



Spiritual Perspectives

March 2016

Seeing the World through Spiritual Eyes
For Friends and Followers of Mukunda Goswami

Real Education

By Radha devi dasi

Women are gaining momentum when it comes to sharing roles and responsibilities with men in the realm of religion. *World Religion News* reported in January 2016. More faiths permit the ordination of women. Even those that do not are opening up different lay roles to women.

For example, Pope Francis ruffled some priestly feathers when he recently announced a reform that will allow priests to wash the feet of women as well as men in Holy Thursday ceremonies. These ceremonies commemorate the time when Jesus washed his disciples' feet. Critics of the change argue that women should not be included among the "disciples of Christ." However, as modern Western culture spreads, women play a greater role in public life. They naturally seek a greater role in their religious lives as well.

This raises the question of how desirable it is to have changes in women's roles at different times and in different places. Our tradition promotes *varnashrama dharma*, or a social structure based on religious teachings. Are women's roles completely fixed by the principles of *varnashrama dharma* or is it healthy to have variations in practice? One part of Srila Prabhupada's genius was to adapt to time, place and circumstance without in any way compromising the essential principles of *bhakti-yoga*.

Although *varnashrama dharma* generally presents very traditional roles for women, Srila Prabhupada himself created a new standard by giving *brahman* initiation to wom-



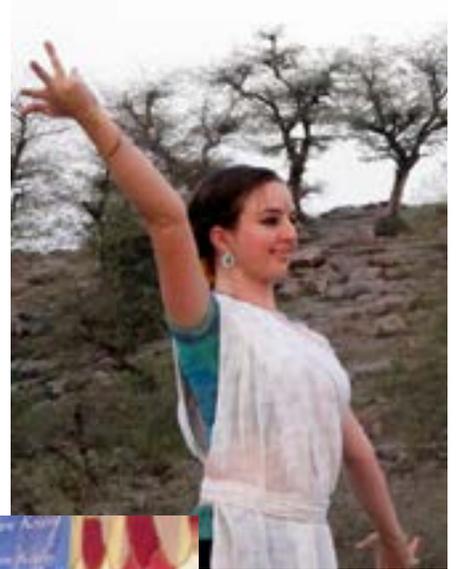
bit.ly/Rud87m

International Vaisnavi Retreat at the holy place of pilgrimage, Govardana Hill

en in America and allowing them to serve temple deities. He responded to his critics by saying that one should not try to change a society's customs and that engaging both "boys and girls" in transcendental activities would help to spread the Krishna Consciousness movement. (*Chaitanya Charitamrita Adi-lila 7.2* purport) At the same time, he promoted the premise that a woman must always be under the protection of a guardian at every stage of her life. Thus, our tradition is not entirely conservative nor fully liberal on the issue of women in religion.

The ideal solution comes when we can allow full access to participation in religious life without sacrificing religious principles. This compromise may be easier than we sometimes believe. For example, in examining the question of whether *Vaisnavis* should be allowed to give *diksa* initiation, the GBC's Sastric Advisory Committee weighed the example of former female gurus against the need to provide protection for women at all times. Their suggestion is to allow female gurus to give *diksa* initiation, but to require that such gurus have family support and at least two *siksa* gurus from whom they can take shelter. ISKCON and the society of devotees around the world will benefit if we can be thoughtfully flexible, preserving the principles of our faith while allowing needed variations.





Official 'Well-Being' Statistics Show Religious People Are Happier Than Atheists

By Kathryn Snowdon, *Huffingtonpost.co.uk*, February 5, 2016
bit.ly/1L8jBZI



A Hindu wedding in the United Kingdom

Religious people from all different faiths are happier than those who have “no religion,” official data released on Tuesday revealed.

Of all the faiths in the United Kingdom, Hindus are the happiest, scoring well above the

national average and just under the demographic of people who consider themselves to be “in very good health,” according to data compiled by the Office for National Statistics.

Christians of all denominations were the second happiest, followed by Sikhs and Buddhists. Those who followed these religions were happier than the average person, who scored a happiness rating of 7.38 out of 10.

On average, Hindus

scored a rating of 7.57 for happiness, followed by Christians at 7.47, Sikhs with 7.45 and Buddhists at 7.41.

ISKCON Supports Hindu Declaration on Climate Change

By Madhava Smullen, *ISKCON News*, December 2, 2015
bit.ly/1U1WOQM

ISKCON has signed the Hindu Declaration on Climate Change issued on November 23rd, showing its support along with 60 other Hindu leaders and organizations.

The Declaration was put together by the Bhumi Project at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, both of which count ISKCON devotees amongst their staff.

Partnering with them on the project was the Hindu American Foundation, the interfaith environmental organization GreenFaith, and the interfaith campaign for climate action Our Voices.

The Hindu Declaration follows similar documents issued this year by Islamic, Christian and Buddhist leaders. It describes how global temperatures are increasing, sea levels rising, and ice in the Arctic and Antarctic rapidly melting.

“Climate change is a stark symptom of the deeper problem of humanity living out of balance with what *Bhumi Devi*, our shared planet, can renewably provide,” it says. It quotes the *Sri Isopanisad*, “*Isavasyam idam sarvam*,” meaning, “This entire universe is to be looked upon as the energy of the Lord.” And the *Srimad Bhagavatam*

Continued on page 3



GopalLila Das (left) with NimaiLila at a recent Environmental Convergence in Rome

(11.2.41): “Ether, air, fire, water, earth, planets, all creatures, directions, trees and plants, rivers and seas, they are all organs of God’s body. Remembering this a devotee respects all species.”

The Declaration then asks the world’s 900 million Hindus to transition to using clean energy, adopt a plant-based diet, and lead lives in harmony with the natural world.

It also calls for strong, meaningful action from the 195 governments currently meeting in Paris from November 30th to December 11th at COP21 (the 21st Conference of Contracting Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change).

The Hindu Declaration has been circulated through press releases and online UN newsrooms, while Christiana Figures, the executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, tweeted it to her 74,000 Twitter followers. “By signing the Declaration, ISKCON is showing that it is working with the global Hindu community and all the other faith groups on climate change,” says Bhumi Project Director Gopal-Lila Das. “It’s also showing that it is concerned about what comes out of COP21.”

Gopal-Lila is currently at COP21, where delegates from 195 countries are presenting the cuts they’ve agreed to make on greenhouse gas emissions, the environmental projects their countries are planning, and how they envision making it all happen.

With the previous international climate change conference – 2009’s COP15 in Denmark – ending in failure with no legal agreements or formal commitments made, COP21 is being called the planet’s last, best hope to stave off the worst consequences of climate change.

“Never have the stakes of an international meeting been so high, since what is at stake is the future of the planet, the future of life,” President François Hollande of France told a packed United Nations plenary session at a convention center in the Le Bourget suburb north of Paris.

To be a success, the meetings need to end with all the countries collectively committing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions enough to keep global average temperatures from rising more than 2 degrees Celsius over preindustrial temperatures.

For his part, Gopal-Lila is broadcasting podcasts with Our Voices daily from COP21,

Continued on page 4

We Would Appreciate Your Feedback
Please Send Your Response To :
feedback@mukundagoswami.org

highlighting the role that faith communities can play in addressing climate change. “Faith is not a silver bullet – we can’t solve this problem with religious organizations alone,” he says. “But people are moved to action by different things: some by politics, or science, or money; and many, especially in the developing world, are moved to action by morality and religion. So that’s where religious communities come in – they can help by giving the moral argument for why addressing climate change is important.”

As far as ISKCON is concerned, Gopal-Lila explains that because the environment is “the religion of the day,” conscious, concerned global citizens will want to know what religious institutions are doing to address climate change.

“ISKCON has a philosophy about caring for the earth,” he says. “But, although many temples and ISKCON members are attentive to this duty, many are not. As the expression goes, global ISKCON needs to “put its money where its mouth is.” In other words, to consistently and actively care for the planet in line with its own tradition and teachings.”

That active care starts not with some vague, impersonal ISKCON “they,” but with each individ-

ual devotee that makes up ISKCON. “If your local temple is still using Styrofoam plates, you can take your own plate to the Sunday Feast and encourage your friends to do the same,” says Gopal-Lila. “If the temple isn’t using organic milk, you can get a group of devotees together to lobby for milk from protected cows. If the temple’s festivals are not environmentally friendly, and leave piles of garbage behind the temple, you can get involved and change that. And if you’re passionate about recycling, or solar energy, and your temple doesn’t have a recycling scheme or solar system, you can look into how to install one yourself.”

It’s an area Gopal-Lila is clear on. “Where eco-friendly practices are not in place, ISKCON devotees need to stop waiting for someone else to act. Instead they should take personal initiative, and also push the leadership of their temples and communities to step up,” he says.

Click here to read the full Hindu Declaration on Climate Change: <http://www.hinduclimatedeclaration2015.org/english>

World’s First Vegan Supermarket Chain to Open in Portland

By Lorrain Chow, *ecowatch.com*, February 19, 2016
bit.ly/1L8jT2O

Vegan products are usually relegated to a tiny section in conventional grocery stores, but Portland, Oregon will soon be home to an entire vegan supermarket.

VeganZ, the first and world’s largest vegan grocery store chain, will set up shop in the famously crunchy city later this year. Along with a supermarket, VeganZ also plans to open a shoe and clothing store and restaurant in Portland.

The chain was founded in February 2011 in Berlin, Germany by former MercedesBenz manager Jan Bredack after he found bountiful vegan options during his travels around the U.S. and Russia, German news site *The Local* reported.

Bredack, who became a vegan in 2009, said he found it hard to “shop normally” at home. Germany, after all, is the meat-loving home to 1,500 different types of sausages and cold cuts.

Bredack said he wants to make vegan shopping easier for everyone and noted that his stores appeal to omnivores as well, estimating that 80 percent of his customers are neither vegan nor vegetarian.



VeganZ

Why a County School Board's Vote on Diwali Has National Implications

Murali Balaji, The Huffington Post, January 19, 2016
huff.to/21Nxsft

The Howard County (Maryland, U.S.) Board of Education's unanimous vote to approve Diwali (Deepavali) as a day off for students isn't just significant for the Hindu community there. It represents a broader discussion on pluralism in rapidly diversifying regions, and is likely to have national consequences as religious minorities grow in number.

The vote to add the holiday on the 2016 calendar was a surprise, given that Hindu community members and organizations such as the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) and Chinmaya Mission had petitioned for inclusion in 2017. But as Board Chairwoman Christine O'Connor noted at the time of the vote, the county acted to ensure that the academic calendar reflected the district's substantial Hindu, Muslim, and East Asian populations by adding Diwali and Eid al-Adha while keeping Lunar New Year's Eve. "We want to do our best to find flexibility within the calendar to provide opportunities for all students to experience all cultures within our community," O'Connor said.

The inclusion of Diwali in the 2016 calendar as a professional day on October 31 (a day after the Lunar Calendar observance of the holiday) reflected a growing trend to diversify school calendars that have for years been exclusively Judeo-Christian. In other counties and cities across America, Muslim holidays such as Eid and East Asian observances such as Lunar New Year have been added. In New York City, Mayor Bill de Blasio added Eid and Lunar New Year, but rejected Hindu, Jain, Sikh, and Buddhist attempts to add Diwali despite a diverse coalition of organizations and elected officials pushing for its inclusion. Howard County's vote might have been prompted by what a neighboring county did just two months earlier. In November, the Montgomery County (MD) Board of Education voted to include Eid al-Adha to its 2016-17 calendar, despite concerns from several Board members and public education advocates on adding the holiday without an evaluation of impact or discussion of any other cultural and religious groups. In most school districts, holidays are usually added when there's an administrative burden, meaning that a certain percentage of students

and staff would miss school during those days. In districts such as Montgomery and Howard, Christians and Jews have traditionally proved that burden, but in recent years, East Asian communities, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs have grown significantly in population.

Following the vote in Montgomery County, community members asked what could be done to include Diwali as a holiday. In turn, I asked folks I work closely with such as Charles Haynes, one of the nation's foremost experts on religion and public schools on the legal ramifications, given how politicized church-state separation issues can be. Haynes has noted that closing school specifically for a religious holiday could have ripple effects, especially as different communities begin to ask for their own holidays. In other words, it could become a Pandora's Box. However, the need to balance church and state separation with the desire of community members to be recognized (since Montgomery County has one of the most well established Hindu, Jain and Sikh communities in the country) was an issue that the Board would need to resolve.

HAF, with the help of a number of Hindu, Jain, and Sikh community leaders and organizations, including the Chinmaya Mission, the United Jain Hindu Temples, and Guru Gobind Singh Foundation (Sikhs observe Diwali as Bandi Chhor Divas, or the day of liberation for Guru Hargobind), started a petition for Montgomery County to include Diwali as a day off in 2017.

This was an issue that many folks felt passionate about, and their non-Diwali observing friends and neighbors joined in to help. As a result, the petition generated over 1,300 signatures in less than a month, and several Hindu community members testified and attended Montgomery County Board hearings over the past two months.

In Howard County, however, I worked with some proactive community members to meet with district officials. A similar petition was started (with nearly 300 signatures in under 2 weeks), and one of the community member's daughters, a student at Centennial High

Continued on page 6

School, got a number of her classmates to sign. We testified at the December Board hearing, but none of us expected Diwali to be included in the 2016 holiday.

The Howard County decision means that a professional development day will be moved to the time when Hindus observe Diwali. Though this year, it falls on a Sunday, many Hindus (and Jains and Sikhs) observe the holiday over several days. The way the Board approved it along with Eid al-Adha seemed to thread the needle between inclusiveness and Constitutional boundaries between church and state by using an existing professional day as a means of acknowledging the holiday. Moreover, it gave the county (and community) a mandate to evaluate its changing demographics. Board Member Janet Siddiqui, who proposed including Diwali and the other holidays, said it was simply a matter of making

Howard County appealing for both its diversity and livability.

“I strongly believe that our school calendar should be inclusive of the cultures and religions of all Howard County residents,” she said at last week’s meeting. “I moved here thirty years ago, because of the schools, but more because of the diversity. In a county where we pride ourselves on our diversity, we have to demonstrate that in terms of our actions.”

While we’ll have to wait another 10 months before finding out whether Montgomery County follows suit, it’s important to realize that including Diwali in a school calendar isn’t just a big step for the families who observe it, but a pragmatic action by a school board whose constituency has dramatically changed. Ultimately, that’s reflective of a proactive pluralism likely to be emulated in other parts of the country.

Lord Hanuman Figurine Is US President Obama’s Lucky Charm

By PTI Washington, *hindustantimes.com*, January 21, 2016
nyti.bit.ly/1QV081b



A statuette of Lord Hanuman is among few items that US President Barack Obama always carries in his pocket and seeks inspiration from whenever he feels tired or discouraged.

President disclosed this on a YouTube interview which the White House scheduled as a way to reach younger audiences as it promotes Obama’s final State of the Union address on Tuesday.

Asked to show off an item of personal significance during the interview with YouTube creator Nilsen on Friday, 54-year-old Obama pulled from his pockets a series of small totems, each of which he said reminded him “of all the different people I’ve met along the way.”

Harvard Launches Free Online Class To Promote Religious Literacy

Antonia Blumberg, *The Huffington Post*, February 19, 2016
huff.to/1QyiCCg

Sales of the *Quran* skyrocketed in the United States following 9/11. Perhaps it was a search for answers, or a desire to parse out certain stereotypes, that made some people turn to the Muslim holy text.

But the increased circulation of the *Quran* due to the recent Paris attacks and rise of the Islamic State has not always helped people to better understand and respect the faith. If anything, fear and prejudice toward Islam has risen. This is one example of the “widespread illiteracy about religion that spans the globe,” said Diane Moore, director of Harvard Divinity School’s Religious Literacy Project to *The Huffington Post*.

To combat this illiteracy, Moore and five other religion professors from Harvard University, Harvard Divinity School and Wellesley College are kicking off a free, online series on world religions open to the masses. The courses are being offered via an online learning platform called edX, which Harvard University launched with Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2012.

The timing is ripe for such a course, Moore said. Religious illiteracy “fuels bigotry and prejudice and hinders capacities for cooperative endeavors in local, national, and global arenas,” Moore told *HuffPost*.

The edX series will include six classes on different subjects that will each run for four weeks. Moore is teaching the first course in the series on “Religious Literacy: Traditions and Scriptures,” which begins on March 1. The next five will dive into specific faiths, covering Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism. Religious literacy entails more than just knowing the Five Pillars of Islam or Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths, Moore said. Such an approach “reinforces the problematic assumption that religions are internally uniform and ahistorical,” she added.

Instead, Moore suggested that religious literacy should include an understanding that religious traditions are “internally diverse,” ever-evolving, and play complex roles in people’s lives. To that end, the course aims to offer participants an understanding of the history and interpretations of religious texts and why some were designated as “sacred.” Students will also dive into contemporary and historical interpretations of the texts

to get a feel for just how “internally diverse” the traditions are.

Moore said she and the other facilitators anticipate up to 50,000 people will enroll for the series, given that it is online and free for students who audit the courses. For those interested in earning a certificate of achievement at the end of the series, edX offers a non-audit track for \$50.

The course is especially aimed at educators, Moore said, as well as members of faith communities interested in multifaith engagement and dialogue. She added, “I’m excited to provide a platform for more informed discourse about religion.”

SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVES

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Mukunda Goswami

PRODUCTION MANAGER

Hari-kirtan das

EDITORS

Mukunda Goswami

Radha devi dasi

PROOFREADING & EDITING

Haridasa das

Padma malini devi dasi

GENERAL CONSULTANT

Devaprastha das

DESIGN AND LAYOUT

Raj Dutia

Articles published in this newsletter are not necessarily the opinion of *Spiritual Perspectives* or ISKCON.