

World Religions: Hinduism

Rev. Mark Hayes

January 13, 2008

Any survey or summarization of the world's major religions must include Hinduism, on the basis of both size and longevity. Hinduism currently claims about 837 million followers, making it the world's third largest religion, after Christianity and Islam. Hinduism is the dominant religion in India, Nepal, and among the Tamils in Sri Lanka. There are about a million Hindus in the United States.

Hinduism is generally regarded as the world's oldest organized religion. One source notes that it is "rooted in an age-old tradition and culture which goes back more or less uninterruptedly for 3500 years" (*Hinduism*, by Herbert Ellinger). In fact it consists of "thousands of different religious groups that have evolved in India since 1500 BCE (David Levinson, *Religion: A cross-cultural dictionary*).

The Hindu religion is known by a number of different names, such as Sanatana Dharma ("eternal religion") or Vaidika Dharma ("religion of the Vedas"). Of course the most commonly used name here in North America is "Hinduism," and that's what I'll be using this morning.

One of the best-known features of Hinduism is its polytheistic nature. That is, it recognizes many gods. Herbert Ellinger, in his book on the basics of Hinduism, mentions that someone once set out to count the Hindu gods and came up with the number 3.3 million. On the other hand, when Ellinger asked a swami (or 'holy' man) in India "about the different gods in the world of Hindu thought, he said: 'They are just names, there is only one God!'"

Part of the confusion here comes from the very understanding of the term 'God'. Of course we've never been confused about such definitions. . .

In Hindu thought, Brahman (not to be confused with Brahma, which I'll mention a little later) is absolute consciousness, the supreme, non-dual reality. As such, Brahman is without properties, or beyond properties, and so is not subject to personification or objectification. It is, in fact, inaccessible to human thought. Within this context, Hindus see certain 'aspects' of this indescribable reality, and these 'aspects' are represented by the pantheon of gods. Many sources use the term "henotheism" rather than "polytheism" to indicate that Hindus recognize a single supreme deity, and recognize other gods and goddesses as facets, forms, manifestations, or aspects of that supreme God; that is, Brahman.

Each Hindu is free to choose for him or herself which particular god or gods are most necessary for his or her personal way to redemption. Ellinger points out that "The Hindu deities are not in competition with one another, and many people turn to several of these divine aspects, these reflections of Brahman."

All that is not to say that all gods are equal in Hinduism. In fact, over the millennia, a trinity of major gods has developed, called the trimurti. It consists of Brahma (as distinct from Brahman), Vishnu, and Shiva. Brahma is considered the Creator, and is usually depicted with four faces oriented to the points of the compass, and four hands holding the four Vedas, which are basic, foundational sacred texts.

Vishnu derives from an age-old sun god, and is understood to be the guardian and preserver of dharma, or eternal law. Vishnu is seen as gentle, and always concerned for humankind. The third figure of the trinity is Shiva, an ambivalent figure who is the bringer of blessings, but also the destroyer of the imaginary world of appearances. Perhaps the best known

depictions of Shiva are as king of the dance, symbolizing the cosmic dance and its five characteristic activities of creation, preservation, destruction, embodiment, and liberation.

I won't go into so much detail about the other three million gods. I will say that all together they form many intertwined families and sub-communities in the complex web of Hindu lore and legend. For instance, we find the elephant-headed god of wisdom, Ganesh, who is the son of Shiva and Parvati. And every god has its own particular qualities and its own collection of stories conveying some small pieces of religious wisdom or truth.

In thinking about denominationalism in Hinduism, you could say that there are as many denominations as there are gods. However, I should point out that about seventy percent of Hindus focus their worship primarily on Vishnu, and about twenty percent on Shiva.

The scriptural bedrock of the Hindu tradition consists of the Vedas, or 'sacred knowledge.' The Vedas were sacred hymns chanted by specially trained priests as much as four thousand years ago. The doctrines usually associated with Hinduism, such as karma, reincarnation, and yogic practice, appeared much later in the Upanishads. And finally, what may be the most important and influential of the Hindu scriptures is the Bhagavad Gita, which took shape between 400 BCE and 400 CE. Its basic message is that "each human life has but one ultimate end and purpose: to realize the Eternal Self within and thus to know, finally and fully, the joy of union with God, the Divine Ground of Being (Brahman)." [Philip Novak, *The World's Wisdom*] Other sacred texts include the *Mahabharata* (of which the *Bhagavad Gita* is a small part), the *Brahmanas*, the *Sutras*, the *Puranas*, and the *Aranyakas*.

In addition to the plethora gods and of scriptures, there is also a plethora of holy days and festivals. It's been said that Hindus celebrate everything. And so it seems. The births, marriages, and victories of the gods, the new year, full moons, harvests, anniversaries, etc. In addition to the many holy days, there are at least twenty major Hindu festivals. I'll only mention two this morning. First, one of the largest, celebrated all over India with enthusiasm and zeal, is Diwali, or the Festival of Lights. The five-day festival commemorates the return of Rama and Sita to their kingdom Ayodhya after fourteen years of exile. Diwali is celebrated on a new moon day in October or November. Its observance in 2008 will begin on October 28.

The other festival I chose to mention is Lohri, which just happens to be today, January 13. It's a time of celebration, with bonfires and children going from house to house collecting treats (much like our Halloween). In addition to celebrating the bond of brotherhood and the spirit of oneness, this festival also signifies the beginning of the end of winter. It assumes special significance for those who have had a marriage or a new birth in their families within the past year.

Regarding belief and practice, Hindus typically organize their lives around certain activities, call the "four aims of Hinduism" or "the doctrine of the fourfold end of life." In particular, the three goals for those who choose to live in the world are:

- *dharma*: righteousness in their religious life.
- *artha*: success in their economic life; material prosperity.
- *kama*: gratification of the senses; pleasure; sensual, sexual, and mental enjoyment.

The fourth aim applies to those who choose to renounce the world, and that is *moksha*: liberation from *samsara*, the virtually endless cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. This is considered the supreme goal of humankind.

A distinctively Hindu form of spiritual practice is yoga. There are actually several different forms of yoga, each of which represents a different path to the same goal of uniting the human spirit with the supreme God (again, Brahman). Huston Smith, in his book, *The World's Religions*, describes four primary yogic paths:

- *Jnana yoga*: the way of knowledge, for spiritual aspirants who have a strong reflective bent.
- *Bakhti yoga*: the way of love, said to be the shortest, but steepest path, requiring a combination of rationality and spirituality.
- *Karma yoga*: the way of works, intended for persons of active bent.
- *Raja yoga*: the way of psychophysical exercises, designed for people who are of scientific bent.

Before I spell out what I see as some of the particular gifts of Hinduism, I do want to recognize what could be seen as downsides of the tradition, at least in practice if not in belief. First is the caste system. One of the earliest sacred texts, the *Rig Veda*, defined four castes: the Brahmins, which included priests and academics; Kshatriyas, who were rulers and the military; Vaishyas, who were farmers, landlords, and merchants; and Sudras, who were peasants, servants, and workers. A fifth category, the Dalit, were outcasts and not even considered to be a part of the caste system. We know them as the “untouchables.” They worked in what were considered “polluting” jobs.

This system, which grates against our egalitarian sensibilities, was actually abolished by law in India in 1949, and has lost much of its power, especially in urban areas. But the tradition has been preserved largely unchanged in some rural areas, and remains a significant force among Hindus throughout much of India.

Another area where Hinduism has been criticized is the status and treatment of women. As in many other religions, there are passages in the sacred texts which can be used to justify treating women as inferior. And throughout the history of Hinduism, as in many other religions, the treatment has sometimes been abysmal, including female infanticide, neglect of girl children, burning of widows, etc. I will just point out that these behaviors have been largely outlawed, and are by no means linked inextricably to the core religious and spiritual values of Hinduism.

I believe that Hinduism, and the nation of India, are on the same long, slow journey as is much of the rest of the world, toward more just and humane treatment of all people, regardless of such categories as social status or gender. Incidentally, Hinduism has a reputation of being highly tolerant of other religions, as reflected in a traditional Hindu saying, “The truth is One, but different Sages call it by different names.”

As for gifts of Hinduism, one very specific one, which has been widely embraced by people around the world, and here in America, is the practice of yoga, as a tool for both spiritual and physical development. One more general feature of Hinduism, that I appreciate and would emulate, is the inherent recognition of differences of individual temperament and personality. While some religious traditions would seem to be prescribing one path for all, Hinduism provides several distinct paths of spiritual practice through the different forms of yoga. Not to mention the huge pantheon of deities from which to choose so as to satisfy your own particular perspectives and sensibilities.

And not only does Hinduism recognize that people are different one from another. It also recognizes that each individual moves through different stages of life, each of which includes its

own particular needs, and appropriate modes of conduct. The four stages of student, householder, retiree, and enlightened one, each have their own aptitudes, and therefore their own responses to the question: “How, then, should I live?”

One final gift: As I have pointed out before, every religious tradition has its own distinctive collections of stories, designed to impart some of the wisdom of the tradition. Hinduism is certainly no exception, and so I’d like to close this morning with a traditional Hindu tale, found in the book *Doorways to the Soul* (ed. Elisa Davy Pearmain):

Siva and Shakti, the Divine Couple in Hinduism, are in their heavenly abode watching over the earth. They are touched by the challenges of human life, the complexity of human reactions, and the ever-present place of suffering in the human experience. As they watch, Shakti spies a miserably poor old man walking down the road. His clothes are shabby and his sandals are tied together with rope. Her heart is wrung with compassion. Touched by his goodness and his struggle, Shakti turns to her divine husband and begs him to give this man some gold. Siva looks at the man for a long moment. “My dearest Wife,” he says, “I cannot do that.” Shakti is astounded. “Why, what do you mean, Husband? You are Lord of the Universe. Why can’t you do this simple thing?”

“I cannot give this to him because he is not yet ready to receive it,” Siva replies. Shakti becomes angry. “Do you mean to say that you cannot drop a bag of gold in his path?”

“Surely I can,” Siva replies, “but that is quite another thing.”

“Please, Husband,” says Shakti.

And so Siva drops a bag of gold in the man’s path.

The man meanwhile walks along thinking to himself, “I wonder if I will find dinner tonight – or shall I go hungry again?” Turning a bend in the road, he sees something on the path in his way. “Aha,” he says. “Look there, a large rock. How fortunate that I have seen it. I might have torn these poor sandals of mine even further.” And carefully stepping over the bag of gold, he goes on his way.

May we each strive always to be ready to recognize and receive whatever nuggets of gold appear in our path, from wherever they may come.

So may it be.