Hinduism Gains a Foothold in America

Building temples and starting summer camps, Hindus step into the American cultural mainstream.

Hindus Believe...
1. in a one, all-pervasive Supreme Being who is both immanent and transcendent, both Creator and Unmanifest Reality.
2. that the universe undergoes endless cycles of creation, preservation, and dissolution.
3. that all souls are evolving toward union with God and will ultimately find spiritual knowledge and liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Not a single soul will be eternally deprived of this destiny.
4. in karma, the law of cause and effect by which each individual creates his own destiny by his thoughts, words, and deeds.
5. that the soul reincarnates, evolving through many births until all karmas have been resolved.
6. that divine beings exist in unseen inner worlds and that temple worship, rituals, and sacraments as well as personal devotional interactions create a communion with the devas and Gods.
7. that a spiritually awakened Master is essential to know the Transcendent Absolute, as are personal discipline, good conduct, purification, self-inquiry, and meditation.
8. that all life is sacred and to be loved and revered, through the practice of nonviolence.
9. that no particular religion teaches the only way to salvation above all others, but that all genuine religious paths are facets of God's Pure Love and Light, deserving tolerance and understanding.

Christians Believe...
1. in one God in three persons. He is distinct from his creation, yet intimately involved with it as its sustainer and redeemer.
2. that the world was created once by the divine will, was corrupted by sin, yet under God's providence moves toward final perfection.
3. that in Adam's sin, the human race was spiritually alienated from God, and that those who are called by God and respond to his grace will have eternal life. Those who persist in rebellion will be lost eternally.
4. that through God's grace and favor, lost sinners are rescued from the guilt, power, and eternal consequences of their evil thoughts, words, and deeds.
5. that it is appointed for human beings to die once and after that face judgment.
6. that spirit beings inhabit the universe, some good and some evil; but that our worship is due to God alone.
7. that God has given us a clear revelation of himself in Jesus and the sacred Scriptures. He has empowered by his Spirit prophets, apostles, evangelists, and pastors who are teachers charged to guide us into faith and holiness in accordance with his Word.
8. that life is to be highly esteemed but that it must be subordinated in the service of biblical love and justice.
9. that Jesus is God incarnate, and therefore the only sure path to salvation. Many religions may offer ethical and spiritual insights, but only Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

A century after Swami Vivekananda popularized Hinduism in "Christian America" during the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 at the Parliament of the World's Religions, his spiritual descendants on U.S. soil have grown into a significant minority whose influence extends far beyond their actual numbers.

Whether they will continue to change the increasingly pluralistic American society, or be changed by the evangelical Christians in it, is unclear. Yet, with a second parliament scheduled for this August and September in Chicago, the Hindus appear to have gained momentum, both numerically and ideologically.

"Because of immigrations from Asian countries, a current fascination with Eastern mysticism among many of this country's spiritual seekers, and the influence of the New Age movement, Hinduism is likely to maintain a steady growth into the next century," says veteran religion writer Russell Chandler in his 1992 book "Racing Toward 2001."

Terry Muck, author of "Those Other Religions in Your Neighborhood," said, "There is some Hindu influence on our culture. There are a lot more natives of India here now than ever before, and they've brought their religion with them—and so you have the growth of what you could call 'temple Hinduism.'"

Dramatic increases
According to the 1990 Census, the number of Asian Indians in the U.S. (not all of them Hindus) jumped 125.3 percent during the 1980s, from 361,531 to 815,447, to about 0.3 percent of the nation's people. The mushrooming of Hindu temples has been even more dramatic. In his 1992 book "Religious Bodies in the United States," J. Gordon Melton...
counts one Hindu intrafaith organiza-
tion (the Vishva Hindu Parishad), 105
Hindu centers, temple associations,
and organizations, 81 Hindu temples,
and 53 Hindu periodicals. This does not
count such Hindu-influenced spinoffs
as the Theosophical Society. Palani-
swami, a Hindu monk living in Hawaii
and editor of the monthly international
English-language newspaper Hinduism
Today, says there are more than 100
completed Hindu temples in the U.S.,
up from about 10 just two decades ago.

Diana Eck, professor of comparative
religion and Indian studies at Harvard
University and for eight years chair of
the World Council of Churches Working
Group on Dialogue with People of Liv-
ing Faiths, notes that Asian Indians
flocked to the U.S. following passage of
the Immigration Act of 1965, which
eliminated the old national-origin quotas. Most, she
says, are first-generation
suburban professionals
who do not fit the stere-
typical Hindu group in
America, the Interna-
tional Society for Krishna
Consciousness, or Hare
Krishnas.

"I think in many
American churches,
there was a certain amount
of concern about whether
their sons or daughters
were becoming Hare
Krishnas," Eck said. "And
in the meantime, no one
noticed that their surgeon
was now a Hindu."

With the immigration of
their family members to
join them, however, the
middle-class nature of H:
duism in the U.S. has been
somewhat diluted. Defini-
tive numbers, though, are
hard to come by.

"We don't really have
any idea who's here any-
more," Eck said. "We don't
take any notice of religion
on census statistics, and, as a result, we
don't have a very accurate sense of who
our neighbors are."

Missions researcher and statistician
David Barrett estimates there are
1,269,000 Hindus in North America
(1 million in the U.S., 200,000 in Can-
da, and the rest in Bermuda). The U.S.-
born Palaniswami, who, as a young
man, became a monk after his initia-
tion in Sri Lanka 26 years ago, counts
100,000 to 800,000 "born Hindus" in
America, many of whom are affluent
immigrants from India, plus a million
more "practicing Hindus ... people
who are following a guru, people who
have been to India and undertaken the
Hindu path of dharma [knowledge of
God] as their way, people who are in
yoga schools or ashrams around the
country, of which there are hundreds."

Hindu renaissance claimed
Hindus who have come to this country
and have become established are also
finding new meaning in their faith, part
of what Palaniswami has called a
worldwide "Hindu Renaissance." H
duism Today, part of that renaissance,
was founded in 1979 by the Californi-
born guru Sivayasuvramunyaswami
and is part of a larger institution called
the Himalayan Academy, headquartered
in Concord, California, with campuses
in the U.S., Malaysia, Mauritius, South

Sunderaraj, general secretary of the
Evangelical Fellowship of India, "They are trying to
mobilize, unify these people
in the name of religion."

Eck said, "For them, coming to Ameri-
can means a kind of international
rediscovery of their own Hinduism.
When people suddenly have to explain,"What is a Hindu, anyway?" to people in the
workplace, or at school, you have to
begin to develop a kind of simplified
way of explaining traditions."

The radical Vishva Hindu Parishad
(VHP), probably the pre-eminent global
institution working for Hindu causes,
has followed the example of U.S. Chris-
tians by providing summer camps and
other activities for Hindu children. Eck
said that since Hindus do not have a
whole cultural support system, many of
their young people are "very much
alienated from their own tradition."

"One of the most striking things
about the Hindu community as it's de-
veloping in the U.S. is the concern,
which the religious people of every tra-
dition have in this country, to pass on
what they value most about their tradi-
tion to the next generation," Eck said.
"It's a particularly American form of
transmitting religious traditions, but
it's an important one."

Outreach efforts
The VHP also raises money from Ameri-
can Hindus for the cause of making
India a Hindu nation, according to Indiaborn Mahendra Singhal, a 30-year Christian convert from Hinduism. Since 1988, Singhal has headed Hinduism International Ministries of Zion, Illinois. The VHP plays down the right-wing politics of its political party in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party, which on December 6 agitated its followers to tear down a sixteenth-century mosque in the northern city of Ayodhya that it claimed was built over the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram. The resulting Hindu-Muslim rioting has killed more than a thousand people, destabilized the reformist administration of P. V. Narasimha Rao, and, perhaps, endangered the idea of secular democracy in a country of 860 million people—83 percent Hindu, 12 percent Muslim, 3 percent Christian, and 2 percent Sikh. Days after the violence began, the government banned the VHP. Yet the sectarian violence has also spread to Pakistan.

In North America, however, Hinduism has a kinder, more philosophical approach. Swami Vivekananda's Vedanta Society, which he started in 1894, has 13 centers nationwide and 2,500 members. Unlike Christians and Muslims, however, Hindus do not aggressively seek converts. They often wait to be asked by spiritual seekers. According to Palaniswami, there are plenty of seekers, and they are often found in traditional churches.

"There's an immense part of young America that is unhappy with doctrinal principles of Christianity," he said. But the larger, "pluralistic, more enlightened part of America," he added, finds Hinduism "immensely enriching. To people who are closed to it, they find it immensely threatening."

The Hindu message
In a 1991 article in the evangelical missions newsletter Pulse, Palaniswami wrote: "The West is clearly open to the Hindu message, ready to hear about yoga, meditation, mysticism, healing and the ancient ways. Such 'products' were too sophisticated for public consumption 30 years ago, but today they're the hottest item on the shelf. Not a small part of this phenomenon is related, indirectly, to the coming of the New Age movement. . . . A small army of yoga missionaries—hatha, raja, siddha, and kundalini—beautifully trained in the last 10 years, is about to set upon the Western world. They may not call themselves Hindu, but Hindus know where yoga came from and where it goes."

Hindu "evangelism"
While some observers, such as Barrett and Sunderaraj, contend that Hinduism is not a missionary faith, others are not so sure. Singhal says that just through his reading of *Hinduism Today* and a couple of other publications, he counted 90 Hindu "traveling or itinerating evangelists" who held meetings in America in 1991.

"I went to a meeting in Madison, Wisconsin," Singhal said. "People were standing there and feeling extremely uplifted because this man from India was here to speak to them."

Singhal is part of a small contingent of Christians who not only are aware of Hindus in the U.S., but are also actively trying to evangelize the Hindu community. It is slow going. Singhal says he saw 17 Hindus become Christians through his ministry in home meetings during 1991, which he called "a tremendous number."

Singhal, a former math instructor who earned his master's degree before he was 20 years old, says he uses a "presuppositional approach" with well-educated Hindus accustomed to thinking logically in professional matters, but not in religion.

"That's part of the Hindu mindset, but if you have the thinking mind, you have to say that you can't have two contradictory belief systems," Singhal said. "One has to be true, one has to be false—both can't be true."

As director of Hinduism International Ministries, Singhal also trains Christians to understand Hinduism and the New Age movement. He has worked with about 100 churches worldwide. Mobilizing Christians for Hindu outreach is also a key concern of Peter Pereira, a native of India from a "very nominal Catholic background," ordained in the United Methodist Church, the pastor of India Christian Fellowship in Chicago, and a missionary of the Society for International Ministries (SIM), Pereira says witnessing to Hindus is not impossible.

"Friendship evangelism is the best thing," Pereira said. But Pereira says many of these Hindus are also looking for opportunities to talk about their beliefs. "They think America is Christianity," he said. "So they're beginning to think, 'These guys don't have moral values. Maybe we should offer them something.'
INTRODUCTION

A traffic reporter on a Philadelphia radio station detailed a bad accident on Interstate 95. On this particular section of highway, he noted, accidents frequently occur. "The place must have some bad karma," he concluded.

The idea of Karma (a force generated by a person's actions which determines destiny) seems to be accepted and quite common today. Indeed, New Age teachings have popularized such beliefs as karma, reincarnation, yoga, Transcendental Meditation, astrology, and being at one with everything (monism). Therapists advertise past lives recovery; movies like Lion King and Chances Are illustrate the Circle of Life; spiritual masters teach techniques for reaching cosmic consciousness.

But these New Age beliefs are not new at all; they originate in the religion of Hinduism that appeared at least 2,000 years before Christ. It is the official religion of India, but it also probably has the most effect, of all Asian belief systems, on the average American. We remember encountering Hare Krishnas selling flowers, candles, or literature in airports and were quickly able to determine that these individuals did not hold to Christian beliefs. But today can we as easily discern the foundations of certain ideas presented in current media: books, magazines, movies?

About 1.5 million Hindus live in the USA. Almost every American city has Hindu doctors and engineers. We relate to them but do not know what they believe or why they believe it. Hence, the Christian church has not reached out to them.

As Christians, we should study other religions in order to know the sources of common ideas in our society. We can then wisely make judgments about what is Christian thought and what is not. We should also study to form an understanding of and a genuine respect for adherents of other religions. If we show an authentic knowledge of Hindu beliefs and a sincere love for those holding those beliefs, we will likely gain an audience willing to hear the reason for the hope within us (I Pet. 3:15).

As the third and final issue in a series about the religions of the people InterServe ministers to, this year's GOAL focuses on Hinduism. The first issue in the series highlighted Islam; the second, Tibetan Buddhism. (For reprints, please use the response form). Of these three religions, Hinduism is the most difficult to understand and to define, mainly because there is no one founder or fixed canon of belief. But we can learn enough about this complicated religion to communicate and share with its adherents.

While the key word in Islam is "submission," and in Tibetan Buddhism is "compassion," the key word in Hinduism seems to be "realization." Hindus seek through knowledge to realize their "godhood." They struggle with the realization that they should be acting as though they were gods, but, in fact, they do not act in such a way. The knowledge that they do not live up to their "godhood" brings shame.

Christianity teaches that Christ took our shame and our sin on the cross so that we can be restored as children of God. This is the freedom that Jesus offers to all. Christians can share this Good News with those who follow Hindu teachings. This issue of GOAL can be a help in learning about Hinduism. The articles in this issue will cover the history and basic beliefs of Hinduism, compare the beliefs to Christianity, and offer help in witnessing to Hindus.

Please pray for wisdom and understanding as you read this issue. We hope this information will introduce you to Hinduism and urge you to additional study so that you will be equipped to confidently minister to those holding Hindu beliefs.

Alan Williams
Editor, GOAL magazine
InterServe/USA

Sri Venkateswara Temple, Pittsburgh, PA
WHO ARE

HINDUS...

and What Do They Believe?

If you live in the Western World, you have almost certainly seen Hinduism, the religion of India, in one of its exported forms. If you have encountered airport Hare Krishna groups, workplace Transcendental Meditation courses, or New Age thinking, you have experienced the influence of Hinduism. It is present in the West and is here to stay.

In order to understand and evaluate these westernized forms of Hinduism, you need to know the basic tenants of the Indian religion from which they originate. But because of Hinduism’s diverse and sometimes contradictory teachings and practices, understanding this religion is no easy task.

Most of the world’s 910 million Hindus live in India, but can also be found in significant numbers in several other Far Eastern countries. In modern times Hindu communities have also spread to such places as Europe, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the USA; as well as to New Zealand, Fiji, and East Africa.

For most Westerners the people and religion of India represent a mood and way of thinking radically different from our own. Descriptive words like exotic, mysterious, and magical come to mind. If you have ever read E.M. Forster’s novel, A Passage to India, or seen the movie based on the book, you have experienced something of the unique feel of India.

The word “Hindu” comes from the Persian word meaning “the people across the Indus River.” When the British came to India they identified the religion of India by this name.

Hinduism and India are inextricably intertwined. Hinduism is the religion, philosophy, and frame of mind of a total culture. As a religious system Hinduism is highly complex, for it is syncretistic in nature, having constantly incorporated a wide range of ideas, rituals, and practices for 4,000 years.

THE HISTORY OF HINDUISM

Origins. The beginnings of Hinduism can be traced to about 2000 BC, when warring Aryans came in droves over the mountains from the Iranian plateau and conquered the people of the Indus Valley, bringing with them their religion of hymns, chants, and prayers. The religion of the Aryans interfaced with the native religion of the Indus Valley, and Hinduism was the result.

The sacred literature of Hinduism was first recorded between 1400 and 1000 BC as the Vedas (veda means “sacred knowledge”). The Rig Veda, a collection of 1,028

FOR FURTHER STUDY


Note: If you are unable to obtain one of these books, InterServe will be happy to loan it to you for one month. To borrow a book please contact the Goal Editor, Alan Williams, at P.O. Box 418, Upper Darby, PA 19082-0418.
hymns of praise to a largely male group of deities, is one of the best known Vedas. The hymns to this group of deities were sung and prayed by a class of priests known as Brähmin.

Sacrifice was at the heart of early Hinduism. Its hymns employed mythical stories involving sacrifice to depict the creation of the world. And since the world was produced by sacrifice, continual sacrifices to the gods were required to maintain it. Because the priests performed the sacrifices and controlled the rituals, they became the most powerful members of society.

Early Development. Over the following centuries (900 to 500 BC) another body of sacred literature, known as the Upanishads grew. This collection is comprised of questions and stories shaped by philosophers who wandered the forests, practicing extreme self-denial as they shared their developing doctrines. Apparently they did this in reaction to the intense emphasis on sacrificial ritualism and the excessive priestly power of the Brahmins. The Brahmins held power by virtue of birth and training, but these ascetic philosophers sought power through meditation and altered states of mind. Eventually, the new emphasis on self-denial and alternative forms of religious expression was accompanied by a gradual shift away from literal sacrifices.

During this period another major shift occurred which has become a pillar of classical Hinduism. The new philosophers rejected the Rig Veda's mythical creation model for the origin of the world and adopted instead a universe comprised of unending cycles of ascent and descent, much like the slow turning of a huge wagon wheel.

Finally, between 100 BC and perhaps 500 AD, a third sacred writing, known as the Bhagavad Gita, appeared. In this writing we find the story of Krishna, a manifestation of the god Vishnu. Krishna is perhaps the closest thing in Hinduism to Christ in that he is represented as eternal and without fault. He is known as the “guardian of the eternal law” and the one who sustains the universe. This deity is also said to return love to those who love him. However, unlike Christ, who is the only human manifestation of God, Krishna is one of ten manifestations of Vishnu.

**HINDU BELIEFS**

Basic Hinduism. Over the past two millennia, Hinduism developed into a complex system of diverse ideas and beliefs. Because it continues to assimilate traditions and views from other religions and cultures, common beliefs and practices which are accepted by all Hindus are almost impossible to define. But, even though no single “bible” exists, the essential tenets of classic Hinduism can be found in the three sacred texts which have been mentioned: the Rig Veda, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita. With many variations, these basic beliefs persist to the present time.

Ultimate Reality. In Hindu thought, ultimate reality is embodied in the concept of Brahman. Everything that exists is in Brahman; there is no “not Brahman.” “Brahman is the universal One Existent. All persons and all things are really Brahman, taking many shapes like fire taking the shape of every object it consumes, or air the shape of every vessel it enters” (Ellwood, p. 71). Because he is considered impersonal and beyond reach, there is virtually no ritual connected with Brahman. At times, however, he is nevertheless spoken of as personal.

The Gods. Although some adherents to the Vedanta school of Indian philosophy claim there is no polytheism in pure Hinduism, most scholars maintain that there are three levels of deity below Brahman. In the first level below Brahman are deities which are considered remote and preoccupied with running the universe. They include the functional gods who were originally supposed to be different manifestations of the same divine unity: Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Preserver), and Shiva (the Destroyer). Countless other gods, each with distinct characteristics and attributes, appeared in Hinduism. The next level of gods, the devatas, generally serve as guardians of a village. The last level are the bhut, malignant spirits who can adhere to an individual and may have to be exorcised. Some authorities claim that there are as many as 300 million Hindu gods.

The Soul. All living things are manifestations of Brahman, the ultimate reality, and contain a life force, the Atman. The core, or essence of a person is the Atman. It is the everlasting, unchanging, permanent substance in a person which will survive this life and the coming death to transmigrate to other lives in other life forms. The philosophers who shaped the Upanishads finally came to the great conclusion that "Atman is Brahman." Thus, if Brahman as ultimate reality is likened to God, then human beings, as indistinguishable from Brahman, are indistinguishable from God—for all reality is one.

The World. What then is the world we see and experience daily? It is maya, illusion. Maya is false knowledge of the underlying reality of Brahman, and exists because of our propensity to separate the “one” into individual states of reality. We exist in a dreamlike ignorance because we do not see Brahman as the one true “being,” but instead perceive individual trees, animals, and people.

(continued on next page)
HINDUISM

CHRISTIANITY

A Comparison of Beliefs
Hinduism and Christianity represent two very different religious outlooks. Their respective belief systems are fundamentally different at almost every point.

that Brahman, the One Mind or Life, is the one reality. He expresses himself through the world and all that is, like a flame taking many shapes. Everything we experience is the one reality and is ultimately indistinguishable from him.

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that duty (dharma) is a set of behaviors which a man must embrace to enable him to relate properly to all aspects of life: work, family, society, the gods, and all creatures. Dharma is not particularly an ethical concept; it is simply what one must do.

that sin is those willful bad actions which result, through the Law of Karma, in a person's being born in the next life at a lower social level, or with greater suffering, than in the present one.

that salvation is liberation from enslavement to the unending cycle of birth, rebirth, and death, enabling one to be absorbed into the one reality.
Transmigration. In maya, the state of delusion about life, we are bound to an endless cycle of illusory existences, called samsara or reincarnation. The Atman transmigrates, or passes through, a succession of life forms—from plant to insect to animal to human. The law of karma determines whether one transmigrates upward or downward in the hierarchy. Karma is the belief that all willful actions have consequences. Good actions, done in conformity with one's appointed dharma (life duty) yield a good result, while bad actions yield a bad result.

Almost like an energy that is associated with all moral acts, karma discharges and accumulates on the karmic body of the Atman, marking it with a moral history. A person's class or status in the present life is a result of past deeds. People whose bad deeds in this life outweigh their good ones can expect to be born in a worse state in their next incarnation. People whose good deeds outweigh their bad ones can expect to advance to a better state in their next life. Ideally the Atman transmigrates upward through the stations of life until final liberation—release from the cycle of existence in the karmic realm.

Liberation. Moksha is liberation from the karmic existence and the state in which the Atman becomes one with Brahman. The path to liberation lies in following Karmamarga (the Way of Action) by transmigrating through the stages of life and the castes of human society to finally transcend the law of karma, which occurs when the sum of good residue and the sum of bad residue are precisely equal. At this point of perfect equilibrium, a person is free from desires, cravings, and passions... and reaches moksha. But a finite number of deeds produced in a finite number of lifetimes can never produce what the infinite requires. Moksha is infinite, unreachable by anything finite. Therefore, Karmamarga must be supplemented by one of the other two paths, or margas, Jnanamarga (the Way of Knowledge) or Bhaktimarga (the Way of Devotion).

The Jnanamarga is based on the body of sacred literature called the Upanishads, which contain the esoteric or secret knowledge of Hinduism, showing a secret "bridge" between the Atman and Brahman. Only those who have specially prepared themselves may study this secret knowledge of the path to self-discovery. The outcome is beyond a person's control, but rebirth will provide an opportunity to try again. This path involves mastering knowledge in ten steps. (See the chart, "The Ten Steps of Jnanamarga").

The Bhaktimarga is the path of devotion. For the average Hindu, intense love and devotion to the Hindu gods is a more accessible way to moksha. Two main branches of the Bhaktimarga are Saivism, Siva worship, and Vaishnavism, Vishnu worship. Some Hindus reject Siva as a violent god, and instead direct their devotion to the "friendlier" god, Vishnu. The Vedas describe tales of Vishnu's concern for the welfare of humanity. The Bhagavad-Gita states that if one is devoted to Krishna (a manifestation of Vishnu), alone, that person will go to eternal rest. It even invites women and artisans, to whom moksha would normally be inaccessible, to achieve liberation through devoted love to the gods (BhG 9:32-34). Such devotion, expressed through a variety of daily offerings and rituals, is the chief hope of most Hindus.

HINDU LIFE
The Four Classes. Early Hinduism under the Aryans developed through clashes with indigenous peoples, and this yielded a deep concern for an ordered society. So the Aryans developed varna, Hinduism's class system, which exists throughout India today. Most scholars agree that division of people according to their vocation was the birth of the caste system. The four original hierarchical classes are the Brahmans, the teachers and priests; the Kshatriya, the rulers and warriors; the Vaishya, the merchants and peasants; and the Sudra, the laborers. Within each of these broad classes are many jatis or specific castes associated with particular trades. The members of a particular caste will only marry within that caste. The Untouchables are the poorest people at the very bottom, outside this class system altogether. Eminence within a village is based on one's caste, and within a caste is based on the family's (the male's) talent and wealth. Within the family, males are superior to females. In the father's absence, the mother is subordinate to her sons. Equality between the sexes does not exist. The way to moksha is not available to women, but only to men in the upper three classes.

The Four Stages of Life. Just as society was divided into four classes, the Aryans divided the life of a man into four stages. The first, brahmacharya (Student), is the stage into which a boy between 8 and 11 is initiated when he is considered ready to learn the Hindu Scriptures and the associated rituals and traditions of his caste. The second is gṛhastha (Householder), when a young man gains skills and a job and fulfills his sacred duty by marrying and producing a family. The third is vanaprastha (Forest Dweller), when, ideally, a white-haired grandfather relinquishes all of life's responsibilities and becomes a religious hermit. The fourth is the final, optional stage of sannyasin (Ascetic), when the very old man gives himself to wandering, meditation, and yoga, and prepares himself for death and final liberation.

The Four Aims of Life. The first aim of life is dharma, or duty, which encompasses the disciplines and responsibilities considered essential for the support of family and society. “Dharma” comes from a word which means “to preserve,” signifying the orderliness which results when change is avoided. One conforms to dharma by following the rules of caste and by moving responsibly through the various stages of life. There is also artha, the honorable earning of the money needed to provide for one's family. Then there is kama, the enjoyment of life. This aim encompasses the pleasures of sex which are enshrined in the famous Kamasutra, a manual of erotic and aphrodisiac instruction. Indians regard it not as pornography, but as an exploration of sacred delights. The final aim is moksha, or final liberation from the unending cycle of birth and death. For the Hindu, moksha is salvation.
HINDUISM

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<th>SIN</th>
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<td>that sin is those willful bad actions which result, through the Law of Karma, in a person's being born in the next life at a lower social level, or with greater suffering, than in the present one.</td>
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<th>SALVATION</th>
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<td>that salvation is liberation from enslavement to the unending cycle of birth, rebirth, and death, enabling one to be absorbed into the one reality.</td>
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Why is it Difficult for Hindus to Become Christians?

1. The cultural outlook of the Hindu world is very different from that of the West. The distinctives of India and the Hindu world which cause Westerners to describe them as "exotic, mysterious, and magical" must make the culture of the West, with its materialism, notions of freedom, and its predominant Judeo-Christian religion, seem just as strange to the average Indian. Alexander the Great invaded India, and the Apostle Thomas founded Mar Thoma, the earliest Indian Christian church. But despite this history and three centuries of British rule, the gap between Indian and Western culture remains very wide—a major stumbling block to Hindu conversion.

2. Hinduism is inextricably intertwined with Indian social and family life. Consequently, when an Indian is converted to Christianity, he or she appears to abandon country, culture, and especially family. The price for such a conversion can be ostracism from family and even from the community. It is no exaggeration to say that an Indian’s conversion to Christianity is often virtually incomprehensible to his or her acquaintances.

3. The religious and philosophical assumptions of a Hindu are radically different from those of a Westerner. A Westerner assumes that history is moving toward a goal, whereas the Hindu assumes that human events are cyclical. The Hindu sees God, man, and nature as manifestations of one reality, whereas the Westerner sees them as very distinct realities. The Hindu assumes there are many gods—maybe hundreds of thousands or even millions—while the Westerner assumes there is one God only. For a true and lasting conversion, each of these differences will have to be addressed and resolved.

4. The Hindu Scriptures are highly different in both form and substance from the Jewish/Christian Scriptures. The sacred Hindu texts are predominantly mythical, legendary, and philosophical in nature. By contrast, the Christian Scriptures claim to convey the words of God, proclaiming his character and will, either directly or through his spokesmen. These Scriptures also relate how God has acted in history. Most Hindus will be uncomfortable with the directness of the Bible, its condemnation of sin, and the ethical obligations which it places upon its hearers.

5. Christianity’s exclusive emphasis on Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation is foreign to the Hindu mind. Hinduism is inclusive in nature, willing to accept all faiths and creeds as legitimate religious paths. This stands in stark contrast to the exclusiveness of Christianity. Thus, it is extremely difficult for a Hindu to accept the Christian claim that Jesus is the only way to God. He will do so only when he sees that this claim comes from the one true God and is the single effective provision for human salvation. This will happen only through prayer and the work of God in that person’s mind and heart (see John 6:44).
HOW SHALL WE WITNESS TO HINDUS?

In last year's *Goal*, we suggested various approaches for witnessing to Tibetan Buddhists. Because of similarities between Buddhism and Hinduism, some of the following approaches to Hindus are similar to those mentioned in the previous publication.

Become as familiar with Hinduism and Hindus as you can. Familiarize yourself with Indian culture in general and Hinduism in particular. Learn from books; learn from people. Make the acquaintance of some Hindus. Try to enter their mindset and imaginative framework. Be kind, respectful, and open. Listen long and hard before you speak.

Make sure your own faith is grounded in Scripture, thoughtful, and integrated with your own experience.

For many Christians desiring to witness to Hindus, this may be difficult. Mature faith is not merely the result of "knowing your Bible" or of having memorized lots of Scripture. Faith which can be passed on to others must be a personally processed faith. Spiritual seekers respond to people whose faith is not merely the recitation of beliefs or standards of behavior, but is personally held and profoundly integrated with their own experience.

Take seriously and reflect deeply on Hindu objections to Christianity.

Some of these are discussed below:

The erroneous perception that Christians believe in two ultimate realities, matter and spirit. Try to help your Hindu friends understand that, like them, Christians believe in one ultimate reality. That reality is God, who is self-existent. We do also believe in material and spiritual realities which are separate from Him, but they are also totally dependent upon Him. (The best source for explaining this is probably Genesis 1).
The decadence of Western culture, which Hindus may see as a direct outgrowth of its predominantly Christian religious heritage. You could point out that, because of the reality of sin in human society, every culture is subject to moral decay. What has led to decadence in the West are either distortions or abandonment of our Christian heritage. Most of the great strides forward in the morality of western society, such as the abolition of slavery, the introduction of child labor laws, the procurement of democratic freedoms, advancement in science and medicine, and demonstrable concern for the poor and oppressed are clearly traceable to our Christian heritage.

Christianity's claim that Christ is the only way to God instead of simply being one way among many. You could explain that if all ways to God are true, then God is unfair. Why? Because, aside from Christ, most other ways to God require a complex combination of intensive work and suffering. For God to allow some people to avoid such effort, and achieve salvation through simple trust in Jesus Christ, would be most unjust if He required others to perform great deeds in order to come to Him.

Reflect on aspects of the biblical world view which stress the connectedness of all things. Christians disagree with the Hindu belief that everything in our world is indistinguishable from one ultimate reality. However, you might show appreciation of Hindu outlook by pointing out that the Bible establishes a strong linkage between the spiritual and physical realms. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, thorns and thistles grew. When Israel sinned grossly, there were shortages of grain, wine, and oil. In other words, when people sin, both their souls and their physical environment are harmed. But when God sets things right through Christ at the end of time, both those who have faith in him and “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay...” (Romans 8:21). For a spiritually open Hindu who believes in a virtually endless cycle of suffering, this word is Good News!

Bathe your entire witnessing effort in prayer.

You can’t save anyone; only God can.

You need to ask God for sensitivity, love, and wisdom as you witness. Then you need to trust God for results.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF SOURCES

The author gratefully acknowledges the use of the following sources in the preparation of these articles:


