Hinduism: A Christian Perspective

Rick Rood gives us an understanding of this major world religion which is becoming more a part of the American scene with the growth of a Hindu immigrant population. Taking a biblical worldview perspective, he highlights the major differences between Hinduism and Christianity.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

Though Hinduism may seem far removed from our everyday experience, it's becoming increasingly important that we as Christians understand this mysterious religion from India. This is so, if for no other reason than that Hinduism claims 1/6 of the world's population, with over 750 million followers worldwide. But it's also important because its influence is being felt more and more in our own country.

Most of us have had at least some exposure to what has become known as the New Age movement. If so, we have probably realized that Hinduism is the wellspring of a good deal of New Age thinking. Most of us are probably also aware than an increasing number of Asian Indians are residing in the U.S. We may be surprised, in fact, to learn that there are approximately 200 Hindu temples or Hindu centers in the U.S. Many believe that due to its eclectic nature, Hinduism has the potential to serve as a major vehicle for uniting much of the non-Christian religious world.

The appeal of Hinduism to Western culture is not difficult to comprehend. For one, Hinduism is comfortable with evolutionary thinking. As modern science emphasizes our physical evolution, so Hinduism emphasizes our spiritual evolution. As much of modern psychology emphasizes the basic goodness and unlimited potential of human nature, so Hinduism emphasizes man's

essential divinity. As modern philosophy emphasizes the relativity of all truth claims, so Hinduism tolerates many seemingly contradictory religious beliefs. As a religion that also emphasizes the primacy of the spiritual over material reality, Hinduism appeals to many who are disillusioned with strictly material pursuits.

Though there are some core beliefs common to virtually all Hindus, there really is no "Hindu orthodoxy"—no hard and fast dogma that all Hindus must believe. It's actually a family of gradually developing beliefs and practices.

Hinduism has its roots in the interrelationship of two basic religious systems: that of the ancient civilization residing in the Indus River Valley from the third millennium B.C., and the religious beliefs brought to India by the Aryan people (possibly from the Baltic region) who began infiltrating the Indus Valley sometime after 2000 B.C.

The religion of the Aryans is described in the writings of "holy men" contained in the Vedas (meaning "knowledge" or "wisdom"). The Vedas are four collections of writings composed between about 1500 and 500 B.C., which form the basis for Hindu beliefs, and which reveal a gradual development of religious ideas. The later sections of the Vedas are known as the Upanishads. These Vedic writings are considered inspired. Later Hindu writings, including the renowned Bhagavad Gita, are of lesser authority, but widely popular.

Hindu Beliefs About God And the World

An understanding of the Hindu beliefs about God is important even if we don't know any Hindus or people from India because we are all in contact with the New Age movement, and it draws its ideas about God from Hinduism. What then do Hindus believe about God?

The early portions of the Hindu scriptures known as the Vedas

describe a number of deities who for the most part are personifications of natural phenomena, such as storms and fire. Prayers and sacrifices were offered to these gods. An extensive system of priestly rituals and sacrifices was eventually developed which served as means of obtaining the blessing of these gods.

The later portions of the Vedas, called the Upanishads, reflect a significant development in Hinduism's concept of the divine. Many of the Upanishads, instead of speaking of a multitude of gods, refer to an ultimate reality beyond our comprehension called Brahman. Though Brahman is impersonal in nature, it is sometimes referred to in personal terms by the name Isvara.

Along with this idea of a single divine reality, the Upanishads also teach that at the core of our being (referred to as "Atman") we are identical with this ultimate reality.

A popular saying in Hinduism is "Atman is Brahman!" In fact, all living things are Brahman at their innermost core! In addition, instead of ritual sacrifice, intuitive knowledge of the oneness of all things came to be endorsed as the way of contact with divine reality. Also found in the Upanishads is the teaching that the material world (including our conscious personalities) is less than fully real. The word "maya" is used to designate the power by which God, or ultimate reality, brought this less than real world into existence.

Though this monistic or pantheistic philosophy provided a comprehensive intellectual understanding of the divine reality for Hindus, it lacked a strong appeal to the heart. As a result, just before the dawn of the Christian era, a great transformation occurred in Hinduism, spurred particularly by the writing of the Bhagavad Gita, the "New Testament" of Hinduism. The Gita records a conversation between the warrior-prince Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna (who is unveiled as an incarnation of the god Vishnu), in which personal devotion

to deity is endorsed as a way of salvation for all classes of people.

From this time forward, these two major streams of Hindu thought and practice grew and developed—the more intellectual and philosophical stream that emphasized the oneness of all things, and the stream that emphasized personal devotion to a god. The latter stream has predominated among the common people of India to this present day. Chief among the gods so venerated are Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver), and Shiva (the destroyer). In India there are many temples devoted to Shiva (or to one of his "wives," such as Kali), or to Vishnu (or to one of his ten incarnations known as avatars). All in all, it is often stated that Hinduism claims 330 million gods and goddesses!

One might wonder how such a multitude of beliefs about the divine could possibly co-exist in one religion. But they do. There is, however, a widespread recognition that none of the personal gods of Hinduism is in any way exclusive or unique. They are all simply different ways of conceiving of the one reality behind all things—Brahman.

Foundational Hindu Beliefs

Next we must turn our attention to two core beliefs of Hindus: (a) what they believe about the source of evil and suffering and (b) what they believe about life after death.

The first of these core beliefs is the doctrine of *karma*. The word karma means "action." But the religious concept has more to do with the results or consequences of actions. The doctrine of karma states that every thought and action results in certain consequences born by the actor or thinker. If a person lies or steals, he will be wronged in some way in the future. Hindus believe that all suffering is due to one's own past actions, in this or in a previous life. Some believe that karma implies strict determinism or fatalism (that one must

simply resign himself to living out his karma). Most, however, believe that though our present is determined by our past, nonetheless we can influence our future by conducting ourselves in a proper manner in the present.

Some have equated the doctrine of karma with the statement in Galatians 6:7 that "whatever a man sows, that he will also reap." It is certainly a biblical teaching that our actions have consequences—for good or ill. But this is not the same as believing that every experience in life is a consequence of one's own past actions. This is definitely not a biblical idea.

The second core belief of Hinduism is the doctrine of reincarnation, or transmigration of souls, called *samsara*. Since it is impossible that all of one's karma be experienced in one lifetime, the Hindu scriptures state that after death individual souls are "reborn" in this world, in another body—human or otherwise. The nature of one's rebirth is determined by the karma resulting from past actions.

Closely associated with the doctrine of reincarnation is that of *ahimsa* or non-injury to living things. This is the core moral value of Hinduism, the protection of all life (which is ultimately divine), and is the main reason why some Hindus are vegetarian.

Also associated with reincarnation is the *caste system*. According to Hindu teaching, there are four basic castes or social classes (and thousands of sub-groups within the castes). Each has its own rules and obligations pertaining to nearly every facet of life. At the top are the Brahmins or priests. Second in rank are the Kshatriyas or warriors and rulers. Third are the Vaisyas or merchants and farmers. Below these are the Shudras or laboring class. Salvation is possible only for the top three castes, who are called the "twice born." Outside the caste system are the untouchables or outcastes. Though outlawed in India in the late 1940s, many in

the countryside are still considered outcastes.

One’s caste is determined at birth by his or her own personal karma. Attempts, therefore, to bring about social change or to improve one’s social position would appear to run contrary to the law of karma and the caste system.

It’s little wonder that the chief aim of the Hindu is to experience release or liberation from this cycle of death and rebirth caused by karma. Hindus call this liberation *moksha*.

Hindu Ways Of Salvation

Why do New Agers practice yoga? Why are they so devoted to meditation? It may come as some surprise that these practices are central to the Hindu search for salvation!

We noted earlier that the chief aim in Hinduism is to gain release from the cycle of reincarnation caused by karma—the consequences of past actions, in this or in previous lives! Now we want to look at the primary ways in which followers of Hinduism seek to achieve this salvation—liberation from earthly existence.

Before discussing the three primary ways of salvation in Hinduism, we must mention the four goals of life permissible to Hindus. Hinduism recognizes that in the course of many lifetimes people may legitimately give themselves to any of these goals. The first is the goal of pleasure or enjoyment, particularly through love and sexual desire. This is called *kama*. The second legitimate aim in life is for wealth and success. This is called *artha*. The third aim in life is moral duty or *dharma*. One who gives himself to dharma renounces personal pleasure and power, to seek the common good. The final aim in life, however, is *moksha*—liberation from the cycle of lives in this material world, and entrance into Nirvana.

Hindus recognize three possible paths to moksha, or salvation.

The first is the way of works or *karma yoga*. This is a very popular way of salvation and lays emphasis on the idea that liberation may be obtained by fulfilling one's familial and social duties thereby overcoming the weight of bad karma one has accrued. The Code of Manu lists many of these rules. Most important among them are certain rituals conducted at various stages of life.

The second way of salvation is the way of knowledge or *jnana yoga*. The basic premise of the way of knowledge is that the cause of our bondage to the cycle of rebirths in this world is ignorance or *avidya*. According to the predominant view among those committed to this way, our ignorance consists of the mistaken belief that we are individual selves and not one with the ultimate divine reality called Brahman. It is this ignorance that gives rise to our bad actions which result in bad karma. Salvation is achieved through attaining a state of consciousness in which we realize our identity with Brahman. This is achieved through deep meditation, often as a part of the discipline of yoga.

The third and final way of salvation is the way of devotion or *bhakti yoga*. This is the way most favored by the common people of India; it satisfies the longing for a more emotional and personal approach to religion. It is self-surrender to one of the many personal gods and goddesses of Hinduism. Such devotion is expressed through acts of worship, *puja,* at the temple, in the home, through participation in the many festivals in honor of such gods, and through pilgrimages to one of the numerous holy sites in India. In the way of devotion, the focus is one obtaining the mercy and help of a god in finding release from the cycle of reincarnation. Some Hindus conceive of ultimate salvation as absorption into the one divine reality, with all loss of individual existence. Others conceive of it as heavenly existence in adoration of the personal God.

A Christian Response to Hinduism

The editor of the periodical *Hinduism Today* said not long ago that a "small army of yoga missionaries" has been trained to "set upon the Western world." And in his own words, "They may not call themselves Hindu, but Hindus know where yoga came from and where it goes."

What should be the appropriate Christian perspective on this religion of the East that is making such an impact in the West? At the outset we must say that as Christians we concur with Hindus on a couple of points. Hindus are correct in their recognition that all is not right with the world and with human existence in it. They are correct as well in suggesting that the ultimate remedy to the human dilemma is spiritual in nature. Beyond these two points, however, there's little common ground between Hinduism and Christianity. Let's note just a few of the more important areas of divergence.

First, Hinduism lacks any understanding that God created this world for a good purpose. It is common for Hindus to speak of God bringing the universe into existence simply as a "playful" exercise of His power. Also lacking is a conception of God as infinitely holy and righteous and as the One to whom we as His creatures are accountable for the way we conduct our lives.

The second major area of contrast between Hinduism and Christianity is the conception of human nature and of the source of our estrangement from God. According to Hindu teaching, man is divine at the core of his being. He is one with God! The problem is that man is ignorant of this fact. He is deceived by his focus on this temporal and material world, and this ignorance gives rise to acts that result in bad karma and traps us in the cycle of reincarnation.

According to the biblical teaching, however, the source of our alienation from God (and ultimately of all that is imperfect in this world), is not ignorance of our divinity, but our

sinful rebellion against God and His purpose for our lives.

This leads to the third and final point of contrast—the way of salvation. According to most Hindu teaching, salvation from the cycle of reincarnation is achieved by our own efforts—whether through good works, meditation, or devotion to a deity. According to the Bible, however, our spiritual need is for deliverance from God's judgment on our sin and for restoration to a life under His direction and care. This salvation can be provided only by God's gracious and undeserved action in our behalf.

It is true that in certain Hindu groups there is a similar emphasis on God's grace (probably as a result of past Christian influence). But even here, there is a major distinction. The Hindu teaching about grace sees no need for an atonement for sin, but simply offers forgiveness without any satisfaction of the judgment on sin required by a holy God.

In contrast, the Christian gospel is this: God the Son became a man, died a sacrificial death on the cross, making real forgiveness of real sins against the real God possible to those who place complete trust in Christ. All who do so can experience true forgiveness, know God and His purpose for their lives, and have the certainty of eternal life with Him!

For a list of resources on Hinduism, and on sharing the gospel with our Hindu friends, contact us here at Probe!

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