



Short Introductions to the World Religions - Hinduism

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1. There are about 600 million Hindus in India, Africa, Indonesia, and the West Indies. The approximate figure for Canada is 100,000.

2. Hinduism is one of the oldest organized religions in the world. Its historical records date back to more than four thousand years. It has no single founder.

3. The openness towards and acceptance of other religious beliefs and practices make Hinduism very attractive in Canada, where the diversity of cultures and religions sometimes creates a problem for the Christian majority.

4. However, the scattered Hindu communities in Canada are struggling to maintain an unbroken transmission, from teacher (guru) to student and new teacher to student, of religious traditions, which are very much linked to Indian languages and to the Sanskrit of the Vedas.

5. The Hindu sees and understands the universe in a very different way than the Christian. This understanding centres on four basic concepts:

(1) Anadi (beginning lessness).

The universe is not created out of nothing (as in Jewish and Christian teaching) but is without beginning. It exists in cycles of creation with relative beginnings. Each

cycle evolves from the seed of a previous one, grows, flowers, drops seed and dies. The next cycle has already started its seed state when the previous one dies. The present universe is in its dying stage. It is already casting off the seed that forms the basis for a new relative beginning of the next universe.

(2) Karma (moral law).

Everyone is responsible for his or her own destiny. Our thinking and action lays memory traces or seeds in our subconscious, and this in turn predisposes us to think and do the same kind of thoughts and actions again and again. The karmic seeds are stored, waiting for the right circumstances to sprout into desire or action. It is then up to the individual's free choice to either reject the bad karma or to reinforce it. Karmic impulses can be rejected and made to wither and die without leaving a seed in the subconscious. Our own free choices make the karma that will influence

our future.

Thoughts and actions that spring up without a trace to the present life can be accounted for by the third concept.

(3) Samsara (rebirth).

Karmas accompany the soul when it leaves the body in death. Many of the thoughts and desires that seem to come from nowhere stem from thoughts and actions of previous lives. The experience in this life is the consequence of all former lives, and the free choices in this life predispose us for all our future lives. Bad karma can lead to rebirth as an animal with no free choice, however, rebirth as an animal makes possible the expiation of accumulated bad karma, leading to rebirth as a human. Rebirth as a god with no free choice leads to the using-up of good merit, which eventually results in a lower position on the karmic scale, in rebirth as a human.

The fourth concept shows a way out of these endless cycles of deaths

and rebirths.

(4) Moksha
(release).

There are three
ways to obtain
release:

The yoga (union) of
knowledge removes
the karmic
obstructions that
cover the true self
by intellectual
pursuits. The yoga
of action aims at
release through
accepting and
performing one's
daily duties
selflessly and
entirely as
dedication to God.

The yoga of
devotion achieves
release through
meditation, prayers
and chanting of the
scriptures. It is the
most common.
Regardless of the
path, the
overcoming of the
ego leads to the
discovery of the true
self (atman), which
is one with God
(Brahman).

6. Hindu gods are
different aspects of
Brahman who can
be worshipped and
experienced in
whatever form
appeals most to the
devotee. Popular
Hindu gods are
Brahma, Vishnu and
Shiva. Krishna is
the ninth avatar
(incarnation) of
Vishnu. These gods
have wives and

families.

7. Hindu literature exists in massive amount and in great variety as to form and quality. The most sacred scriptures are:

(1) The Four Vedas: Psalms, Chants, Sacred Formulas and Charms.

(2) The Brahmanas are rule books for practices of worship and ritual activity.

(3) The Upanishads (Vedantas) are aiming at higher levels of mystical purification.

(4) The Bhagavad Gita is considered to be the revelation for this time of increased karma and the declining part of the cycle of the present universe.

8. Hindu life is divided into four stages:

(1) student,
(2) householder,
(3) forest dweller,
and
(4) wandering holy man.

In the first two stages caste laws must be obeyed, duties and rituals performed. The last two allow for the withdrawal from society and caste duties to pursue the mystical path. The

Hindu caste system has to be understood in the light of these different levels of spiritual realization on the path to union with God (Nirvana, release from bondage).

9. Jesus Christ is seen in Hinduism as an avatar (incarnation) of Brahman.

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