

# Hinduism and Christianity

There is no monolithic, consistent religion called Hinduism. There is an immense diversity of religious beliefs and practices among the various peoples who call themselves Hindus. It is impossible therefore to capture Hinduism. What follows is but a preliminary and inadequate attempt to get some basic feel for the most elusive world religion. We finish with a rough and ready comparison and contrast of Hinduism and Christianity.

## Introductory Facts

1. The name "Hindu" comes from Persian pronunciation for the river Siddhu, now known as the Indus.
2. The Indus Valley civilisation dates around 2000 BC. Statues have been unearthed of a mother goddess, suggesting observance of a fertility cult. One figure shows a man sitting cross-legged and surrounded by animals. This is possibly an early form of Shiva.
3. The Aryans ("the noble people") moved into India around 1500 BCE. They were nomadic, but eventually settled down building cities in the heart of northern India especially along the river Ganges. The Aryans are responsible for the *Rig-Veda*, the earliest of the Scriptures now venerated by Hindus.
4. Hindus believe their religion is the "eternal religion" (*santana dharma*), without beginning or end.
5. Hinduism has about 1 billion followers and is a family of religions with four principal denominations:
  - a. Saivism: devotees worship Lord Shiva as the supreme deity
  - b. Shaktism: devotees worship goddess Shakti (or Devi) as the supreme deity
  - c. Vaishnavism: devotees worship Vishnu as the supreme deity
  - d. Smartism: devotees regard all gods as expressions of the same God and permit worship of any god
6. Common ground on which all four Hindu denominations stand:
  - a. Belief in karma
  - b. Belief in reincarnation
  - c. Belief in a supreme being who is both form and pervades form and who creates, sustains and destroys the universe, then recreates it afresh in never-ending cycles
  - d. Belief in the importance of temple and image worship
  - e. Belief that there is no inherent evil
  - f. Belief in illusion (*maya*), with some variations of conception
  - g. Belief in the ultimate goal of liberation of the soul from rebirth (*moksha*)
  - h. Belief in the principle of not harming any living being (*ahimsa*)
  - i. Belief in the need of a spiritual guide (*satguru*)
  - j. Wearing of the sacred marks (*tilaka*) on their foreheads as sacred symbols (though each wears a distinct mark)
  - k. Preference for cremation of one's corpse in the belief that the soul will inhabit another body in the next life
  - l. According highest authority to the Vedas and Agamas

## Explanations

### Brahman

"Place this salt in water and come to me tomorrow morning."

Svetaketu did as he was commanded, and in the morning his father said to him: "Bring me the salt you put into the water last night."

Svetaketu looked into the water, but could not find it, for it had dissolved. His father then said: "Taste the water from this side. How is it?"

"It is salt."

"Taste it from the middle. How is it?"

"It is salt."

"Taste it from that side. How is it?"

"It is salt."

"Look for the salt again, and come again to me."

The son did so, saying, "I cannot see the salt. I only see water."

*His father then said: "In the same way, O my son, you cannot see the spirit. But in truth he is there. An invisible and subtle essence is the Spirit of the whole universe. That is Reality. That is Truth. THOU ARE THAT!" (Bhagavad-Gita)*

### The Caste System

#### a) The Origin of the Caste System

The origin of the caste system is traced back to myth. There are three versions:

##### *The Rig-Veda Myth*

In the Rig-Veda 10.90 the first creature is Purusha, who possessed a thousand heads, a thousand eyes and a thousand feet. All other creations are emanations or products of Purusha.

Purusha was created to be the first sacrificial victim. Traditionally, Indian sacrifices are made using ghee. According to the Rig-Veda, when Purusha was sacrificed the spring season served as ghee, summer provided the sacrificial fuel and autumn the oblation. Purusha was sprinkled with sacred water upon the sacred grass. The sacrificial oblation itself gave birth to sacred verses, chants, meters and formulae. It also gave birth to horses, animals with upper and lower teeth, cows, goats and sheep.

Different parts of Purusha's body gave birth to different natural phenomena:

1. His moon from his mind
2. The sun from his eye
3. Indra and Agni from his mouth
4. The wind from his breath
5. The atmosphere from his navel
6. The heaven from his head
7. The earth from his feet
8. The quarters (cardinal directions) from his ear.

When Purusha's body was divided up, different body parts gave rise to different social classes. So, his mouth became the *brahman* (the priestly class); his two arms were made into the *rajanya* (the warrior class); his two thighs the *vaishyas* (the merchant class); from his two feet the *shudra* (the peasant class) was born.

His mouth became the Brahman.  
 His arms became the Kshatriya  
 His thighs are the Vaisya,  
 The Sudra was produced from his feet. (*Rig Veda* 10:90.12)

### *The Manu Myth*

Brahma created Manu, the first man. From Manu came the four different types of people. From Manu's head came the Brahmins, the best and most holy people. Out of his hands came the Kshatriyas, the rulers and warriors. The craftsmen came from his thighs and are called Vaisyas. The remainder of the people came from Manu's feet and are known as Sudras. As time progressed over 3000 subcastes came into existence. The Indian government has outlawed the caste system but it has made little difference to everyday life for the vast majority of the Hindu population.

### *The Brahma Myth*

According to the Laws of Manu (c. 1500 BCE or 250 BCE?) the Brahman priestly class emanated from Brahma's mouth at creation (Law 93). Law 87 speaks of how Brahma assigned separate duties and occupations to those who sprang from his mouth, arms, thighs and feet: the Brahmanas, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra respectively.

#### **b) The Importance of the Caste System**

Until a century ago the acceptance of the caste system was considered by the orthodox to be the sole effective criterion of whether one was or was not a Hindu. Hume comments, "Amid the unequalled variety of religious belief and practice which has prevailed in Hinduism, caste is the only feature which has been present through all its historical phases and successive scriptures." Contrast this with the Christian church, e.g., James 2. The biblical Christian community rejects a hierarchy of status and insists on the priesthood of all believers.

#### **c) The Exclusivism of Caste**

In classical Hinduism caste groups married within each group and ate only with that group. Except for unusual cases, caste is immutably fixed at birth; it limits a Hindu's choice of occupation, marriage partner, dress, eating habits, religious practice, and his freedom to move about.

#### **d) The Hierarchical Nature of Caste**

The Brahmins topped the system and the untouchables (*harijans*) lay at the bottom, being consigned to specially polluting tasks, e.g., leather work, butchering, brewing, cleaning latrines, fishing, etc. A Hindu regards those in castes below him as ritually impure. In some matters the lower castes have more freedom; a Sudra may eat meat and his widow may remarry - options forbidden to orthodox Brahmins.

A Brahmin, no matter how thirsty, may not accept a drink of water from a Sudra. He cannot even dine with his own son until after the child is invested with the sacred thread.

#### **e) Ethical Implications of Caste**

In the *Bhagavad Gita* Krishna's first word to the desperate Arjuna appeals to the caste system as the basis of the ethic Arjuna should act upon in deciding whether it is right for him to wage war against his own relatives. He is exhorted not to yield to an ignoble

manliness unworthy of a warrior. For the warrior caste "there exists no greater good than a war enjoined by duty." Indeed such a war is "an open door to heaven."

## Purpose of Life

The word *purusharthas* is used to refer to the four Hindu goals of life. This a compound of "human being" (*purusha*) and "object/objective" (*artha*), hence "human objectives". The *purusharthas* may be thought of as a ladder with four rungs. The Hindu is urged to achieve four main objectives: religious piety (*dharma*), material gain and standing (*artha*), pleasure (*kama*) and liberation (*moksha*).

The first rung on the Hindu ladder is *dharma*. This is a complex word which defies easy translation. It refers to that which upholds the entire universe, a natural law or reality which is responsible for all existence, but which is inherent in the natural order and invisible. The pursuit of *dharma* is a quest for order and harmony both within oneself and with the environment within which one lives. *Dharma* also means all thought and action that is in sync with this natural law. Hindu scriptures such as the Bhagavadgita or the Upanishads, it is believed, enable a person to distinguish between right or harmonious (*dharma*) and that which is wrong, that is, out of kilter (*adharma*). Consequently, the aim of *dharma* incorporates understanding the teachings and doctrines of Hinduism and also individual religious duty and virtue.

Since *dharma* is foundational to all existence it follows that it must be the first aim of the aspiring Hindu. If a person accumulates wealth (as per the second goal) or indulges in sexual passion (as per the third goal) without observing *dharma* then the consequences are dire both to others and to oneself.

The second rung on the Hindu ladder is *artha*, a Sanskrit word that especially describes worldly status and material prosperity. Provided Vedic moral principles are observed it is considered to be a worthy aim to seek fame, high social status and the accumulation of wealth. This is because Hinduism sees that such prosperity effects human happiness and well being. Indeed, without money a person may not be able to perform his religious duties and fulfil his *dharma*.

In recent centuries India has been riddled with mass poverty and, as a result, this poverty-consciousness has actually distorted this key Hindu goal. Hinduism does not glorify poverty, yet many Hindus refuse to accept any saint or sage as a true yogi if he is not living a life of abject poverty. Many Hindu scholars believe this common mentality is an unfortunate effect of Buddhist influence.

The word *kama* ("desire") comprehends all forms of sensual gratification. However, in Hinduism there is often a focus on the narrow meaning this word may assume, namely "sexual desire", as advocated in the famous *Kama Sutra*. Since even animals seek physical pleasure this third aim is the most inferior of the four. Hinduism does encourage ordinary people to fulfil their sexual passions, provided this is in keeping with *dharma*. However, it also urges sexual abstinence for students and ascetics who devote themselves to the study of Hindu scriptures and the pursuit of Brahman.

The ultimate goal of Hinduism is *moksha* ("liberation"). This involves terminating the cycle of death and rebirth. The transmigration of the soul ends when consciousness of

time, space and causation is transcended. At this point the self no longer exists as an egoistic personality and when all its passions are stilled (*nirvana*).

There are various ways of explaining the relationship between these four aims. One way is to view *dharma* as a person's legs, walking on earth, thoroughly connected with the natural order. *Artha* and *kama* are a person's arms which are active in the middle region. *Moksha* is a person's head resting in heaven.

Another image is that of a wheel, with *dharma* representing the hub, *artha* and *kama* the two spokes and *moksha* its circumference.

If *dharma* is the center of the wheel of human life, *artha* and *kama* are the two spokes and *moksha* is its circumference. If *dharma* is at the center of human life, beyond *moksha* there is no human life, but only a life divine.

The four *Purusharthas* are also like the four wheels of a chariot called human life. They collectively uphold it and lead it. Each influences the movement of the other three, and in the absence of any one of them, the chariot comes to a halt.

A common approach is to view right, well-ordered living (*dharma*) as primary, since, it is argued, it is this which enables a person to acquire wealth and worldly standing (*artha*) which benefit others and self. It is further reasoned that such prosperity enables a person to enjoy sensual pleasure (*kama*) in a way that benefits the other and self. However, eventually, a person comes to recognize that physical gratification is a fleeting pleasure and then seeks liberation (*moksha*).

Some Hindus, taking the view that the desire for liberation is itself an expression of selfishness, encourage adoption of a fifth goal termed "love of God" (*prema*) or "eternal loving service" (*nitya-lila*).

## Liberation (moksha/mukti)

*Moksha* actually means absence of *moha* or delusion. This can be achieved through three paths:

- a) **The way of knowledge (*jnana marga*)**. Human suffering is due to ignorance. It is erroneous for a man to see himself as a separate and real entity. In reality there is only Brahman. It is when we continue to see ourselves as a separate entity that we are chained to the wheel of birth, death and rebirth. The way of knowledge leads to liberation once one attains to the ultimate moment of liberation in which one fully realises one is actually part of the ultimate Brahman and not a separate entity. In other words, liberation occurs when one comes to comprehend that all of reality is essentially pantheistic.
- b) **The way of devotion (*bhakti marga*)**. Devotion to a particular deity reflected in acts of worship, both public and private. The devotee also expresses his love for the deity in his love of family, master, etc. This way has to be learned from a guru who can explain from the sacred scriptures the nature of Brahman, Atman, the universe, and people's place in it.

The way of devotion has largely centered around the deities Vishnu and Shiva. In *Death of a Guru*, Maharaj recalls that his grandfather, "Nana", killed his first son, offering the tiny baby as a sacrifice to the gods. "This was not an uncommon practice, but it was never spoken of openly. Nana's favourite deity was Lakshmi, consort of Vishnu the preserver. Goddess of wealth and prosperity, she demonstrated her great powers when Nana rose at almost one leap to become one of the most powerful and wealthy men in my native Trinidad."

- c) **The way of ritual works (*karma marga*)**. The path to salvation through religious duty, that is, the performance of prescribed ceremonies, duties and religious rites. The practitioner hopes to be reborn as a Brahmin on his way to liberation.

## Creation

The first of the four Yugas is called *Satya Yuga* (Age of Gold). At this point humanity is in an original state of Godlike innocence.

The second Yuga is called *Treta Yuga* (Age of Silver). In this Age spiritual awareness has decreased by one fourth from its original state.

In the third Yuga, *Dvapara Yuga* (Age of Copper) negativity has reached a level of 50%.

In the fourth and final Yuga of this particular cycle, *Kali Yuga* (Age of Kali, Age of Iron) righteousness wanes to but one fourth of its original state. It is commonly believed that Kali Yuga began 3102 BC and is scheduled to last a total of 432,000 years, leaving 427,000 years to go. At the end of Kali-yuga the world will be reborn and there will be another four part yuga-cycle. This will begin with *Satya-yuga*, the Age of Truth.

The *Vishnu Purana* is one of the most ancient of Indian Scriptures. It says about *Kali Yuga*:

The leaders who rule over the Earth will be violent and seize the goods of their subjects. Those with possessions will abandon agriculture and commerce and will live as servants, that is, following various possessions. The leaders, with the excuses of fiscal need, will rob and despoil their subjects and take away private property. Moral values and the rule of the law will lessen from day to day until the world will completely perverted and agnosticism will gain the day among men.

The end of *Kali Yuga* is not an absolute end. It is the end of a whole Manvantara (a Hindu division of time of immense length), but this is simultaneously the beginning of another Manvantara. The so-called "end of a world" is but the end of illusion. This ancient Indian philosophy concerning the cycles of ages centres around Vishnu, the preserver God. The "end" comes when the world is absorbed into Vishnu himself before being born again. It is believed that Vishnu has already saved humanity on many occasions and that he has appeared as a Saviour in many different forms. He is believed to have incarnated in 10 avatars of whom the last three have been Rama, Krishna and the Buddha (Shakyamuni). The expectation is that he will appear again as Kalki 'the avenger', riding a white horse. He will destroy the present world (the corrupt age of the goddess Kali) and take humanity to a different, higher plane (the golden age of Krita).



In the fourteenth chapter of the last canto of the *Paramahansa Samhita* portion of the *Vayu Purana*, named *Sri Gauranga Candra Udaya*, Lord Brahma prays to the Supreme Lord Sri Hari thus:

In the age of Kali, people are spontaneously attracted to sinful activities and are devoid of the regulations of the scriptures. The so-called "twice-born" are degraded by their low-class activities and those who are born in low-class families are always hostile to brahminical culture. The twice-born are low-class by quality and do business by selling mantras. These so-called learned men are absorbed in their intestines and genitals and their only identification is the thread they wear. Indulging in over eating, absorbed in bodily consciousness, lazy, intellectually dull and greedy for others properties, they are consistently against God-consciousness. Due to being overly inclined towards false paths without essence, they manufacture their own processes for self-realization. Neglecting their actual duties they are expert in blaspheming You (the Supreme Personality of Godhead) and the saintly persons; hence again Mother Earth is in tears due to this burden. Therefore, Oh Lord of the Universe, destroyer of the miseries of the destitute, please mercifully do what is befitting for the protection of the Earth and the living entities.

In the *Bhagavata Purana* Kali-yuga is further described:

The unmanifested forces of time are so powerful that they can reduce all matter to oblivion in due course. In Kali-yuga, the last millennium of a round of four millenniums, the power of all material objects deteriorates by the influence of time. In this age the material body of the people in general is reduced, and so is the memory. The action of matter has also not so much incentive. The land does not produce food grains in the same proportions as it did in other ages. The cow does not give as much milk as it did formerly. The production of vegetables and fruits is less than before. As such, all living beings, both men and animals, do not have sumptuous, nourishing food. Due to want of so many necessities of life, naturally the duration of life is reduced, the memory is short, intelligence is meager, mutual dealings are full of hypocrisy and so on.

We also read in the *Bhagavata Purana* (1.3.43):

In the Kali-yuga the population is just a royal edition of the animals. They have nothing to do with spiritual knowledge or godly religious life. They are so blind that they cannot see anything beyond the jurisdiction of the subtle mind, intelligence or ego, but they are very much proud of their advancement in knowledge, science and material prosperity. They can risk their lives to become a dog or hog just after leaving the present body, for they have completely lost sight of the ultimate aim of life.

It is further stated:

Beef is forbidden in the scriptures, and the bull and cows are offered special protection by the followers of the Vedas. But in this age of Kali, people will exploit the body of the bull and the cow as they like, and thus they will invite sufferings of various types.

## Illusion

A popular way of illustrating *maya* involves using Shankara's famous illustration. A man is walking along the road at twilight. He sees something lying in the dust just ahead of him. In the poor light he imagines it to be a snake and in terror looks around for something to defend himself with. Then suddenly he realises his eyes have been playing tricks on him. It is not a snake at all, but a piece of old rope. He relaxes, laughs at his mistake and continues on his journey. Hindus explain that ultimate reality is like the old rope. People imperfectly perceive this reality, just as the traveler mistakenly superimposed the image of a snake upon the unperceived reality of the old rope. Liberation is achieved when this ignorance is corrected.

## Hinduism and Christianity Contrasted

|                                  | <i>Hinduism</i>  | <i>Christianity</i>   |
|----------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Founder</b>                   | None   | Jesus Christ  |
| <b>Authority</b>                 | No single scripture binding on all Hindus, though the Vedas are often particularly venerated   | The Bible is the inspired and infallible Word of God binding on all Christians  |
| <b>Creation<br/>- its future</b> | The universe is periodically created and re-created and each time passes through four Yugic cycles. In each Yuga the quality of life moves further away from <i>dharma</i> . We are presently in the final cycle, the <i>Kali Yuga</i> .                                 | The universe was created by God, but human sin and divine judgment means that it is subject to decay. However, ultimately it will be replaced by a new created order. Christians live in "the last days".   |
| <b>- its reality</b>             | Hindus say the world is <i>maya</i> , illusory. But as long as it appears real we must accept it seriously as such. However, reality is not as it appears to be. There is no inherent impetus in Hinduism to develop science.  | Christians see the world as having objective reality with its source in the creative will of God. However, Satan has blinded the eyes of sinners so that they do not see reality as it really is and fail, therefore, to recognize the revelation of God's glory. |
| <b>God<br/>- reality</b>         | Essential belief in Brahman as the ultimate reality - indefinable, impersonal and unknowable.  | Essential belief in God as the ultimate reality - uncontainable, personal and knowable through his self-revelation.   |
| <b>- Trinity</b>                 | Many Hindus regard Brahman as an eternal Trimutri or a Three-In-One-God (the Hindu Trinity): Brahma, the Creator, Vishnu, the Preserver, and Shiva, the Destroyer. But these are different forms of Brahman (often iconographically represented as a three-faced deity). | God is a Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These are not three forms of God (a heresy called Sabellianism) but three persons, though there is still but one God.   |
| <b>- Revelation</b>              | Hindus place enormous emphasis on rituals ( <i>pujas</i> ) involving images (it is popularly said that Hindus worship 33 million gods). Brahmins invite deities to infuse these images with their presence and breath and thus become manifest in and through the image. | The use of images or man-made representations of God are utterly abhorrent. God solely reveals himself in and through his Word. Also it is people who image God by their God-made constitution. Jesus supremely manifests God as the ultimate Word and Image.     |
| <b>- Scripture</b>               | The range of writings is immense. Some of the major Scriptures are the Mahabharata (100,000 verses), the Bhagavadgita (The Song of the Lord; Gita), the Puranas (18  | There are 66 inspired books forming the Bible, divided into Old Testament (39 books) and New Testament (27 books). There are many Christians who read the   |



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|                               | major; 18 minor; 400,000 couplets in all Puranas), Ramayana (24,000 couplets), the Vedas (includes Brahmanas and Upanishads; the Rig Veda alone is 5 times the size of Psalms)   | entire Bible each year.  |
| <b>Purpose of Life</b>        | In classical Hinduism there are four ends of life:<br>1. Pleasure ( <i>kama</i> ), with sex as the most intense of the pleasures.<br>2. Economic gain ( <i>artha</i> )<br>3. Virtue or action in accord with the Dharma ( <i>dharma</i> )<br>4. Liberation ( <i>moksha</i> ) | People are created to glorify God and enjoy him forever. This involves being transformed into the likeness of God/Christ.  |
| <b>Humanity - and "God"</b>   | An extension of the Being of "God"; part of "God"; manifestations of the impersonal Brahman without individual/self worth.   | Created in the image of a personal God, but separate and distinct from him, yet having immense individual/self worth.  |
| <b>- and relationships</b>    | People are not allowed to form friendships and intimate, loving relationships with all fellow human beings. The caste system places severe limits on such relationships.   | Jesus commands loving one's neighbour and, indeed, even one's enemy. Jesus refused to follow social norms and freely related with "untouchable" lepers, socially ostracized tax collectors and the lowest social classes - "sinners" and prostitutes.  |
| <b>- and individual worth</b> | Historically, the orthodox have regarded the caste system as the sole effective criterion of whether one is a Hindu or not. Individual worth is assessed according to this hierarchical system.  | The biblical Christian community rejects a hierarchy of status and insists on the priesthood of all believers and the creation of all people in the image of God.  |
| <b>- and suffering</b>        | A person's life is a trap set by actions one performed in countless previous incarnations. Those who are greatly suffering are frequently deemed to be experiencing the consequences of bad <i>karma</i> . This worldview discourages compassionate social action.           | Predestination is not determinism. People are responsible for their own actions and salvation in Christ is offered to all. Sin ultimately explains suffering, but individual sufferings are often not directly caused by that individual. Even evil people are immensely loved. This motivates actions to alleviate suffering and meet human need. |
| <b>The Basic Problem</b>      | Ignorance  | Sin. Ignorance of God is culpable.   |
|                               | Hindus believe in the transmigration of the soul. The soul is trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of birth, death and   | People live and die and after that comes judgment. Because all people are sinful all people stand under divine condemnation.   |

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|---------------------|---|---|
|                     | reincarnation ( <i>samsara</i> ).   |   |
| <b>The Solution</b> | Liberation ( <i>moksha</i> ) from illusion and ignorance and thus from <i>samsara</i>   | Forgiveness and reconciliation with God   |
| <b>The Means</b>    | Detachment from desire; intuiting oneness with "God" through self-effort  | Solely achieved through Christ's saving work and responded to with repentance and faith   |
|                     | Hindus may follow either of three paths to liberation:<br>1. The way of knowledge (discovering one is part of Brahman)<br>2. The way of devotion (worshipping a particular deity)<br>3. The way of ritual works (practicing religious duties) | Sin so thoroughly pervades all human thought and action that it is impossible to please God. Sinners cannot achieve salvation. Through God's undeserved grace, Jesus alone has been provided as the way to salvation. |
| <b>- pilgrimage</b> | For Hindus, pilgrimage ( <i>yatra</i> ), is so important that there are somewhere between 58,000 to 64,000 places of pilgrimage places for Hindus, usually located on the banks of rivers, coasts, seashores and mountains.                   | God's presence is no longer associated with any particular place but with his people.   |
| <b>The Outcome</b>  | The individual disappears as "he" or "she" merges into the Oneness.   | Eternal fellowship with God as a treasured individual in community.   |