

Hinduism and Buddhism

Introduction and Christian Apologetics

Hinduism

Attempting to describe the worldview of pantheism to which over a billion Hindus, Buddhists, and followers of other Eastern religions belong presents a difficult, if not impossible challenge, given the amazing diversity of beliefs even within each of these religions. Unlike the major theistic religions, the Eastern religions, and Hinduism in particular, lack a central founder, creed, or authoritative scripture. Thus, beliefs about God, gods, life after death, salvation, and sin vary among nations, cities, peoples, and castes (ordered descent-based social groupings within Indian society).

As for the nature of God, no unifying conception exists. Hindus may believe any of the following: monism (all existence is one substance); pantheism (all existence is divine); panentheism (God is in creation as a soul is in a body); animism (God or gods live in nonhuman objects such as trees, rocks, animals, etc.); polytheism (there are many gods); henotheism (there is one god we worship among the many that exist) and monotheism (there is only one God). As for beliefs about the afterlife or attaining "salvation", these also differ. Hundreds of sects created by caste, geography, belief, and language lead outsiders to view Hinduism as a chaos of strange rituals and superstitions.

Among the strange rituals and superstitions are: worship of trees, of serpents, and of special "genii" (which are often of demoniacal nature as in the case of the goddess of smallpox); practice of magic; and idolatry (temple idols are actual incarnations of a godhead). Another seemingly primitive feature of Hinduism is the divine status given to natural features and phenomena. For example, many believe that bathing in the Ganges River can destroy one's sins. Hindus also revere heavenly bodies, such as the planets, the sun, and the moon.

Hinduism's tremendous diversity in beliefs probably arises from its unorganized history. Unlike other major world religions, Hinduism has no single founder, creed, teacher, or prophet acknowledged by all Hindus as central to the religion, and no single holy book is universally acclaimed as being of primary importance. We can trace its beginnings, however, to the polytheistic and ritual religions of India's aboriginal people, inhabiting the region around 2000 B.C. They wrote sacred poems and entire manuals on rituals. Hindus now refer to the earliest of these writings as the *Vedas*, and many consider them to be transhuman, that is, not authored by human beings.

A dominant feature of the Vedic period was ritual sacrifice, but sacrifice gave way to great intellectual speculation around the sixth century B.C. Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) emerged at this time, as well as many others who questioned the structure of Indian religion by focusing on an individual's own spiritual journey rather than relying on a priestly class. The concluding portions of the *Vedas*, known as

the *Upanishads*, were written during this period. The *Upanishads* set forth two concepts that all Hindus can now agree upon, **samsara** (reincarnation) and **karma** (consequences of behavior). The "law of karma" refers to a system of cause and effect that may span several lifetimes. It dictates that human beings gain rewards or suffer punishments from every action they perform. Good and bad deeds do not simply cancel each other out. One has to experience the fruits of all actions in the course of many lives, and this determines the nature and quality of one's next existence.

If Hinduism can be said to have an ultimate goal, then the *Upanishads* set this forth. The text asserts that the soul's quest lies in achieving liberation (**moksha**) from the ever-revolving wheel of life, death, and rebirth (samsara). The *Upanishads* also claim that behind the many gods stands one supreme being, identified as **Brahman**, which is considered to be beyond all human comprehension. Ultimately, Brahman cannot be described because it is infinite, and definitions set boundaries. Some later texts claim that the divine entity without attributes (nirguna Brahman) assumes a form with attributes (saguna Brahman) to make itself accessible to humankind. Saguna Brahman is called Ishvara. According to Hindu tradition, Ishvara becomes manifest to humanity in three forms: Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Preserver), and Shiva (the Destroyer). These are the three main deities of Hinduism, but some 330 million other gods play smaller roles.

Later literature deals with **dharma**, or truth and righteousness. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, another sacred text, Brahman is referred to as the deity Vishnu. It is believed that over the ages Vishnu has descended to earth several times in animal and human form to overthrow evil and establish dharma. The *Bhagavad Gita* emphasizes that dharma should be performed without expectation of reward but with devotion to one God. Devotionalism (**bhakti**)--the intensely personal worship of, and surrender to, this supreme being, whatever its manifestation--has been one of the most common features of many Hindu communities ever since.

Earlier it was stated that the *Upanishads* set forth the quest for liberation from the cycle of life and death that every soul is believed to undergo. All Hindus share a belief in this process, but how, one may ask, do Hindus seek to achieve liberation? In the course of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna, an incarnation of the god Vishnu, describes three pathways to liberation: the way of action; the way of devotion; and the way of knowledge. The way of action is the path of unselfish action; a person must do one's duty (dharma), such as doing good deeds. Another way is that of devotion (bhakti). This path may be the most popular one among Hindus of every walk of life. Ultimately, if one surrenders to the Lord, he forgives all sins and destroys karma. Many Hindus consider such complete devotion to a god or a goddess, leaving oneself open to divine grace, the only way to salvation.

The two ways described so far come from schools of thought that make an ultimate distinction between the human being and God. According to the way of knowledge, however, the human soul (**atman**) is believed to be identical with Brahman. Humanity's problem lies in the fact that we are ignorant of our divine nature. If we could realize that "individuals" are merely extensions of Brahman, then we would no

longer attach ourselves to the desires of our separate selves, and thereby to karma. Yielding ourselves to absorption by Brahman leads to destruction of karma and, as a consequence, to liberation. This pathway does not generally appeal to the masses, which regard the diversity in polytheism as normal. Philosophers, on the other hand, find this pathway more sensible.

Witnessing to Hindus: Practical Suggestions

When doing campus evangelism, remember that meaningful dialogue with Hindus results from patience, words couched in love, prayer, and attempting to understand from where they are coming. First of all, never assume that you know what any one Hindu believes, for Hinduism has a wide diversity of beliefs. Before rushing into the gospel presentation, listen to them. Showing interest in their culture and belief system will make them more inclined to consider what you have to say. While they talk, listen for key words such as “achieve,” “overcome,” and “strive.” These words reveal how enlightenment stands in sharp contrast to Christian salvation. Enlightenment relies on human effort, but salvation relies on none. Discuss passages such as Romans 3:19-24 and Ephesians 2:8,9 to make the distinction between the two clear.

Because two of the possible pathways to enlightenment rest on human achievement, many Hindus feel hopelessly bound to the endless cycle of death and rebirth. The law of karma is a law of nature—every cause has its effect and there is no hope for forgiveness. Christianity, however, can offer such a hope. For Hindus who find themselves fatigued from striving, the words of Christ in Matthew 11:28 may provide comfort, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

When presenting the gospel, use as simple language as possible. We must always remember that Christianity has its own vocabulary. Using theological terms without defining them can lead to great confusion. Take, for example, the phrase “born again.” To a Hindu this phrase refers to reincarnation, a bondage from which they are striving to be liberated. To Christians, on the other hand, being “born again” is desirable.

While conversing with Hindus, also keep God’s personal nature at the forefront. This will help them understand what Christianity is all about. If God has a personal nature, unlike Brahman, then humans have the capability of rebelling against Him. Christians refer to this as sin. Sin has no meaning with an impersonal God, because only a personal being can make moral distinctions. Emphasizing the personal aspect of God’s nature also shows that sin can have consequences. Even on a human level, we are aware that sin breaks relationships. At the same time, however, we are also aware that persons have the capacity to forgive. An impersonal force, such as Brahman, would not have this capacity. To illustrate the personal aspect of God’s nature, you might use the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). Hindus will relate to this easily.

Buddhism: History and Beliefs

During the earlier discussion of Hinduism's history, it was mentioned that a period of great intellectual speculation occurred around the sixth century B.C., and Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) emerged at this time. From his teachings, Buddhism derives its basic ideology. Because Siddhartha spent most of his life immersed in Hindu culture one will see Hinduism's strong influence on his ideology.

Buddhist tradition relates that Siddhartha was born into one of northern India's most prosperous families at a time when possessing abundant wealth was the norm. Frequent heavy rains in northern Italy made landowners wealthy and manual irrigation unnecessary. Thus Siddhartha experienced little hardship throughout most of his life. In fact, he never left the walls of his father's palace until his early thirties. What he saw upon finally leaving disturbed him greatly and led him to question his worldview. In the park just outside the palace he witnessed three sights that brought home the reality of human suffering: a person in old age, a sick man, and a corpse. Coming to grips with the presence of suffering in the world would in time steer Siddhartha toward enlightenment.

Why, one may ask, did it take Siddhartha so long to realize that humans suffer, and why did those three sights affect him so? The answers to these questions lie in the fact that Siddhartha's father protected him from suffering throughout his life. Lacking exposure to human suffering until midlife increased his sensitivity to pain. Whenever he did become aware of it, he developed a pessimism toward life that penetrated to the core of his being. It shook him so much that he left his family to follow an ascetic, or someone who seeks liberation from the cycle of life and death through renunciation of everything.

Siddhartha withdrew from society so that he could concentrate on devoting himself to strenuous fasting and self-denial. Finding this pathway to liberation unproductive, he adopted a new system of thought, the "Middle Way," which seeks to avoid the extremes of self-indulgence and self-denial. Siddhartha then continued to wander and contemplate human suffering. Eventually his wanderings brought him to the Bodi Tree, or "Tree of Awakening." Under this tree he gained insight into four basic holy "truths," these being: "truth of suffering itself," "truth of the origin of suffering," "truth of the removal of suffering," and "truth of the Path." Upon understanding these truths, Siddhartha experienced the enlightenment or awakening (*bodhi*) that made him a *buddha* (it should be noted that while Siddhartha is called *the* Buddha, he was not the first, or the last, to attain "*buddha-hood*").

Buddhists today do not regard Siddhartha as divine, though some of their rituals may suggest they do. He simply brought a doctrine, the way of enlightenment that each person can achieve for himself. Buddha demanded no "faith"; indeed, he refused to be revered as a religious authority. Whenever Buddhists today venerate relics associated with his life, they do so to intensify their focus on his teachings.

Buddhists now refer to the four basic holy “truths” that Buddha discovered under the Bodi Tree as the “Four Noble Truths.” One can summarize them as follows:

- **Truth of Suffering Itself:** Humans all cling to temporary things and to their individuality by thinking that flesh, sensation, perception, striving, and consciousness last forever. In the end, however, everything in life has a beginning and end. The body dies, love is lost, and perceptions change. Everything is doomed to corruption. Whatever begins and ends without attaining a fixed goal or any satisfaction is full of suffering.
- **Truth of the Origin of Suffering:** Suffering originates from thinking that things in the universe are permanent and from attempting to cling to one’s individuality. In reality nothing in the universe has permanence, not even the soul. What one perceives as permanent is merely a bundle of temporary events on a deeper level. Because humans perceive things as permanent, they thirst after these things. Thirsting after impermanent things brings suffering.
- **Truth of the Removal of Suffering:** Suffering ends when one is no longer ignorant of the impermanent nature of things. Once this occurs, one has achieved *nirvana*, literally the “blowing out” of the fire of ignorance, which the Buddha perceived to be the “fuel” of samsara, or the endless cycle of death and rebirth. Because nirvana gives a cessation of thirst after impermanent things, it leads to a state of compassion for others, free from self-centeredness.
- **Truth of the Path:** Only by a life of avoiding extremes through morality, concentration, and wisdom can humans end desire, pull themselves from suffering, and achieve the final goal of liberation. The Noble Eightfold Path offers guidelines on how to do this. It consists of the following stages: 1) Right views about the world and life by insight into the four truths; 2) Right Disposition and Right Resolve; 3) Right Speech; 4) Right Conduct; 5) Right Livelihood; 6) Right and Proper Effort and Endeavor; 7) Right Recollection; 8) Right Concentration and Contemplation.

Basically, Buddha’s teachings boil down to the following. The Eightfold Path is a systematic approach to extinguishing desire. Cessation of desire ends suffering and leads to a life free from self-centeredness, which burns up all past demerits in the karma system, avoids accumulating new demerits, and builds up merits for a favorable rebirth. Whenever karma is exhausted over a series of lifetimes, it no longer fuels samsara. Therefore, perfection of the Eightfold Path means final escape from the cycle of death and rebirth.

Witnessing to Buddhists: Practical Suggestions

If, in doing campus evangelism, you encounter Buddhists, be aware that the Kennedy questions will have little meaning to them, because Buddhists are, in fact, atheists. In the West, God means the one Creator-God who transcends the world and to whom man can return after having rebelled against him. In the East, however, this concept of God is lacking. They do have their “gods,” but their associated characteristics

differ markedly from those of our God. Even Brahma, the infinite deity, is deluded into thinking he is the creator. Like all other beings he is the product of previous conditions.

Buddhism's lack of religious trimmings and its denial of the existence of a Creator-God and human souls have led some to argue that Christians should look at Buddhism as a philosophy, rather than a religion. If this argument has truth, we should not get the impression that Buddhists want to argue philosophically. In fact, Easterners have an explicit dislike of logical sequences; they think with their feelings. They believe one will arrive at truth by integrating logic and feelings into a single flow of thought.

For the most part, Easterners have lived in an isolated world where no one has ever questioned their beliefs. The sect to which they belong determines what texts they should read and upon which they should base their system of thought. They have never learned to think for themselves. Therefore, attempting to discuss matters objectively tends to produce sharp and negative reactions. For this reason, we must have a great deal of patience in dealing with Buddhists.

Campus evangelism strives to lead the lost to Christ by approaching students on campus and starting up a conversation. We have learned, however, that effective evangelism sometimes requires more than one conversation. More than likely, witnessing to Buddhists will require just this. Establishing a friendship simply to convert them, however, will not only cause them to despise you, but Christ as well. Become their friend because you genuinely love them as a fellow human being.

Two important aspects of Eastern culture set it apart from other ethnic groups: *indebtedness* and *shame*. Whenever someone performs benevolent acts for Easterners, they not only feel inclined to reciprocate out of politeness, they feel indebted—and they do not want to be indebted to anyone. This can act as a major obstacle for accepting the free gift of salvation. What we must stress is that God loves us because we are His creations, not because of anything we do for him. In becoming their friend they can more easily come to grips with this concept if they see God's love, not attempts to earn our way into heaven, prompting us to do good deeds.

Most Easterners would rather die than bring shame upon their family. Avoidance of shame plays such a large part in their culture that this can act as a stumbling block in presenting the gospel. The Christian doctrine of the cross is particularly repulsive to them. Seeing Christ nailed to the cross brings feelings of disgust to them, for they view Him as a weak god, lacking strength and honor. By identifying themselves with Christ, they fear bringing shame upon themselves. What we must stress is that only a god who has suffered as Christ did can understand our troubles; only a god who genuinely cares for humanity would allow himself to suffer shame; and only a god who is truly God can rise from the grave and grant eternal life.