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Category : [November 1988](#)

Published by Anonymous on Nov. 02, 1988

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Former Semetic Establishment Interfaith Group Transformed by Hindu Initiative

On September 22nd the Hindu Cultural Society of western New York (HCS) was accepted as a full member of the interfaith coalition BAMM - the Buffalo Area Metropolitan Ministries, Inc. Hindus are now part of a great new trend of urban pluralistic community interfaith councils. There are about twenty or thirty of these new interfaith groups in North America with stable leadership and very large established congregational bases. BAMM is effectively mobilizing the religious sector in western New York toward cross-religious education, tolerance and social justice. As a part of BAMM, Hindu will work with Christians, Muslims and Jews to wield spiritual muscle in problem areas common to all communities: poverty, the drug war, youth values, AIDS, women's rights, etc.

BAMM was formed about 15 years ago in the once arch-conservative Christian (90% Catholic) area of western New York state. Initially a forum of Christian and Jewish denominations, it accepted Islamic representatives in 1981. Late in 1987, BAMM's president, the Rev. Charles White asked Lingayat Pasupatiswami (ordained into sannyas at age 12 by Swami Sivananda,) to assist in a BAMM outreach to small non-Christian groups. On April 19th, 1988, two Hindu petitions for membership came under review by the BAMM Steering Committee: those of the Hindu Cultural Society of Western New York and Pasupatiswami's own organization, Mother Surabhi's Animal Outreach.

Despite initial warm overtures from BAMM leaders, the Hindu petitions were tabled. The June BAMM statement of purpose specifies the organizations which associate together through BAMM represent expressions of Judaic, Christian, Islamic or Unitarian traditions. In order to receive Hindu representation in BAMM, the statement of purpose would have to be modified." Several months of organizational waffling followed. BAMM vice-president Rabbi Marrus proposed to change the statement of purpose which read, "The communities of Jews, Christians, Muslims and Unitarians...In obedience to the one God..." to read, "The religious communities...In recognition of the Divinity to which we all respond..." A local paper

reported that conservative Christian and Muslim factions, accepting the incorrect view that Hinduism is polytheistic, questioned Hinduism's is polytheistic, questioned Hinduism's compatibility with Semetic monotheism. Nothing happened for several month, and it appeared that Hindus were getting "buffaloed" in Buffalo.

One of the BAMB leaders, Father Mazur, a Catholic priest who had been to India, told Hinduism Today that he had been openly active in networking with local Hindus. Father Mazur said he attended some local pujas and kept in close touch with Hindus in the area. He asked the Archdiocese in Washington DC to send Dr. John Borelli (a National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Executive Secretary for Inter-religious Relations) to Buffalo. Dr. Borelli's presentation to BAMB cleared remaining doubts. Rabbi Marrus told Hinduism Today, "A sense developed very quickly that the Hindu community would bring an entirely new perspective into many of our activities. Christian/Jewish/Muslim dialogue has been going on for decades. But the dialogue between western and eastern religion in the U.S. has been a new thing. This was the first recognition that there were more than just individuals. There was in fact the beginning of a definable Hindu community able to share and participate in common communal concerns." On Saturday, September 22nd, BAMB adopted the broader statement of purpose, and the Hindu Cultural Society was brought in as a full member. On the phone from his Archdiocese office in Washington, Dr. Borelli said to Hinduism Today staff, "I think that this was a very big step for a lot of these clergymen and showed great trust in the BAMB leadership. If not for the presence of Father Mazur and his experience in India, it might not have happened."

One shadow of confusion crossed the otherwise positive "BAMB Affair-Lingayat Pasupatiswami's petition for membership of Mother Surabhi's was turned down. The ostensible reason was that BAMB only took in denominational representatives, not representatives of single congregations. Mother Surabhi's has no formal membership and only 35 active devotees. The HCS and BAMB offered to let the swami participate in the interfaith work through the HCS umbrella.

The swami contends that the HCS represents only one facet of the very broad Hindu family of religious traditions, and that his Saivite Hindu ministry is completely independent of HCS structure. Lingayat Pasupatiswami explained to Hinduism Today that he is promoting ahimsa through animal rights work, conducts weekly satsangs and Siva Puja at facilities unconnected with HCS and recently received full faculty status as a chaplain of Hindu campus ministry at a local New York University-a first for a Hindu clergyman. While supporting the HCS petition, he feels that separate membership for orthodox Saivism is valid and important. So far,

BAMM is standing firm but remaining open, saying later development may yet warrant distinct Saivite representation.

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