**Is Pluralism Tolerant? An assessment of the pluralist interpretation of world religions in light of charges of Evangelical "hinduphobia".**

Alan Myatt, Ph.D.
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary-Charlotte
presented at the
Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting
Providence, RI - Nov. 19, 2008

For some time now there has been concern over the question of what have come to be known as *politically correct* interpretations of pluralism that lead to the stifling of free-speech and dialogue. Accordingly, certain types of speech are vilified and suppressed all in the name of tolerance. There is nothing novel in this and it has been written about extensively by conservative commentators in the press, as well as in some academic publications (cf. Stetson and Conti, 2005). More recently a controversy was sparked in Canada when the Canadian Human Rights Commission heard a complaint from the Canadian Islamic Congress over a series of articles in *Maclean's* magazine alleging *islamophobia* for what it perceived as negative portrayals of Islam. While the case was ultimately dismissed, it was seen as part of an alarming trend to criminalize certain forms of expression by labeling them as *hate-speech* (Canadian Press, 2008). With this case, a particular religion came to the forefront as a victim class of hate-speech, along with more well-known victim groups based on race, sexual orientation or gender. Of great concern are the implications of this type of controversy for long-standing constitutionally guaranteed civil rights such as freedom of speech and religion.

This paper is written as a response to another, lesser known, example of allegations of hate-speech against a religion, in this case Hinduism, that has significant implications for freedom of speech and religion, as well as questions of academic freedom, missiology and inter-religious dialogue. The allegations are of *Hinduphobia* on the part of various Evangelical

ministries who aim to engage Hindus evangelistically.  The allegations were released in 2007 in a report by the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) entitled *Hyperlink to Hinduphobia; Online Hatred, Extremism and Bigotry Against Hindus.* Many of the ministries critiqued in the report are missions agencies involved in active outreach to Hindus around the world, though the report itself was limited to the internet activities of such groups.

In reading the report it became apparent that it espouses notions of pluralism and tolerance that have broader implications.  Indeed, it seems there are parallels between the HAF report's view of pluralism, and notions of pluralism that have been promoted by academics in religious studies over the past three decades.  Specifically, I see similarities between the pluralism of the report and some of the concepts advocated by John Hick in his defense of a pluralist approach to the question of religious truth. While I am not arguing for any kind of a direct link between the two (though I think it unlikely that the HAF report authors are unaware of Hick's work), I do think that both notions of pluralism have common ground.  The first part of this paper will give a brief overview of Hick's thesis on pluralism with some critical observations. Then a discussion of the HAR report on Hinduism will follow, raising the question as to whether this might be the logical outcome of the type of thinking that Hick promotes. Concluding comments will consider how we might respond to the challenge raised by the HAR report.

**The Case of Hick's Pluralism**

Discussions of the encounter of world religions have noted three basic approaches among Christians to interpreting their relationship.  The traditional method of exclusivism, or particularism, holds that only one of the various world religions can ultimately be true.  Christian

exclusivists hold that Jesus is the unique incarnation of the personal Triune God and that salvation is only possible through faith in him.  Some, but not all, exclusivists have entertained a highly critical approach to other religions.  Inclusivists agree that Salvation is uniquely realized by and through the work of Jesus Christ.  However, they understand that other religions may function in some ways as a preparation for the higher revelation of Christianity.  They hold out great hope that sincere followers of other faiths may be saved, though they believe that this salvation is ultimately mediated through Christ, even if the one being saved is unaware of this. Pluralists are located at the opposite extreme from exclusivists.  They believe that no one religion is superior, or more true than others, but rather they all represent equally valid means of relating to God or the ultimate reality.

My purpose here is not to delve deeper into the debate over these three perspectives since there is already a well known body of literature that does so (Hick, 1995; Okholm and Phillips, 1995; Netland, 2001; Sinkinson, 2001; Tennent, 2002).  Others have pointed out various contradictions and problems inherent in Hick's version of pluralism, so there is no need to repeat most of those arguments here. Instead, I would like to briefly remark on an   important point of Hick's pluralism and see how it might relate to the climate that produced the HAF report.

While Hick's development of his pluralist approach to religion is spread out over a variety of publications, it was his *An Interpretation of Religion: Human responses to religion* that formulated it most fully.  In a subsequent, and much shorter work, *A Christian Theology of Religion: The rainbow of faiths*, Hick restated and defended his thesis against his critics.  My discussion of Hick will focus on some key points as set forth in this later work.

A clear theme that emerges in Hick's writing is his growing aversion to the notion that those who have not had access to the gospel of Christ would, therefore, not be able to experience salvation.  This seems to him to be irreconcilable with the revelation of God's love in Jesus Christ.  In addition, his close contact with followers of other religions led him to observe that they seem to show the same fruits of spiritual growth as found in Christianity.  This is the case in both individual followers and entire cultures where a specific religion is prominent (Hick, 1989, p. 13-16).

The question of salvation is thus, central to Hick's agenda. Since he sees the fruits of spiritual life equally in all religions, then this fruit must indicate the presence of salvation equally in each case as well.  But if this is so, then salvation as Hick defines it cannot possibly mean literally what the various world religions claim that it does.  He, himself,  clearly acknowledges that they teach contradictory doctrines not only about salvation, but also about God, and a host of other doctrines.  He defends his pluralism as a means of showing respect for these differences over against the exclusivists, who denigrate them as being false, and the inclusivists who condescendingly reinterpret them as channels for a hidden Christian form of salvation (Hick, 1995, p. 41ff).  Yet, in order to make his hypothesis works he offers a definition of salvation that would not be recognized by many of the traditions he wishes to interpret.

The notion of salvation that Hick proposes necessitates a rethinking of the nature of God, or the ultimate reality to which religious rituals, beliefs and affections are directed.  He succinctly summarizes this by noting that the great religious traditions "are directed towards a transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to a re-centering in what, in our inadequate terms, we speak of as God, or as Ultimate Reality, or the Transcendent, or the Real. ...

4

And what is variously called salvation or liberation or enlightenment or awakening consists in this transformation from self-centeredness to Reality centeredness" (Hick, 1995, p. 18). God, or Ultimate Reality, cannot conform literally to any of the notions of deity found in most religions, since this entails differing notions of salvation.

Hence, Hick opts for a neo-Kantian concept, which he calls the Real, that represents "an ultimate ineffable Reality which is the source and ground of everything, and which is such that in so far as the religious traditions are in soteriological alignment with it they are contexts of salvation/liberation" (Hick, 1995, p. 27). He appeals to Kant's notion of the noumenal to indicate that this reality cannot be known in itself. However, the different interpretations of God and reality found in the various religions are all valid human responses to the Real, such that religious doctrines are not mere human projections but are based on concrete experiences of a transcendent reality.

Various critics of Hick have pointed out that all of this is tantamount to a flat denial of the truth value of the doctrinal affirmations held to in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and so forth (cf. the essays in Okholm and Phillips, 1995; Netland, 2001; Sinkinson, 2001). In each case, the adherents are claiming that their experience of God is, in fact, an experience of the final ultimate reality. Aside from some liberally minded, mostly academics (Paul Tillich comes to mind), those calling themselves Christians do not understand that there is some kind of ineffable, suprapersonal ground of being, back behind the Triune God revealed through Jesus Christ. Neither do the majority of Muslims imagine that Allah is merely their culturally conditioned response to an unknowable mystery. When Hindus speak of Brahman as the ultimate reality, they really do think that it *is* the ultimate reality. Each would understand Hick's proposal not as

a more sophisticated and fair (or tolerant) interpretation of their views. They would quite rightly see it as the imposition of an alien world view on top of their own, and in such a way as to gut it of its essential content and remake it into something entirely different. Surely, they would say, this is not tolerance, but rather an encounter with a brute form of ideological totalitarianism.

Hick is, of course, quite aware of these types of criticism and seeks to respond to them. He asserts that he does indeed respect the very real world view differences between Hindu and Muslim views of God, or Buddhist and Christian notions of salvation. However, he claims that even though the religions are different, they "are *generically* the same in that they all point to something lacking in the present and they each propose a means for arriving at a better future" (Hick, 1995, p. 41). Confronted with the problem of conflicting truth claims and equally edifying fruits, they must be seen somehow as equally valid. His view is, therefore, not based on any supposedly privileged or superior standpoint. It is simply a conclusion based on empirical observation (Hick, 1995, p. 50).

In any case, he contends that he is not saying that the different names of God, Yahweh, Allah, Brahman, Jesus Christ, are simply different ways of referring to the same ultimate reality. No, each "refers to a different persona of the Real" (Hick, 1995, p. 46). They are not identical with the Real, but are different ways that humans picture the Real. While it is admitted that this does amount to a denial of the literal understanding that each religion has of itself, this is justified as being a virtue since, "once you've concluded that their moral and spiritual fruits seem to be, although different, more or less equally valuable, you are driven to the realization that the Real is capable of being experienced in more than one way" (Hick, 1995, p. 47).

At this point there are numerous objections that could be and have been raised. For our purposes here, I will limit myself to pointing out that Hick's attempt to answer his critics has not salvaged his system. If anything, his response simply reinforces their criticisms. First of all, it isn't necessarily clear that Hick's evaluation of the spiritual fruits of the world's religions as being relatively equal is defensible. Certainly on the cultural level, there seems to be good evidence to the contrary.[1] However, even if this observation is granted, it simply begs the question as to how the truth claims of the various religions should be evaluated. Why should increasing moral goodness be the criterion of determining that one is becoming aligned with the Real? On what basis may we conclude that an ineffable, unknowable absolute is good? Sinkinson (2001) asks, "Why should the Ultimate Real be a God of universal love rather than a cosmic tyrant?" (p. 162). Indeed, Hick rejects exclusivism on the basis that it is inconsistent with God's love, but in the end he finishes up with an impersonal absolute that vitiates any possibility of there being a God of love in the first place.

We have seen, then, that Hick's pluralism cannot function unless it transforms the religions it encounters into epiphenomena of its own world view. Rather than being religiously neutral, or scientific in nature, this new world view is best understood as a new religion that quite intolerantly absorbs the others into its own system, greatly distorting them in the process. Like a computer virus that begins writing its own code over that of the native operating system, Hick's pluralism reconfigures all other religious systems to the structure of it own matrix, so that they

---

[1]Despite Hick's denials, it seems rather clear, for example, that Christianity was decisive to the development of modern science as a self-sustaining cultural enterprise in a way that was not possible in Muslim, Hindu and other non-Christian cultures. See the detailed study of Stanley Jaki (1990).

reflect its image.  Sinkinson is surely correct when he observes that Hick's system inevitably collapses into another form of the absolutism Hick claims to abhor (2001, p. 169ff).  His ideas enter into religious dialogue under the guise of friendly respect, yet like the famous horse of Troy, they invade and then colonize each of the world's faiths until they are properly submissive to the authority of its neo-Kantian paradigm.  In the end his system is a destroyer of diversity and a subverter of honest dialogue.  We can expect, therefore, that wherever the logic of pluralism prevails the result will reflect this type of ideological colonization. In the name of tolerance and diversity any serious discussion of differences will be suppressed.  We will now turn to the recent HAF report to see an example of this in action.

**The HAF Report**

The HAF report, *Hyperlink to Hinduphobia*, begins with a forward by religious studies professor Jeffery D. Long, giving it the imprimatur of the academy, and presumably, situating it within broader academically acceptable definitions of pluralism and tolerance.  At least this would seem to be the impression created for the casual reader, who perhaps might not be aware of some of the more nuanced debates over the subject.  Long sets the tone for the report by noting that its target is "anti-Hindu bigotry" which is equated with racism and anti-Semitism and declared to be dangerous (2007, p. 6).  The danger does not come from any direct incitement to violence, but rather he states that "hateful speech and false information can create a climate in which such violence is expected" (Long, 2007, p. 6).

In contrast, the HAF is said to be "firmly rooted in the ideals of tolerance and Hinduism basic to this country (the United States)" (Long, 2007, p. 6). The report, according to Long, is a wake-up call to all like minded supporters of tolerance and fairness, so that all religions might be

respected and that all of their followers may feel "safe and included" (2007, p. 6). This feeling of

a lack  inclusion appears to  represent a threat and seems to be a primary criterion by which it is

determined that particular speech is hateful.  If it generates a  feeling of being left out, then this

must surely signal the second-class status of its targets, and being the objects of contempt as

such, this must imply the potential for violence.  Or at least, these seem to be the assumptions

underlying this statement.

As the report moves into its main body these themes become more pronounced. It begins

with a statement of purpose.

> The focus of this report is to identify and analyze websites that target Hindus and their
> religion in the firm conviction that, if left unchallenged, such websites perpetuate hatred
> at best, and breed violence at worst. It exhibits a myriad of websites found to contain
> hateful content towards Hindus and their beliefs and also reveals the individuals and
> groups sponsoring these sites (HAF, 2007, p. 13).

It is important, before looking at the specific examples cited, to note that the best interpretation

placed on them is that they are purveyors of hate.  The more sinister notion that they promote

violence is underscored by the invoking of  al-Qaeda and Islamic terrorism in general as

examples of effective users of internet technology in order to pursue their goals (HAF, 2007, p.

9).  This guilt by association is thrown in as a bonus, with no supporting arguments linking the

organizations mentioned, but with all the force of the emotional baggage they carry.  This is not

lost on the reader.  Added to this are other emotionally loaded terms, such as "hate-mongers",

"bigotry" and "intolerance", all employed to describe the character and activities of those

targeted by the report (HAF, 2007, p. 9).

Hence, it should come as no surprise to find that the report speaks positively of efforts to criminalize hate-speech in Canada and Europe.  It notes with approval that, "several nations have already recognized the need to balance people's freedom of expression with their right to be free from hate targeted against them" (HAF, 2007, p. 10).  The report notes the difficulty of overcoming First Amendment obstacles to such laws in the United States, but concludes that there is a "need to balance people's freedom of expression with their right to be free from hate targeted against them" (HAF, 2007, p. 11).

In the absence of coercive legal means of controlling internet content the report encourages the use of blocking techniques, employed by some countries to control internet content availability, as well as voluntary censorship on the part of site host providers.  Thus, major companies that run web servers are encouraged to require users to refrain from posting hateful content and to remove such material when it surfaces.  Beyond this, the work of several NGOs are noted as examples of how on-line "hate" can be monitored and exposed (HAF, 2007, p. 12).

The real heart of the report is in its specific allegations of hate as represented in numerous examples.  Quotes and brief commentaries are given that enable the reader to understand more clearly exactly how the terms defining hatred and intolerance are being employed.  Before giving examples, the report summarizes three methods allegedly used to attack Hinduism.

> The methods generally used to degrade Hinduism are: 1) categorizing Hindu rituals and traditions as "devil worship," a characterization used time and time again in order to promote a fear of Hindus and their beliefs; 2) portraying Hindu practice as profane and morally repugnant, i.e., depicting Hindu deities as perverse and lurid caricatures; and 3) falsifying Hinduism's teachings and principles in order to claim the religious superiority of other traditions. The ultimate outcome is the same – another unfortunate blow to tolerance and pluralism." (HAF, 2007, p. 13).

It is important to note that one of the principle grievances is that critics of Hinduism routinely distort and misrepresent it in ways that are insulting and degrading.  We shall see that there are clearly instances where this is the case.  However, the report seeks to deflect practically any criticism in this manner, often circumventing the possibility of legitimate debate about Hindu practices and beliefs.

For our purposes of analysis, specific examples of alleged anti-Hindu hate may be divided into two distinct categories.  There are those that employ language and terminology which could be construed as inflammatory.  Given the negative emotional baggage attached to such discourse, one would be justified in asking if this falls short of acceptable standards of scholarship as well as of appropriate missiological engagement.  On the other hand,  there are those allegedly hateful statements that, in fact, represent areas of legitimate interpretation and critique. It appears that a significant aspect of the concern raised by the report is exactly what is the nature of legitimate discourse concerning basic religious beliefs and practices.

Examples of  both types of alleged hate are indicated in various web sites quoted.  One example cites yoga as a practice that opens the mind to demons, while the Hindu god Shiva is said to be a demon god (HAF, 2007, p. 15).  The gods of India are said to be creations of Satan while the doctrine of reincarnation is called one of his lies.  Hindu worship is referred to as nonsense.  Hatred towards Muslims is also alleged in that the site denies that Allah is the God of creation (HAF, 2007, p. 15).

Among the more inflammatory type of messages discussed, are statements that Hinduism is "The Pig Pen from the East" and a "dirty and dignity-destroying religion".  Hinduism is associated with sexual perversion and moral filth, while Hindu doctrines are subject to crude

caricatures. Karma and reincarnation are ridiculed with the accusation that Hindus practice

vegetarianism due to fear of eating a reincarnated relative by accident (HAF, 2007, p. 16). The

Goddess Kali is murderous and bloodthirsty, according to one site, which goes on to state that

Hindus receive psychic powers from devils through the practice of yoga (HAF, 2007, p. 17).

Several of the sites quoted interpret Hinduism as being a device of Satan to deceive.

They discuss demon possession as an outcome of Hindu practice and in one case liken the

bringing of children to temples by Hindu and Buddhist parents as a type of child sacrifice for

demonic possession (HAF, 2007, p. 22). Hinduism is called a lie from the Devil as is

reincarnation, and one site orders Satan to "get out of the heart of any Hindu" (HAF, 2007, p. 23,

24 ). The report notes that Hindus are said to be in satanic bondage, under demonic control and in

spiritual darkness (HAF, 2007, p. 19). That one of the alleged hate sites quoted is called

exposingsatanism.org would seem to exacerbate the concerns of the HAF report (HAF, 2007, p.

24).

It is not difficult to understand why emotionally loaded language of this sort would be

interpreted as hateful, and it is clearly arguable that the HAF has a point in at least some of these

cases. Criticism that descends into name-calling is not a helpful means of engaging those with

whom one would like to maintain a positive witness to the gospel. If the goal is actually to

engage in dialogue, then accounts of other religions that are deliberately pejorative should be

avoided. The HAR objects that such language creates fear of Hindus that may lead to

discrimination. A case could be made that the more extreme language employed might reveal an

already pre-existing fear. At least it indicates prejudice that likely obscures the objectivity of the

critic.

The second category of alleged hate, however, concerns observations and interpretations that are considerably more measured.  They employ language that, while critical, remains more objective.  Nevertheless, these assessments are categorically classified as examples of hate and intolerance, in need of repression just like the others.

In this category we include simple statements such as that found on the *cbn.com* site asserting that Hindus worship the wrong God (HAF, 2007, p. 14).  One example of alleged hatred is a broader statement that Hinduism teaches various false doctrines.  The statement that Hinduism "worships the wrong God, follows the wrong religious authority, seeks the wrong destiny, and teaches the wrong ways to achieve that destiny." is viewed as a clear example of hate speech along with the assessment, "there is no valid evidence why anyone should believe it (Hinduism)" (HAF, 2007, p. 29).  It appears that any simple statement that hinduism is incorrect, regardless of how even tempered,  is viewed as hatred. Indeed, no fewer than nine pages of the report mention the statement that Hinduism is false as an example of derogatory hate-speech, with the statement that Hinduism is simply wrong, twice receiving that honor (HAF, 2007, p. 45).

Additional offensive speech includes any notion that Hinduism is soteriologically deficient. Some examples have already been mentioned.  Others include statements that Hindus are "lost" and "in darkness".  Both of these statements are employed on Southern Baptist sites and are singled out specifically as egregious examples of hatred, noting that they constitute part of a "fierce attack" against Hindu beliefs (HAF, 2007, p. 18).  A related example of alleged hate-speech is the statement "that a greater hope exists than that offered by Hinduism"(HAF, 2007, p. 26). Hence the notion that Hinduism cannot lead to forgiveness and reconciliation on the South

Asian continent also makes for hate speech (HAF, 2007, p. 29).  One is left with the impression

that any kind of disagreement with the truthfulness of Hinduism and its  alleged spiritual benefits

automatically indicates prejudice and hatred which could erupt into violent persecution at any

moment.  This impression is only heightened by the indication that to suggest that Christians

should not practice yoga or that the gods of Hinduism do not exist are also a forms of hatred

(HAF, 2007, p. 23, 32).

A similar line of argumentation is taken up in that construals of Hinduism as having any

negative social consequences are also viewed as forms of hate-speech.  To argue that poverty and

overpopulation (HAF, 2007, p. 14) or lack of social humanitarianism in India are related to

Hinduism is hate-speech (HAF, 2007, p. 16), while care is taken to characterize the caste-system

and its inherent discrimination as not really being part of Hinduism (HAF, 2007, p. 41).

Finally, the HAR report flatly states that the assertion that there are distortions in

Hinduism due to "untruth" in its teachings is itself false and worthy of being classified as hate-

speech (HAF, 2007, p. 32). Apparently it is inappropriate to declare that any religion is false, as it

notes in describing one site, "The site is filled with content trying to convey the superiority of the

Christian faith and the 'falseness' of other religions" (HAF, 2007, p. 24). Note the scare quotes

designed to bring into question the possibility of judging the truthfulness of one religion over

against another. Pluralism is thus the ethical norm that defines the nature of hate-speech.  Indeed,

the report remarks on the "non-pluralistic attitude" of the Mission Frontier online magazine in its

allegations of anti-Hindu hatred.  Any assertion, then, of Christian truth or superiority over

against Hindu teaching and practice must be precluded.

The examples of speech referenced in the report must be opposed since they "espouse chauvinism and bigotry over the principles of pluralism and religious tolerance" (HAF, 2007, p. 33). Their method is "to exoticize, objectify and contemptuously discard" Hinduism by means of terminology describing it as "demonic, false, hopeless, satanic, cursed, evil, filthy, perverted, murderous, and sinful" (HAF, 2007, p. 33). Such speech is identified with "anti-Semitism, homophobia, racism and other forms of bigotry and hatred" (HAF, 2007, p. 33). The conclusion of the report then carries the argument to the next level by declaring that it is a first step is analyzing anti-Hindu hate groups. Such groups are a threat because their discourse "threatens interfaith dialogue, mutual respect and civil discourse - basic underpinnings of American culture - at best, and ultimately leads to violence at worst" (HAF, 2007, p. 33).

In sum, we learn from the HAR report that Christian groups targeting Hinduism for evangelism are essentially anti-Hindu hate groups, particularly if, as is inevitable, they engage in any type of conversation that posits the falsity of any Hindu beliefs or that Hinduism has any negative social and cultural consequences (HAF, 2007, p. 33). Such assertions are the result of ignorance and defamatory and can only best be labeled as hinduphobia.

In an interestingly paradoxical move, the report concludes with an appendix containing FAQs about Hinduism, which aims to set the record straight concerning its basic beliefs and essential practices. In this section we find a very brief, yet robust affirmation of traditional Hindu notions of deity, reincarnation, karma, yoga and meditation, the notion of the avatar, and others. God, who may go by many names, is said to be the all-encompassing reality that contains time and space, a description that indicates a pantheistic understanding of divinity. Accordingly, "The *Vedas* propound that all beings, from the smallest organism to man, are considered

manifestations of God and members of a universal family" (HAF, 2007, p. 40). If true this would logically preclude any Jewish, Christian or Muslim notion of deity as being an accurate representation of God's nature.

The same could be said for salvation. Hindu belief is affirmed in the notion that through the processes of karma and reincarnation, the individual soul may evolve over many lifetimes to the liberation of union with god (HAF, 2007, p. 39). Again, if the assertion of this as true is logically the assertion that Christian and Muslim views of salvation are simply false, unless we are to reduce all of these doctrines to mere mythological responses to the "Real" as Hick describes it. However, it seems that such an interpretation of the Hinduism of the HAR would be extremely forced at best. There is no hint that the authors of this report hold to anything other than a traditional view of Hindu doctrines.

**Assessment**

My first reaction upon reading this report was to think that if the goal of its authors is to promote a situation where persons of all faiths are able to feel safe and included, then they have failed spectacularly, since the result was to make this Evangelical Christian feel threatened, attacked and ostracized. This was not a mere mental response. The report provoked a gut level fear, as I perceived it to be a fundamental threat to my religious and academic freedoms. Further reflection has mitigated this somewhat, with both the realization that, at least for now, there is little chance of widespread enforcement of the report's recommendations and that there are some areas of legitimate concern that the report raises.

So any response to this will have to do at least two things. First it will need to honestly deal with extremist examples of anti-Hindu rhetoric, some of which do seem to promote

excessively negative stereotypes and inaccurate portrayals. This type of discourse must be confronted and repudiated. Other cases may present criticisms of Hinduism that perhaps are technically in line with a biblical assessment, but we have to ask ourselves whether or not the use of emotive and inflammatory language is an ethical manner to communicate such ideas. Even from a merely pragmatic basis we should ask whether or not such language is really the best means to communicate our concerns and reach those with whom we disagree.

Secondly, our response needs to point out the flaws in the report's evaluation of the situation and offer a defense of the right of Evangelicals (and others) to engage in critical dialogue and evangelistic outreach in the encounter with Hinduism and other religions.

In the first case, we can readily admit that the use of name-calling (Hinduism is a "pig-pen religion") is never an appropriate way to characterize anyone, regardless of their religious persuasion. Unless a label conveys something essentially descriptive and accurate that helps to illuminate the conversation, it is a hindrance. Furthermore, it disrespects the person referred to; a person who is, after all, made in the image of God and thus deserving of the respect due to being God's image bearer. Such discourse is rightfully seen as offensive. It will likely drive people away, or move them to retaliate without giving serious consideration to what we have to say. It seems that before posting any remarks about other religions on-line it would be good to run our writing through the grid of the Golden Rule.

A corollary to this is the rather obvious principle that whatever we say about other religions ought to have the virtue of being accurate. While this is taken for granted in academia, the internet is free from the safeguards that scholars have imposed on themselves. There are no peer reviews for church and lay ministry sites, making it quite easy for superficial and inaccurate

portrayals to proliferate. Timothy Tennent has noted the past tendency for Evangelical treatments of other religions to be "reduced to simplistic charts or sweeping generalizations that operate at a superficial level" (Tennent, 2002, p. 12). Evangelical scholars can play a positive role in correcting this, not only producing solid academic works that engage other religions, but also in taking an intentional interest in churches, missions agencies and lay ministries that sincerely desire to carry the gospel to those of other faiths.[2] Rather than just criticizing them from afar, we could offer our involvement and help such that they are able to avoid mistakes that provoke the kind of anti-Evangelical hostility evidenced in the HAR report.

Efforts along these lines were made in the past in ETS with the Society for the Study of Alternative Religions study group. Unfortunately, this group seems to have become essentially defunct. I am not sure if this is because of ambivalence or perhaps reticence of some of us who are qualified in this area to be too closely associated with some of the so called "anti-cult" ministries, but it seems to me that if these ministries are problematic they are only going to improve through interaction with serious scholars on these questions. There are always going to be ministries and outreaches led by people who do not have advanced academic training. They need the encouragement and guidance that we can offer. I think that their presence here at ETS has demonstrated that they are hungry for this type of interaction. So my first response to the HAR report is to encourage us to do some self-examination and cleaning of our own houses where we can, and to advocate for a closer relationship between Evangelical scholars of religions

---

[2]Timothy Tennent (2002) offers an excellent example of how productive and respectful inter-religious dialogue can be advanced without compromising the participants' commitment to the truth of their faiths.

and ministries who are on the front-lines of outreach. Resurrecting the Society for the Study of Alternative religions, or something like it, would be a good place to start.

As for the HAR report itself, there are several problems that need to be confronted, for if left unchallenged it advances an attitude that poses a serious threat to fundamental freedoms and rights.  Rather than being a force for tolerance and civility, represented in basic American values, the report itself is a radical attack on those very values that are essential for honest and civil relations between those of differing points of view.

If we are to accept the report's assumption that simply asserting that the views of another religion are false is a form of hate-speech, then any and all serious inter-religious dialogue, not to mention any serious work on the fundamental problems of philosophy of religion, must come to a screeching halt.  The ability to engage in serious thought, dialogue and criticism of fundamental notions concerning the nature of God and ultimate reality, human destiny, spiritual advancement and the common social good, presupposes the ability to critically compare, dissect and evaluate differing and opposing proposals.  The brute fact of the matter is that different religions do give contradictory and irreconcilable answers to these basic questions.  The search for truth involves comparing these ideas for their merits and weaknesses.  If one is to have the freedom to accept one set of ideas as true, and to give reasons for doing so in rational and respectful academic discussion, then there must be the corresponding freedom to express the opinion that opposing views are false.  To assert that expressing such an opinion is a form of hate-speech is to vilify centuries of serious scholarship in theology and philosophy of religion as simply a form of power politics.  This is not tolerance and pluralism at all.  It is exactly the kind of ideological tyranny that emerges in Hick's totalizing absolutist position and it poses an unethical, unacceptable, and I

might add, a potentially illegal threat the basic academic freedoms that allow the academy to advance knowledge in the first place.

In addition it seems seriously inconsistent for the authors of the report to berate and accuse Christians of being hate mongers for expressing their disagreement with Hindu doctrines, and then to present and defend Hindu doctrines as truth. By asserting that Hindu notions of Brahman represent the nature of ultimate reality, or God, they are thereby asserting that Christian notions are false. Is this not then, a form of hate-speech by their own definitions of the term? Are they not hate-mongers for implying that the Christian Trinity does not exist, since they assert the incompatible doctrine that God is the all-inclusive reality? Are they not intolerant for implying that the Christian notion of the final judgment after this life is false, given their assertion of the truth of reincarnation and karma? If we cannot assert that an opposing viewpoint is *not* true, how then can we rationally assert that our own, contradictory views, *are* true? Does not this entire exercise render vacuous any kind of truth claims at all? It seems that all that would be left is the mere expression of tentatively held opinions - a type of agnosticism that may be friendly enough on the surface, but that like Hick, removes the real content of religious belief that makes having a faith worthwhile in the first place.

No, I would not say that they are hate-mongers for asserting the truth of their position and the falsity of Christian theism. I would say they are merely exercising their rights to religious freedom to believe as they wish and to propagate those beliefs in a free society. I would just ask them to respect our rights as well. For it seems quite clear that the HAR report is, in fact, an attack against the basic principles of religious freedom and freedom of speech, both of which are protected in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. When they advocate the

open abrogation of these rights with false allegations of hate, then they seem to have crossed the line from merely propagating their beliefs to advocating active persecution of their perceived enemies.

There is no evidence offered, after all, that there are any malicious motives behind calls for Christians to pray for Hindus; that this is based on actual hatred. Asserting that Hindus and other non-Christians are lost, that is, that they are outside the purview of salvation, is not an attack against anybody. It is a simple observation of the status of all persons, given the assumption that the framework of the Christian understanding of creation-fall-redemption is true. Why shouldn't Christians be allowed to interpret the world through the framework of their religious world view? Rather than provoking violence, the weight of history shows that it usually provokes compassion and concern amongst serious Christians. Is it hatred, after all, that prompts people to give up comfortable lives in the world's most wealthy nation, uprooting families often under difficult circumstances, in order to go and preach the gospel of Christ in lands far from home and often filled with serious difficulties and challenges? While some of the more extreme examples cited in the HAR report might indicate contempt and fear, many of the sites listed represent missions agencies whose clear motivation in reaching out to Hindus is their great love and compassion for them. Now, from a Hindu perspective this may seem misplaced, but surely they can see that if we grant, even for the sake of argument, the Christian understanding that all people need Christ for eternal salvation, that the motive is not hate at all, but rather love and self-sacrifice in order to share with them what Christians have found to be of most value in life.

Certainly when Hindus encourage Christians to seek enlightenment in meditation, the fact that this assumes that Christians are less enlightened is not evidence of latent hatred. It is rather, evidence of compassion and concern on the part of Hindus to improve the well-being of their Christian neighbors. An honest and charitable, that is, a non-hateful assessment of such efforts by both sides should be willing to recognize this. Instead, however, the report imputes false motives to Christian missionaries and their agencies and thus damages the cause of true tolerance and civility. I do not think it an exaggeration to say that if the same standards that the HAR report uses to define hatred are applied to itself, then it advances against Christians the same type of hatred that it decries. This may not have been the intention of the report, but if hatred is measured by the terminology and tactics used, then it appears to be the case. If unjustly casting others as haters and bigots is not itself a form of hate-speech, then one is left to wonder just what is.

Finally, it is of serious concern to find that the HAR report is given credibility by its association with scholars and such organizations as the Simon Wiesenthal Center, whose work concerning the victims of the Nazi holocaust is admirable. The implicit equation of Hindus as a potential victim class comparable to holocaust victims appears to go beyond the bounds of accuracy. It is true that Hindus are persecuted in some parts of the world and this is completely deplorable. However, there is little credible evidence of any kind of an impending reign of persecution of Hindus in North America, or anywhere else in the West for that matter, and the purpose of truth is not served by creating the impression that there is. It is the case, however, that the systematic and severe persecution of Christians by radical Hindu groups in certain parts of India has been going on practically unabated for some time now. This is well documented. I

receive new reports with specific examples in my e-mail at least two or three times a week.  Yet

this reality is not addressed in the report and little is said about it at the HAF web site.[3]

The virtual ignoring of the systematic persecution of Christians by radical Hindus may be

merely an unintentional oversight on the part of the HAR.  Perhaps the organization is not aware

of it.  On the other hand, a more cynical appraisal would be tempted to view this as part of the

over-all double standard that seems to underlie the HAR report.  In turn, this double standard

appears to reflect the larger cultural shift in the definition of tolerance and pluralism that has

already pervaded secular society, particularly the political left, and much of the secular academy

as well.

Brad Stetson and Joseph Conti have exposed this shift in their well documented study,

*The Truth About Tolerance* (2005).  They have given evidence that much of what passes for

tolerance and pluralism in American intellectual life is more akin to a "bait and switch" scheme,

in which words like choice, change, tolerance and diversity are used as code words to mask an

underlying agenda of enforcing political and moral conformity to a particular social stance that

tolerates no dissension.  Tolerance, rather than meaning living in peace with ideas and people

with whom one disagrees is now defined in terms of agreement with or affirmation of those ideas

(Stetson and Conti, 2005, p. 90ff).  Hence, tolerance of homosexuality, for example,  is not

simply allowing gays to practice their lifestyle in peace.  Tolerance, in this new definition, is

nothing less than declaring it to be a normal and healthy variation of human sexuality.  This

---

[3]Assist News Services (www.assistnews.net) has done an admirable job of releasing and archiving articles documenting this trend. Searching their site on http://www.assistnews.net/mysearch/pagedresults.asp?SearchText=Hindu%20AND%20radicals yields numerous such articles.

clearly parallels the HAR report's position that anything less than affirming the truth of Hinduism is a form of hateful bigotry.

We could note, then, that both the HAR report and the Hick thesis on pluralism are products of the times. They are part of a larger social trend that has been in progress for some time at the intersection of late modernity and post-modernity. They both show a strange hybrid of post-modern relativism masking an underlying hypermodernist absolutism. Neither deals adequately with the ideas of their critics. In the end, they should be resisted by all who value academic and religious freedom in the pursuit of truth.

# References

Canadian Press. (2008, June 28) Human rights complaint against Maclean's dismissed, *Globe and Mail.* Retrieved June 28, 2008, from http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/ story/ RTGAM.20080628.wMacleans0628/BNStory/National/home.

Hick, John. (1980). *God Has Many Names.* Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.

Hick, John. (1989). *An Interpretation of Religion: Human responses to the transcendent.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Hick, John. (1995). *A Christian Theology of Religions: The rainbow of faiths.* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Hindu American Foundation (HAF). (2007) *Hyperlink to Hinduphobia: Online hatred, extremism and bigotry Against Hindus.* Retrieved on Nov. 13, 2008 from http://www.hinduamericanfoundation.org/pdf/hate_report_2007.pdf.

Jaki, Stanley. (1990) *Science & Creation: From eternal cycles to an oscillating universe.* Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1974, reprinted by Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America.

Long, Jeffery D. (2007). "Foreword" *Hyperlink to Hinduphobia: Online hatred, extremism and bigotry against Hindus.* Hindu American Foundation.

Netland, Harold. (2001). *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The challenge to Christian Faith & Mission*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Okholm, Dennis L. & Phillips, Timothy R. (1996). *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Sinkinson, Christopher. (2001). *The Universe of Faiths: A critical study of John Hick`s religious pluralism*. Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press.

Stetson, Brad & Conti, Joseph G. (2005). *The Truth About Tolerance: Pluralism, diversity and the culture wars.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Tennent, Timothy C. (2002). *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.