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Raymond Brady Williams  
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## AN INTRODUCTION TO SWAMINARAYAN HINDUISM

*An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* is a comprehensive study of a modern form of Hinduism that is growing in the place of its birth in the Indian state of Gujarat and among Indian immigrants in East Africa, Britain, and the United States. It is the most prominent form of transnational Hinduism because it creates networks that define and preserve ethnic and religious identity in the modern context of rapid mobility and communication. Founded by Sahajanand Swami or Swaminarayan (1781–1830), a religious reformer in a time of great social and political change in Gujarat, Swaminarayan Hinduism expounds a path of devotion to Swaminarayan as the final, perfect manifestation of god.

Raymond Brady Williams provides a detailed introduction to the history, theology, discipline, and ritual of this important form of Hinduism. Based on and extending, with considerable updating and revision, his *A New Face of Hinduism: The Swaminarayan Religion* (Cambridge, 1984), the book places Swaminarayan in the context of transnational Hinduism and analyzes its current status in India and abroad.

RAYMOND BRADY WILLIAMS is Professor of Religion and Director of the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion at Wabash College, Indiana. He is the author of several books, including *A New Face of Hinduism* (1984) and *Religions of Immigrants from India and Pakistan* (1988). A member of the Society of Biblical Literature and the Association of Disciples for Theological Discussion, he also serves on the board of directors of the American Academy of Religion and is founding editor of the journal *Teaching Theology and Religion*.

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RAYMOND BRADY WILLIAMS

*Wabash College, Indiana*



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## *Preface*

The Shri Swaminarayan Mandir located in Neasden in north London, which is illustrated on the cover of this book, is an impressive statement in stone that Swaminarayan Hinduism has been firmly planted by Indian immigrants in Britain and in other Western countries. The impressive architecture and intricate details that mirror traditional temples in Gujarat reveal an intimate connection with the roots of Swaminarayan Hinduism, which sink deeply into the fertile and variegated soil of Gujarati culture and Hinduism. A Gujarati poet stated, “Wherever a Gujarati resides, there forever is Gujarat.” Others have added, “Wherever a Gujarati resides, soon a Swaminarayan temple appears.” At the beginning of the twenty-first century Swaminarayan Hindus are experiencing steady expansion in India and abroad as part of a successful transnational religion.

On a first visit to Swaminarayan temples in Gujarat in 1976, I stayed in one of eight very modest guest rooms in a small temple in Ahmedabad (now Amdavad). Now that temple has a modern eight-story guesthouse with airconditioned rooms and a fully equipped medical clinic on the first floor. The guesthouse sits in a huge temple compound of multi-storied buildings that serve as the administrative hub for hundreds of temples and centers around the world. I also visited another temple in Ahmedabad where the *sadhus*’ rooms in a nineteenth-century building still had dirt floors. Now the *sadhus* reside in a new modern residence hall. My first visit to the only Swaminarayan temple in New York in 1976 was to the basement of a private house on Bowne Street in Flushing, New York, where images had been set up in a small room. Now a large temple on that property in Flushing oversees 22 Swaminarayan temples and 148 centers in the United States. I first met Swaminarayan Hindus in London in a small abandoned chapel in Islington that had been converted into a temple seating approximately one hundred people. In 1996 Swaminarayan Hindus dedicated the new Swaminarayan temple in



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Neasden which attracts both worshipers and tourists, hosting more than 600,000 visitors each year. Now images from these new temples are available for *darshan* on the Internet, which illustrates the rapidity of change and the power of new technologies.

Whether in modest surroundings or splendid new facilities – in India or abroad in East Africa, Britain, or the United States – Swaminarayan Hindus have been unfailingly kind and helpful to me as a researcher trying to learn about their religion. Indeed, many among the householders and sadhus have become friends. Often during my research I heard an old Gujarati saying, “Three people are to be treated as gods: your parent, your guru, and the guest in your house.” I have enjoyed the hospitality enjoined by the saying and have been enriched by many friendships.

Acharya Tejendraprasad Pande and his son Koshalendraprasad Pande of the Ahmedabad diocese and Sadhu Narayanswarupdas, popularly known as Pramukh Swami, who is the spiritual and administrative leader of the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Sanstha, were gracious in their welcome. Without their permission and assistance in arranging interviews, attendance at festivals, and visits to temples and residences of sadhus, research would not have been possible. In the course of research I interviewed scores of Swaminarayan sadhus and hundreds of householders. I have attended hundreds of Swaminarayan meetings and festivals. It is not possible to name the sadhus and householders who have contributed information and understanding to this work. I offer thanks to all of them by singling out for special thanks Atmaswarupdas Swami, who was one of the first Swaminarayan sadhus I met and who is now *mahant* of the Swaminarayan temple in Neasden, and the family of Dinker G. Ashier of London, who were among the first householders I met and who have remained good friends. I express to many more my gratitude for their hospitality to a non-Hindu who was a stranger in their midst.

My first book on Swaminarayan Hinduism was published by Cambridge University Press in 1984 as *A New Face of Hinduism: The Swaminarayan Religion*. Readers of this book will understand the enormous changes that have taken place in the interim that create the need for a revision of that work. The earlier book left Swaminarayan Hindus just having moved out of an abandoned chapel in north London in Islington and out of a basement in Flushing, New York and embarking on major building projects in India. This revision brings the story up to date and portrays Swaminarayan Hindus as the most important recent

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religious export of India and as a significant part of the new transnational movement of religions. It will be fascinating to see what the shape and extent of Swaminarayan Hinduism will be when and if a new revision is called for in the future.

I continued to conduct research and to write about Swaminarayan Hinduism over the past two decades since the publication of the first book. (See the list of references for a list of publications during that period.) More specific research for writing this revision was conducted in India, Britain, and the United States in the winter and spring of 1999. I am grateful to Wabash College for its generous support of this research project.

Many Indian words have become assimilated into English; others remain quite foreign. The result is that any decision about the use of italics and diacritical marks in the text seems arbitrary. The practice in this work is to italicize the first appearance of words from Indian languages about which some question may arise. Each such word then appears in the glossary with diacritical marks and a brief definition or description. Some variations in spelling in publications of the group result from the use of both Gujarati and Sanskrit forms of words. I have used the forms most common in the group.

I have dedicated previous books to several groups: family, academic department, and church. As one gets older, some things become more simple and clear. Hence, this book is dedicated simply to Lois.