

Missionary Encounters with Other Faiths

Engaging the Heart of Hinduism

Introduction and History

Hinduism is a word created by Westerners to encompass the dominant religious and social system of India. It was a term to describe the people living near the Indus River.

- Traditionally, those we call Hindus refer to their religion as the *dharma*, which means 'the way' or 'the religion.'
- There are approximately 900 million Hindus in the world.
- Hinduism has no founder nor does it have a central authority like a pope or ayatollah. There is no single scripture and no defining creed.
- It is one of the oldest continuing religions reaching back to 3000 BC. Indus people mixed with Aryans who migrated from the west.
- Although most Hindus agree on certain concepts, Hinduism has no mandatory set of beliefs.

Historical Development

Way of Works (Vedic): The first major development in Hinduism occurred around 1500 BC.

- There was an increase in the rules and regulations propagated by the Brahmins (priests).
- The caste system developed
- Reincarnation became integral
- Reaction against this system of works led to Buddhism, Jainism, and even changes in Hinduism.

Way of Knowledge (Vedantic): 6th century BC saw a move away from works toward an internal faith.

- The point was to find god deep within oneself.
- The two ways continued to exist and influencing each other.

Way of Devotion (Bhakti): 8th century AD added another element to Hinduism

- Each devotee focuses on one particular god or goddess
- This deity provides the needs for the person (this-worldly needs or salvation)

Today these three ways blend together to give us modern Hinduism.

What *most* agree on:

Transmigration of the Soul: Life is hard and full of suffering and, what's worse, when you're done with one life of suffering, you're going to have another one and another one and so on.

Karma: What you come back as is determined by what you did in your previous lives. It does not necessarily have to be a human life, either; you could come back as a bird or a worm or an insect. Your actions in one life will have automatic repercussions in your following lives. It is also virtually impossible to escape that cycle, because even your best deeds may have unintended negative consequences.

The goal is to find a way out of the seemingly never-ending cycle of reincarnations and break the bondage of karma.

What *many* agree on:

Vedic emphasis on Ritual obligations: it is important to maintain fundamental rules of life.

Vedantic emphasis: One of the most important problems of all human beings is that they have forgotten that they are living in an unreal world. There is only one true reality, which is Brahman, the spiritual being that is ultimately beyond our understanding or descriptive ability.

Treating our world of experience (maya) as though it were real will keep us in the illusion and in the cycle of reincarnations.

If we come to a realization that there is a Self (atman), that is identical with Brahman, we are on our way to escaping from bondage.

Bhakti emphasis: Committing oneself in a special way to one particular god or goddess and relying on that deity to provide for all their needs. The goal is to do all you can to honor and worship the god in the hopes that this deity will reciprocate with blessings.

Gods

There are 300 million gods in Hinduism, but not all gods are considered of equal importance. The three main gods are: Brahma (the creator of the universe), Vishnu (the preserver), and Shiva (the destroyer of the world whenever it has become so corrupt that it needs to be replaced with a new one).

Each of these gods has a female counterpart (Shakti), who brings out his power.

Brahma = Sarasvati (goddess of learning)

Vishnu = Lakshmi (goddess of fortune)

Shiva (has variable)= Parvati (his devoted wife), Durga (goddess of death), and Kali (the frightening destroyer of evil)

Vishnu incarnates himself in the world in order to restore order. His most prominent past incarnations (avatars) include Krishna and Rama.

While there is only one eternal being, there are millions of gods. People, though, need a god they can feel close to. Each one of these gods or goddesses is only one face of the supreme Brahman.

Brahman

- The absolute and ultimate reality that exists beyond the appearance of our everyday lives
- Has no form and is everywhere: in people, plants, and animals
- Is a universal being but is not a person; rather it is the source of all existence
- The Brahman that exists in each human being is called atman, the eternal spirit that is the same in each living thing and the life force of the universe.

Caste system

Within this system, Hindus support each other by performing the duties of their caste. If one does not do his or her duty (dharma) perfectly, it harms all of society and the entire universe suffers. How well or poorly one performs one's duties has direct bearing on one's karma.

Brahmins	Priests
Kshatriyas	Warriors, Rulers
Vaishyas	Merchants, Landowners
Shudras	Workers

Dalits (Untouchables)-outcastes, who make up 15 percent of India's population have been excluded from society and religion by the traditional structures.

Your cast dictates your level of education, your job, and your choice of spouse (you cannot marry above your caste).

Other Features

Yoga: Physical postures and breathing exercises; goal is liberation of the spirit from the body and unity with Brahman.

Statues or Idols must be washed and clothed regularly and given proper worship.

Home practices are extremely important in Hinduism. A traditional Hindu house contains deities that must receive offerings every day.

Sacred Cows: Cows must never be killed or eaten. They roam the countryside freely. This is because all life is sacred.

A **guru** is a religious teacher or guide. A guru can show you the way, but you must follow it. A **swami** is a title of respect like 'sir.'

Engaging the Heart of Hinduism

1. An answer to inequality

The caste system is a difficult concept to defend, yet it does provide an answer to the inequality of our starting points. We are born in a particular caste or a particular lot because of what we did in a past life. It is not the whim of a god or the gods, but our own deeds that brought us into a world of privilege or poverty.

While there is an appeal to this rationality, it makes the assumption that poverty or riches, higher or lower caste is a “better” life. We believe that there is dignity and value in life at whatever “station” you are born in and being born of “privilege” is not an advantage to living a blessed and flourishing life.

2. Life is an Illusion

This prominent theme in Vedantic Hinduism speaks a lot of truth about the real world. There is a lot about our “real world” that we fabricate and a lot of “reality” that we are dull to.

Of course, we believe that this ultimate reality is not hidden or only found through an internal search, but can only be found through revelation. The Holy Spirit must change us from those who suppress the truth to those who acknowledge and live in the truth

3. Outlook on Life

Respect for life: A Hindu’s emphasize a respect for all life. This leads many to become vegetarian and pacifistic. Yet, it seems contradictory to have such a low view of human equality and self-worth in the caste system. Their concept of losing one’s identity and being as the goal of life also reduces the dignity and value of the individual.

Pessimism: Ultimately, a Hindu’s view of life is pretty bleak. Remaining in the cycles of life is bad and must be overcome. Gods must be manipulated in order to escape life. For a cultural religion with such beauty this seems like an unfortunate perspective. Christians don’t view life as something to escape from, but something that needs redemption. Our ultimate hope is that the wonderful shadows of this world will be redeemed and brought to their intended glory.

4. Justice: See observations under Buddhist karma.