

Hinduism

Hinduism is thought to have originated among the animistic tribes of the Indus Valley sometime before 1500BC and to have evolved into its present form over a long period. It has about 762 million adherents which makes it the third largest religion in the world. Most Hindus are concentrated in India, Nepal and parts of Sri Lanka.

Throughout the twentieth century many of the teachings and practices of Hinduism have been made popular in the western world by groups like the Theosophists, the Divine Light Mission, the Self-Realization Fellowship, Ananda Marga and Hare Krishna, all of which have grown out of mainstream Hinduism.

Hinduism is a diverse religion. It has no specific doctrinal creed and is very tolerant, allowing each person to choose his or her own set of beliefs. The following are core beliefs acknowledged by most, but remember some Hindus will not hold even to all of these.

God

Brahman, the ultimate and only reality, is an eternal, impersonal, incomprehensible, indivisible life force that is present in everything. The universe is continuous with the being of Brahman. Indeed, only Brahman exists everything else is unreal.

Nevertheless, Hindus worship many gods. Sometimes referred to as avatars, they are thought of as personal manifestations of some of the attributes of Brahman. They include Vishnu, Shiva, Krishna, Rama and Hanuman. In fact there are many thousands of such gods and their number continues to grow as new names are added. When the people of the world fall into ignorance and immorality, Brahman manifests himself as an avatar to help humanity regain its former knowledge and righteousness.

“God is one only, and not two. Different people call on Him by different names: some as Allah, some as God, others as Krishna, Shiva, and Brahman. It is like the water in a lake. Hindus drink it at one place and call it ‘jal,’ Muslims at another place and call it ‘pani,’ and Christians at a third place and call it ‘water’. But it is one and the same thing. Opinions are but paths. Each religion is only a path leading to God, as rivers come from different directions and ultimately become one in the ocean.”

Quote from a Hindu mission pamphlet

Creation

The cosmos is an eternal emanation of Brahman.

Man

Man too is continuous with the being of Brahman. The eternal life-force in every creature — the real inner person or Atman — is Brahman. Individual existence is an illusion.

Traditionally every person belongs to one of five castes: brahmins (priests and scholars), kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), vaisyas (people involved in commerce), sudras (farmers and servants) or dalit (untouchables). A person's caste is determined by birth. Many modern Hindus reject the notion of caste distinctions.

Man's Problem

Living beings are trapped in existence and the suffering that is part of it in a cycle of birth, death and re-birth.

Actions in life (karma) determine the next reincarnation. Good karma can lead to a better reincarnation but the ultimate goal is moksha, which is to escape the futile cycle of existence by being released from one's ignorance of reality and realising one's identity with Brahman. The law of karma, which ensures that everyone receives just recompense for their behaviour, is built into the very fabric of the universe and cannot be thwarted.

The Solution To The Problem

There are three paths to moksha;

1. The path of duty: to fulfil the duties (dharma) of one's caste not in the pursuit of reward but simply because it is one's duty.
2. The path of knowledge: the ascetic path of contemplation and self-denial that leads to the mental realisation of oneness with Brahman.
3. The path of devotion (bhakti): devotion to one of the many Hindu gods expressed in worship, sacrifice and pilgrimage.

The Final Outcome

After death the Atman migrates to another body — human or animal — and this continues through many lifetimes until the person attains moksha. Moksha, release from entrapment in the cycle of re-incarnation is the merging of the Atman back into Brahman. Individual personality and self-consciousness are lost.

How Do We Know These Things Are True?

Hinduism has many holy books arranged in three groups. The first two contain teachings that have existed from eternity, were heard by various gurus and have been passed on.

1. The Vedas, the oldest texts, were orally revealed by the god Brahma and passed down in oral tradition. These form the basis of all the other religious writings.
2. The Upanishads are philosophical writings. They consider, among other things, the nature of the Atman, and Brahman.
3. The Smriti (remembered writings) are regarded as less authoritative but have tremendous influence. They include legal and ethical texts and folk legends. Most important among them is the Bhagavad-Gita.

Each group is further subdivided. The relative importance of the various writings and how they should be classified and organised is a contentious issue among Hindus.

Distinctive Practices

Various rituals and practices have grown up around these core beliefs. They include the practice of yoga, the observance of various religious festivals and respect for all living creatures (although some practice animal sacrifice).

Questions For Discussion

1. How does the Hindu understanding of God differ from the Christian understanding? What passages of Scripture would you use to demonstrate what you believe?
2. How might you present the distinctive teachings of Christianity to a Hindu?

Words You Might Not Have Recognised

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| Animism | The belief that things in nature, e.g. trees, mountains, and the sky, have souls or consciousness. |
| Asceticism | Choosing austerity and self-denial as a personal or religious discipline. |
| Emanation | Something that issues from or is sent or given out. |
| Yoga | A Hindu discipline that promotes enlightenment through a system of postures, breathing exercises and rituals. |