship campaigns from those who purported to find "defamation" or "blasphemy" in their writings.

The catalyst for my invitation was a paper I had given several weeks before at the AAR Annual Meeting about Rajiv Malhotra and his use of philanthropy to influence members of the academy (see next essay by Jack Hawley on page iii). Subsequently, I became the target of a barrage of Internet venom by colleagues of Malhotra. But the consequences occasioned by that presentation did not become the principal subject of my talk at the conference. Instead, after briefly recounting my own experience with Internet hate mail from complete strangers, I spent most of my time speaking for the first time in an academic forum about repercussions stemming from my 1995 essay, "Rajas, Thugs, and Mafiosos: Religion and Politics in the Worship of Vindhyavasini." This essay described insights drawn from my fieldwork about the temple priests, pundits, and shareholders of a temple site in India, where certain individuals functioned as what informants described as "mafiosos." Perhaps most remarkably, some of the most significant so-called mafiosos were prominent religious leaders at the temple: "shareholders" of the temple, who owned the proceeds of a day's offerings, and "temple priests," whose job was to mediate between pilgrims and the Goddess. In 1996, I was contacted by sources in India advising me that my essay had become known there. It was clearly conveyed to me that any further publications describing the violence or questionable economic activities among the religious leaders at the temple would occasion an undesirable response. At first I tried to remove anything about the political and economic dimensions (the manuscript was under contract with SUNY), but after nearly six months of effort at sanitizing, I realized those issues were at the heart of understanding anything meaningful about the religious leadership at the research site; the Grated, inoffensive book was to me fundamentally dishonest.

I shared with others at the symposium that I had felt unmoored, silenced, and alone; I did not know any colleagues who had had similar experiences stemming from their research. Complicating my life was that I found that teaching about India sometimes triggered stress that exacerbated a chronic health problem. I came to realize that I would have to make a transition in both my research and teaching. Ultimately, I decided to continue to focus my research on Hindu religious leadership, but in a markedly different way. I shifted my focus away from a more anthropological approach of specific sites. I turned instead to the intersections of meditation, models of Hindu leadership independent of specific religious sites, and Hinduism in the West. These topics would not require visiting India again, had no associations to stress triggers, and as a long-time meditator, concentrating on the subject helped me to accept and even embrace the change.

My experience at the “Symposium on the Study of Hinduism in a World of Identity Politics and Religious Intolerance” affected me deeply. Beyond the feeling of relief in sharing my story with others who have faced similar situations, the sheer number of stories underscored again and again the truth that scholarship, teaching, and their implications are not decontextualized — people are involved, interests are involved, and what we do as scholars actually matters.

## Bibliography

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