

HINDUISM

Overview: The vast majority of Hindus live in India, some 700 million, where they account for approximately 82% of the population. Hinduism developed over many centuries and as such has no one founder or leader. The most famous is Mahatma Gandhi who led India to freedom from the British Empire. The goal of Hinduism is Nirvana, a oneness with Brahman, and a release from the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Hinduism is divided into many sects and offshoots. Three religions that began as movements within Hinduism are Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. Hindu's are divided along the lines of whether the physical universe is real or illusory. The non-dualist see Brahman alone as real and the world as illusory. The qualified non-dualists affirm the reality of Brahman and the universe in that the universe is an extension of Brahman. The dualists see Brahman and the universe as two distinct realities.

History:

The origins can be traced back to about 1500BC in what is now India. It began as a polytheistic and ritualistic religion. Initially the rituals were simple enough to be performed by the head of the household. Through many centuries the rituals became more complex, making it necessary to create a priestly class to perform the rituals correctly. During this time the *Vedas* were written to give the priests instructions as to how to perform these rituals. Because of this change the priests took on greater position and power among the people, so that priests became the sole means to approach or appease the gods.

About 600 BC the people revolted. The Hinduism that emerged afterward emphasized the importance of internal meditation as opposed to external rituals. The *Upanishads*, or *Vedanta* ("the end of the *Vedas*"), were written during this time frame (800-300BC). They are much like the New Testament.

Views of God:

Their view of God developed over time. Starting out as polytheistic (there are still an estimated 330 million gods in Hinduism) it moved towards a monistic force ("all is

one”), which is called Brahman. The *Upanishads* develop the one reality behind the many Gods. The highest form of Brahman is *nirguna*, which means “without attributes” Even after the *Upanishads* are written the concept of God continues to develop. *Nirguna* Brahman became *saguna* (with attributes) Brahman. This personified form is also known as *Ishvara*.

According to Hindu tradition *Ishvara* became known to humanity through the *Trimurti* (three manifestations) of Brahman. The manifestations include *Brahma* (the creator), *Vishnu* (the preserver), and *Shiva* (the destroyer). The *Ishvara* became even more personified through the ten mythical incarnations of *Vishnu*, called *avatars*. *The avatars* include animals and people such as Rama, Krishna, and Buddha.

Beyond the *Trimurti* and the *avatars* there are an estimated 330 million gods.

Views of Humanity:

Most Hindus believe that they are in their true selves an extension of and one with Brahman.

Views of Sin:

The law of *Karma* is very similar to the concept of sin but with a few important differences. They both involve moral issues and both are said to have a cause and effect relationship in our lives.

But:

Karma cannot affect one’s relationship to Brahman since Brahman is the essence of the existence in all things. Good or bad *Karma* makes no difference to the fact that we are unconditionally extended from the oneness.

The law of *Karma* is like a law of nature for morality, its consequences are inevitable and inescapable. There is no possibility of forgiveness.

Views of Scripture:

Their earliest scriptures are the *Vedas*. *Veda* means knowledge and it has the same root as the English word for wisdom. There are four *Vedas*: *Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, and the *Atharva Veda*. Each *Veda* is divided into four parts: *Mantras* (basic verses or hymns sung during the rituals) *Brahmanas* (explanation of the verses), *Aran-yakas* (reflections on their meaning), and the *Upanishads* (mystical interpretations). The *Vedas* are the primary scriptures, they are called *shruti* (that which is heard) an equivalent to revelation.

The secondary scriptures are considered *smriti* (remembered). Included in the *smriti* are the *Ramayana* (Rama’s Way), and *Mahabharata* (the great story). Within the *Mahabharata* epic is the most popular of all Hindu scriptures the *Bhagavad-Gita*, in which the main character is Krishna. While the *smriti* are not as authoritative as the *shruti* they have had more influence on India’s culture.

Views of Salvation:

The salvation or goal of Hinduism is *Moksha* (liberation). It is the liberation from the wheel of life, death, and rebirth. Such liberation is attained through enlightenment, realizing that only the oneness Brahman is real and the individual self is an illusion. With such a realization in mind one must strive to detach oneself from desires of the ego. There are at least three paths to this enlightenment; *karma marga* (the way of action and ritual), *jnana marga* (the way of knowledge and meditation), and *bhakti marga* (the way of devotion).

According to the Upanishads the goal of enlightenment is for the individual self to lose its separate identity in the universal self.

Other Major Teachings:

- Samsara (reincarnation) ~ This refers to the ever-revolving wheel of life, death, and rebirth. We are said to be reaping in this life the consequences of the deeds committed in previous lifetimes. A person's karma determines what kind of body (whether human, animal, or insect) one will be reincarnated into.
- In any one life one's place is fixed in a caste or level of society.
- All life is sacred and should be respected and not harmed.
- No particular religion teaches the only way to salvation above all others. All genuine religious paths are facets of God's "pure love and light" and deserve tolerance.

Approaching Hindus With The Gospel:

- Point to the forgiveness Jesus offers.
A former Hindu and an Indian evangelist Bakht Singh once said, "I have never yet failed to get a hearing if I talk to them about forgiveness of sins and peace and rest in your heart". Forgiveness is a real need and not available to Hindu's in their belief system, which is based on the law of karma. A good biblical passage is Matthew 11:28-30.
- Show God's personal nature.
Show how we hurt him. Such as grieve the Holy Spirit
Show how he loves us. Sent his Son to die for us.
How he is aware of and can empathize with our suffering (Ex 3:7; Heb 4:15)
- Be humble and let them see your peace of mind and assurance of forgiveness
- Focus on Jesus. Give them a N.T. and ask them to discover who Jesus was. Let your friend know Gandhi said, "I shall say to the Hindus that your lives will be incomplete unless you reverently study the teachings of Jesus"
- Be aware of differing definitions. Such sayings as "born again" would mean something completely different to a Hindu, who would understand it to mean reincarnation.

Works Consulted

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