

Christians Confronting Cultural Issues

Session 4: Hinduism

Acts 19:21-28

Atheism with 330 Million Gods

- More than one billion people claim to follow Hinduism, but many actually follow folk versions that include ancestral and animal worship.

- Hinduism is strongest in India and Pakistan but grows most rapidly in the United States and Western Europe.

This Week's Goal

- state basic Hindu beliefs;
- give a biblical response to each belief;
- suggest ways to witness to Hindus.

Stone Soup for the Soul

Even though it was my first debate, I was certain that I had won from the outset. A communications business was offering so-called diversity training and, as part of its comparative-religions emphasis, had asked me to speak, along with a Hindu priest from the local temple. After I had made my introduction, the priest stepped to the podium and began: "I must say for the purposes of honesty and disclosure that I also accept Jesus as God without hesitation. I believe Jesus is divine and was completely the revelation of the Lord."

Was the Hindu priest confessing Christ as Lord? Was he leaving Hinduism to claim Jesus as Prophet, Priest, and King? No, the Hindu was simply stating the central premise of Hinduism: a belief in the theological equivalent of stone soup.

Perhaps you remember the classic fable "Stone Soup". As a town descends into poverty and starvation, one person sets up a boiling cauldron of water in the city square. One by one, townspeople add the meager remnants of their pantries. Eventually, cooperation and generosity create an amazing soup, and the city eats. Hinduism operates much like the stone –soup metaphor because it is an amalgamation of many religions. It adds dashes of Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and other religions to one large pot of polytheism. The resulting dish is Hinduism. Consequently, as Hinduism enters a culture, it introduces ingredients from every religion to that culture.

An estimated 14 to 15 percent of the world's population claims to be Hindu. As you study this week, be forewarned that Hinduism is a confusing religion. Imagine that you were raised in a world

of many conflicting gods, much like the first-century culture Paul confronted. Wouldn't you want to know something-anything-for sure?

Vishnu Hinduism

Another very popular form of Hinduism is called Vishnu. The Vishnuites worship the specific god Vishnu, who they believe has come to earth nine times as an avatar (savior) to rescue humanity. Vishnu has already come to earth as a fish, a turtle, a boar, a half-lion and half-man, a dwarf, Parasurama, Rama, Krishna, and Buddha. Rama and Krishna are considered the most important of these incarnations. Vishnu Hindus await the coming of Kalki, the final rescuer.

Shivaite Hinduism

The most violent form of Hinduism is the sect that worships the destroyer god Shiva. Adherents also worship his wife, who goes by various names-Kali, Sati, Deva, and others. This form of Hinduism, known to be bloody and immoral, is responsible for much of the bloodshed in present-day India.

Populist Hinduism

A cultic form of Hinduism exists among the more than one billion inhabitants of India. The people borrow gods from the various Hindu systems but also add ancestral worship. This practice may be confusing to Christians, who look for clear categories and denominations. In the Asiatic regions of the world where Hinduism is strong, temples rise up everywhere, many of which are unaffiliated with any branch of Hinduism. Spiritual teachers (gurus) and holy men (swamis) wander the continent and attract followers in the thousands. This form of Hinduism, the most polytheistic, can cause much frustration for Christians. When evangelists come to a city and call for the people to repent and believe in Jesus, Hindus walk forward in masses.

Why would this response by Hindus be a problem? Because Hindus accept multiple gods, they may not be accepting Jesus as their only Savior and Lord. They might simply be adding Him to their collection of gods!

Definition-Reincarnation

The belief that the souls of the dead successively return to earth in new bodies or forms.

Culture Clash-One with the Divine

Hindu influences are everywhere in our culture. Environmentalists espouse a belief in the common energy we share with trees and animals. Angel worshipers seek contact with angels as minigods or spiritual guides. Even the use of the horoscope has a Hindu flavor, because an astrologer believes that instead of acting by choice, we are compelled to act by the forces and energies of the universe, such as aligning planets. Someone who relies on a horoscope says, "Of courts I'm afraid of commitment; I'm a Scorpio."

How Can I Know? Authority and Truth

We will examine six concepts that form the nucleus of Hinduism. Regardless of the sect, each Hindu adheres to some form of these principles.

Brahma: Reality

The ultimate reality or god of Hinduism is Brahma. Even the atheistic systems of Hinduism believe in the ultimate goal known as Brahma. Hindus believe that the human soul, known as the atman, connects to Brahma. A Hindu's ultimate hope is that his atman unites with Brahma.

Maya: Illusion

Hinduism teaches that all suffering is simply an illusion. It is not real. Like the cult Christian Science centuries later, Hinduism denies the actual substance of suffering. It is maya -an illusion.

Moksha: Salvation

Moksha is a process by which people are freed from the cycle of reincarnation and suffering.

Samsara: Reincarnation

Hindus believe in a continuous chain of reward and punishment called reincarnation. Reincarnation applies not only to life (you come back as a frog, for example) but also to social structures, known as castes. If you are better than you were in a past life, you advance upward in the social caste.

Karma: The Law of Moral Consequence

Karma is the guiding force behind Hinduism. The word actually means action, but the concept is simple: payback. It is the law of consequence. You are recompensed based on your actions, and when you perform a righteous act, you receive a reward.

Witnessing Tip-Build on Respect for the Word

Hindus respect sacred writings. Many Hindus will attentively listen to an explanation of the teachings of the Bible. Use this openness to present biblical truth about god, Jesus, and salvation. Don't allow yourself to get lost in the maze of Hindu complexity. Present the clear witness of Scripture to the basic beliefs you have studied today.

Bhakti: Devotion to a Personal God

The Bhagavad Gita, written during the first century, enunciates the concept of bhakti, devotion to a personal god.

Why Am I here? Purpose and Ethics

According to Hinduism, Brahma created the first man, named Manu. Out of Manu came four separate and distinct types of people:

Brahmins came from Manu's head. The highest caste of people, they serve as the priests of Hinduism.

Kshatriyas came from Manu's hands. They are the rulers, politicians, and warriors. They compose the ruling class of kings and senators, along with soldiers, who hold an exalted position in Hinduism.

Vaisyas came from Manu's thighs. They are the creative caste of craftsmen and farmers. Think of them as the businessmen and store owners who keep the economy alive with their entrepreneurial spirit and creativity.

Shudras came from Manu's feet. These are manual laborers and the servants. As the caste system developed in history, each category also subdivided, so today there are more than three thousand distinct levels of social status.

One final caste must be mentioned. The **Harijan**, also known as Outcastes or Untouchables, make up a large portion of the Hindu population. In Hindu history the Untouchables were considered almost subhuman, the lowest form of Hindu existence. Today they are given the worst jobs and occupy the lowest stations in life.

Witnessing Tip-Share God's Love

Your attitude when relating to Hindus oppressed by caste and karma must be one of love. God accepts and loves each Hindu, and we can open the door to a Christian witness by showing that love. As a relationship develops, you may be able to share that Christ loves every person, regardless of social or economic position (see Luke 15; 19:1-10; John 3:16, 1 John 4:9-10)

*Worship, O Cow, to thy tail-hair, and to thy hooves and to thy form! Hitherward we invite with prayer the Cow who pours a thousand streams, by whom the heaven, By whom the earth, by whom these waters are preserved. . . . They call the Cow immortal life, pay homage to the Cow as Death. She hath become this universe . . . hath become the Gods, and men, and Spirits . . . The Cow is Heaven, the Cow is Earth, the Cow is Vishnu, Lord of Life
(Atharva Veda, X:10)*

How is this possible? Some Hindus believe that the cow contains the spirits of dead ancestors. Yet they do not view their ancestors as having gone lower but higher in the reincarnation cycle.

Witnessing Tip-Help the Hindu Break Free

As a Christian, you have good news for Hindus trapped by a belief in reincarnation. Christ's triumph over sin means that Hindus who accept Christ can break free of that cycle. Share with the Hindu Christ's triumph over sin and His taking on Himself the penalty of humankind's sin (see Mark 10:32-45; John 8:1-11; Rom. 8:1-17). Through Christ they can be free from the guilt that results from their actions. They don't have to carry out works intended to bring salvation. Christ's forgiveness cleanses them from sin.

Hindu Belief	Biblical Truth
Brahma is an impersonal force.	Matthew 6:9
Hinduism denies a sin nature and evil.	Psalms 51:4; Romans 3:23
Hinduism ties salvation to works.	1 John 2:2
Hinduism offers countless second chances.	Hebrews 9:27

A Comparison of Beliefs		
	Christianity	Hinduism
God	One God. Personal and knowable. Distinct from creation.	Impersonal and unknowable.
Jesus	Unique Son of God who provided salvation through atoning death and resurrection.	An enlightened man.
Source of Authority	Bible is divinely inspired and preserved and contains perfect instruction and truth.	The Vedas and other writings.
Humanity	Not part of God. Sinful by nature.	Divine. Part of God. Basically Good.
Sin	Sinful nature and choices are humanity's problem.	No sin. Ignorance of divinity is humanity's problem.
Salvation	Accepting God's gift of forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ.	Escaping law of karma and becoming one with God.

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