Congress' Hindu Blessing
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CEREMONY

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Ohio temple priest Venkatachalapathi Samuldrala offers first-ever HIndu prayer in US Congress

On September 14 India's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee gave his first-ever address to a joint session of the US Congress. A Hindu priest delivered the opening prayer, also a first. The priest, Venkatachalapathi Samuldrala, of the Siva Vishnu Temple in Parma, Ohio, was invited by Representative Sherrod Brown of Ohio, an ardent supporter of India and Indian Americans and congressman of the temple's congressional district.

Marking a major shift in relations between the US and India, Rep. Brown escorted Vajpayee into the historic chamber where all Congressional Representatives and Senators were gathered. Brown then welcomed Samuldrala and requested House Chaplain Rev. Daniel P. Coughlin to "invite Mr. Samuldrala to give today's prayer as a testimony to the religious diversity that is the hallmark of our nation."

The prayer was delivered in English and said, in part, "O God, you are omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient. You are everything and nothing is beyond you. You are our mother and

father, and we are all your children.... Today are assembled the elected representatives of the people of this nation. They are ready to perform their duties. God, please guide them in their thought and actions so they can achieve the greatest good for all."

A few days later, a leading conservative Christian organization, the Family Research Council (FRC), protested the prayer saying, "Our [country's] founders expected that Christianity--and no other religion--would receive support from the government as long as that support did not violate peoples' consciences and their right to worship. They would have found utterly incredible the idea that all religions, including Paganism, be treated with equal deference." "As for our Hindu priest friend," the online newsletter arrogantly concluded, "the United States is a nation that has historically honored the One True God. Woe be to us on that day when we relegate Him to being merely one among countless other deities in the pantheon of theologies."

There was an instant backlash to this boldly bigoted and unAmerican opinion. Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a religious liberty watchdog group, was one of the many people that struck back in support of the Hindu priest. He said, "It is truly rare, even within the Religious Right, to see a group display simultaneously such a poor understanding of history and a remarkable lack of respect for religious diversity. Usually such profound ignorance like this is commonly found in the 18th, not the 21st century."

Public outcry and behind-the-scenes pressure caused FRC to remove the document from their website the following day and issue a clarification which amounted to a complete retraction. It said, in part, "We affirm the truth of Christianity, but it is not our position that America's Constitution forbids representatives of religions other than Christianity from praying before Congress."