

India: Land of Religions

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India is a land of public religion. You see it everywhere--temples, mosques and churches, small shrines on the side of street painted with bright colors, garlanded polychrome pictures of gods in the shops bathed in incense, people praying in public, decorated cows painted, religious flags tied to trees, religious processions and festivals. We need only to open our eyes and to initiate discussions with local people to see how important religion is in the lives of most Indians.

India is a land of many religions. About eighty percent of the more than nine hundred million people living in India consider themselves Hindus. More than one hundred million are Muslims, seventeen million Sikhs, and thirty-one million are Christians--a little more than half of these are Protestants. There are Jains, Buddhists, Parsis and Baha'i.

Hinduism is not a single religion with a coherent set of doctrines. One can be an atheist, polytheist, monotheist or pantheist and be a good Hindu. There are six major schools of religious philosophy which range from pure materialism to spiritual monism, but most common people combine Hindu beliefs in gods such as Vishnu and Siva with local beliefs in spirits, evil eyes, divination, magic and astrology. Some scholars argue that Hinduism as we view it today--as a single religion--is a product of the colonial era. Prior to the eighteenth century, India had many regional religious beliefs and practices, great religious centers such as Varanasi, Madurai and Puri that attracted pilgrims and supplicants, and religious orders of mendicants and priests. The rediscovery of the Vedas (the ancient religious texts) by modern scholars, and the British penchant for calling all followers of India's traditional religions "Hindoos" led to a reawakening and consolidation of these religions into a loosely linked whole called Hinduism.

Hinduism

If Hinduism is not a single religion, what is it? At root Hinduism is a world view--a way of looking at reality that lies behind the bewildering diversity of doctrines and practices. We will look at three themes that are common to most forms of Hinduism.

The first worldview theme is that **all life is one**. Gods, humans, animals and plants all share in the same kind of life. Gods have more life, and so are more powerful. Humans, animals and plants have less life. This means that there is no qualitative difference between the great gods, lesser gods and humans. Consequently, all humans are the same as gods. So also are animals and plants. All in this great hierarchy of life that runs from high gods to microbes must respect, serve and even worship those above, and help those who are below. Consequently, too, animals are the same as humans. Highest in the animal order are cows. They, in particular, deserve worship on special occasions. To kill and eat animals is akin to murder and cannibalism. The more spiritual and orthodox are strict vegetarians, those less spiritual eat fish, fowls and goats, and those who eat cows that have died naturally are thereby the defiled or 'untouchables.'

The belief in the oneness of life is reinforced by belief in *karma* and *samsara*. *Karma* is the impersonal law of the universe that rewards all good deeds and punishes evil ones. Even the gods are under its rule. When they sin or revel in sensuous pleasures (and they frequently do), they must suffer. *Samsara* is the cycle of rebirths each being experiences. Not all one's good or evil deeds are rewarded or punished in this life, so one's moral credit and debit are carried on into the next. Gods who sin are reborn as ants, untouchables who are righteous are reborn as high caste people, and holy saints as gods.

The second worldview theme is that **our human dilemma is ultimately due to ignorance, not sin.** The way to salvation, therefore, is not confession, forgiveness and reconciliation. It is enlightenment--to experience in the depth of our being what is really real, and who we really are. Through proper disciplines of the body and mind (*yogas*) we can gain this life transforming realization--we are gods, and then we will be freed to live above the cares and burdens of this world.

The third worldview theme is that **there are many roads to salvation, but all lead to the same place.** Attaining salvation is like climbing Mt. Himalaya. Some are near its base and others near the top, but all must climb up from where they are.

The highest roads are those of meditation that lead to enlightenment (*jnana marga*). These are the paths of physical and mental discipline (*yoga*) that overcome the tyranny of our minds and sense, and free a person to experience the flash of inner realization of oneness with the universe. There are no gods to worship, no good deeds to do, no sins to confess. Few reach enlightenment, but those who do may live out their lives on earth showing people the way to release from the drudgery and suffering of life.

The middle roads are those of devotion to a particular god (*bhakti marga*). A proverb says that there are three-hundred thirty million gods, but the spiritually mature know that these are but manifestations of one god. Each religious community and each caste has its own supreme god that it worships. In addition, everyone can choose a personal god to follow (*ishta devata*). Most Hindus are devotees of Siva or one of his many incarnations, or of Vishnu and his ten major and many minor incarnations.

Those on the path of worship make offerings to the images in their homes and local temples, invite priests to perform their birth, marriage and death rites, organize devotional song services, and make pilgrimages to distant shrines. In so doing they throw themselves on the mercy of the god, hoping for his compassion and help. Most Hindus see themselves at this level of religious advancement.

At the bottom are those who are unable to withdraw from the cares of everyday life to meditate, and who do not know how to worship the gods properly. They can, however, begin to climb the mount of salvation by the paths of duty (*karma yoga*). They can crack coconuts and burn incense to the gods, seek to live moral lives, and show proper respect to those above them in the hierarchy of life, even though they do not know what it all means. In doing their individual and caste duties to which they are born, they can earn merit, and in the next life they will rise and be able to follow higher paths to salvation.

The common people combine orthodox beliefs and rituals with local animistic practices in what is called Folk Hinduism. Most ordinary Hindus, particularly in the villages, not only worship in the local temple, celebrate Hindu festivals and conduct Hindu marriages and funerals, they also go to diviners to discern the future, shamans for healing, astrologers to guide their choices, and magicians to bless their crops or curse their enemies. They put charms on the foreheads of brides and grooms, and avoid calling attention to newborn babies to protect them from the evil eye; sacrifice animals to ward off plagues; reverence their ancestors; and placate or exorcize spirits and ghosts. They turn to Hinduism for answers to the ultimate questions of life, but for answers to the existential problems of everyday life, they often turn to folk beliefs and practices.

Islam

India is the second largest Muslim country in the world. When British India was divided in 1947, regions where the majority of the people were Muslims became Pakistan and Bangladesh, but many Muslims remained in India as minorities, particularly in the North.

Islam means "submission" to the laws and will of Allah, **the** God in Arabic, who is Almighty, All-knowing, and Merciful. He will preside over the Last Judgment when all will be assigned either to Paradise or Hell, depending on how well or badly they have "submitted" and lived as a true Muslim or as a lost heathen ensnared by Satan. The true words of Allah were revealed to his final Prophet, Muhammad, and are written in the Qur'an by the Archangel Gabriel. To be a Muslim, one must affirm with sincere conviction that "There is one God, Allah, and Muhammed is his prophet." One should also pray five times a day facing Mecca (where Islam was founded by the Prophet in A.D. 622), give alms to the poor, fast during daylight during the month of Ramadan, and make the pilgrimage to Mecca, the Prophet's birthplace and where he is buried. One should also keep the Muslim laws (Shariat) and traditions such as not eating pork, and drinking wine.

Lay Muslims often combine orthodox teachings with beliefs in spirits, magic, divination, astrology and evil eyes in what is known as Folk Islam.

Sikhism

Sikhism was born in India in the early sixteenth century as a reform movement in Hinduism which emphasized that God is one. Guru Nanak taught, "There is no Hindu, there is

no Muslim." Today Sikhism is seen by most people as a separate religion. Its core practices are the repetition of the *Nam* ("Name") of God, reading the sacred scriptures (*Guru Granth Sahib*), participation in the militant Sikh community (*Khalsa Panth*), hard labor and sharing one's earnings with others. Most Sikhs live in Punjab, and militant factions are fighting for their own nation, Khalistan.

Christians

It is widely believed that the apostle Thomas brought Christianity to Kerala on the Southwest coast of India, where more than twenty percent of the people claim to be Christian (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Nestorian). Roman Catholic missionaries arrived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Protestant missionaries in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. Churches have grown, particularly in South India, and in the tribal states of Northeast India where more than eighty percent of the people are Christians. In the great northern states there are less than one percent. The Mennonite and General Conference churches are in ##Bihar and Maharashtra in the north, and the Mennonite Brethren churches in Andhra Pradesh in the south.

Our Response

Given this religious pluralism, what do we as Christian have to offer? The temptation is to accept the Hindu belief that all religions lead to salvation. Our response must be to proclaim the uniqueness of Christ as Savior and Lord, and to do so in love as servants, not in arrogance as superiors.

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