



CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

in Hindu-Christian Weddings

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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 WEDDINGS

Traditionally, Hindu marriages are arranged by the parents or guardians of the bride and groom and no pre-marital dating is allowed. In the cases in which males and females choose their own partners, permission must be obtained from both sets of parents.

There are seven traditional ceremonies:

- 1. Vagdana**, the verbal contract made by the parents or guardians of the couple.
- 2. Kanya**, Sampradana, the giving of the daughter by her father to the groom.
- 3. Varana**, welcoming the bride and groom.
- 4. Panigrahana**, the ritual of hand-holding by the bride and groom.
- 5. Saptapadi**, the seven-step walking ritual by the bride and groom.
- 6. Laj homa**, the creation of the holy fire that symbolizes the formless divinity.
- 7. Sindur dam**, the groom puts red vermillion on the forehead and in the part of the hair of the bride.

Marriage ceremonies are usually held after sunset and before sunrise. Guests may dress casually but modestly, and no head covering is required. Gifts can be brought to the ceremony, which can be held in any area that is covered (a home, a temple or outside under a canopy). A Hindu monk (called a swamiji) or a Hindu priest (called a panditji) usually officiates.

There is a reception both before and after the ceremony. Usually traditional cultural foods are served, and they may last for hours. An appropriate greeting to the couple is simply, "Congratulations."



Panigrahana, the ritual of hand-holding by the bride and groom.



During Sindur dam the groom puts red vermilion on the forehead and in the part of the hair of the bride.

CULTURAL CONTEXT IS IMPORTANT



We have described here very general information about Hinduism in North America. It is always a good idea to talk with the couple getting married directly about their particular customs and to talk with the panditji or swamiji 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. Remember, also, these same religious diversities will apply to the couple as they live together in their marriage and raise any children.





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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