

Hinduism

By C. Fred Smith

Founders: No one founded Hinduism; instead it is a collection of closely associated religions and philosophies on the subcontinent of India.

Date: Hinduism arose after 1500 BC as settlers came into the Indus River Valley adopting local gods and bringing new teachings with them.

Origin of the term: “Hindu” is a word that arose from an originally Persian term, for the valley of the River Sindhu, (now called the Indus River). Later the term was used by Muslims to refer to the religious beliefs of India and was adopted by the British.¹

Basic character: Hinduism is made up of a multiplicity of theologies, philosophies, gods and sects. This makes Hinduism difficult to characterize. The word Hinduism itself functions as a catchall word for a whole collection of traditional Indian beliefs and practices. Still, there are a few common characteristics. Basically, Hindu religious practices all seek to overcome the law of Karma, which causes death and rebirth, or reincarnation,² and to experience one’s unity with Brahman—the “stuff” of which all of reality is made. All rituals, practices and teachings are designed to lead ultimately to overcoming this law of Karma.

Organizational Structure: Within Hinduism there is no central authority; each temple is self-supportive. In Tamil Nadu, a state in southern India, a government department pays for renovation and upkeep of temples and administers a charitable fund for benevolence causes. In the United States, Hindu temples are often supported by subscriptions and fees from members and are run by a board of trustees.³

HISTORY

Hinduism owes its beginnings to the civilization developed by the Aryans in the Indus River Valley around 1500 BC. Over the next 2000 years, this civilization absorbed the beliefs of the local peoples, who made up several different cultural groups⁴ and reworked them into a much more extensive philosophy, without completely discarding the earlier system of gods and legends.⁵ During this period, Hinduism’s basic foundations were laid, including the rise of an extensive system of home and temple rituals, and the most ancient written texts, the *Vedas*. “Veda,” a Sanskrit word for knowledge;⁶ originally referred to teachings handed down orally, but according to Hindu tradition, were written down by a team led by a guru named Vyasa at some time in the past.⁷

Over many centuries Hinduism continued to develop; but always retained elements of its past development. During the Epic Period, temple rituals became increasingly important while priests became more powerful members of society. During this time the best-known Hindu scripture was written, the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is part of a larger epic poem, the *Mahabharata*. Other sacred texts from this period include *The Upanishads*⁸ and *The Ramayana* a multi-volume epic poem.⁹

It was during the Epic Period that the caste system developed in India,¹⁰ though its roots are much older. It most likely arose out of the need for a subsistence society to impose a division of labor to ensure the society’s survival.¹¹ The system ensures that there are people to do the less fulfilling physical labor jobs as well as sufficient military men to protect the society. Clearly, not everyone can be of the highest castes if the mundane work of maintaining a community is to be done.

Early on the castes were considered equal in importance, and one was assigned to a caste based on skills and talents. Later, following the Epic Period, this changed and the system

became hereditary, and thus a hindrance to upward mobility.¹² There are four main castes, although the system itself is part of a much larger chain of being, ranked from highest and more pure, down to the lowest and least pure.¹³ The four main castes are the Brahmin, or priestly caste, which includes teachers and scholars, the Warrior caste, who protect society, the Vaishya or merchant caste, which also includes farmers, and the Shudras, who do manual labor but also may be artists.¹⁴ It is the Shudras and the outcastes, or untouchables who belong to no caste, who traditionally have suffered the most, being denied education and opportunity.¹⁵

For over 1500 years now, India has been subject to foreign immigration and invasion, most recently from western colonial powers, mainly Great Britain. This has affected the caste system in many ways. Under the British, members of the Brahmin caste found new educational opportunities and went into medicine and law, and even military service.¹⁶ Other higher caste members of society benefited from increased educational opportunities. After India became independent, government efforts to end the caste system have been somewhat successful, although certain aspects of it linger.

HINDU TEACHINGS

Pantheism: Brahman is all. Basic to the Hindu worldview is Pantheism, the idea that everything is God. God is not merely *in* trees and rocks, oceans and mountains, but these things are themselves manifestations of God. This is not exclusive to Hinduism, but it adds an important and unique dimension. Hindus believe that the ultimate reality behind the Hindu gods, and behind everything else is an impersonal essence called Brahman. Brahman is the “single reality underlying the diversity of appearances.”¹⁷ The idea that there are separate things, such as chairs, tables, rocks, trees, people, animals, etc. is merely an illusion. This illusion is called in Sanskrit, *maya*.¹⁸ (It may well be part of the deep background of our word magic, and magi.). “Brahman projects the universe through the power of Its (sic) maya” and is yet entangled within its own projection.¹⁹ The individual self is one with Brahman also, but with an important difference: In Hindu belief, you are Brahman. That is, your mind, the immaterial part of you is identical to Brahman; it is not just a manifestation of Brahman. You are trapped in the illusion that you are a separate self with a separate identity.

Moksha. The goal, in Hindu belief is *moksha*, to overcome the illusion that one is separate from Brahman. We are ignorant of our true Brahman nature and must overcome this ignorance. It is not enough just to know the meaning of the sentence, “you are one with Brahman”—this is experiential knowledge. One must experience this one-ness. To achieve *moksha* one must follow at least one of three paths: The first is the way of devotion.²⁰ Devotion involves making offerings and performing rituals in honor of one or more of the various gods. This is the most popular path. The other two paths are the path of attaining wisdom and the path of selfless service or good works.²¹ Many Hindus follow all three paths to some extent.

Karma. The idea that actions done in this life have future consequences, and that one’s situation today is a result of actions done in previous lives is of “central importance” in Hinduism.²² This is called the law of Karma. Karma extends beyond the present life, due to Hindu belief in re-incarnation. It regulates the endless cycle of death and rebirth—re-incarnation, or the transmigration²³ of the soul. To achieve Moksha, one works off all the effects of Karma. One comes to experience oneness with Brahman and any need for further activity, and further generation of Karma, ceases. Since most Hindus realize that achieving experiential one-ness with Brahman is rare, the practical goal of much of Hinduism is to improve one’s situation in the next life by properly managing Karma.

Hindu Pantheon. It is said that there are over 300 million gods in Hinduism. This is actually a reflection of the fact that many local gods are worshipped in regions and various villages across India and it is generally understood that these are all the same deities under different local names.

There are some major deities that are recognized generally throughout Hinduism. Among these is a group of three major deities, sometimes mistakenly referred to as the “Hindu Trinity.” This is an error because they are nothing like the Christian Trinity, being three different beings with sometimes contradictory functions. Their names are Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Brahma²⁴ is the creator, Vishnu the sustainer and Shiva is the destroyer. Each of these has a female

consort. Brahma's consort is Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge, Vishnu's is Lakshmi, the goddess of love and Shiva's is Kali, the goddess of power, especially destroying power, but also of transformation.²⁵ If you visit a Hindu temple you may see statues of at least one of these three with his consort. Kali is especially recognizable since she has multiple arms and her tongue sticks out.

Other main deities include Ganesha, the god with an elephant head, Hanuman, the ape god who is a major figure in the *Ramayana*, another epic poem,²⁶ and Swaminarian, a man who, about a century ago, believed he was a god and convinced a large number of followers. The largest Hindu temple in the U.S. is in Georgia, and is dedicated to Swaminarian.²⁷

HINDU PRACTICES

The path of ritual devotion is the oldest and most popular path to Moksha. This ritual most often goes under the name of Puja—and there is puja practiced in the home and puja in the temple.

Puja at home. Many Hindus maintain an altar with an image of one or another of the gods (often Ganesha, the elephant-headed god) in their home or place of business. Small offerings of food are placed on this altar morning and evening. The image of the god will be regularly washed, clothed, carefully tended and even put to bed at night. The father of the household has primary responsibility for the Puja ritual, although his wife may step in if need be.²⁸

Puja in the temple. Hindu temples, especially in the U.S. will have niches or sections devoted to various gods though the temple itself may be mostly dedicated to one major god. At the Ekta Mandir of the Dallas/Fort Worth Hindu Temple society, various pujas, rituals and classes are held daily.²⁹ For a fee, a Hindu priest will conduct a special ritual or other service at one's home, or business, or in the temple itself.³⁰

Festivals. There are numerous Hindu festivals, usually in honor of the “descent day” or birthday of one of the gods. Divali, the “Festival of Lights,” is probably the best-known Hindu festival. Divali is a five day celebration that is observed by Hindus everywhere.³¹ Hindu Temples and associations in the U.S. often sponsor Divali celebrations as well as other festivals.³² Hindu festivals are generally open to the public as all are welcomed to discover more about Hindu beliefs and culture.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Brahman is all. While Hinduism holds the position that the only reality is Brahman, thus all is an illusion; the Bible teaches that one can live in and enjoy the creation knowing it is real. The Bible states that “God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1) and that “The heavens reveal the glory of God and the earth shows his handiwork” (Psalms 19:1). Therefore, Christians rejoice in the creation, seeing the greatness of God in the beauty of trees, mountains, waterfalls, etc. Hindus, on the other hand, if they are consistent with their worldview, must see the creation as an illusion. It is less than fully real. It is difficult to see how one really enjoys the goodness of creation.³³

Moksha. According to Hinduism there are three paths to overcome moksha so one can become one with Brahman but offers no assurance. The Bible teaches that man's problem is not of intellect or realization but of a moral problem called sin. Romans 5:12 explains that all have sinned and the penalty for sin is death. The remedy to man's sin problem does not come from man's reasoning ability, instead through Christ's work on the cross (Romans 5:8). Christianity offers a dynamic relationship with God that is achieved only by receiving forgiveness of sin by faith in God (Romans 10:9-10). The Bible teaches in 1 John 5:13 that one can be confident in their standing with God once they have placed their faith on Christ.

Karma. Hinduism places a burden on its followers to do good works so that they may reach moksha; but the law of Karma often prevents the adherent to achieving Brahman. The adherents to Hinduism have little to no hope to ever break the law of Karma and achieving Brahman. Christianity offers a radically different view in the biblical doctrine of justification and substitutionary atonement (Galatians 2:16; 2 Corinthians 5:21). The only way a Hindu can overcome the law of Karma is through good works. However, the Bible teaches that while good works are a way of showing the love of God to others; the best man can offer is compared to

filthy rags in God's eyes (Isaiah 64:6). A Christian's identity is not in their good works, nor do they trust in their works to obtain salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Pantheism/Hindu Pantheon/Trinity. Hinduism offers a pantheistic worldview that holds that God is an impersonal force (Brahman) that is everything; whereas Christianity explains that there is only one God who is not a force but a personal God (Isaiah 43:10). While Hinduism teaches that a person is and has God inside them but for them to realize their inner deity they must overcome moksha. The Bible states that with man there is "none righteous" (Romans 3:10) and all mankind has "sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Furthermore, while there are multiple deities within Hinduism Jesus taught, "you shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve" (Luke 4:8). The "Hindu Trinity" shows a skewed picture in comparison to the Trinity described in the Bible. While the Trinity doctrine cannot be fully comprehended, the Trinity is revealed throughout the Bible. The Trinity is best understood as describing God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit was coeternal, coequal and one in essence, nature, power, action and will.

Christians wishing to explain the good news of Christ to their Hindu friends³⁴ can share the forgiveness available by grace through faith in Jesus as the answer to karma and moksha.

Notes

¹ Jayaram V. "The Origin and Definition of the Name Hindu" Hinduwebsite.com, http://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism/h_meaning.asp (accessed April 30, 2015).

² A separate 4-page Profile has been published related to this subject: Eric Pement, "Reincarnation," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2015). A complete collection of Profiles (over 450 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook. This Profile is available at: <http://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/reincarnationprofile.pdf>.

³ For example the Hindu Temple in Irving TX requires a membership fee of 100 dollars per year, plus fees for various types of services offered by the priests. www.dfwhindutemple.org (accessed March 17, 2015). The Hindu Temple near Davenport Iowa has a board of directors and a Constitution and by-laws. <http://www.iowatemple.org/Bylaws.pdf> (accessed March 17, 2015).

⁴ Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 23-30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶ Bhaskarananda, Swami, *The Essentials of Hinduism*, 2d ed. (Seattle WA: Viveka Press, 2002), 11.

⁷ "Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa" Krishna's Mercy, <http://www.krishnasmercy.org/dotnetnuke/Worship/KrishnaDwaipayanaVyasa/tabid/66/Default.aspx> (accessed May 14, 2015).

⁸ Eaknath Easwaran, *The Bhagavad Gita* 2d ed. (Nigiri Press 2007), and Easwaran, *The Upanishads* (Nilgiri Press, 2007).

⁹ "Ancient Indian History: The Epic Age" narasimhan.com, http://narasimhan.com/SK/Culture/culture_history/culture_hist_epic_age.htm (accessed May 15, 2015).

¹⁰ Kallie Szczepanski. "History of India's Caste System" asianhistory.com, <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/india/p/indiancastesystem.htm>, (accessed May 15, 2015).

¹¹ The "Brihadaranyaka Upanishad" describes all four castes as rising out of Brahman. Each caste was "projected" in order to allow Brahman to prosper. The god of procreation and protection, Prajapati (a reflection of Brahman, ultimately), became the members of each of the four castes. Thus, the caste system came to be seen as a reflection of the nature of reality itself. *The Principle Upanishads* edited and translated by Swami Nikhilananda, "Brihadaranyaka Upanishad" (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 192-93.

¹² Bhaskarananda, 25.

¹³ Flood, 58-59.

¹⁴ Flood, 59.

¹⁵ Bhaskarananda, 27, and Flood, 61.

¹⁶ Bhaskarananda, 26.

¹⁷ Flood, 85.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁹ "Svetasvatara Upanishad" (IV. 9) in *The Principle Upanishads* edited and translated by Swami Nikhilananda, "Brihadaranyaka Upanishad" (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 135.

²⁰ *Bhagavad Gita* 9:22-28.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 3:3.

²² Flood, 85-86.

²³ Transmigration is an earlier term for reincarnation. The idea is that the soul can migrate from one body to another. For more information see "Reincarnation" in the Profile Notebook; available at: <http://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/reincarnationprofile.pdf>.

²⁴ "Book IV: Kishkindha Kanda – The Empire of Holy Monkeys" valmikiramayan.net, http://www.valmikiramayan.net/utf8/kish/sarga2/kishkindha_2_frame.htm (accessed May 16, 2015).

²⁵ "The Hindu Trinity" hindunet.org, <http://www.hindunet.org/god/trinity/> (accessed May 16, 2015).

²⁶ "Book IV: Kishkindha Kanda – The Empire of Holy Monkeys" valmikiramayan.net, http://www.valmikiramayan.net/utf8/kish/sarga2/kishkindha_2_frame.htm (accessed May 16, 2015).

²⁷ BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, <http://www.baps.org/Global-Network/North-America/Atlanta.aspx> (accessed May 16, 2015).

²⁸ Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* 2d ed. (Downer's Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 302.

²⁹ "Temple Scheduled Puja & Services," D/FW Hindu Temple Society, <http://dfwhindutemple.org/services/temple-services/>, (accessed April 24, 2015).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, and <http://dfwhindutemple.org/services/priest-services/>, (accessed April 24, 2015).

³¹ Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* 2d ed. (Downer's Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 305.

³² "Hindu Festivals" AHA Shiva Vishnu Temple <http://ahasvtemple.org/upcoming-events/>, (accessed April 24, 2015).

³³ John Newport, *Life's Ultimate Questions* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1998), 387.

³⁴ For a strategy and tips to sharing the gospel with Hindus visit: <http://www.watchman.org/articles/other-religious-topics/witnessing-tips-and-strategy-for-sharing-the-gospel-with-hindus/>.



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