

[Religious Freedom: Satguru Delivers Opening Prayer For US House of Representatives](#)

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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Satguru Delivers Opening Prayer For US House of Representatives

Publisher of HINDUISM TODAY, invited as Guest Chaplain, invokes God's grace for wise leadership and advocates the Hindu ideal of nonviolence

ON JUNE 4, 2013, SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI became the first Hindu monk and only the third Hindu in history to deliver the opening prayer before the US

House of Representatives. The prayer is given each day the House is in session, immediately after it opens for business and before the Pledge of Allegiance. Bodhinatha's one-day service as Guest Chaplain was cosponsored by Rep. Ed Royce (R) of California's 39th district and Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard (D) of Hawaii's 2nd district. Rep. Royce, now in his 11th term, is a conservative Republican from Southern California and chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee; Rep. Gabbard is the first Hindu elected to the US Congress, and her district includes Kauai Aadheenam, home of HINDUISM TODAY.

According to the House Chaplain's office, the prayer has four rules: it can only be 150 words long, it has to be entirely in English and it can mention neither any particular political issue of the day nor the national holiday of another country. Bodhinatha offered: "May today's session of the House of Representatives, to which Americans rightly turn for leadership, be abundantly blessed by the Lord Supreme. Through personal introspection, a collaborative heart and by God's all-pervasive grace, may the members present here, despite differing views and staunchly held convictions, find the wisdom to craft mutually acceptable solutions to our nation's challenges.

"The tragic Boston Marathon bombings, still vivid in all our minds, implore us to advocate the humanity of a nonviolent approach in all of life's dimensions. Hindu scripture declares, without equivocation, that the highest of high ideals is to never knowingly harm anyone. May we here in this chamber, and all the people of our great nation, endeavor to face even our greatest difficulties with an unwavering commitment to seek out and to find nonviolent solutions. Peace, peace, peace to us, and peace to all beings."

Representative Royce then thanked Bodhinatha from the House floor for his "opening prayer and for gracing us with the same spirit that guides the Hindu belief."



HAF's DC Days

The invitation came through the work of the [Hindu American Foundation \(HAF\)](#), a prominent US advocacy group. It coincided with HAF's tenth annual Advocacy Day, during which they met personally with individual members of Congress and hosted a well-attended evening reception. During those events, they conveyed HAF's concerns and recommendations regarding the deplorable treatment of Hindus in Pakistan and Bangladesh and the pending immigration reform bill now before Congress. Each office was provided a copy of HAF's annual Human Rights Report, available at bit.ly/HAF_HRR, which details human rights violations against Hindus in ten countries.

"Our government leaders are hearing from Hindu Americans in a sustained, consistent way for the last decade, and the results are showing," said Suhag Shukla, Esq., HAF's Executive Director and Legal Counsel. "Our commitment to the community is to continue these efforts, expand them and usher in a new generation of Hindu-American leaders making a difference in political engagement."



Day of blessing: Bodhinatha gives the prayer from the House podium; with Rep. Royce and the House Chaplain, Reverend Patrick J. Conroy, S.J.; HAF executive Council, Board and staff with Bodhinatha; Speaker Pro Tempore, Rep. Steve Womack of Arkansas, formally opens the House for business

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First Hindu Prayers Met with Protest

Bodhinatha's appearance as guest chaplain attracted none of the controversy of the first two Hindu prayers, in 2000 and 2007. Those, in fact, attracted such virulent protests from some evangelical Christians as to merit their own entries in Wikipedia: bit.ly/Samuldrala and bit.ly/Rajan_Zed

The first Hindu guest chaplain was Venkatachala-pa-thi Samuldrala of the Siva-Vish-nu Temple of Parma, Ohio, who gave the prayer in the House chambers on September 14, 2000. The Family Research Council denounced his appearance as, "One more indication that our nation is drifting from its Judeo-Christian roots.... Alas, in our day, when "tolerance" and "diversity" have replaced the Ten Commandments as the only remaining absolute dictums, it has become necessary to "celebrate" non-Christian religions—even in the halls of Congress.... Our founders expected that Christianity—and no other religion—would receive support from the government as long as that support did not violate people's consciences and their right to worship. They would have found utterly incredible the idea that all religions, including paganism, be treated with equal deference. Many people today confuse traditional Western religious tolerance with religious pluralism. The former embraces biblical truth while allowing for freedom of conscience, while the latter assumes all religions are equally valid, resulting in moral relativism and ethical chaos.... As for our Hindu priest friend, 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."

Protests against Rajan Zed's appearance as guest chaplain in the US Senate began even before he gave the prayer on July 12, 2007. Among others, the prominent Christian historian David Barton said he wondered "why the US government is seeking the invocation of a non-monotheistic God. Since Hindus worship multiple Gods, the prayer will be completely outside the American paradigm, flying in the face of the American motto 'One Nation Under God'."

As Zed began his prayer on the 12th, Ante Pavkovic of Operation Save America shouted from the Senate gallery, "Lord Jesus, forgive us, Father, for allowing a prayer of the wicked, which is an abomination in your sight. This is an abomination. We shall have no other gods before You. Lord Jesus, have mercy on our nation for allowing this abomination, this idolatry, for violating the First Commandment 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me.' God forgive our nation, in Jesus name, Amen." Pavkovic was immediately arrested, along with his wife and daughter who shouted similar protests in an astounding breach of protocol (not to mention the law) for the traditionally staid Senate chambers.

Operation Save America's director, Rev. Flip Benham, later issued a statement as to why the Pavkavics broke the law rather than protest peacefully. "Our answer is, when one stands up in the face of gross idolatry being allowed in the Senate, in the chamber of the United States Senate, it is incumbent on a Christian to stand up and speak the truth. No matter what, we must obey God rather than men. When you stand up and are arrested, and the Hindu is allowed to go free, this country has gone upside-down."

Bodhinatha's appearance attracted no known protest or controversy, but rather was warmly complimented by the Congressional representatives and their staff indeed all who heard it. Suhag Shukla observed, "The fact that there were no hateful hecklers, protests, or vehement condemnations, as there were during the remarks of the two past Hindu guest chaplains, is indeed encouraging. Was it the result of some level of acceptance and assimilation of Hinduism in America or the overall recognition that representatives of all religions or none have a right to offer legislative prayer or wisdom? One can't be certain, but can certainly take it as a positive sign, whatever the reason."

Bodhinatha himself, when asked, suggested, "Perhaps the two organizations who protested in the past—Family Research Council and Operation Save America—as well as similar conservative Christian organizations, came to the conclusion that

taking a strong stand against non-Christian prayers in Congress was not a position which resonated well with many Americans and was best dropped.”

The video of Bodhinatha's prayer and Rep. Royce's speech can be seen at <http://bit.ly/Cspan-Bodhi>
