



CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP in Hindu-Christian Funerals

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HINDU FAITH 101

Hinduism has been called the oldest religion in the world, and some adherents refer to it as Sanatana Dharma, or "the eternal law." Today it is the third largest of the world's religions, after Christianity and Islam, with approximately 1.8 million adherents in the U.S. as of 2015.

Christian clergy are increasingly asked to participate in rituals related to Hindu funerals. Participating in such a ritual requires some degree of knowledge of the religion. However, Hinduism is a very complex religion with many traditions, and it is difficult to give a comprehensive understanding of its beliefs and practices. What follows is a description of Hinduism in the United States, particularly related to ritualistic Hinduism, closely associated with temple worship. The Christian minister who is invited to participate should first speak respectfully to the family to learn the beliefs and practices related to funerals in the particular branch of Hinduism to which they relate.

Basically, Hinduism is a family of connected religious cultural clusters (including: Shaivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism) that share concepts, rituals, texts and sacred sites. In general, Hinduism teaches God is within every being and object in the universe and at the same time transcends every being and object in the universe. The essence of

every soul is divine, and the purpose of life is to become aware of that divinity. The diverse forms of practice, including worship and meditation, are intended to lead the soul toward a direct experience of God or Self.

Prominent among Hindu beliefs are the four Purusarthas, or proper goals of human life. They include: dharma (ethics), artha (work), Kama (emotions) and moksha (liberation). Beliefs also include: karma (action, intent and consequences), samsara (the cycle of rebirth) and various yogas (paths or practices to attain moksha). Hindu practices include worship, meditation, family-oriented rites of passage, annual festivals and pilgrimages. The goal is to transcend these forms and the world as it is ordinarily perceived and to realize the divine presence everywhere. There are hundreds of gods in Hinduism, each of which is a different way of conceiving and approaching the one God beyond name and form. And, there are several texts, including: Vedas, Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and the Agamas.



WHAT CHRISTIAN CLERGY NEED TO KNOW ABOUT HINDU FUNERALS

In general adherents to the Hindu faith believe that, although the physical body dies, the individual soul has no beginning and no end.

When a person dies, his or her soul may pass into another incarnation (the condition of which depends on the karma of the life just ended as well as previous lives). If, over many lifetimes, the deceased soul has realized the true nature of reality, then some believe the soul will become one with Brahman, the One, All-Encompassing soul. Others believe the soul will attain the abode of God.

Usually, a funeral takes place within 24 hours of the death. A guest is welcome to phone or visit the bereaved immediately to offer condolences. At the service casual but modest attire is appropriate, however black clothing is not appropriate. It is better to wear white.

There is no funeral home in Hinduism, so the body remains at the deceased's home until it is taken to where it will be cremated (or, in some cases, buried) which is usually the next day. Flowers, brought by mourners, are placed at the feet of the deceased.

There will always be an open casket and guests will be expected to view the body but not to touch it. A priest or senior member of the family will officiate at the ceremony using a special book.

Ten to 30 days after the death another ceremony takes place, called the shraddha. This time is intended to liberate the soul of the deceased for its ascent to heaven. It takes place at the deceased's home, and guests are expected to bring fruit to the home. A priest will officiate, and food will be served to the guests.



In the ceremony a last food offering is symbolically made to the deceased and then the body is cremated.



A ceremony (called a mukhagni) will take place at the place of cremation.

CULTURAL CONTEXT IS IMPORTANT



We have described here very general information about Hinduism in North America. It is always a good idea to talk directly with the family of the deceased about their particular customs and to talk with the panditji who also may be participating in the service. It is also important to remember that Hindus have traveled to North America from all over the world. The vast majority of Hindus in North America are from Asia, and in particular India or Nepal. They have brought with them their own cultural contexts, which should be respected. If you have questions, make sure you ask.





Resources for Deeper Study

The Council of Bishops Office of Christian Unity and Interreligious Relationships, publisher of this brochure, wishes to acknowledge the contents are intended as a guide and have been developed from a general North American context. United Methodists of other cultural contexts are encouraged to volunteer to create a similar resource applicable specifically for them.

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India: A Sacred Geography, Diana Eck, New York: Three Rivers Press, 2012.

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