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Unique $2-million Shrine Honoring all Religions is Architectural Feat and Spiritual Sanctuary in Virginia

Spring, 1980. The gurr and clank of a D-9 bulldozer breaks the silence along the James River. Swami Satchidananda sits at the controls beaming a smile from beneath his orange knit cap that keeps his long white hair in place as he personally breaks ground for a 9-acre man-made lake. A simple dedication ceremony follows.

That was the physical beginning of LOTUS, the Light of Truth Universal Shrine, now moving into final structural stages on 1,000 acres of rich, natural beauty along the James River in Buckingham County, Virginia. Mentally, it had been developing for decades as Swami's dream - a place where men and women of all faiths could silently worship the One Supreme God. About 100 of Swami's devotees are here with Swami, creating LOTUS and the "Yogaville" community of family and renunciate members.

The 3-level concrete and wood structure is shaped like a giant lotus flower, commonly chosen as a metaphor for spiritual unfoldment. At the center of the bud's interior, a ray of light shoots upward out of a three-dimensional yantra. At the tip of the spired ceiling, the light is diffused into twelve beams which shine downward to illuminate simple shrines nestled in the hollow petals of the lotus flower, one each for the major religions.

Each faith is represented by its primary symbol (captured in ornate stained glass) and its scriptural references to spiritual light. Religions represented are Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Shintoism, Taoism, African religions, native American religions, all the other known religions, and all unknown or forgotten religions.

The essential metaphysical elements of LOTUS are all of Hindu origin - many of them made in India and donated by close devotees - the vimanam (central exterior spire), palipeedam, yantra, etc. Swami's occult knowledge has enabled him to structure the shrine to prism divine energies. His use of a chakram of gems and precious metals echoes the Agamic tradition, as does the yantra engraved in gold and placed beneath the lowest level. Already, the vibration is extremely strong, reports Swami Prakashananda Ma.

Beneath the main shrine will be a central hall surrounded by libraries of scriptures and books on each religion and below that a meditation chamber (entered through a concealed hatchway) for "experiencing complete silence." Silence will also be maintained throughout the building, and no rituals will be performed.

Beautiful reflecting ponds with many lotus-shaped fountains (carved of granite in India) will enhance the 200-foot walk to LOTUS from the two large reception buildings. Swami's future projection is that around LOTUS there will be small individual shrines for the various religions built in the architecture traditional to each faith.

Most recently, contracting firms from Charlottesville have placed the huge, laminated beams to form the superstructure of the upper chamber. Plywood sheathing will create the shell and the foundation for pink and white Italian ceramic tile. Architect James Jagadish McCabe said they hope to complete the exterior work by winter and continue with the interior during the cold weather. LOTUS dedication target date: July, 1985.

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