Does Hindu cleric who prays before legislative bodies speak for Hinduism?

Rajan Zed goes by the title of president of the Universal Society of Hinduism. Some other Hindu leaders say they know little about him.

by Sonia Paul in the May 8, 2019 issue

A YouTube video from 2007 captures the introduction of Hinduism to the prayer life of the US Senate.

“Today’s opening prayer will be offered by our guest chaplain, Mr. Rajan Zed, of the Indian Association of Northern Nevada,” says Sen. Bob Casey (D., Pa.), who was serving as the presiding sergeant-at-arms that day, in the recording, made in July of that year.

Rajan Zed, an Indian immigrant who lives in Nevada, is seen dressed in a salmon-colored robe and a saffron scarf, with prayer beads around his neck. Before he has a chance to speak, a voice sounds out from the Senate’s public gallery: “Lord Jesus, forgive us, Father, for allowing the prayer of the wicked, which is an abomination in your sight—”

Casey cuts off the protester with the gavel, saying, “The sergeant-at-arms will restore order in the Senate!”—but another voice echoes out: “We shall have no other God before you, you are the one true American God!”

Zed, looking perturbed, starts again. “Let us pray. We meditate on the transcendental glory of the Deity Supreme,” he gets out, before a woman’s voice is heard yelling. The sergeant-at-arms intervenes yet again, and this time Zed is able to finish.

This scene began Zed’s 12 years of representing Hinduism in legislative bodies. Since Harry Reid, then Senate majority leader, invited him to deliver the first Hindu invocation in Congress, Zed has offered Hindu prayers before 17 other legislative bodies.

Zed’s one-to-two-minute blessings, like those by chaplains of other faiths, are meant to appeal to a broad American sense of civic spirituality while respecting the separation of church and state. They are usually uncontroversial, though in early April some Republicans in the North Dakota House of Representatives left their seats on the floor and sat at the back of the House chamber in protest, the Associated Press reported.

Rep. Jeff Hoverson, also a Lutheran pastor, told AP, “I don’t want to be compelled to pray to a false god.” He had met before the session with Zed and told him the protest “was nothing personal.”

In a country where minority religions are routinely misunderstood and vilified, one can view Zed’s efforts to present Hinduism in the public square as admirable. But the origin of Zed’s reputation as a spokesman for Hinduism raises questions about who gets to speak for the religion, or for any minority faith in the United States, and why.

As with Islam and Buddhism, Hinduism’s decentralized structure often means that the loudest voices are taken to be authoritative. One of the American public’s first encounters with Hinduism came when Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu monk, spoke at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893.

It wasn’t until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which brought a generation of skilled labor to the United States from India and other Hindu nations, that it became more common for Americans to find themselves working with Hindus or driving past a temple in their area. Even then, these immigrant communities were less eager to explain their faith than to fit into American life.

Some point to September 11 as the watershed that propelled Hindus to educate the public about their tradition, along with Muslims and Sikhs.

But according to Suhag Shukla, executive director of the Hindu American Foundation, founded in 2003, the Hindu community had long needed an advocate to address misrepresentations of Hinduism in the media, largely because journalists had few sources in the Hindu community.

“Stakeholders and members of the community . . . were not the spokespeople for their tradition,” said Shukla. “Academics or anthropologists and other people were speaking on behalf of Hinduism, as opposed to Hindus.”

Scholars of Hinduism and South Asian studies and members of mostly Hindu communities feud about the correct representation of Hinduism and South Asia. In 2014 the book *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, by Wendy Doniger of the University of Chicago Divinity School, caused an uproar with its portrait of the faith. Middle school textbooks used in California since 2005 have outraged some Hindus with their account of ancient India and South Asia.

Amid these struggles to articulate what Hinduism's religion, culture, and identity stand for, Zed, who goes by the title of president of the Universal Society of Hinduism, has emerged as a clarion voice, even as members of the HAF and Sadhana, another Hindu advocacy organization, say they know little about him.

While most legislatures and councils welcome Zed, some commentators have pointed out the grandiosity of one person claiming to speak for the world's 1 billion Hindus.

"The way that the Hindu tradition has historically developed and been understood in and outside India, it doesn't lend itself to that sort of easy characterization," said Udit Thakur, a board member of Sadhana, which is founded on the principles of faith in action. "There isn't one authoritative voice of Hinduism. I don't think that there really should be."

In addition to praying before legislative bodies, Zed has made the news campaigning against the commodification of Hinduism and Hindu symbols in American culture. He has requested and received apologies from companies such as the outdoor recreation retailer REI for a yoga mat towel featuring an image of Lord Ganesha. He routinely demands that Amazon remove the sale of apparel featuring Hindu gods, goddesses, and symbols. And he has urged the Bank of Canada to produce beef-free bank notes (Canadian paper currency is said to contain traces of beef or mutton tallow).

Associating vegetarianism with Hinduism, however, is an example of how a singular account can take hold when just a few people represent an extraordinarily diverse community. The notion that vegetarianism is a core tenet of Hinduism is inflated, likely due to "cultural and political pressures" within India, according to recent research. While several Indian states have banned the slaughter of cattle, especially since the appointment of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in 2014, vegetarianism is mostly linked to more affluent Indians and some upper-caste Hindu diets.

Shana Sippy, an assistant professor at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, who studies the Hindu diaspora, cautions that campaigns about consumer products causing outrage can foster an overly simplistic narrative. What is offensive is “personal and contextual,” she said, pointing out that the gods Krishna and Lakshmi are found on butter and rice packages in India.

“Expressing discomfort with a representation is different than saying, ‘You need to pull those things off the shelf,’” she said. “I think we walk a fine line between questions of censorship and freedom of speech.”

How Zed views his work or the mission of the Universal Society of Hinduism is not clear. Zed repeatedly declined an interview, citing his busy schedule. The barebones website of his society states that it “started in the mind of the Hindu statesman, Rajan Zed.” There’s no sign of professional staff or a physical presence and—despite a “donate” button—no evidence that it is a nonprofit. Zed’s background and how he supports his travel around the country remain a mystery. —Religion News Service

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