

# Hinduism - we are all divine

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To the typical Western way of thinking, Hinduism and other Asian views of life appear strange. That's because we who live in the Western world have a religious and cultural heritage much different from that of people of the East.

Western thought began in ancient Greece where men like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle saw that the universe had a plan and purpose. To these early Greek ideas, Judaism and Christianity added the teachings of the Bible, which explained that this plan and purpose reflected the nature of a rational and energetic God who had created the universe. The Bible taught that the infinite God is personal, that He loves people and, because He is their Creator, He has the power to make moral demands upon them. In addition, the Bible taught the dignity and worth of each person, created "in the image of God," with the power of reason, the ability to make choices and the capacity to relate to God (see Gen. 1:26,27). The Bible also taught that time and history are progressing to a definitive judgment day.

Things developed much differently in the East. Typically, Eastern religions emphasize that everything in the world is temporary, changing, ephemeral and unreal and that our perceptions of the world are most often misleading and illusory. The physical universe is not seen as a rational, ordered universe revealing God's glory (see Ps. 19:1-4), but as a hindrance to experiencing "Ultimate Reality."

In the East, Ultimate Reality is thought of as attainable within each individual by realizing intuitively that the "self" is Divine, or at least part of the Divine. God is, for the most part, seen as an impersonal, unifying force who takes no personal interest in individuals. The idea of a Creator having authority over the universe and making universal moral demands is, by and large, rejected.

## Origins and background of Hinduism

The word "Hinduism" comes from the Indus River, which flows through what is now Pakistan. In the third millennium B.C., the great civilization of Mohenjodaro flourished there, populated by the darkskinned Dravidians. From what archaeologists have been able to discover, the Dravidians had a polytheistic fertility

religion that centered upon worship of the forces of nature and use of rituals, merging human sexuality with the hope for abundant crops.

About 2000 B.C., the light-skinned and warlike Aryans came over the Caucasus Mountains and conquered the people of the Indus Valley. The Aryans also had a polytheistic religion, and some of the most popular Dravidian gods received new Aryan names but retained their old functions. The Aryans wrote down their hymns, prayers, mythic stories and chants into the Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads, composed between 2000 and 700 B.C., and known as the Vedic literature. These writings are considered by Hindus to be supernaturally inspired and are as sacred to them as the Bible is to Christians.

Dravidian polytheistic fertility religion and the early Aryan Vedic polytheistic religion laid the foundations of what later became Hinduism. While the earliest Vedas were blatantly polytheistic and devoted to rituals and sacrifice, the later Vedas showed a movement toward pantheism (from the word "pan," meaning "everything," and "theos," meaning "God"). According to pantheism, God did not create the world; God is the world, along with everything in it.

Although the earlier Hindu scriptures had mentioned many gods, the highest goal, according to the later Vedic literature, was union with Brahma, the impersonal absolute. The priests of Brahma became known as the Brahmins, who performed the ritual duties for the community, which were demanded in the early Vedic writings to appease the many gods. The Brahmins also maintained a monopoly on the higher truths of pantheistic Brahmanism. Brahmins grew more and more powerful until they became the highest social class.

Around 500 B.C., still more writings were added to the Hindu scriptures. Their purpose was to establish Varna, a rigid caste system, or social hierarchy. One hymn tells how four castes of people came from the head, arms, thighs and feet of the creator god, Brahma. The four castes were the Brahmins (priests); the Kshatriyas (warriors and nobles); Vaisyas (merchants and artisans); and Shudras (slaves). Each caste was then subdivided into hundreds of subcastes, arranged in order of rank. Only Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas were allowed to take full advantage of all that the Hindu religion has to offer, but the Shudras were not

allowed to hear the Vedas or to use them to try to find salvation.

Even lower on the social totem pole were the Untouchables who, until the twentieth century, were considered so low they were outside the caste system and, most of the time, were treated as subhuman. In the past, Untouchables always had the dirtiest and filthiest jobs, drank polluted water, ate carrion meat, wore clothing of disgrace and watched their children die of malnutrition. They were denied property, education and dignity.

When India became a nation in 1947, the government officially outlawed discrimination against Untouchables. The greatest force for changing these laws and customs, which kept Untouchables in virtual slavery, has been the influence of Christian missionaries, who have played a major role in challenging the social-economic-religious power blocs in India. Still, the social reality in many Indian villages is that change comes slowly and grudgingly.

## Two core beliefs of Hinduism

Hinduism is not really one religion, but many religions that interact and blend with one another. There is no known founder of Hinduism, no creedal statements of faith to sign and no agreed-upon authority. In fact, one can be a good Hindu and believe in one god, many gods or no god at all! This is because, for Hindus, contradictory ideas are not a problem. All reality, contradictory or not, is seen as "one." There are, however, two foundational assumptions that almost all Hindus believe without question: reincarnation and karma.

Reincarnation is the belief that the atman, a person's uncreated and eternal soul, must repeatedly be recycled into the world in different bodies. In some forms of Hinduism, souls may be reincarnated as animals, plants or even inanimate objects. Reincarnation is the process that takes the Hindu through the great wheel of samsara, the thousands or millions of lives (all full of suffering) that each atman must endure before reaching moksha: liberation from suffering and union with the infinite.

Karma ("action") has to do with the law of cause and effect. For the Hindu, karma means merit or demerit, which attaches to one's atman (soul) according to how one lives one's life. Karma from past lives affects a person's present life, and karma from this life will determine a person's station in the next life.

The Bible flatly contradicts Hindu ideas of reincarnation and karma. Hinduism teaches that the atman (soul) is uncreated and eternal. The Bible teaches that each person is created by God, will die once and then be resurrected once at the judgment (see John 5:17-30; 1 Cor. 15; Heb. 9:27). Hinduism teaches that the atman is perfect, free and unlimited, and no matter how many lives it takes, eventually each and

every atman will realize its divine nature. The Bible teaches that each person has one life to live, and after this comes the judgment (see Heb. 9:27).

## Paths to Moksha

For Hindus, the great spiritual challenge is that the soul, or atman, is separated from Brahma (Ultimate Reality) and trapped in samsara, the seemingly endless process of being reincarnated over and over. Moksha, which is liberation from samsara and reunion with Brahma, is the goal. In Hinduism, there are basically three paths to moksha: the path of works (dharma), the path of knowledge (inana) and the path of passionate devotion (bhakti).

When following dharma, the path of works, a person has a set of specific social and religious obligations that must be fulfilled. He must follow his caste occupation, marry within his caste, eat or not eat certain foods and, above all, produce and raise a son who can make a sacrifice to his ancestors as well as perform other sacrificial and ritual acts. By fulfilling these obligations, the person using the path of works may hope to attain a better reincarnation and perhaps, after thousands or tens of thousands of reincarnations, achieve moksha.

A more difficult way to achieve moksha is the path of knowledge (inana), which includes self-renunciation and meditation on the supreme pantheistic reality of Hinduism. This very aesthetic path is open to men only in the highest castes, and it is described in the Upanishads, a series of philosophical treatises composed beginning around 600 B.C. The Upanishad texts teach that the world as we experience it is mere maya (illusion) and that Brahma is the only thing that really exists and has meaning.

The path of knowledge most often includes the practice of yoga (yoking, or union). Yoga is the attempt to control one's consciousness through bodily posture, breath control and concentration, to the extent that one comes to understand experientially that one's true self, one's undying soul (atman), is identical with Brahma. This leads to the famous Hindu saying, "Aham asmi Brahma" ("I am Brahma").

The path of passionate devotion to a god (bhakti) is the most popular way to achieve moksha. This path is described in earliest form in the epic poems of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, composed somewhere between 300 B.C. and A.D. 300. Bhakti is also found in the Puranas, folktales and erotic stories composed between the fourth and sixteenth centuries A.D.

According to the way of bhakti, a devotee may choose any of the 330 million gods, goddesses or demigods in the Hindu pantheon and passionately worship that particular god. In actual practice, almost all Hindus following the way of bhakti worship Vishnu or Shiva.

Most popular is the god Vishnu, who has many names and has appeared as avatars (saviors - the incarnation of deity) in the form of a giant turtle, as Gautama Buddha and as Rama and Krishna, the two important heroes of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Vishnu also has many sexual consorts (wives), as does Shiva, who is worshiped by other millions of Hindus. Shiva can be linked to the ancient pre-Aryan fertility god of the Dravidians. Rituals performed by Shiva worshipers are not unlike the worship of the Canaanites, whom God commanded the Israelites to destroy (see the book of Joshua).

The way of bhakti appeals to the lower classes (the vast majority of the inhabitants of India) and offers a much easier path for their souls to progress to higher forms of birth through reincarnation - and eventually to reach moksha. Through bhakti the worshiper bypasses going through as many rebirths and lives as the other paths demand. There are no torturous yoga exercises to perform, nor is there a need to be part of the intelligentsia or a special caste.

### **Hindu "evangelization" of the west**

Hindu ideas began to influence Western thought in the mid-nineteenth century when Ralph Waldo Emerson, a leading American exponent of transcendentalism, steeped himself in Hindu writings. His doctrine of the "Oversoul" was an expression of pantheism, and his concept of self-reliance is remarkably similar to the Hindu understanding of atman as Brahma. Henry David Thoreau, a contemporary of Emerson and fellow transcendentalist, was inspired by the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita when he wrote Walden and some of his other books.

The first significant breakthrough, however, came in 1893 at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Illinois. At that meeting, Swami Vivekananda made a sizable impression on the cream of American intellectual society. In the 1930s the Ramakrishna Order of India sent another young monk, Swami Prabhavananda, to establish the Vedanta Society of Southern California.

The followers of the modern Vedanta movement believe that the most recent incarnation of Vishnu is that of Sri Ramakrishna (after whom the Ramakrishna Order was named). Ramakrishna lived in Bengal toward the end of the nineteenth century. His followers say that he practiced all the spiritual disciplines of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam and that he attained a vision of God in each one. Ramakrishna would often say, "Many faiths are but different paths leading to the one reality, God."

Vedanta, which played a major role in the New Age movement, purports to be friendly toward all religions. Aldous Huxley, author of Brave New World and one of Vedanta's ardent followers, said, "It is perfectly possible for people to remain good Christians, Hindus, Buddhists or Muslims and yet to be united in full

agreement on the basic doctrines of the Perennial Philosophy."

In the 1960s, the Beatles went to India and were taught transcendental meditation (TM) by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. They brought TM back to the United States and other nations, where it became extremely popular. Since then Hinduism in various forms has entered the mainstream culture of the United States to such an extent that certain ancient Vedantic ideas are unquestioned by millions of Americans. One basic example is the Vedantic motto: All approaches to God are true and valid.

Teachers of Vedanta, such as Swami Prabhavananda, say that a Hindu "would find it easy to accept Christ as a divine incarnation and to worship Him unreservedly, exactly as he worships Krishna or another avatar (savior) of his choice. But he cannot accept Christ as the only son of God."

The great Indian leader Mohandas K. Gandhi made a similar statement: "It was more than I could believe that Jesus was the only incarnate son of God. And that only he who believed in him would have everlasting life." Gandhi also said that he could not believe there was any "mysterious or miraculous virtue" in Christ's death on the cross.

Gandhi, like other Hindus, could not accept the Christian answer to the problem of sin, yet he felt a deep hunger for real salvation from sin. He wrote, "For it is an unbroken torture to me that I am still so far from Him, who, as I fully know, governs every breath of my life, and whose offspring I am."

### **Hinduism versus Jesus Christ**

Along with their rejection of God as sovereign Creator of the world, Hindus also part company with Christianity on the critical issue of Jesus Christ as God's incarnate Son. Hindu worshipers of Vishnu, for example, believe that God has become incarnate many times in the past. The Bible teaches that God became incarnate only once in human history (see John 1:14). Jesus came not to teach humanity various "ways" to salvation, but to be "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6) and "to take away the sins of many" (Heb. 9:28).

The resurrection of Christ demonstrates His absolute uniqueness as God the Son, His victory over death and His divine approval from God the Father. It also refutes the Hindu teaching of continuous reincarnation and their belief that Christ is just another teacher or avatar (super-savior).

### **Why the hindu's god is too small**

Actually, Hinduism is more a philosophy than a theology (a study of God). The Hindus try to make a tremendous case for the bigness of their impersonal

god Brahma — the "that" behind and beyond reality. But where does the Hindu seek Brahma? Within himself. For the Hindu, each person is "god" (or at least part of "god"). The Hindu's god is too small. The biblical record (see 1 John 5:11,12) states that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. If we have the Son, we have eternal life (not a series of mythological, absolutely unproven reincarnations). As an Indian folksong puts it:

"How many births are passed, I cannot tell.  
How many yet to come, no man can say:  
But this alone I know, and know full well,  
that pain and grief embitter all the way."

Christians, however, can rest in "the blessed hope - the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13).

### Summing up major differences between Hindus and Christians

- **Regarding God and Jesus Christ:** Hindus do not believe in a personal, loving God, but in

Brahma, a formless, abstract, eternal being without attributes, who was the beginning of all things. They believe that Jesus is not God but just one of many incarnations, or avatars, of Vishnu. Christians believe that God is an eternal, personal, spiritual Being in three persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit (see Matt. 3:13-17; 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14). Jesus Christ is God as well as sinless man and He died for our redemption (see John 1:13,14; 1 Pet. 2:24).

- **Regarding sin and salvation:** Hindus call sin "utter illusion" because they believe all material reality is illusory. They seek deliverance from samsara, the endless cycle of death and rebirth, through union with Brahma, which is achieved through devotion, meditation, good works and self-control. Christians believe that sin is prideful rebellion that leads to eternal separation from God after living only one life, not many (see Rom. 3:23; Heb. 9:27) and that salvation is gained only through believing in the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (see Rom. 3:24; 1 Cor. 15:3).

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