“Do Hindus Believe in Our Jesus?”

I have a question about Hinduism. I just had a conversation with someone who claims to be Hindu, yet believe in Christianity as well. He said that salvation in Hinduism is not only by karma (or karm, as he called it), but also by dharm, which he referred to as the acknowledgment of God being God. He also said karm was what good you have done, and didn’t talk about consequences of it. He said that wasn’t as much doctrine as mis-interpretation. He was saying that they believe in the same Jesus, but there’s no way this could be true. I wish we could have talked longer, but this wasn’t possible. My question is this: are any of these claims found in their scripture?

Thanks for your question about Hinduism. Hinduism is a very diverse collection of religious/philosophical beliefs. It’s very common to meet two Hindus who completely contradict one another. That being said, it’s not a surprise to hear some of the things that you heard from your Hindu friend.

One of the yogas (ways to reach human potential) of Hindu thought is called bhakti. This type of yoga is the personal devotion a person can have in any given form of the Deity. Many Hindus think Christianity is a great means by which to devote oneself to God. It already has a rigorous set of beliefs and practices in place that can be used as a road to ultimate liberation. Huston Smith says, “Many Hindus acknowledge Christ as a God-man, while believing that there have been others, such as Rama, Krishna, and the Buddha.”

Allow me to make some observations. First of all, if you meet a Hindu who believes in Jesus, consider this a great place to find common ground. Don’t be discouraged. The next step is to

find out just what he or she believes about Him. It's possible that this person may be a true believer in Christ. Remember, God is not just the God of "western" thought. But it's also possible that he or she believes in a different Jesus, influenced by a pantheistic worldview. Does he think Jesus is just one of many ishtas (forms of the divine)? If so, then why would Jesus claim to be the only way to God in John 14:6? If the Scriptures are called to question, then what other resources do they use to believe that Jesus was even an ishta in the first place? If his Jesus is not the Jesus of the Bible, then it might be a great idea to find out just where he's getting his concepts of Him. Also you might bone up on why there's warrant for belief in the inspiration of the Bible and the person of Jesus in the Bible. See our Web site for all sorts of information and helps (Theology and Philosophy Topics)

I would also suggest you read up on Hindu thought a bit. I'd say the best bet is to form a relationship with this Hindu and talk to him. There may or may not be any textual source for his beliefs. Unlike the religions of the West, Hinduism doesn't have an authoritative text to refer to for all their beliefs. They have some helpful texts, such as the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita. These are the most well known and accessible texts for understanding the religion and philosophy of Hindus. But neither of them will talk about Jesus, per se (being written before His time). I suggest Huston Smith's book *The World's Religions* or S.A. Nigosian's *World Religions: A Historical Approach*. I pray that you'll have plenty of discussions with this person and that God would use you to sharpen one another (you to be a better disciple, him to be a disciple of the one true God).

Kris Samons
Probe Ministries

Yoga and Christianity: Are They Compatible? – A Biblical Worldview Perspective

Michael Gleghorn takes a hard look at yoga to determine if the practice is compatible with Christian living. After examining the spiritual underpinnings of yoga and the relationship of the physical aspects to the spiritual teaching, he concludes that Christians seeking physical exercise would be wise to consider techniques other than yoga.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

What is Yoga?

What is yoga? For many in the West, yoga is simply a system of physical exercise, a means of strengthening the body, improving flexibility, and even healing or preventing a variety of bodily ailments. But if we inquire into the history and philosophy of yoga we discover that "much more than a system of physical exercise for health, Yoga is . . . [an] ancient path to spiritual growth." It is a path enshrined in much of the sacred literature of India.{1} Thus, if we truly want a better understanding of yoga, we must dig beneath the surface and examine the historical roots of the subject.

Before we begin digging, however, we must first understand what the term "yoga" actually means. "According to tradition, 'yoga' means 'union,' the union…of the finite 'jiva' (transitory self) with the infinite'…Brahman' (eternal Self)."{2} "Brahman" is a term often used for the Hindu concept of "God," or Ultimate Reality. It is an impersonal,

divine substance that "pervades, envelops, and underlies everything."{3} With this in mind, let's briefly look at three key texts that will help us chart the origin and development of yoga within India.

It appears that one can trace both the practice and goal of yoga all the way back to the *Upanishads*, probably written between 1000-500 B.C.{4} One *Upanishad* tells us: "Unite the light within you with the light of Brahman."{5} Clearly, then, the goal of yoga (i.e. union with Brahman) is at least as old as the *Upanishads.*

In addition, the word "yoga" often appears in the *Bhagavad Gita,* a classic Hindu text possibly written as early as the fifth century B.C.{6} In chapter 6, Krishna declares: "Thus joy supreme comes to the Yogi . . . who is one with Brahman, with God."{7}

Finally, in about A.D. 150, the yogi Patanjali systematized yoga into eight distinct "limbs" in his *Yoga Sutras*. These eight limbs are like a staircase, supposedly leading the yogi from ignorance to enlightenment. In order, the eight limbs are: *yama* (self-control), *niyama* (religious observances), *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breathing exercises), *pratyahara* (sense control), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (deep contemplation), and *samadhi* (enlightenment).{8} It's interesting to note that postures and breathing exercises, often considered to be the whole of yoga in the West, are steps three and four along Patanjali's "royal" road to union with Brahman.

We see that yoga is an ancient spiritual discipline deeply rooted in the religion of Hinduism. This being so, we may honestly wonder whether it's really wise for a Christian to be involved in yoga practice. Next, we'll continue our discussion by examining some of the important doctrinal differences between yoga and Christianity.

Yoga and Christianity: What are the Differences?

Many people today (including some Christians) are taking up yoga practice. We'll later consider whether yoga philosophy can truly be separated from yoga practice, but we must first establish that there are crucial doctrinal differences between yoga and Christianity. Let's briefly look at just a few of these.

First, yoga and Christianity have very different concepts of God. As previously stated, the goal of yoga is to experience union with "God." But what do yogis mean when they speak of "God," or Brahman? Exactly what are we being encouraged to "unite" with? Most yogis conceive of "God" as an impersonal, spiritual substance, coextensive with all of reality. This doctrine is called pantheism, the view that everything is "God." It differs markedly from the theism of biblical Christianity. In the Bible, God reveals Himself as the personal Creator of the universe. God is the Creator; the universe, His creation. The Bible maintains a careful distinction between the two.{9}

A second difference between yoga and Christianity concerns their views of man. Since yoga philosophy teaches that everything is "God," it necessarily follows that man, too, is "God." Christianity, however, makes a clear distinction between God and man. God is the Creator; man is one of His creatures. Of course man is certainly unique, for unlike the animals he was created in the image of God.{10} Nevertheless, Christianity clearly differs from yoga in its unqualified insistence that God and man are distinct.

Finally, let's briefly consider how yoga and Christianity differently conceive man's fundamental problem, as well as its solution. Yoga conceives man's problem primarily in terms of ignorance; man simply doesn't realize that he is "God." The

solution is enlightenment, an experience of union with "God." This solution (which is the goal of yoga) can only be reached through much personal striving and effort. Christianity, however, sees man's primary problem as sin, a failure to conform to both the character and standards of a morally perfect God. Man is thus alienated from God and in need of reconciliation. The solution is Jesus Christ, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."{11} Through Jesus' death on the cross, God reconciled the world to Himself.{12} He now calls men to freely receive all the benefits of His salvation through faith in Christ alone. Unlike yoga, Christianity views salvation as a free gift. It can only be received; it can never be earned.

Clearly, Christianity and yoga are mutually exclusive viewpoints. But is every kind of yoga the same? Isn't there at least one that's exclusively concerned with physical health and exercise? Next, we'll take a closer look at hatha yoga, the one most often believed to be purely physical in nature.

What Is Hatha Yoga?

Here we've learned that yoga is an ancient spiritual discipline rooted in a belief system that is utterly incompatible with Christianity. But is this true of *all* yoga? Isn't *hatha* yoga simply concerned with physical development and good health?

Hatha yoga is primarily concerned with two things: *asana* (physical postures) and *pranayama* (breathing exercises). But it's important to realize that both asana and pranayama also play a significant role in Patanjali's *raja* (or "royal") yoga. In the traditional eight "limbs" of Patanjali's system, asana and pranayama are limbs three and four. What then is the relationship of hatha to raja yoga?

Former yoga practitioner Dave Fetcho states that yoga postures "evolved as an integral part of Raja . . . Yoga."{13} He

points out that the author of the famous handbook, the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika,* "presents Hatha . . . solely and exclusively for the attainment of Raja Yoga."{14} He also cites a French yoga scholar who claims, "the sole purpose of . . . Hatha Yoga is to suppress physical obstacles on the . . . Royal path of Raja Yoga and Hatha Yoga is therefore called 'the ladder to Raja Yoga.'"{15} Fetcho concurs, noting that the physical postures are "specifically designed to manipulate consciousness…into Raja Yoga's consummate experience of *samadhi:* undifferentiated union with the primal essence of consciousness."{16} These statements should make it quite clear that hatha, or physical, yoga has historically been viewed simply as a means of aiding the yogi in attaining enlightenment, the final limb of raja yoga.

This is further confirmed by looking at Iyengar yoga, possibly the most popular form of hatha yoga in the U.S. The Web site for the Iyengar Yoga Institute of San Francisco states: "BKS Iyengar studies and teaches yoga as unfolded in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjaili [sic] and the Hatha Yoga Pradipika among other classical texts. Thus Asana, or postures, are taught as one of the eight limbs . . . of yoga defined by Patanjali."{17} In fact, the ultimate goal of Iyengar hatha yoga is precisely the same as that of Patanjali's raja yoga.{18} Both aim to experience union with "God," Brahman, or universal consciousness.

If all these things are so, it seems increasingly apparent that hatha yoga may ultimately involve its practitioners in much more than physical exercise. Although it may not be obvious at first, the ultimate goal of hatha is the same as every other form of yoga: union of the self with an impersonal, universal consciousness. We must remember that the Bible never exhorts Christians to seek such an experience. If anything, it warns us of the potential dangers in doing so. Next, we'll consider whether yoga practice might, in fact, be dangerous—and why.

Can Yoga be Harmful?

Despite its touted health benefits, there are numerous warnings in authoritative yoga literature which caution that yoga can be physically, mentally, and spiritually harmful if not practiced correctly.

For instance, Swami Prabhavananda warns of the potentially dangerous physical effects that might result from yoga breathing exercises: “Unless properly done, there is a good chance of injuring the brain. And those who practice such breathing without proper supervision can suffer a disease which no known science or doctor can cure.”{19}

In addition, many yogis warn that yoga practice can endanger one’s sanity. In describing the awakening of “kundalini” (coiled serpent power) Gopi Krishna records his own experience as follows: “It was variable for many years, painful, obsessive…I have passed through almost all the stages of…mediumistic, psychotic, and other types of mind; for some time I was hovering between sanity and insanity.”{20}

Finally, however, from a Christian perspective it seems that yoga could also be spiritually harmful. To understand why, let’s return to the experience of “kundalini.” Yoga scholar Hans Rieker declares, “Kundalini [is] the mainstay of all yoga practices.”{21} But what exactly is kundalini and why is it so central to yoga practice?

Swami Vivekananda summarizes the kundalini experience as follows: “When awakened through the practice of spiritual disciplines, it rises through the spinal column, passes through the various centres, and at last reaches the brain, whereupon the yogi experiences samadhi, or total absorption in the Godhead.”{22} And researcher John White takes the importance of this experience even further declaring: “Although the word kundalini comes from the yogic tradition, nearly all the world’s major religions, spiritual paths, and

genuine occult traditions see something akin to the kundalini experience as having significance in "divinizing" a person. The word itself may not appear…but the concept is there…as a key to attaining godlike stature."{23}

Reading such descriptions of the kundalini, or coiled serpent power, the Christian can almost hear the hiss of that "serpent of old…who deceives the whole world."{24}In Eden, he flattered our first parents by telling them: "You will be like God."{25} And though Christianity and yoga have very different conceptions of God, isn't this essentially what yoga promises?

Swami Ajaya once said, "The main teaching of Yoga is that man's true nature is divine."{26} Obviously this is not the Christian view of man. But if the goal of yoga is to realize one's essential divinity through union with "God," then shouldn't the Christian view the practice that leads to this realization as potentially spiritually harmful? Next, we'll conclude our discussion by asking whether it's really possible to separate yoga philosophy from yoga practice.

Can Philosophy and Practice be Separated?

We've seen that yoga is an ancient spiritual discipline whose central doctrines are utterly incompatible with those of Christianity. Even hatha yoga, often considered to be exclusively concerned with physical development, is best understood as merely a means of helping the yogi reach the goal of samadhi, or union with "God." Furthermore, we've seen that all yoga, including hatha, has the potential to be physically, mentally, and spiritually harmful.

In light of such evidence, it may appear that this question—"Can yoga philosophy be separated from yoga practice?"—has already been answered in the negative. And this is certainly the view of many yoga scholars. Dave Fetcho, formerly of the Ananda Marga Yoga Society, has written, "Physical yoga, according to its classical definitions, is

inheritably and functionally incapable of being separated from Eastern religious metaphysics."{27} What's more, yoga authorities Feuerstein and Miller, in discussing yoga postures (asana) and breathing exercises (pranayama), indicate that such practices are more than just another form of physical exercise; indeed, they "are *psychosomatic* exercises."{28} Does this mean that separating theory from practice is simply impossible with yoga?

If one carefully looks through an introductory text on hatha yoga,{29} one will see many different postures illustrated. A number of these may be similar, if not identical, to exercises and stretches one is already doing. Indeed, if one is engaged in a regular stretching program, this is quite probable. This raises an important question: Suppose that such beginning level yoga postures are done in a context completely free of yogic philosophy. In such a case as this, doesn't honesty compel us to acknowledge at least the *possibility* of separating theory from practice?

While I hate to disagree with scholars who know far more about the subject than I do, this distinction does seem valid to me. However, let me quickly add that I see this distinction as legitimate *only* at the very beginning of such practices, and *only* with regard to the postures. The breathing exercises, for various reasons, remain problematic.{30} But this distinction raises yet another question, for how many people begin an exercise program intending never to move beyond the most basic level? And since by the very nature of yoga practice, such a distinction could *only* be valid at the very earliest of stages, why would a Christian ever want to begin this process? It seems to me that if someone wants an exercise program with physical benefits similar to yoga, but without all the negative spiritual baggage, they should consider low-impact or water aerobics, water ballet, or simple stretching.{31} These programs can be just as beneficial for the body, without potentially endangering the soul. In my opinion, then,

Christians would be better off to never begin yoga practice.

[Note from the webmistress: Also see Why a Christian Alternative to Yoga? on the PraiseMoves.com website for an excellent treatment of this subject from a former yoga instructor who explains why the two are incompatible.]

Notes

1. Raphael, *Essence and Purpose of Yoga: The Initiatory Pathways to the Transcendent* (Massachusetts: Element Books, Inc., 1996), back cover.
2. Brad Scott, "Exercise or Religious Practice? Yoga: What the Teacher Never Taught You in That Hatha Yoga Class" in *The Watchman Expositor* (Vol. 18, No. 2, 2001): 5.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 6.
5. Ibid., cited in Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal* (New York: New American Library, 1957), 120ff.
6. *Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Juan Mascaro (New York: Penguin Books, 1962), back cover.
7. Ibid., 71.
8. John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), 601.
9. See Romans 1:18-25.
10. See Genesis 1:26.
11. John 1:29.
12. See 2 Corinthians 5:19.
13. Dave Fetcho, "Yoga," (Berkeley, CA: Spiritual Counterfeits Project, 1978), cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 602.
14. Ibid., 603.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 602.
17. See "Source and Context: Patanjali and Ashtanga Yoga" at http://www.iyisf.org/. This quotation was obtained from the site on March 1, 2002.

18. Ibid.
19. Swami Prabhavananda, *Yoga and Mysticism* (Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press, 1972), 18, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 604.
20. Gopi Krishna, *The Awakening of Kundalini* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975), 124, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 608.
21. Hans Ulrich Rieker, *The Yoga of Light: Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (New York: Seabury Press, 1971), 101, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 606.
22. Swami Vivekananda, *Raja Yoga* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1970), 16, cited in Scott, "Exercise or Religious Practice? Yoga: What the Teacher Never Taught You in That Hatha Yoga Class," 5.
23. John White, ed., *Kundalini Evolution and Enlightenment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1979), 17, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 606.
24. See Revelation 12:9.
25. See Genesis 3:5.
26. Swami Rama, *Lectures on Yoga: Practical Lessons on Yoga* (Glenview, IL: Himalayan International Institute of Yoga, Science and Philosophy, 1976, rev.), vi, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs,* 596.
27. Dave Fetcho, "Yoga," 2, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 600.
28. George Feuerstein and Jeanine Miller, *Yoga and Beyond: Essays in Indian Philosophy* (New York: Schocken, 1972), 27-28, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 600.
29. For example, Richard Hittleman, *Introduction to Yoga* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969)
30. For instance, the breathing exercises can by physically dangerous. Sri Chinmoy wrote, "To practice pranayama without real guidance is very dangerous. I know of three persons whohave died from it…" See *Great Masters and the Cosmic Gods* (Jamaica, NY: Agni Press, 1977), 8, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs,* 604. In addition,

however, from a Christian perspective such exercises may also be mentally and spiritually dangerous (at least potentially) because they can induce altered states of consciousness that may make one more vulnerable to demonic deception. Indeed, psychologist Ernest L. Rossi has written of pranayama: "The manual manipulation of the nasal cycle during meditation (dhyana) is the most thoroughly documented of techniques for altering consciousness." See Benjamin B. Wolman and Montague Ullman, eds., *Handbook of States of Consciousness* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1986), 113, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs,* 595.
31. Of course such programs will need to be tailored to each individual's needs and goals. It's always a good idea to talk to your doctor before beginning any new exercise program.

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"My Christian Girlfriend Doesn't Want to Follow My Hindu Faith"

I read Rick Rood's article on Hinduism with interest; I am faced with a dilemma and was hoping if you could offer me some advice and solace. I am a Hindu and have received a proposal from a Christian girl – AG denomination; (she converted from Hinduism 3 years ago).

Whilst my parents expect her to follow my religion after marriage; I am of the view that she can follow her religion but she has to partake in all my Hindu religious activities; and that we have to have a Hindu marriage. I also respect Christianity and she can go to church etc. with myself

accompanying her whenever possible.

She has come back to me saying that all the above will be a sin in Christianity and that she will be punished if she participates in my activities. I have been advised by my priest to participate in her activities where possible. I respect her choice of religion coz for me there is only one god; it's just that we all have our own ways of faith.

I also realize that there are other factors like children to be considered here. I like this girl and will find your advice invaluable.

It would also help if you could provide me the details of people who have been in a similar situation. And at the same time it would also help if you could look into the prospects of taking out a "best practices" manual for lets say hindu/christian; christian/muslim marriages etc. which would provide some sort of a guideline.

Thank you for your kind letter. I do not know which article of Rick's that you read, but if you haven't yet read his article entitled, Do All Roads Lead to God? The Christian Attitude Toward Non-Christian Religions I would encourage you to do so. I think it will help you better understand your Christian girlfriend's perspective on participating in your Hindu religious activities.

In the Bible, the second book is called Exodus. In Exodus 20:1-6 the Lord gives His people the first two of the Ten Commandments. These are: 1. To have (or worship) no other gods except the Lord, and 2. Not to make, or worship, any idols or images of anything in all creation. As you can probably see, these first two commandments would make it very difficult for your Christian friend to be faithful to her own religious convictions AND participate in Hindu religious activities.

Christians believe that Jesus is the only way to God. In fact, this is what Jesus Himself claimed in John 14:6. Jesus demands

our exclusive devotion and allegiance. We are not allowed to worship anyone else but the one true God of the Bible.

Although I cannot tell you what to do about marriage, I do know that (statistically speaking) interfaith marriages are much more difficult and face many more problems than do marriages in which both partners have shared religious beliefs. I would encourage both of you to seriously consider these difficulties BEFORE you get married. For example, in what religious tradition will your children be raised? What will they be taught about God, what happens after death, etc.?

Finally, if you're interested in learning what the Bible says about how a person can have a personal relationship with God, please visit the following web page: http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=276. This website also has the entire Bible available for you to read and study if you like.

Thanks again for writing.

Wishing you all the best for your future,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

A Short Look at Six World Religions – Understand the Beliefs of Non-Christians

An overview of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses from a conservative Christian perspective.

Islam

There are three monotheistic religions in the world, religions that teach that there is only one God: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

The term “Islam” means “submission” to the will of God, and the person who submits is called a “Muslim.”

The founder of Islam is Muhammad, who was born in 570 A.D. At age 40 he claimed to begin receiving revelations from a spirit being he believed was the angel Gabriel. These later were recorded and became the Qur’an, Islam’s holy book.

There are Six Articles of Faith that all Muslims hold to. The first is that “there is no God but Allah.” The second Article of Faith is belief in a hierarchy of angels, of which the archangel Gabriel is the highest. Each Muslim is assigned two angels, one to record his good deeds and the other to record the bad deeds. At the bottom of the angelic hierarchy are the jinn, from which we get the word “genie.” They are a Muslim version of demons.

The third Article of Faith is belief in 104 holy books, with the Koran as the final revelation. The fourth is belief in the prophets. According to the Qur’an, God has sent a prophet to every nation to preach the message that there is only one God. 124,000 prophets have been sent, most of them unknown but some of them biblical characters, including Jesus. Muhammed, though, is the prophet for all times, the “Seal of the Prophets.”

The fifth Article of Faith is belief in predestination. All things, both good and evil, are the direct result of the will of Allah. Islam is a very fatalistic religion.

The sixth Article of Faith is the day of judgment. Those whose good deeds outweigh their bad will be rewarded with Paradise; those whose bad deeds outweigh their good will be judged to

hell. Islam is a religion of human works. The Bible tells us, though, that we can never earn God's acceptance on the basis of our deeds.

There are Five Pillars of Islam, obligations every Muslim must keep. The first is reciting the creed, "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his messenger." The second is prayer: 17 cycles of prayer, spread out over five times of prayer each day. They must wash in a prescribed manner before they kneel down and face toward Mecca.

The third pillar is almsgiving, 2.5% of one's income for the poor. The fourth pillar is fasting during the lunar month of Ramadan. Muslims must forego food, water and sex during daylight hours. The fifth pillar is making the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lives.

Sometimes you will hear people say that Allah is another name for the God of the Bible. Is it the same? "Allah" is the Arabic name for God, and Arab Christians use the name Allah to describe the God of the Bible. Mohammed taught that there is one true God who is the same God that Jews and Christians ("the People of the Book") worship. He began Islam on the foundation of the God of the Bible. We can say that in principle, we worship the same God. Islam began on the foundation of belief in the one true God to combat the pagan polytheism of the area. However, Mohammed departed from this foundation, and we differ in our understanding of how God has fully revealed Himself. In the Qur'an, Allah is a distant spiritual being, but Yahweh is a Father to His children. Allah does not love wrongdoers, but God demonstrates His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Allah has predetermined everything about life; the God of the Bible invites us to share our hearts with Him.

Hinduism

Hinduism may seem like an alien religion of people on the

other side of the world, but it has infiltrated our culture in all sorts of ways. You're probably familiar with most of the basic Hindu concepts without even realizing it. Have you seen the *Star Wars* movies? They are filled with Hindu ideas. Ever watch *Dharma and Greg* on TV? "Dharma" is an important Hindu term for moral duty. 30% of Americans believe in reincarnation, which is a Hindu concept. Transcendental Meditation is thinly disguised Hinduism. George Harrison's song "My Sweet Lord" invokes a Hindu chant. New Age philosophy is Hinduism wrapped in Western garb.

Hinduism is tremendously diverse. It encompasses those who believe in one reality, Brahman, as well as those who believe in many gods—as many as 330 million! Some Hindus believe the universe is real; most believe it is illusion, or *maya.* (This world view isn't consistent with reality. You won't find Hindus meditating on railroad tracks, for instance.) Some believe Brahman and the universe are one; others see them as two distinct realities.

Despite the diversity within Hinduism, there are five major beliefs of this religion. The first is that ultimate reality, called Brahman, is an impersonal oneness. In *The Empire Strikes Back,* Yoda tells Luke that everything—the tree, the rock, etc.—is all part of "The Force." This is monism: the belief that all is one. Nothing is distinct and separate from anything else.

Another Hindu belief is that just as the air in an open jar is identical to the air around the jar, we extend from and are one with Brahman. All is one, all is god—and that means that we are god. In her book and movie "Out on a Limb," Shirley MacLaine relates a time when she stood on a beach, embracing this concept and declaring, "I am god! I am god!" It's a very Hindu concept.

Humanity's primary problem, according to Hinduism, is that we have forgotten we are divine. The consequence is that we are

subject to the Law of Karma, another important Hindu belief. This is the moral equivalent to the natural law of cause and effect. You always reap what you sow. There is no grace, there is no forgiveness, there is never any escape from consequences. It's a very heavy burden to carry. Not only that, but Hinduism says that the consequences of our choices, both bad karma and good karma, follow us from lifetime to lifetime. This is another Hindu concept: samsara, the ever-revolving wheel of life, death, and rebirth, also known as reincarnation. A person's karma determines the kind of body—whether human, animal, or insect—into which he or she is incarnated in the next lifetime.

The final major Hindu concept is liberation from the wheel of birth, death, and rebirth. One can only get off the reincarnation merry-go-round by realizing that the idea of the individual self is an illusion, and only the oneness of Brahman is real. There is no heaven, though—only losing one's identity in the universal oneness.

Praise God that through the Lord Jesus, Christianity offers hope, forgiveness, grace, and a personal relationship with a personal God in heaven. Jesus means there's a point to life.

Buddhism

Buddhism does not believe in a personal God. It does not have worship, prayer, or praise of a divine being. It offers no redemption, no forgiveness, no hope of heaven, and no final judgment. Buddhism is more of a moral philosophy, an ethical way of life.

In his essay "De Futilitate," C.S. Lewis called Buddhism "a heresy of Hinduism." Buddhism was founded by a Hindu, Siddhartha Gautama, during the sixth century B.C. After being profoundly impacted by seeing four kinds of suffering in one day, Siddhartha committed himself to finding the source of suffering and how to eliminate it. One day he sat down under a

fig tree and vowed not to rise again until he had attained enlightenment. After some time, he did so and became the Buddha, which means “enlightened one.” He started teaching the “The Four Noble Truths,” the most basic of Buddhist teachings.

The First Noble Truth is that life consists of suffering. The Second Noble Truth is that we suffer because we desire those things that are impermanent. This is absolutely central to Buddhism: the belief that desire is the cause of all suffering.

The Third Noble Truth is that the way to liberate oneself from suffering is by eliminating all desire. (Unfortunately, it’s a self-defeating premise: if you set a goal to eliminate desire, then you desire to eliminate desire.) The Fourth Noble Truth is that desire can be eliminated by following the Eight-Fold path.

In the Eight-Fold Path, the first two steps are foundational to all the others. Step one is Right Understanding, where one sees the universe as impermanent and illusory and believes that the individual does not actually exist. If you ever hear someone say, “The world is an illusion, and so am I. I don’t really exist,” they’re probably exploring Buddhism. (You might want to pinch them and see what they do.) Right Thought means renouncing all attachment to the desires and thoughts of oneself, even as he recognizes that the self doesn’t exist.

Other parts of the Eight-Fold path are Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Awareness, and Right Meditation. Ethical conduct is very important in Buddhism. There are commands to refrain from the taking of any life (that includes ants and roaches in your house), stealing, immorality, lying, and drinking.

The Eight-Fold Path is a set of steps that describe not only a good life but one which will move the follower toward Nirvana, the goal of Buddhism. Nirvana is not heaven; it is a state of

extinction, where one's essence—which does not actually exist in the first place—is extinguished like a candle flame, marking the end of desire and thus the end of suffering.

One of the important concepts in Buddhism is samsara, a cycle of birth, death and rebirth. It differs from the Hindu concept of reincarnation in that Buddhism teaches there is no self to continue from one life to the next. Another important concept is karma, the belief that you reap what you sow, and your karma follows you through the cycles of samsara. Note the inherent inconsistency here: there is no self to continue from one life to the next, but one's karma does?!

Buddhism says there are many paths to the top of the mountain, so there are many ways to God. Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me."

Judaism

Both Christianity and Judaism have their roots in Old Testament faith. But Christianity is really a sister, rather than a daughter, to Judaism, which is the religion developed by rabbis from 200 B.C. on.

When the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., that spelled the end of sacrifices and the priesthood. Instead of being guided by prophets, priests and kings, the Jewish people turned to rabbis as their authorities on matters of laws and practice.

There was basically one kind of Judaism until the eighteenth century when the Age of Enlightenment swept through Europe. That's when the three major branches of Judaism arose.

That one basic kind of Judaism is what is now called "Orthodox Judaism." It has a strong emphasis on tradition and strict observance of the Law of Moses.

Reform Judaism began in Germany at the time of the

Enlightenment. Reform Judaism is the humanistic branch. In fact, there are many Reform Jews who don't believe in God at all. For them, Judaism is a way of life and culture with a connection to one's ancestors that is about legacy, not faith.

The middle-ground branch, seeking to find moderate ground between the two extremes of the Orthodox and Reform branches, is Conservative Judaism.

If there is any religious principle that Judaism explicitly affirms and teaches, it is the unity of God. You may have heard of the *Shema*, found in Deuteronomy 6:4¾"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." This one all-important principle is the reason so many Jewish people have a hard time understanding Christianity, which they see as a religion of three gods, not one God in three Persons.

The Old Testament is the Scripture of Judaism. Many Jews, though, do not consider the Old Testament to be the Word of God or inspired, although they do give it respect as a part of Jewish tradition and history.

There are some lifestyle practices that set people apart as distinctively Jewish. Traditional Jews, usually Orthodox but including some from other branches, observe the Sabbath. This means abstaining from work, driving, and lighting a fire from Friday night to Saturday night. Orthodox Jews also keep kosher, which means keeping the Old Testament dietary laws. The most well known is the prohibition against mixing meat and milk at the same meal, although many people are also aware that most Jewish people do not eat pork or shellfish.

It is difficult for Jewish people to place their faith in Jesus as Messiah because it is not considered a Jewish thing to do. In fact, they see "Jewish Christian" as an oxymoron. For many, being Jewish equals "Not Christian." But there's another big reason it is so hard for Jewish people to come to faith in Christ. They don't see a need for "salvation,"

because there is nothing to be saved from. If there is a God, then Jewish people already have a special relationship with Him as His chosen people. Jesus is superfluous for Jews.

If you know someone who is Jewish, pray that God will cause the scales to fall from the eyes of their heart and they will see the truth: that there's nothing more Jewish or more godly than submitting in faith to one who was, and is, the very Son of God, and who proved His love for them by dying in their place on the cross.

Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses

Have you ever answered your door to find a couple of nicely-dressed people asking to talk to you about spiritual things? Chances are they were either Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses. Since both groups send many missionaries not only into American homes but to foreign countries, it makes sense to cover them in a discussion of world religions.

Many people think of Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses as Christians in slightly different denominations, but this is not the case. To put it bluntly, both religions teach another gospel and another Jesus. They are cults, not Christian denominations.

Mormonism was founded by Joseph Smith, a teenage boy in New York. He claimed that he was visited by first God the Father and the Son, and then by the angel Moroni, who gave him golden plates, which he translated into the Book of Mormon. He said that Christianity had been corrupted since the death of the last apostle, and God appointed him to restore the truth. But Joseph Smith provided nine different versions of these events, which set the tone for the rest of his teachings.

Deuteronomy 18:22 gives God's standards for His prophets: 100% accuracy. Joseph Smith wrote a lot of prophecies, many of which never came true. He was a false prophet, and the

religion he founded is not from God.

Mormonism is not Christian because it denies some of the essential doctrines of Christianity, including the deity of Christ and salvation by grace. Furthermore, Mormon doctrine contradicts the Christian teaching that there is only one God, and it undermines the authority and reliability of the Bible.

Jehovah's Witnesses was founded by Charles Taze Russell, another false prophet. His Watchtower Bible and Tract Society has produced a prodigious amount of literature. It has prophesied the return of Christ in 1914, 1925, and 1975. Again, by God's standards, the representatives of the Watchtower Society are false prophets.

Jehovah's Witnesses deny the basics of the Christian faith. They deny the Trinity. They believe there is one singular God, Jehovah. Jesus is actually the created being Michael the Archangel, and who became flesh at the incarnation. The Holy Spirit is not God but an active force much like electricity or fire. They deny the bodily resurrection of Christ. Like Mormons, they deny the existence of hell and eternal punishment.

Both of these religions teach salvation by works, not God's grace. And they teach that salvation is only found in their organizations.

What do you do if they come to your door? First, don't do anything without sending up a prayer of dependence on God. If you are not well-grounded in your own beliefs, unless you know not only what you believe but why it's true, then you should probably politely refuse to talk to them, and work on your own understanding of your faith. Both Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are very successful at drawing in church-goers who can't recognize false teaching because they don't know what's true.

If you do know the Bible and what you believe, then

prayerfully and humbly answer their questions and comments by showing them what the Bible says. And pray that God's Spirit will show them the truth. He is grieved that people for whom Jesus died are so deceived.

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The Mystery of Reincarnation – A Christian Perspective

Can reincarnation be true? Dr. Pat Zukeran examines evidence for this Eastern belief and compares it to the Biblical concept of resurrection.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

Eastern Doctrine of Reincarnation

Many cultures throughout the world have long held to the concept of reincarnation. A recent Gallup Poll revealed that one in four Americans believed in reincarnation. Reincarnation literally means, "to come again in the flesh." World religions author Geoffrey Parrinder defines reincarnation as "the belief that the soul or some power passes after death into another body."{1}

Reincarnation is a major facet of the eastern religions of Hinduism and Buddhism. Many sects have variant views of reincarnation. Here is a general summary of the basic principles. Most hold to a pantheistic view of God. Pantheism comes from the Greek *pan* meaning "all" and concept of *theism*

meaning “God.” In Pantheism, God is an impersonal force made up of all things; the universe is God and God is the universe. All created beings are an extension of or an emanation from God.

Living things possess a physical body and an immaterial entity called the soul, life force, or Jiva. At death, the life force separates from the body and takes a new physical form. The law of karma determines what form the individual will take. This law teaches that one’s thoughts, words, and deeds have an ethical consequence, fixing one’s lot in future existences.{2} Our present state is the result of actions and intentions performed in a previous life. The amount of good or bad karma attained in our present life will determine if one returns in a higher or a lower form of existence.

One will endure hundreds, even millions of reincarnations, either evolving into a higher or lower form of life to work off the debt of karma. This cycle of reincarnation is called the *law of samsara*. Eventually one hopes to work off all bad karma and free oneself from the reincarnation cycle and attain unity with the divine. This freeing from the cycle of reincarnation is called *moksha*. The soul is viewed as imprisoned in a body and must be freed to attain unity with the divine.

Each school of thought varies in their teaching regarding how one attains ultimate deliverance from the reincarnation cycle. Most agree that it is only from the human form one can attain unity with the divine. Deliverance from the bondage of the body can be attained through various means. Some schools teach that through enlightenment that comes from knowledge, meditation, and channeling, one can break the cycle. Other schools teach that deliverance comes through faith and service to a particular deity or manifestation of the divine. In return, the deity will aid you in your quest for moksha. Other schools teach that one can attain deliverance through discipline and good works.

Much of the reincarnation teaching in the West is adapted from the teachings in the eastern religions. Is there evidence that proves reincarnation to be true? We will examine these next.

Evidences for Reincarnation

Leading reincarnation researcher Dr. Ian Stephenson, head of the department of Neurology and Psychiatry at the University of Virginia, believes there is compelling evidence for reincarnation. Proponents give five proofs: hypnotic regression, déjà vu, Xenoglossy, birthmarks, and the Bible.

The first proof is hypnotic regression. Reincarnation proponents cite examples of individuals giving vivid and accurate descriptions of people, places, and events the individual could not have previously known. Today there is a small branch of psychology that practice past life therapy, the belief that one's present problems are the result of problems from a previous life.

However, the accuracy of facts attained from hypnosis remains highly questionable. First, some people are known to have lied under hypnosis. Second, human memory is subject to distortions of all sorts. Third, under hypnosis a patient's awareness of fantasy and reality is blurred. Dr. Kenneth Bowers, a psychologist at the University of Waterloo and Dr. Jan Dywane at McMaster University states:

> ". . .although hypnosis increases recall, it also increases errors. In their study, hypnotized subjects correctly recalled twice as many items as did unhypnotized members of a control group but also made three times as many mistakes. During hypnosis, you are creating memories."{3}

Fourth, studies have shown that under hypnosis, patients are easily influenced by leading questions. In the process of hypnosis, the patient is asked to release control of his or her consciousness and body. Hans Holzer states, "Generally

women are easier to hypnotize than men. But there are exceptions even among women, who may have difficulty letting go control over their bodies and personalities, something essential if genuine hypnosis is to take place."{4} In this state, memories can be altered by the cues from the hypnotist. For these reasons, many law courts do not consider testimony under hypnosis reliable evidence.

Past life recall can also be attributed to the influence of culture. Cultures heavily steeped in the doctrine of reincarnation create an environment conducive to past life recall. The countries of India, Sri Lanka, Burma, and western Asia have a very high number of cases. Many who make claims of past life recall win the respect of their society. In areas like these the culture can have a strong influence on one's subconscious mind. If reincarnation is true, past life recall should be prevalent in all cultures, not primarily in one area.

Finally, the majority of the incidents occur among children. Dr. Stephenson states, "Many of those claiming to have lived before are children. Often they are very emotional when they talk of the person they used to be, and they give minute details of the life they lived."{5} Children are the most susceptible to suggestion and their testimony should be viewed with caution.

At best, the evidence from hypnotic regress can only suggest a possibility of reincarnation, but it does not conclusively prove it.

Déjà vu refers to a distinct feeling you have been to a place or performed an event before, while engaged in something that is presently happening. Reincarnation proponents attribute this to a previous life. However, researchers give alternate explanations. In our subconscious, we often relate a present event with a past one that the conscious mind does not remember. Since the two events are similar we often fuse the

events together in our minds, thus creating an impression that we have experienced this before. Other researchers have shown that the data that enters the eye is sometimes delayed for a microsecond on its way to the brain. This leads one to think that they have seen the data before.

Xenoglossy is the sudden ability to speak a language one has never learned. Reincarnation advocates attribute this as the language one spoke in a previous life. However, cryptoamnesia can account for this phenomenon. In cryptoamnesia, an individual forgets information that was learned earlier and recalls it at a later time, not knowing its source. It is possible that one can hear foreign terms through the media or as a child and recall these when prompted.

The fourth proof is the appearance of unique birthmarks that are similar to those possessed by a deceased individual. However, it is difficult to show any connection to reincarnation. Similarity does not prove sameness.

These alternative explanations can explain most of the evidences for reincarnation. However where they fall short, we must entertain the possibility of demonic possession where a foreign spirit takes control of the person as demonstrated several times throughout the New Testament. Demonic spirits have existed for thousands of years and are not limited by time and space. The information they possess can be injected into a person's mind during possession. Eastern meditation techniques allow for this possibility. Dr. Bro writes of Edgar Cayce, the father of the New Age movement, "Cayce's power came without equipment, in quiet. He appeared to empty himself, to hollow out his consciousness as a receptacle, a conduit."{6}

Even reincarnation advocates believe that many cases of past life recall can be attributed to possession. They confess that it is difficult to determine whether a past life recall is the result of reincarnation or possession. William de Arteaga states, "In reference to the demonic counterfeit hypothesis,

we can safely say that for many past life visions it is the most solidly verified hypothesis of all."{7}

Edgar Cayce stated, "That's what I always thought, and against this I put the idea that the Devil might be tempting me to do his work by operating through me when I was conceited enough to think God had given me special power. . . ."{8}

Although the evidence can be interpreted to support reincarnation, it cannot conclusively prove it.

Biblical Evidence for Reincarnation

Although reincarnation proponents cite the Bible as proof of their claim, the Bible refutes the idea. It teaches that we live once, die once, and then enter our eternal state. Hebrews 9:26b-27 states, "But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people. . . ." The focus here is on the sacrificial work of Christ. Instead of the continual animal sacrifices needed to atone for sins under the old covenant, under the new covenant Christ paid for sins once and for all.

In the same way as Christ, who appeared only once, man is destined to die once. Just as there is finality in Christ's sacrifice, there is finality in man's physical death. After that, the soul faces the judgment before God to determine one's eternal destiny. Once judgment is delivered, Scripture gives no evidence that sins can be atoned for in another time of living on earth (Rev. 20:11-15; Luke 16:19-31; Matt. 25:31-46).

The passage often appealed to by those who support reincarnation is John 9:1-3, which states, "As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born

blind?'" Reincarnation proponents claim that in this passage the disciples are attributing the man's blindness as the result of bad karma from a previous existence.

However, Jewish theology attributed birth defects to two factors. Prenatal sin committed by the baby after conception, but before birth, or sin committed by the parents. Genesis 25:22, the struggle of Jacob and Esau in Rachel's womb, was interpreted as a conflict that resulted from prenatal sin. Exodus 20:5 states that the parents' sin often had repercussions on their offspring. However, in the passage in John 9:1-3, Jesus refutes any connection between the man's defects and any previous sins, thus putting an end to any concept of karma.

Another passage is Matthew 11 where Jesus states that John the Baptist is Elijah. Reincarnation proponents interpret John as being the reincarnated Elijah from the Old Testament. This cannot be true for the following reasons. First, in 2 Kings 2, Elijah never died, but was taken to heaven. In the reincarnation model one must die before one can take on a new form. Second, in Matthew 17 Elijah appears with Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration. John the Baptist had lived and died by this time. If he had been the reincarnation of Elijah, John would have appeared instead. John came not as the reincarnation of Elijah, but in a metaphorical sense as Elijah in that he was filled with the same spirit and power as Elijah. So the Bible does not affirm reincarnation.

Reincarnation and Resurrection

The Bible teaches that what happens after death is a resurrection, not reincarnation. First Corinthians 15 is one of the clearest passages on what happens to the human soul after death. Like the reincarnation proponents, we agree that the immaterial component of man separates from the body at death and survives eternally. We both agree that the soul inhabits another bodily form.

The major difference is this: reincarnation proponents believe that the soul inhabits many bodily forms in an evolutionary progress toward union with the divine. This can happen over millions of years or in a shorter period. The Bible teaches in Hebrews 9:26b-27, as previously discussed, that we live once, die once and then enter into an eternal state.

Our eternal state is described in 1 Corinthians 15. Verse 20 states, “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” By “firstfruits” Paul was drawing on the imagery found in the Old Testament. The firstfruits were prior to the main harvest and served as an example and an assurance of the harvest that was coming. So Christ’s resurrection is a precursor and a guarantee of the believer’s resurrection. His resurrection greatly differs from the reincarnation model.

First, Christ’s resurrected body physically resembled His earthly body. It had physical properties displayed by the fact that He could be touched, He communicated, and He ate. His glorified body also possessed supernatural attributes. He was able to walk through walls, appear and disappear, and ascend to heaven.

Paul describes the glorified body as having a different kind of flesh from the earthly body. He states, “All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another, fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies. . . .” The new body will be imperishable and immortal. It will be a spiritual body that is designed for life in heaven. The glorified body will not suffer the effects of sin or the effects of time, sickness, or pain.

The unrighteous, however, enter a state of eternal torment immediately after death. Luke 16:19-31 demonstrates this point. In this example the unrighteous wealthy man enters hell immediately at death. In Matthew 25 the goats enter a state of eternal punishment with no hope of escape.

In summary, these are the differences. First, reincarnation teaches that the migration of the soul occurs over many lifetimes while resurrection occurs once. Second, reincarnation teaches we inhabit many different bodies while resurrection teaches we inhabit only one body on earth and a glorified immortal body in heaven that resembles our earthly one. Third, reincarnation teaches we are in an evolutionary progress to union with God while resurrection teaches we arrive at our ultimate state immediately at death. The Bible does not support reincarnation and it must not be confused with the doctrine of the resurrection, which is very different.

Notes

1. Geoffrey Parrinder, *Dictionary of Non-Christian Religions* (Philadelphia; Westminister Press, 1971), 286.
2. John Noss, *Man's Religions*, New York: MacMillan Press, 1980, 90.
3. Elizabeth Stark, "Hypnosis on Trial," *Psychology Today,* February 1984, p. 35, as cited by Geisler and Amano, *The Reincarnation Sensation*, 67.
4. Hans Holzer, *Life Beyond*, Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1994, 176.
5. Dr. Ian Stephenson, quoted in *Life Beyond* by Hans Holzer, Chicago: Contemporary Press, 1994, 167.
6. Harmon Bro, *A Seer Out of Season: the Life of Edgar Cayce*, (New York: New American Library, 1989), 13.
7. William de Arteaga, *Past Life Visions: A Christian Exploration* (New York: Seabury, 1983), p. 174, as cited by Geisler and Amano in *The Reincarnation Sensation*, 80.
8. Thomas Sugue, *The Story of Edgar Cayce: There is a River*, (Virginia Beach: Association for Research and Enlightenment, 1973), 219, as cited by Geisler and Amano in *The Reincarnation Sensation*, 79.

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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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