

HINDUISM AND THE BIBLE

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HINDUISM AND THE BIBLE

Oh, East is East, and West is West,
and never the twain shall meet. . . .

Rudyard Kipling's famous lines are an apt description of the vast gulf separating the ways and thoughts of the Western world from those of the East. Nowhere is this more evident than in a comparison of the foremost religion of India, Hinduism, with biblical Christianity.

According to 1992 statistics, there are 705,000,000 Hindus worldwide, making Hinduism the third largest religion in the world after Christianity and Islam. All but about 5,000,000 Hindus live in south Asia, especially India. Some 1,250,000 reside in North America.

Hinduism is on the rise. It is important that Christians know something about this powerful religion and how it differs from "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). May God bless us as we stand firm in that faith and share it with a dying world!

Historical sketch

Hinduism's roots go back to the time of the ancient Aryans. This people—whose name means "noble, free"¹—began moving into India from the northwest early in the second millennium before Christ. The Aryans may originally have come from Iran, although there is much unclarity concerning their origins.

Their language was Sanskrit, a member of the Indo-European family of languages, as are Greek, and the Teutonic, Slavic, and Romance languages. Their religion was polytheistic. In this, it was typical of the times. We think, for example, of the ancient Greeks or the world in which Abraham (1800 B.C.) and Moses (1400 B.C.) moved.

The light-skinned Aryans distinguished themselves from the natives of the region. Their differences in color and status gave rise to the caste system, which was to become one of the foundational tenets of Hindu thought and Indian life.

For generations, Aryan religion passed down by word of mouth. About 1500 B.C. it began to take written form in the *Vedas*. The word means "knowledge," and "to Hindus the *Vedas* are—as is the Bible to Christians and the Koran to Muslims—the primary source of religious belief."² They consist chiefly of invocations

to various gods.

As the Aryans ventured farther into India, their literature reflected that expansion. Two epic works recount this period—the *Mahabharata*, "Epic of the War of the Descendants of Bharata," and the *Ramayana*, "Story of Rama." The former work is the longest poem in the world, consisting of 100,000 verses. A portion of the *Mahabharata* is perhaps the best known of all Hindu writings—the *Bhagavad Gita*, "Celestial Song." The great epics have become "part of the popular life of the people, supplying ideal heroes and heroines."³ While they furnish what scant historical knowledge there is of the period, the epics are far more myth than history. One scholar states, "History, in the ordinary sense of the word, is unknown in Indian literature."⁴

In the epic period, we see the old Vedic gods being replaced. The famous Hindu "trinity"—Brahma, Siva, and Vishnu—emerged as preeminent among the deities.

The *Upanishads* (about 800—600 B.C.) introduced more new developments. They reflect a more philosophical bent than previous writings. They also show the Indo-Aryan religion taking on a more pessimistic outlook, with release from life becoming an important goal. At this time the idea of *Atma*, the "world soul," developed. So did the concept of the migration of the soul at death from one body into another. One's *karma*—good or bad actions—determined where his or her soul would go.

About 500 B.C. two reform movements arose within Hinduism. Both were revolts against the power of the upper caste, the *Brahmins*, as well as against the polytheism of the day. Both kept the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth as central. And both have developed into religions in their own right—Buddhism and Jainism.

In 326 B.C. Alexander the Great invaded India, but not before there had already been considerable interchange between the civilization of India and Greece. Several decades before Alexander's conquests, we find in Plato's *Republic* the concepts of *karma* and migration of the soul. His division of the ideal society into the guardians, auxiliaries, and workers closely parallels the caste system.

Around 300 B.C. the discipline of *yoga* was introduced as a way of dealing with *karma*.

More centuries passed, and the myths of the ancient times were popularized in the eighteen Sanskrit poems known as *Puranas*.

The tenth century after Christ saw another invasion of India from the northwest, this time by Muslims. The name Hindu (which is a Persian word for Indian) dates from around A.D. 1200, when the Muslims used it to distinguish the faith of India from their own. The blend of Islam and Hinduism gave rise to the Sikh faith about 1500.

The Hindu religion is closely tied to the historical and cultural development of its place of origin, "Mother India." Radhakrishnan, a former president of modern India, remarked, "Hinduism is more a culture than a creed."⁵

Hindu thought and life

Over the centuries, the Hindu religion has evolved into a very complex system of thought and way of life. Several basic themes undergird today's Hinduism and have profound impact on Hindu life.

One of those central themes is *pantheism*, the belief that the entire universe is a part of "God." Even if we are not aware of it, we are a fragment of "God." In contrast, the Bible teaches that God, the Creator, is distinct from his creation. Moreover, the Hindu "God," often referred to as *Brahman*, is an impersonal force, quite unlike the personal God we worship and to whom we pray. While at first glance, pantheism seems far from the polytheism of the ancient Aryans, it's not really such a huge step. To believe that nature is shot through with deities is not far from saying that all nature is a part of the divine.

In actual practice, most Hindus recognize many gods. Chief among them are Brahma the Creator, Siva (or Shiva) the Destroyer, and Vishnu the Preserver. Each has a female partner. Brahma's is Sarasvati, symbolizing knowledge and truth. Kali, goddess of judgment and death, is the consort of Siva. Lakshmi, the goddess of beauty and fortune, is the wife of Vishnu. Vishnu, incidentally, is known through ten *avatars*, or incarnations. The most famous of these is Krishna, recognized as a god in his own right and the most popular of all Hindu gods.

The Hindu ideal is to be absorbed into the ultimate reality of Brahma and to be free from this present material world, which is considered merely an illusion (*maya*). This leads to a second fundamental belief of Hinduism—*reincarnation*.

Eastern thinking holds that "a man has a soul, and it passes from life to life, as a traveler from inn to inn."⁶ The doctrine of reincarnation, also known as *samsara* (wandering), rebirth, or transmigration, is at odds with the Bible's assertion, ". . . man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).

Moreover, the weary repetition of struggling through one life after another for a million years or so is, in Mahatma Gandhi's words, "a burden too great to bear."⁷ According to Hindu thought, an individual passes through thousands of reincarnations until he is finally released from this dreary bondage into union with Brahma. This union (known as *moksha* to the Hindus, *nirvana* to Buddhists) is likened to a drop of water being absorbed into the ocean.

People's accumulation of *karma*—their good and bad deeds—determines where they will spend their next reincarnation.

Closely tied to reincarnation and *karma* is the Hindu *caste* system. Hinduism asserts that Brahma determined the world should be divided into four castes, or levels. The upper level, consisting of priests and philosophers, is the *Brahmin* caste. Next come the *Kshatriyas*—the warriors, administrators, politicians, and professionals. On the third level are the *Vaisyas*—farmers and merchants. The fourth level is that of the *Sundras*—laborers and servants. Below them all are a fifth group, "the untouchables," who are scorned as social outcasts.

The four main groups have been subdivided into many others. A 1901 census listed 2,378 with the Brahmins having the largest numbers and the lowest caste having second most.⁸ Since then, the number has increased. Historian Michael Edwardes notes the hold that the caste system has had on India:

Caste is the steel frame of Hindu society and an organization of almost incredible complexity, but the basis is the belief in the divine origin of the four castes, fixed and unchanging, the gulf between them impassable. To destroy caste would be to demolish the whole Hindu social structure. Conquerors and invaders, Buddhist, Muslim and Christian, have been forced to accept its all-pervading strength.⁹

The caste system has locked the people of India into a fatalistic resignation to the social class into which they are born. To see firsthand the squalor, filth, and disease everywhere present in India is to get some notion of where Hindu thought leads.

The three ways

Hinduism teaches three ways of attaining release from the almost endless chain of reincarnation. Each way lays on people the heavy burden that they must save themselves, whereas the Bible presents the good news that salvation is "the gift of God—not by works" (Ephesians 2:8,9).

The first is the way of knowledge (*jnana-marga*). This way includes meditation and reasoning. *Yoga*, the use of meditation and physical discipline to gain self-mastery, often falls within this way. Relatively few, such as the Hindu monks, follow this intellectual way.

The second is the way of works (*karma-marga*). Good works are performed to achieve release into the eternal.

The most popular path is the way of devotion (*bhakti-marga*). Most Hindus devote themselves to the worship of some manifestation of Brahman. Although in theory Hinduism is pantheistic, in practice among the masses of people it is polytheistic, having some thirty million different gods. I recall a conversation I once had with a Hindu in India; he was very happy to accept Jesus as another among many gods—but not as *the* way.

In following these ways, Hindu life revolves around several practices. One is *puja*, the offering of flowers and food to the gods. Another is meditation on a *mantra*, a sacred word or phrase spoken over and over. The *mantra* "Om" is said to represent the ultimate in its fulness. A common thread running through all Hindu life is veneration for the sacred cow. The cows are allowed to go anywhere and eat anything.

While Hindus pride themselves on being open to all religious ideas, they are not. As just noted, they do not accept Christ as he presents himself. Nor are they especially tolerant of other religions. On December 6, 1992, Hindus attacked and destroyed a 430-year-old mosque in Ayodhya, India. In the rioting of the following week, over 1000 people were killed and thousands more wounded.¹⁰

Hindu literature

The texts of Hinduism are voluminous. In the monumetal series *Sacred Books of the East*, Hindu writings account for twenty-one of the forty-nine volumes of texts. And that is without including all Hindu sacred books!

Hindu literature breaks into two main groupings, the scriptures and the nonscriptural

literature. The first group is the *Veda*, which is classified as *Shruti*, that is, "heard." The second is the *Smriti*, "remembered."¹¹

The *Vedas* were composed and compiled between 1800 and 500 B.C. They fall into four categories: (1) *Samhitas* (the earliest scriptures, made up of four main sections, *Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Atharva Veda*), (2) *Brahmanas* (priestly writings, commentaries, rituals), (3) *Aranyakas* ("forest texts"), (4) *Upanishads* (philosophical discourses). Each of the four categories contains numerous writings, and all the writings after the *Samhitas* correspond to one of the four main sections of that earliest group.

The nonscriptural literature, the *Smriti*, contains several major groupings. The first are the *Sutras* ("threads"), written about 500—200 B.C. These writings present the requirements of Vedic religion. They include social rules (*dharma*), as well as priestly and domestic duties. The best known *Sutra* is the *Vedanta Sutra*, a synopsis of the *Upanishads*.

A second grouping contains the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The two epic tales of India attempt to give purpose and order to life, even in times of unrest. The *Ramayana* is the shorter of the two poems; it has 24,000 couplets. It tells of Rama, the sixth incarnation of Vishnu, who is dedicated to ridding the world of evildoers. The *Mahabharata* is a huge collection of adventure, myth, history, and superstition. The *Mahabharata* contains the *Bhagavad Gita*, which in some listings is included in the *Shruti*.

The *Puranas* (written after A.D. 300) contain ancient myths about gods, heroes, and teachers. The best known is the *Bhagavata Purana* which tells of Vishnu's incarnation as Krishna, prior to the events described in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Also included in the writings are the *Laws of Manu*. Manu is the Noah of Hindu tradition, who survived a flood and founded a new race of people. The twelve books in this collection deal with rituals, legends, and theological discussions.

The *Shruti/Smriti* distinction has been referred to as canonical/semicanonical.¹² This description is helpful in that it shows how the lines are not clearcut, as is the case with many aspects of Hinduism. We will look at a random, yet representative, sampling of readings:

Rig Veda

The *Rig Veda* represents the oldest and

most important of the four *Samhitas*. It is divided into ten books, containing 1028 hymns of praise—which is what *Rig* means—to the Aryan deities. Chief among them was Varuna, corresponding to the Greek Uranus. Another important god was Agni (Latin *ignis*), the life force of nature and god of fire and sacrifice. Worshipers would cast offerings of grain, butter, and spices into the flames. The following hymn, the first in the *Rig Veda*, addresses Agni:

I worship by hymns Agni, the high-priest of the sacrifice, the deity, the sacrificial priest who presents oblations to the deities and is the possessor of great riches.

May Agni . . . conduct the deities hither (*i.e.*, in this sacrifice).

Through Agni, the worshiper comes by wealth which multiplies daily, which is the source of fame and which secures heroes.

O Agni, the sacrifice, around which thou residest, is unimpeded and reaches the celestials in heaven.

May Agni, the presenter of oblations, the attainer of success in works, ever truthful, highly illustrious for many noble deeds, divine, come hither with the celestials.

Whatever good, O Agni, thou mayest confer upon the giver of oblations, that, indeed, O Angiras, belongs to thee.

Bowing unto thee mentally, O Agni, we approach thee daily, both morning and evening.

Thee, the radiant, the protector of sacrifices . . . the perpetual illuminator of truth and increasing in thine own room.

Like unto a father to his son, O Agni, be easily accessible unto us; be ever present with us for our well-being.¹³

In the *Rig Veda's* "Hymn of Man," we find the origin of the caste system. The four castes came from the dividing up of primal man:

When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet?

His mouth became the brahmin; his arms were made into the warrior, his thighs the people, and from his feet the servants were born.¹⁴

Brahmanas

Referring to this portion of the Hindu scripture, one scholar remarks,

In the whole range of literature few works are probably less calculated to excite the interest of any outside the very limited numbers of specialists, than the ancient theological writings of the Hindus, known by the name of *Brahmanas*. For more wearisome prolixity of exposition, characterized by dogmatic assertion and a flimsy symbolism rather than by serious reasoning, these works are perhaps not equalled anywhere; unless, indeed, it be by the speculative vapourings of the Gnostics.¹⁵

Nevertheless, we include a portion of the *Brahmanas*, since they show the hold that the priestly caste gained over the lives of the people. Ceremonies and sacrifices are described down to the smallest detail. Before making a sacrifice, the worshiper takes a vow of abstinence—avoiding certain foods (especially meat) and carnal pleasure, cutting one's hair, sleeping on the ground, and observing silence. The *Brahmanas* open by describing this process:

He who is about to enter on the vow, touches water, whilst standing between the Ahavaniya and Garhapatya fires, with his face turned towards east. The reason why he touches water is, that man is (sacrificially) impure on account of his speaking untruth; and because by that act an internal purification (is effected),—for water is indeed purifying. 'After becoming sacrificially pure, I will enter on the vow,' thus (he thinks); for water is indeed purifying. 'Having become purified through the purifying one, I will enter on the vow,' thus (he thinks, and) this is the reason why he touches water.

Looking towards the (Ahavaniya) fire, he enters on the vow with the text: 'O Agni, Lord of vows! I will keep the vow! May I be equal to it, may I succeed in it!' For Agni is Lord of Vows to the gods, and it is to him therefore that he addresses these words....

After the completion (of the sacrifice) he divests himself (of the vow), with the text: 'O Agni, Lord of Vows! I have kept the vow; I have been equal to it; I have succeeded in it.'¹⁶

Upanishads

The *Upanishads* form the end of Vedic scriptures and are commonly referred to as *Vedanta*, that is, "the end of the *Veda*." They are a collection of speculative treatises and comprise

the basics of Hindu philosophy. "They alone of the Vedic corpus are widely known and quoted among most well-educated Hindus, and their central ideas have become a part of the spiritual arsenal of rank-and-file Hindus, while the earlier Vedic texts remain largely the special reserve of priests and scholars."¹⁷

The following excerpt illustrates the oneness of the individual *atman* or soul with the universal:

'Place this salt in water, and then wait on me in the morning.'

The son did as he was commanded.

The father said to him: 'Bring me the salt, which you placed in the water last night.'

The son having looked for it, found it not, for, of course, it was melted.

The father said: 'Taste it from the surface of the water. How is it?'

The son replied: 'It is salt.'

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

The son replied: 'It is salt.'

'Taste it from the bottom. How is it?'

The son replied: 'It is salt.'

The father said: 'Throw it away and then wait on me.'

He did so; but salt exists for ever.

Then the father said: 'Here also, is this body, forsooth you do not perceive the True (*Sat*), my son; but there indeed it is.

'That which is the subtle essence, in it all that exists has its self. It is True. It is the Self, and thou, O Svetaketu, art it.'

'Please, Sir, inform me still more,' said the son.

'Be it so, my child,' the father replied.¹⁸

The individual soul (*atman*), then, is imperishable and is one with the ultimate reality, that is, *Brahman*, who is "pure Spirit," upon which everything rests. The following illustration is another example of this key teaching in the *Upanishads*:

'If some one were to strike at the root of this large tree here, it would bleed, but live. If he were to strike at its stem, it would bleed, but live. If he were to strike at its top, it would bleed, but live. Pervaded by the living Self that tree stands firm, drinking in its nourishment and rejoicing;

'But if the life (the living Self) leaves one of its branches that branch withers; if it leaves a second, that branch withers; if it leaves a third, that branch withers. If it

leaves the whole tree, the whole tree withers. In exactly the same manner, my son, know this.' Thus he spoke:

'This (body) indeed withers and dies when the living Self has left it; the living Self dies not.

'That which is that subtle essence in it all that exists has its self. It is the True. It is the Self, and thou, O Svetaketu, art it.'

'Please, Sir, inform me still more,' said the son.

'Be it so, my child,' the father replied.¹⁹

Along with such pantheism, we also find passages that speak of individual sin, for example:

These are the three adorations of the all-conquering Kaushitaki [from whom this *Upanishad* receives its name]:

At the rising of the sun he said, 'You who give liberty, make me free from my sins'.

When the sun was mid-way in heaven he said, 'You who are on high and give liberty, set me on high and make me free from my sins'.

At the hour of sunset he uttered this prayer, 'You who give full liberty, make me fully free from my sins'.²⁰

Freedom from sin, of course, cannot be found in human philosophies or efforts. At its heart, Hinduism is completely devoid of the gospel, the forgiveness that is ours in Christ and revealed in the Holy Bible.

Bhagavad Gita

This is the most famous portion of Hindu literature. Although not a part of scripture, at times it is classified as *Shruti*. It is a part of the *Mahabharata* and describes a conversation between Prince Arjuna and his charioteer, who happens to be Krishna.

Battle is about to begin, and much of the discussion deals with the value of action or inaction. The underlying thesis is that men and gods are but manifestations of the One Divine Spirit. Moreover, the poem has done much to encourage devotion to Krishna, who asserts, "Only by *bhakti* can men see me and know me and come to me."²¹

In our excerpt from chapter four of this poem, Krishna discusses several central themes of Hinduism:

The Blessed Lord said:

1. This changeless way of life (*yoga*)
did I

To Vivasvat [a name for the sun]
[once] proclaim;

To Manu Vivasvat told it,
And Manu to Ikshvaku passed it
on.

2. Thus was the tradition from one
to another handed on,
The Royal Seers came to know it;
[But] in the long course of time
The way of life (*yoga*) on earth was
lost.

3. This is the same primeval way of
life (*yoga*)
That I preach to thee today;
For thou art loyal, devoted (*bhakta*)
and my comrade,
And this is the highest mystery.

Arjuna said:

4. Later thy birth,
Earlier Vivasvat's:
How should I understand thy words
That in the beginning thou didst
proclaim it?

The Blessed Lord said:

5. Many a birth have I passed
through

And [many a birth] hast thou:
I know them all,
Thou knowest not.

6. Unborn am I, changeless is my
Self;

Of [all] contingent beings I am the
Lord!

Yet by my creative energy (*maya*) I
consort

With Nature—which is mine—and
come to be [in time].

7. For whenever the law of
righteousness (*dharma*)
Withers away, and lawlessness
(*adharma*)

Raises its head,
Then do I generate Myself on earth.

8. For the protection of the good,
For the destruction of evildoers,
For the setting up of righteousness,
I come into being, age after age.

9. Who knows my godly birth and
mode of operation (*karma*)

Thus as they really are
He, his body left behind, is never

born again:

He comes to Me.

10. Many are they who, passion,
fear and anger spent,
Inhere in Me, making Me their
sanctuary:

Made pure by wisdom and hard
penances,
They come [to share in] the manner
of my being.

11. In whatsoever way [devoted]
men approach Me,
In that same way do I return their
love (*bhaj*-).

Whatever their occupation and
wherever they may be,
Men follow the path I trace.

12. Desiring success in their (ritual)
acts (*karma*),

Men worship here the gods;
For swiftly in the world of men
Comes success, engendered by the
act [itself].

13. The four-caste system did I
generate

With categories of 'constituents'
and works;

Of this I am the doer, know thou
this:—

And yet I am the Changeless One
Who does not do [or act].²²

From these few examples, we can see that Hindu literature gives powerful testimony to man's natural longing for spiritual peace, forgiveness, and eternal life. Yet it calls for the impossible—man working out his own salvation. Only the Bible points to Christ, who has done it all for us.

Hinduism and the West

As noted above, the interchange between India and the West goes back to ancient times. Our concern here is to bring it into our own times. Rammohun Roy (1772—1833), a Bengali Brahmin, has been called "the father of modern India." He began the revival of Hinduism at the very time that William Carey, "the father of modern missions," was carrying on his pioneering work in India.

Hinduism's impact in North America goes back 100 years. In 1893 Swami Vivekananda of India made an impressive appearance at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago. That he was intent on conquering the West for

Hinduism is clear from his own words:

This is the great ideal before us, and every one must be ready for it—the conquest of the whole world by India—nothing less than that, and we must all get ready for it, strain every nerve for it. Let foreigners come and flood the land with their armies, never mind. Up, India, and conquer the world with your spirituality! Aye, as has been declared on this soil first, love must conquer hatred, hatred cannot conquer itself. Materialism and all its miseries can never be conquered by materialism. . . . Spirituality must conquer the West. Slowly they are finding out that what they want is spirituality to preserve them as nations. They are waiting for it, they are eager for it. Where is the supply to come from? . . . Such heroic workers are wanted to go abroad and help; to disseminate the great truths of the *Vedanta*. The world wants it; without it the world will be destroyed. The whole of the Western world is on a volcano which may burst tomorrow, go to pieces tomorrow. They have searched every corner of the world and have found no respite. They have drunk deep of the cup of pleasure and found it vanity. Now is the time to work so that India's spiritual ideas may penetrate deep into the West.²³

The years following Vivekananda have seen an influx of other *swamis*, more commonly known as *gurus*. These men are regarded as spiritual masters, who have supposedly reached the end of their many thousands of reincarnations. They share their vast store of accumulated spiritual insights with their devotees.

Recent decades have seen a number of *gurus* gain notoriety in the United States. To name but three: Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (founder of Transcendental Meditation), A. C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada (Hare Krishna), and Maharaj Ji (Divine Light Mission). These and other *gurus* have risen and then passed from prominence, either through death or loss of credibility.

Yet Hinduism's influence in the West continues to grow, far outweighing the actual number of Hindus. Key Hindu concepts have become household terms and, what is more, been absorbed into the belief systems of countless Westerners. For example, at the turn of the century only one or two percent of people in Europe and North America believed in reincarnation; by 1982 that figure was about twenty-two per-

cent.²⁴

The so-called New Age Movement has done much to further Hindu ideas. Shirley MacLaine and other New Age advocates have popularized notions such as, "You are God."

In this way, the biblical concept of sin and salvation has been undermined. Humanity's basic problem is not seen as sin, but as the lack of knowledge. Once we realize we are God, we can get on the path to salvation.

Hinduism and Christianity

Comparison of teachings

Hinduism and its writings differ with biblical Christianity at almost every turn. We note seven key differences:

1. Hinduism recounts myths. The Bible is anchored in history. It recounts God's dealings with mankind in time and space. As Peter declares, "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1:16).

2. Hinduism teaches that the material creation is illusion (*maya*), while the spiritual is real. The Bible presents both the physical and material as real, valuable components of God's creation.

3. Hindu scriptures present a changing, evolving religion. The Bible consistently points to the one true God, progressively unfolding his promises and their fulfillment in Christ.

4. Basically, Hinduism is a religion of pessimism, offering nothing but the prospect of almost endless reincarnations. Christianity offers the certain hope of salvation in Jesus.

5. "God is love," asserts the Bible (1 John 4:16). That love is demonstrated in the fact that "Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). While Hindus may talk of love, their religion centers in an impersonal, uncaring god.

6. Like every non-Christian religion, Hinduism is but another religion of works. Only Scripture shows that while no one can save himself, it is a gift of God's grace, which we receive through a Spirit-worked faith.

7. Hinduism is without Christ. In the Bible, we have Christ, who is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24).

Christians and Hinduism

As the West continues to lose its grip on once commonly-held biblical truths, believers

need to stand firm. We need to know the Bible. We need to know the differences between falsehood and truth and then share that truth in love.

The difference between Hinduism and Christianity is not really Eastern versus Western world views. Nor is it simply a matter of cultural or philosophical differences. It is a question of who is God. The Hindu god, of which we are supposedly a part, is a vague impersonal force. But Jesus Christ has shown himself to be God incarnate, victor over sin, death, and the forces of hell. On the last day he will visibly return to judge his creation. As Kipling's poem continues:

Oh, East is East, and West is West,
and never the twain shall meet,
Till earth and sky stand presently
at God's great judgment seat.

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TERMS

Atman—the self, soul, surviving successive bodies until *moksha* provides release.

Avatar—an incarnation of godhead who descends from the spiritual world.

Bhakti yoga—the yoga of devotional service to deity.

Brahma—the first created living being in the universe.

Brahman—the impersonal feature of god.

Deva—a demigod or devotee.

Dharma—spiritual duty in accord with cosmic law and order.

Guru—spiritual master.

Jnana—spiritual knowledge.

Karma—activities and their reactions.

Ksatriya—the order of society whose occupation is governmental administration and military.

Mantra—a transcendental sound vibration.

Marga—path, way, discipline leading to salvation.

Maya—illusion that keeps people from understanding “the Supreme Personality of Godhead.”

Moksha—release, liberation of the *atman* from bondage to *samsara*.

Mukti—liberation.

Puja—worship of a deity or object representing deity.

Samsara—worldly realm of rebirths, transmigration.

Sudra—the order of society of those “unqualified” for any work other than menial service.

Vaisya—the agricultural community.

Veda—knowledge, collection of ancient texts.

Yoga—the process of linking with the Supreme.

Yogi—one who practices *yoga*.

NOTES

1. Michael Edwardes, *A History of India* (London: New English Library, 1967), p. 21.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 28.
4. Kashinath Trimbak Telang, trans., *The Bhagavadgita*, Volume VIII in *The Sacred Books of the East*, F. Max Mueller, ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965), p. 1
5. R. Pierce Beaver, *Eerdmans' Handbook to the World's Religions* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982), p. 170.
6. Mark Albrecht, *Reincarnation, A Christian Appraisal* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1982), back cover.
7. As quoted in "Gods of the New Age," Video (Hemet, California: Jeremiah Films, 1988).
8. Edwardes, *A History of India*, pp. 24,25.
9. Ibid., p. 25
10. "Hindus Destroy Mosque; India in 'grave peril,'" *Chicago Tribune*, December 7, 1992.
11. David Johnson, *A Reasoned Look at Asian Religions* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985), pp. 170,171, offers a table and overview of the rather complicated classification of Hindu literature.
12. Kenneth Boa, *Cults, World Religions and the Occult* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1990), p. 22.
13. Lewis Browne, *The World's Great Scriptures* (New York: MacMillan, 1946), p. 61.
14. Harold Coward, et al., eds. *Readings in Eastern Religions* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988), p. 11.
15. Julius Eggeling, *The Satapatha-Brahmana*, Volume XII in *The Sacred Books of the East*, F. Max Mueller, ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1963), p. ix.
16. Ibid., p. 3.
17. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, ed. and trans., *Textual Sources for the Study of Hinduism* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1988), p.2.
18. K. M. Sen, *Hinduism* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 141.
19. Ibid. p. 140.
20. Juan Mascaro, trans., *The Upanishads* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 105.
21. Beaver, *Handbook to the World's Religions*, p. 192.
22. Robert C. Zaehner, *Hindu Scriptures* (London: Dent, 1966) pp. 266,267.
23. Louis Renou, ed., *Hinduism* (New York: George Brazziller, 1962), pp. 228,229.
24. Mark Albrecht, "Hinduism" (Unpublished essay), p. 9.

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FOR DISCUSSION

1. In what key ways does Hinduism differ from Christianity? Why can there be no coming together of the two religions?
2. How is pantheism diametrically opposed to the biblical teaching of the nature of God and creation? See Genesis 1:1. What important difference is there between pantheism and the omnipresence of God? See Psalm 139:7-12. How does pantheism affect the doctrine of sin?
3. Sometimes Hindus point to Jesus' words in Luke 17:21, "the kingdom of God is within you," as teaching pantheism. What is Jesus talking about here? Consider the context, Luke 17:20,21, and passages such as Matthew 23:25,26; John 18:36.
4. What factors in Hinduism might lead people to a pessimistic, fatalistic view of life?
5. Why does Hindu meditation and conscious-ness seem to balance the Western (not necessarily Christian) emphasis on the active life?
6. At times a distinction is made between transmigration and reincarnation. The former is used for the ancient Indian-Hindu concept that people can pass from this life into lower life forms (plants, animals). The latter is used for the Westernized concept that people only pass into other human lives. Why would the more purely Hindu concept be unappealing in the West?
7. Some say that Jesus' words in Matthew 11:14 teach reincarnation: "[John the Baptist] is the Elijah who was to come." What is Jesus teaching here? Consider the context, Matthew 11:7-14, as well as other passages, Luke 1:17; John 1:21. Does Jesus teach reincarnation when he says, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3)? Look at the context, John 3:1-12; also John 1:12,13; 1 Peter 1:23.
8. Discuss the connection between Hindu religious beliefs and conditions in Indian society.
9. What are the differences between Hinduism's *karma* and the Bible's grace?
10. What points of discussion are there with Hinduism?