

## Hinduism: The Story of Diversity and Devotion

Hinduism is by far the most complex religion in the world, shading under its enormous parasol an incredibly diverse array of contrasting beliefs, practices, and denominations.

*Linda Johnsen*

Hinduism is not organized in the way we see most religions in the world. It does not have a particular founder, savior, book, leader, or holy place. It has no specific day of the week to observe, or call to prayer, or certain ritual that everyone must observe. It is decentralized and localized in a way in which it allows anyone to observe the basic principles that are best for him or her.

*Stephen Knapp*

There can be as many Hindu Gods as there are devotees to suit the moods, feelings, emotions and social backgrounds of the devotees.

*Sri Ramakrishna*

### Part 1: The Beginning

In a beginning, says Hinduism—not *the* beginning—the universe was full of water. In the middle of the water was an ever-growing egg, which was surrounded by the four elements of wind, fire, water, and sky. In the middle of the egg was Vishnu, one of the three most powerful gods in the Hindu pantheon. Vishnu was floating on the egg in the water and took the form of Brahma, the god of creation, who then created everything. When it is time to destroy this present world

before creating the next, Vishnu will take the form of Shiva, the god of destruction. Together these gods—the Hindu trinity—create, sustain, and destroy the universe.<sup>1</sup>

In a beginning—so goes another Hindu creation story—the universe was but a soul or *atman*. Because it desired a mate, it became as big as a man and a woman who were embracing, and divided its body in two. Together they produced humankind. Afterward the soul of the woman became a cow, and the soul of the man became a bull. From their union cows were born. The soul of the cow proceeded to turn into every female animal species, just as the soul of the bull transformed itself into every male animal species until all animals, “down to ants,” were created. Eventually the original soul created everything else in the world in a similar way. At the conclusion of the creation account, it was discovered that the soul was actually Brahman—Pure Awareness or the Supreme Reality. This reinforces the idea that everything is either directly or indirectly connected to Brahman.<sup>2</sup>

In a beginning—so goes just one more Hindu creation story—there was nothing in the universe. In fact, the universe was not there either! The only thing that existed was the Brahman or Divine Essence, which was without beginning or end. Lord Vishnu manifested himself on the water, where he slept on a great egg. While he was asleep, a lotus flower appeared out of his navel, and it grew and grew. From that lotus flower emerged the god Brahma—not to be confused with Brahman, of which Brahma is just one manifestation.

Brahma was curious about the origin of this lotus flower, and began asking himself the basic questions of life: “Who am I and where have I originated? What is the purpose of my existence?”<sup>3</sup> So he traveled for a hundred years to find the origin of the lotus flower; when he could not find it, he took another hundred years to return to his original home. Eventually he fell asleep from exhaustion. When he awoke, the four-armed Lord Vishnu was standing before him, and ordered him to perform meditation. Brahma did not realize that Vishnu was the origin of the lotus flower that bore him, and was put off by this other being ordering him around! Immediately the two got into a fight and continued fighting until they saw the image of the god Shiva standing before them. They agreed to stop fighting

1. This creation story is based on the “Vishnu Purana,” in *The Vishnu Purana*, trans. H. H. Wilson (Calcutta, 1894).

2. This creation story is based on the “Brihadaranyaka Upanishad,” in *The Bible of the World*, ed. Robert Ballou (New York: Viking Press, 1939), 38–41.

3. The “Shiva Purana,” in *Shiva Purana*, trans. B. K. Chaturvedi (New Delhi: Diamond Pocket Books, 2006), 10.

so that they could locate the origin of the shadow. They searched for thousands of years, to no avail.



Fig. 1.1. Statue of the Hindu god Vishnu on a temple wall.

Similar to the case before, the two gods Vishnu and Brahma ceased searching and decided to pray. After a hundred years of praying, the five-faced and ten-armed Shiva appeared before them. It was good that they were all together, they agreed. Shiva made an important announcement:

We are all three parts of the same entity. We are one and the same though having different forms. Brahma is the creator, Vishnu is the preserver, [and] I am the destroyer . . . There is another being named

Rudra who will originate from my body. But understand that Rudra and I will not be different.<sup>4</sup>

Once each of their roles had been established, creation began. In this way, these three supreme Hindu gods created humankind and everything that exists.

So go three of the more interesting creation stories of Hinduism. There are many more creation stories—thousands more. If you are anything like me, you may be wondering how it's possible to have multiple creation accounts. Isn't there only one? In Hinduism there are two ways to answer this question. The first is that there are myriad accounts of creation. And none of these is perceived as "contradicting" another. Rather, each of these stories refracts the tiny light of a much greater reality. Unlike Western expressions of Christianity, Hinduism is much more accepting of diversity and paradox.

The other part of the answer is that there are innumerable beginnings and ends of creation. Hindus believe the world has been created and destroyed countless times. So it is theoretically possible that one creation story contains one actual creation account, while a different one contains another. In Hindu thinking, the universe is billions of years old, and it goes through continual cycles of creation and destruction that repeat themselves just like the four seasons. As one Hindu practitioner explains:

Hindus experience time as cyclical, not progressing forward toward a final point as folks believe in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This concept is important because it leads to a completely different understanding of human history and of our role in the divine plan.<sup>5</sup>

According to Hinduism, when our present world cycle ends, another will be created. These cycles will continue in perpetuity. The cycle we are currently in is called *Kali*. Some believe this cycle began in 3102 BC at the time of the great Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*.<sup>6</sup> Characterized by darkness, vice, and short life spans (only 120 years for human beings), the *Kali* cycle lasts 432,000 years. It will eventually be replaced by a longer and more stable cycle. In line with Hindu thought, most of us who are alive today will eventually experience this new cycle—although we will do so in a different reincarnation of ourselves!

4. *Ibid.*, 10–11.

5. Linda Johnsen, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Hinduism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alpha, 2000), 8.

6. John Keay, *India: A History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 3.

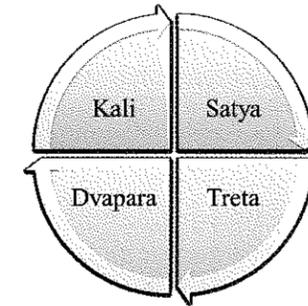


Fig. 1.2. The four cycles of Hinduism.

As far as these different cycles of creation and destruction are concerned, no one knows exactly when the earth was created. Nor is there any founder or apparent origin of Hinduism. Instead, practitioners of Hinduism assert that this religion has always existed, and is therefore called in Sanskrit—a Hindu religious language similar to Latin in Christianity—*Sanatana Dharma* or “the eternal religion.” This is a shocking declaration to some Christians, who believe that our Judeo-Christian heritage is the sole claimant of being the world’s oldest religion. On the contrary, Hindu practitioners understand their views and values to reside within the fabric of the universe itself. The laws and principles of Hinduism, it is believed, are interconnected with the laws of the cosmos. And regardless of which cycle we may find ourselves in—or even in what planet or solar system—these principles are eternally true.

## Part 2: Historical Origin

As I mentioned above, Hinduism does not have an easily traceable historical origin. Whereas, for instance, historical figures like Siddhartha Gautama (d. 483 BC) and Muhammad (d. AD 632) serve as convenient beginning points for Buddhism and Islam, respectively, Hinduism has the distinction of having no founder or religious leader. Thus, rather than turning to a specific historical figure to demarcate its origin, it is better to understand Hinduism as a melding together of four common periods—or, as one religious scholar describes these periods, a series of geological layers.<sup>7</sup> In this configuration, we could classify all the great diversity that we call “Hinduism” into four clearly identifiable layers or traditions—all of which, it is important to note, are

7. Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Rule the World—and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 139.

legitimate expressions of this religion or way of life: (1) Indus, (2) Vedic, (3) Wisdom, and (4) Devotion.

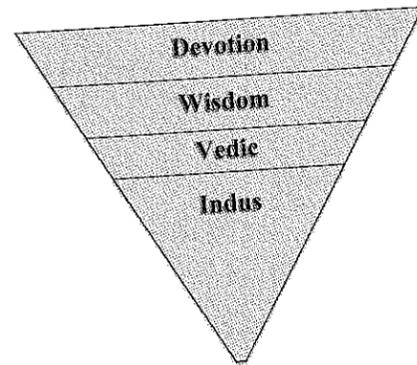


Fig. 1.3. The four traditions or "layers" of Hinduism.

**First Hindu Layer: Indus Civilization**

The first tradition, or perhaps pre-tradition, of Hinduism is traced back to a people who lived in current-day Pakistan and northwest India. They are called Aryans or Indo-Aryans. As a group, the Aryans thrived about four thousand years ago, and they are mentioned in the oldest Hindu scriptures, the Vedas. The Aryan society was a highly developed one, whose geographical reach encompassed the entirety of Greater India—a land that included modern-day countries such as India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan. It is debated whether this society was indigenous to Greater India or whether it came from a different location. Either way, it was through this culture that the term *Hindu* originated. The story of how this people group came to be known as Hindus goes like this:

One of the neighboring countries [of the Aryans], Persia, had a common border with ancient India, which at that time was known as Aryavarta—the land of the Aryans. This common border between Persia and ancient India was the river Indus, called in Sanskrit, Sindhu. The Persians could not pronounce Sindhu correctly; they pronounced it Hindu. They also called the Aryans, living on the other side of the river Sindhu, Hindus; thus the religion of the Aryans became known as Hinduism.<sup>8</sup>

With the rise of Christian missionaries from Europe and North America in the nineteenth century, the names *Hindu* and *Hinduism* stuck, and they

8. Swami Bhaskarananda, *The Essentials of Hinduism: A Comprehensive Overview of the World's Oldest Religion* (Seattle: Viveka Press, 2002), 2.

have become synonymous with essentially all the people from Greater India who are not Muslim. Over time the term also came to encompass those in this region who were not Buddhist, Jainist, Sikh, or Christian.

**Second Hindu Layer: Vedic Period**

It is from the Aryans that the second tradition of Hinduism emerges. Known as the Vedic period, this era is perhaps best associated with the influence of the caste system—with the Brahmins or priestly class at the top of the rung. As a passage from the Rig Veda, the oldest of the Vedas, explains:

One fourth of Brahman constituted all beings, while three fourths of him are immortal and stand above. With the one fourth below, he extended on all sides into animate and the inanimate . . . His face became Brahman. His arms were made into the Kshatriya, his thighs became the Vaishya; from his feet the Shudra was born. (RV 10.90.3-4, 12)<sup>9</sup>

At the top of the caste system were the Brahmins, who were seen as being constituted out of Brahman itself, which is Pure Awareness or Supreme Reality—what we as Christians might call an impersonal god. This priestly class was significant because it was the only group that could perform vital cultural and religious rituals and pronounce sacred mantras to the gods for sustenance and balance in the world.

CASTE	RANK	DESCRIPTION (AND DHARMA)
Priests (Brahmins)	Highest	Traditionally assigned to studying and teaching the Vedas, and performing vital rituals
Warriors (Kshatriyas)	Second highest	Assigned to protect and govern people. Includes politicians, princes, military, and police officers
Merchants (Vaishyas)	Second lowest	Assigned to take care of business. Includes the middle class, such as teachers, merchants, and businesspeople
Servants (Shudras)	Lowest	Assigned to serve those in the three castes above. Includes farmers and manual laborers
Untouchables (Dhaliits)	No class	The people who have no status and cannot participate fully in their religion

9. Wendy Doniger, trans., *The Rig Veda* (London: Penguin, 1981), 61.

Below the priestly (Brahmin) class were the remaining castes: warriors, businesspeople, menial laborers, and finally the untouchables—those who do not even qualify as being part of this system. In association with each caste, there is a *dharma* or responsibility. For the warriors, it is to protect; for the businesspeople, it is to take care of business and finance; and for the menial laborers, it is to serve. Largely acknowledged but frequently misunderstood, the caste system or *varna* (“color”) has played an extremely influential role in the history of Hinduism for centuries.

It was during the Vedic period that the first of the four Vedas or sacred scriptures, the Rig Veda, was composed. These texts date to the time of Moses.<sup>10</sup> In the Vedic period, the two main gods worshiped were Agni, the god of fire, and Indra, the god of storms. Although each of the Hindu traditions today traces its origin back to the Vedic period, this era’s most notable gods like Agni and Indra “have lost their importance and now play only a quite subordinate role.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, I have never met a Hindu who believed them to have any real importance in their lives or in Hindu thought.

#### *Third Hindu Layer: Philosophical Tradition*

Instead of focusing on the Vedic gods and the vast rituals that only the top three classes in the caste system can participate in, the third tradition of Hinduism—which emphasizes wisdom and philosophy—gives prominence to different gods and concepts that have been connected with the Hindu religion ever since this time. This includes concepts such as reincarnation, karma, and *advaita* or non-duality, the doctrine that all is one and nothing is separate from another being. Rather than turning to manifestations of the Divine Essence or Brahman, practitioners of this third tradition of Hinduism turn internally to the Brahman within each person.

Over the years, Hindus have distilled the vast teaching of this tradition into four truths called The Great Contemplations or The Great Utterances, which ultimately lead to one essential concept: I and Brahman are one. This is often a hard teaching for my students to grasp, so accustomed as we are to think of the creator as “wholly other”—as one Christian theologian asserts—and completely distinct from creation. Whereas Christians believe that God created humankind in his image—

10. William Young, *The World's Religions: Worldviews and Contemporary Issues* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 59.

11. Hans Kung et al., *Christianity and World Religions: Paths to Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism* (New York: Maryknoll, 2001), 151.

but not out of his own body—so Hindus influenced by this philosophical tradition, by contrast, believe that Brahman resides in every sentient being like a drop of water comes from the sea. In this way, you and I are one with all of creation.

Truth	Sources
Consciousness is Brahman.	<i>Aitareya Upanishad</i> 3.3 of Rig Veda (RV)
I am Brahman.	<i>Brihadaranyaka Upanishad</i> 1.4.10 of Yajur Veda (YV)
You are Brahman.	<i>Chandogya Upanishad</i> 6.8.7 of Sama Veda (SV)
The self and Brahman are one.	<i>Mandukya Upanishad</i> 1.2 of Atharva Veda (AV)

#### *Fourth Hindu Layer: Devotional Hinduism*

Although it is important and helpful to recognize the earlier forms of Hinduism, today the most common form of Hinduism is what may be referred to as devotional or *bhakti* Hinduism. In contrast with Brahmin priests performing rituals or gurus pursuing union with the Supreme Reality by renouncing the world or endlessly meditating, devotional Hinduism is about the average man or woman devoting his or her life to a god without leaving the comforts of life. This form of Hinduism is encapsulated by a well-known chapter in the Bhagavad Gita, which is a section of a much larger epic poem called the Mahabharata. In this chapter in the Gita, Lord Krishna informs his pupil Arjuna:

Whosoever desires to worship whatever deity (using whatever name, form, and method) with faith, I make their faith steady in that very deity. Endowed with steady faith they worship that deity, and fulfill their wishes through that deity. Those wishes are, indeed, granted only by Me. (7:21-22)<sup>12</sup>

The meaning of this passage is straightforward. All you have to do in this life is choose whichever god you want to be devoted to and then be obedient to him or her. It need not matter whether this god is Krishna, Jesus, Allah, a planet, or even a person—since each of these is seen as a representation of the same True Reality: Brahman. Your sincere devotion to this incarnation or expression of god is all that is needed.

12. Shri Purohit Swami, trans., *Bhagavad Gita: Annotated and Explained* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths, 2010), 63.

The majority of Hindus in the world practice devotional Hinduism. As one contemporary author writes, "Hinduism today is a way of devotion."<sup>13</sup> To devotional Hindus, their gods are real, personal, and faithful. In fact, I have witnessed practicing Hindus dedicate as much devotion, care, and love to their personal god as I have seen in many other religions—including Christianity. One of the most famous Hindu devotional worshipers was a Brahmin priest and guru named Ramakrishna (1836–86), who lovingly spent hours a day worshipping the goddess Kali. As one English Hindu practitioner writes about Ramakrishna and his devotion to Kali:

[Ramakrishna's] absolute trust in and devotion to the Mother [goddess Kali] led him from stage to stage of ecstasy, empowerment, and revelation of her nature in all its dazzling and paradoxical formal and formless aspects until, at last, he came to know her to be as inseparable from Brahman the absolute reality "as burning is from fire."<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 1.4. Murti (or sacred statue) of the Hindu goddess Kali, stepping on her husband Shiva in a temple in Malaysia.

13. Prothero, *God Is Not One*, 153.

14. Swami Nikhilananda, trans., *Selections from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna: Annotated and Explained* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths, 2002), viii.

### Part 3: Religious Writings

Unlike Islam or Christianity, whose scriptural canons are closed and relatively small, the sacred writings of Hinduism are enormous and ongoing. It is not unheard of for gurus to compose new scriptural texts in the present, although they do not carry the same weight as the more historical and established writings. As I mentioned above, at the foundation of the structural basis of Hindu sacred texts are the Vedas. One author writes succinctly, "The four Vedas form the core of our religion."<sup>15</sup> The traditional author, or at least compiler, of the Vedas (as well as the older Hindu scriptures) was Vyasa, a man believed to have lived over five thousand years ago.<sup>16</sup>

	Writings	Content
<b>Heard (Shruti)</b>	<i>Vedas</i> <i>Brahmanas</i> <i>Sutras</i> <i>Laws of Manu</i> <i>Upanishads</i>	Four sacrificial and ritual works Instructions for priests Instructions for all people Instructions for all people Philosophical meditations
<b>Received (Smrti)</b>	<i>Mahabharata</i> <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> <i>Ramayana</i> <i>Puranas</i>	Epic of war between tribes Vital section of Mahabharata Epic story about Rama Stories about various gods*

\* Modified from Winfried Corduan, *Pocket Guide to World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 70.

Somewhat similar to the notion of two types of canonical writings in Catholicism—first and most important, the proto-canonical or first-canonized writings (which virtually every Christian tradition accepts), and second, the deutero-canonical or second-canonized writings (which Protestants call the Apocrypha and reject as not divinely inspired)<sup>17</sup>—Hinduism has two sets of sacred texts. The oldest scriptures are called *shruti* ("that which is heard"), since they were believed to have been intuited by seers. These seers were spiritual masters who supposedly entered deep states of consciousness to hear the words of the universe to write down in their scriptures. The other group is called *smrti* ("that which is received"), since they were conceived, formulated, and written

15. Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati, *The Vedas*, 7th ed. (Mumbai: Bhavan's Book University, 2009), 3.

16. Johnsen, *Hinduism*, 48.

17. Michael Gorman, ed., *Scripture: An Ecumenical Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 11.

by humans.<sup>18</sup> Although these distinctions are still maintained, some in the second group of religious writings are just as famous and beloved as those in the first. It is difficult to date many of these texts, although many Hindus claim they are the most ancient of religious writings.<sup>19</sup>

The four Vedas (“knowledge”), like the Torah or first five books of the Jewish and Christian Bibles, are foundational. Although they are rarely read today by modern Hindus, they contain vestiges of the Vedic period from many thousands of years ago. The Vedas are composed in Vedic, an ancient form of Sanskrit, and include countless hymns directed toward a variety of gods as well as sacrificial rituals for Brahmin priests to perform. For the uninitiated, the Vedas are difficult to understand. They require a teacher to explain the spiritual or inner meaning of the literal words. The other main group of writings in the first order of canonized scriptures is the Upanishads (“sitting nearby”), which were written by the philosophers and contain stories between teachers and their pupils as well as mystical interpretations or reflections on the Vedas. There are more than two hundred Upanishads, although one hundred eight are usually grouped as the core ones.

In addition to the first order of canonized Hindu scriptures, there are a number of beloved sacred texts in the second order. We saw one group of these writings, the Puranas (“of ancient times”), in the beginning of the chapter when I discussed creation myths. These are traditionally eighteen in number, although, of course, the fluidity of the Hindu canon allows for more. These contain creation stories or myths. The Ramayana (“Rama’s journey”) and Mahabharata (“great telling of India”) are both epics, and are very long books. The first is about the god Rama, who is an incarnation or avatar of the god Vishnu, and his ventures to recover his wife Sita from a demon. The latter is a story about two rival clans who wage war against each other and find themselves in difficult situations requiring wisdom and sound ethics. A small section of this epic—which is otherwise about four times as long as the entire Bible!—is called the Bhagavad Gita (“song of god”). In this beloved book, the god Krishna serves as a spiritual guide to the warrior Arjuna. And Arjuna, realizing what an amazing opportunity he has to speak face-to-face with a god, asks to see what the Supreme Reality looks like—a request that Krishna obliges.

#### Part 4: Beliefs

As may be gathered, Hinduism is one of the most diverse of world religions. Unlike Islam, for instance, which requires assent to key articles

18. Winfried Corduan, *Pocket Guide to World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 70–71.

19. Johnsen, *Hinduism*, 48.

of faith such as belief in one omnipotent God—known as Allah or “the God”—as well as the finality of Allah’s messenger Muhammad, Hinduism is not nearly as dogmatic. To an outsider, one can get the impression that anything goes with Hinduism. Although not exactly true, the religion does have different scriptures, different gods, different worship practices, different postures toward one’s purpose or goal in life, and different ways to pursue whatever goal of life one wants to observe. As history of religions scholar Huston Smith writes:

If we were to take Hinduism as a whole—its vast literature, its complicated rituals, its sprawling folkways, its opulent art—and compress it into a single affirmation, we would find it saying: You can have what[ever] you want.<sup>20</sup>

Hinduism is less about a set of stringent doctrines and timeless beliefs and more about what one makes of it. In this sense, one scholar quite rightly points out, “There is nothing that you can say about Hindus or Hinduism without some form of qualification.”<sup>21</sup>

Compare Hinduism with Buddhism, for example. Although there is great diversity within Hinduism’s largest religious offshoot, there is probably less than in Hinduism—no doubt because Buddhism has a definite historical founder who serves as a measuring rod of orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right practice). Hinduism does not.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, it is not quite true to imply that anything goes within Hinduism. Although there are not necessarily religious leaders evaluating one’s beliefs to determine whether one is “in” or “out,” there are some shared beliefs and attitudes. Below is a list of nine commonalities within the Hindu religion. Although not every Hindu would agree with these articles—again, Hinduism is perhaps the most diverse of all the major religions—these articles nevertheless serve as a good starting point for discussion about Hindu core beliefs.

#### *Nine Beliefs of Hinduism*<sup>23</sup>

1. Hindus believe in one all-pervasive Supreme Being [Brahman] who is both immanent and transcendent, both Creator and Unmanifest Reality.

20. Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 13.

21. Stephen Jacobs, *Hinduism Today: An Introduction* (London: Continuum, 2010), 6.

22. Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 10.

23. See the following website: <http://www.hinduismtoday.com>.

2. Hindus believe in the divinity of the four Vedas, the world's most ancient scripture, and venerate the Agamas as equally revealed. These primordial hymns are God's word and the bedrock of *Sanatana Dharma*, the eternal religion.
3. Hindus believe that the universe undergoes endless cycles of creation, preservation, and dissolution.
4. Hindus believe in karma, the law of cause and effect by which each individual creates his own destiny by his thoughts, words, and deeds.
5. Hindus believe that the soul reincarnates, evolving through many births until all karmas have been resolved, and *moksha*, liberation from the cycle of rebirth, is attained. Not a single soul will be deprived of this destiny.
6. Hindus believe that divine beings exist in unseen worlds and that temple worship, rituals, sacraments, and personal devotionals create a communion with these *devas* and gods.
7. Hindus believe that an enlightened master, or *satguru*, is essential to know the Transcendent Absolute, as are personal discipline, good conduct, purification, pilgrimage, self-inquiry, meditation, and surrender in God.
8. Hindus believe that all life is sacred, to be loved and revered, and therefore practice *ahimsa*, noninjury, in thought, word, and deed.
9. Hindus believe that no religion teaches the only way to salvation above all others, but that all genuine paths are facets of God's Light, deserving tolerance and understanding.

The nine beliefs above serve as a good rubric from which to discuss the core elements of Hindu thinking. Because discussing all nine of these articles would require a book in and of itself, we will limit our discussion in this section to the first article: the Supreme Being. This immediately distinguishes the Hindu religion from, on the one extreme, Buddhism, which classically denies a personal god, and, on the other extreme, Islam, which asserts the existence of *the* only God: Allah. It has been estimated that there are 330 million gods within Hinduism, but there is no requirement to believe in one or another. In this way, there is great diversity. In fact, there are several potential beliefs concerning the nature and number of gods:

1. There is one God, and all the other "gods" are mere manifestations of the one true God.

2. There are many gods.
3. There is no god, just our own imaginations conceiving of different gods.

For Christians, this is strange and does not make sense. How can different people be of the *same religion* when one person believes in many gods, while another person believes in one—or none! I distinctly remember having a conversation with a group of Hindu believers from India at a Hindu temple when I asked how many gods there are. Without blinking, they responded in unison: "We believe in one god!"

"Then how," I rejoined, "are there so many different gods in Hinduism?"

Again in unison, they replied: "There is one supreme God that cannot be fully known or understood. The gods we talk about on earth and give devotion to are simply manifestations of that one supreme God."

This gets to the core of a common misconception about Hinduism. Although there are countless "gods"—whether Shiva or Vishnu or Ganesha or Parvati or Hanuman—these gods are commonly understood by Hindus as representations of the true God, whom we cannot fathom. This is why one Hindu can worship Shiva, while another worships Kali. Although each person seems to be worshipping a different god, the person is really worshipping only the one true God, who is manifest through Shiva or Kali or whomever. How do you decide which god to worship? It depends. Some people worship specific gods because of the town or village they live in or because of their family or place in the caste system.

More pragmatically, some worship a particular god because of that god's association with a specific thing. I remember one conversation I was recently having with a Hindu priest about this very topic. He said that perhaps the most popular deity in his temple was the goddess Lakshmi. I asked him why, and he was quick to reply: "Because most of the people in our temple would like more money, so it's natural to worship her, who has cascades of gold coins rushing down from her hands!" In the temple where he presided, he said, it is not that some people prefer Shiva or some people prefer Vishnu—two of the most popular gods in the Hindu pantheon. Instead, people worship this god or that god based on their need of the moment. Are you about to go on a business trip? Then ask for guidance from Ganesha, the god of venture and journey. Are you in need of money? Then ask Lakshmi!



Fig. 1.5. Statue of Ganesha, one of the most beloved Hindu gods.

### Part 5: Worship Practices

Unlike Christians, who have historically worshiped on Sunday mornings, Hindus do not have a prescribed service or time of worship, a practice that is called *puja* (“reverence”). In fact, most Hindus have their own personal shrines at home and do not necessarily attend a temple on a regular basis. They are able to perform *puja* at home on their own (or, for wealthier families, with the aid of a priest). They will feed, clothe, and give worship to these household gods on a daily basis. These gods are small statues called *murtis* (“embodiment”) that are imbued with the divine through a ceremony by a priest, and Hindu practitioners need to make use of the priest and temple only on special occasions—such as for festivals, for individual requests, or for making or fulfilling vows. For those who do attend a Hindu temple, a religious service typically includes a congregational *puja* three times a day where the priest performs a special ceremony or ritual.<sup>24</sup> Individuals are also able to make use of the temple through the rituals of the priest for a fee. The highlight of many services is *darshan* (“sight”), when a person is “seen” by the god that he or she is devoted to—or even by a guru—in order to receive a transaction of blessing.

In terms of worship practices, there are three main paths or *yogas* (“yokes”) to God,<sup>25</sup> which we discussed in a section above. Depending on which religious path one takes, this compels one to live a certain way.

<sup>24</sup> Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 208.

<sup>25</sup> There is sometimes added a fourth way, called *raja yoga*, which is for the advanced and focuses on the mind and meditation.

Although the term *yoga* in the West generally conjures up the image of a fit person trying to make a workout spiritual as well as physical, this type of yoga in Hinduism, called *hatha yoga* (“path of persistence”), is not common or particularly spiritual.<sup>26</sup> As the related term *yoke* in English suggests, *yoga* means yoking or uniting something to something else—in the case of Hinduism, yoking one’s soul or *atman* (“self”) to the Supreme Reality or Brahman. For all practical purposes, the different ways of yoking one’s soul to Brahman are paths that one can follow. Because there are several paths to the same destination, the paths are not mutually exclusive. They can be combined or they can be roads that individuals take at different phases of their lives.

### *The Different Types of Yoga as Illustrated in the Bhagavad Gita*

Of the three established paths of uniting one’s soul to the divine, the first one, called *karma yoga* (“path of action”), is about action or works. Specifically, it is the selfless action that one performs according to one’s duty or station in life—including one’s place within the caste system. It is about sacrificing your own ego or self in order to become one with and to be used by the divine. If you are a stay-at-home mother, for example, this means that you are to perform those duties that come with this line of work, and to do so cheerfully and without complaint. You are to understand your work without regard for your own benefit or advantage. You work for your husband, your children—and for your god. By doing so, you are able to be a channel of the divine and you are working out your own karma or deeds. In the beloved Bhagavad Gita, *karma yoga* is the type of yoga that is traditionally understood to be the first of three in that book. Although the protagonist Arjuna is demoralized because he does not want to fight his cousins, the god Krishna explains to him that it is his duty as a warrior in the caste system to fight—regardless of the consequence. By so doing, he is able to be a channel of the divine and to fulfill his purpose on earth. In short, the importance of living within the boundaries of the caste system in Hinduism cannot be overestimated.

As I have amply discussed above, the second type of yoga is by far the most common in Hinduism today. Called *bhakti yoga* (“path of devotion”) or devotional Hinduism, this form of Hinduism is about showing love and devotion to a god or goddess of your choosing (among the millions of gods and goddesses available!). There are four major denominations or

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *The World’s Religions*, 27.

schools of thought within devotional Hinduism. In a manner of speaking, they recognize different gods as supreme:

1. The school of Vishnu (Vaishnavism), which venerates Vishnu, his wife Lakshmi, and Vishnu's incarnations (such as Krishna and Rama).
2. The school of Shiva (Shaivism), which venerates Shiva, his wife Parvati, and their son Ganesha.
3. The school of Shakti (Shaktism), which venerates goddesses such as Kali and Durga, who are both consorts of Shiva.
4. The school of Smarta (Smartism), which venerates any number or combination of gods.

TYPE	DESCRIPTION	SECTION	EXCERPT FROM BHAGAVAD GITA
Works (Karma Yoga)	The (selfless) action one performs according to one's <i>dharma</i> or duty without desire of reward	Chaps. 1-6	"Perform all your actions with mind concentrated on the Divine, renouncing attachment and looking upon success and failure with an equal eye." (2.48)
Devotion (Bhakti Yoga)	Devotion to one's god (in this case, Krishna as the avatar of Lord Vishnu)	Chaps. 7-12	"Listen, O Arjuna! And I will tell you how you shall know me in my full perfection, practicing meditation with your mind devoted to me, and having me for your refuge." (7.1)
Knowledge (Jnana Yoga)	Distinguishing between what is real and unreal	Chaps. 13-18	"The one who can see the Supreme Lord in all beings, the Imperishable amid the perishable, this is the one who really sees." (13.27)*

\* Shri Purohit Swami, trans., *Bhagavad Gita: Annotated and Explained* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths, 2010), 19, 59, 109.

Of all the different forms of Hinduism, *bhakti yoga*, or the way of loving attachment and devotion, is the path most like Christianity. As Christians direct our love, faith, and worship to God through the person of Jesus Christ, so *bhakti* practitioners direct their love and devotion to a particular god—whether Krishna, Kali, Vishnu, or another. And also like Christianity, the person who practices this type of yoga directs his

or her love and adoration to a god who is personal and personable. This devotion is demonstrated by repeating the god's name, by offering the god fruit or flowers, and by offering worship and prayers to him or her.

The third type of Hindu religious practice is *jnana yoga* ("path of knowledge") or philosophical Hinduism. This is the path for the very spiritual. The goal is discrimination between what is real and what is unreal, and what is true and what is not true. The way toward discriminating between these things is by meticulous study and reflection. Through practice, one is then able to understand and apply the notion that we, as living beings, are not different from the Supreme Reality, and that I am not different from you. Like separating oil from water when poured into a glass, a *jnana yogi* has to separate the true and infinite self from the transient self. One common exercise for this type of yoga is practicing thinking and saying that it is not you, for instance, who is reading this book; rather, it is Josh or Janet—or whomever—who is reading this book! By doing so, you are able to detach yourself from the impermanent and thereby unify yourself to the permanent.

Part 6: Point of Contact

One way to think about the Hindu religion is to understand it as the journey of the soul. Like a hermit crab that uses a shell for a time before inevitably taking on a new one, Hinduism asserts that a soul or *atman* endures year after year, century after century, millennium after millennium. For one century it may be a man; for a millennium it could be another sentient being. This cyclical view of reality clashes with the Christian worldview. As Christians, we agree that life is a journey, but we do not see it as an endless cycle of death and rebirth. Thanks to Jesus Christ, who has conquered death, we do not have to fear what will happen to us after we die physically. We have entrusted our lives to the One who is Lord of both body and soul.

For Christians, the way we receive the benefits of Christ's death (and his conquering of death) is by trusting in him for the forgiveness of our sins. As the New Testament authors explain, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), except, that is, for Jesus—who is the only One who was "without sin" (Heb. 4:15). We therefore turn to Jesus for our salvation. In Hindu thought, by contrast, one's sins do not warrant the sacrificial death of God's son; nor is salvation given prominence. What is more important for Hindus is not salvation from sin but liberation from the continual cycle of death and rebirth—what is called *samsara* ("continuous flow"). Liberation from this cycle comes

about by uniting with the divine. This is accomplished by devoutly and resolutely following one of the major paths we discussed above. By following such a path, one will either ensure a better birth in the next reincarnation of oneself or, as an advanced guru, learn how to escape *samsara* and be forever united to Brahman. The latter is very difficult to do, so the average Hindu is resigned to seeking a better birth in the next lifetime.

Because of the great tolerance and syncretism of Hinduism, it is not uncommon for Christians to share their faith in Jesus with Hindus, and for Hindus to cheerfully add Jesus to their pantheon of gods. I remember having a conversation with a Hindu woman about my Christian faith in Jesus, and why it is important to worship him. "But I do worship Jesus," she said. "I have a statue of Jesus at my home that I pray to every day!" As Ramakrishna, one of the great Hindu teachers of the past few centuries, whom I mentioned above, once stated, "Truth leads to unity, ignorance to diversity." What Ramakrishna meant is that all religions, although seemingly different, are actually the same and lead to the same God. As Christians, we certainly believe in the unity of the body of Christ, but we deny that Jesus is only one of many ways to God. On the contrary, we believe that Jesus is "the way" (John 14:6) to God. There is not another path or yoga to the Father (1 John 5:12).

In the end, Hinduism is certainly a fascinating religion—one that is vibrant, diverse, and deeply spiritual. It is for this reason that it continues to attract practitioners in the West who are spiritually bankrupt and weary of the materialism and consumerism of our everyday lives. It is also attractive to many in the West because of what Christian author Os Guinness calls "the ABC (or 'anything but Christianity') mood" of the West, which fancies any religion that is fresh and lively—provided that it is not Christianity!<sup>27</sup> As the West continues to come into more contact with the East, religions such as Hinduism—and the worldviews they espouse—will only become more prominent. It is for this reason that it is important to know more about this juggernaut of a religion—out of which, by the way, the term *juggernaut* originated<sup>28</sup>—so that we can know how to discern its teachings as well as how to respond to Hindus and fellow believers with gentleness and respect about the great hope that lies in us as Christians.

27. Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose in Your Life* (Nashville: Word Publishing Group, 2003), 145.

28. The term originated from a large craft used by Hindus in special ceremonies that carried *murtis* or Hindu gods. See Young, *The World's Religions*, 75.

## Discussion Questions

1. Imagine what it would be like to view life as an unending cycle of reincarnation—life, death, and rebirth. How would this affect the way you approached each day? How would it affect your future planning?
2. In contrast with Christianity, Hinduism has thousands of creation stories. In the three Hindu stories included in this chapter, what differences are there between the Hindu gods and the God of the Bible in Genesis? Do these differences matter?
3. Given the popularity in the West of *hatha yoga*—or what most Americans would simply call *yoga*, conjuring up images of healthy, flexible people in aerobic garb—is it appropriate for Christians to engage in yoga for exercise purposes? Does considering the fact that *hatha yoga* is not particularly spiritual affect your opinion?
4. Some Hindus worship Jesus as a god. Does this open up the possibility of Christian dialogue and witness with Hindus? How does a Christian convey the ultimacy of Christ as the one "way"? What obstacles would there be to overcome in such a conversation?
5. The caste system is often viewed negatively by Westerners because of its lack of opportunity for social mobility. Many in the caste system believe that their station in life is their "fate," and that it cannot be changed. What kind of hope can the gospel of Jesus Christ offer to people in the caste system? Specifically, what hope does it offer to those living in the lowest, "untouchable" echelons of the caste system? What passages of the Bible come to mind?

## Further Readings

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