

We are all Hindus now

By Lisa Miller | NEWSWEEK

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America is not a Christian nation. We are, it is true, a nation founded by Christians, and according to a 2008 survey, 76 percent of us continue to identify as Christian (still, that's the lowest percentage in American history). Of course, we are not a Hindu—or Muslim, or Jewish, or Wiccan—nation, either. A million-plus Hindus live in the United States, a fraction of the billion who live on Earth. But recent poll data show that conceptually, at least, we are slowly becoming more like Hindus and less like traditional Christians in the ways we think about God, our selves, each other, and eternity.

The Rig Veda, the most ancient Hindu scripture, says this: "Truth is One, but the sages speak of it by many names." A Hindu believes there are many paths to God. Jesus is one way, the Qur'an is another, yoga practice is a third. None is better than any other; all are equal. The most traditional, conservative Christians have not been taught to think like this. They learn in Sunday school that their religion is true, and others are false. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me."

Americans are no longer buying it. According to a 2008 Pew Forum survey, 65 percent of us believe that "many religions can lead to eternal life"—including 37 percent of white evangelicals, the group most likely to believe that salvation is theirs alone. Also, the number of people who seek spiritual truth outside church is growing. Thirty percent of Americans call themselves "spiritual, not religious," according to a 2009 NEWSWEEK Poll, up from 24 percent in 2005. Stephen Prothero, religion professor at Boston University, has long framed the American propensity for "the divine-deli-cafeteria religion" as "very much in the spirit of Hinduism. You're not picking and choosing from different religions, because they're all the same," he says. "It isn't about orthodoxy. It's about whatever works. If going to yoga works, great—and if going to Catholic mass works, great. And if going to Catholic mass plus the yoga plus the Buddhist retreat works, that's great, too."

Then there's the question of what happens when you die. Christians traditionally believe that bodies and souls are sacred, that together they comprise the "self," and that at the end of time they will be reunited in the Resurrection. You need both, in other words, and you need them forever. Hindus believe no such thing. At death, the body burns on a pyre, while the spirit—where identity resides—escapes. In reincarnation, central to Hinduism, selves come back to earth again and again in different bodies. So here is another way in which Americans are becoming more Hindu: 24 percent of Americans say they believe in reincarnation, according to a 2008 Harris poll. So agnostic are we about the ultimate fates of our bodies that we're burning them—like Hindus—after death. More than a third of Americans now choose cremation, according to the Cremation Association of North America, up from 6 percent in 1975. "I do think the more spiritual role of religion tends to deemphasize some of the more starkly literal interpretations of the Resurrection," agrees Diana Eck, professor of comparative religion at Harvard. So let us all say "om."

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Lisa Miller: Religion Editor

Lisa Miller, who was named Society editor in July 2000, added Religion editor to her duties in October 2006. She reports, writes and edits stories on spirituality and belief and writes the weekly BeliefWatch column in the Periscope section of the magazine. Miller wrote "The Politics of Jesus" cover story (10/13/2006), which examined the impact of religion in the midterm elections.

She also helped launch the "OnFaith," an online global conversation about religion and faith moderated by Newsweek Editor Jon Meacham and Washington Post writer Sally Quinn and co-branded with the Washington Post.

As Society editor, Miller oversees reporting on religion, education, family and health. Miller oversaw "The Giving Back Awards," double issue in July 2006, where Newsweek recognized people who were making a difference in the world. In July 2005, she oversaw the "Spirituality in America" double issue, which looked at the rise of spirituality nationwide and why many Americans are choosing to seek spiritual experiences outside of traditional religions. Miller is currently writing a book about heaven, starting with the history of the idea of it and contemporary beliefs about it.

During her tenure, Miller has led coverage of numerous health and issues-related cover stories including: "Sex, Shame and the Catholic Church," (March 4, 2002), "The Bible and the Qur'an," (Feb. 11, 2002), "Fighting Addiction," (Feb. 12, 2001), and "God and the Brain," (May 7, 2001).

Award-winning stories and cover packages that Miller edited include: The National Headliner Award for feature writing for David France for a series of articles. They included: "The Angry Profit is Dying," (June 11, 2001) about AIDS activist Larry Kramer on the 20th anniversary of the killer virus; "Scouts Divided," (August, 6, 2001) on internal strife within the Boy Scouts of America over allowing homosexuals to join; and "Blood and Money," with David Noonan (December 17, 2001) an investigation into whether the donations made after September 11 really went where they were intended.

Miller came to Newsweek from The Wall Street Journal, where she was an award-winning senior special writer covering religion for the paper's front page since 1997. She was also an editor for the Marketplace page (1993-94), where she helped launch the weekly "Health Journal," and a travel reporter (1994-97).

She started her journalism career as an editorial assistant (1984) at the Harvard Business Review and later became manuscript editor there (1985-87) before moving to The New Yorker (1987-92) and then Self magazine (1992-93), where she was senior editor for arts coverage and created their "In Focus" section in the front of the book.

Miller received a New York Newswomen's Club award in 1998 for feature writing. She graduated from Oberlin College with a B.A. in English in 1984.