



UNCOMMON GROUND: Pseudo-Christian and Other Heretical Movements Session 1– Hinduism

HINDUISM

Overview

- The development of Hinduism dates to the period 1700-500 B.C. During this time span the Aryans (Persians) conquered and integrated with the people of the Indus Valley. The result was a synthesis of Indian and Aryan (Persian) cultures, and their animistic and polytheistic beliefs.
- Religious ideas and practices were passed down at first orally in mythic stories, chants, and prayers...and eventually written down in Hindu's earliest and most sacred scriptures known as the Vedas. There are many other sacred Hindu texts. The Vedas are viewed as "revealed," and others as "remembered."
- Many gods populate these scriptures, and like other tribal religions, people believe in the importance of appeasing these gods since they are thought responsible for death, disaster, fertility and well being.
- "Hindu" is the Persian name for the Indus river. In early Islamic texts, "al-Hind" refers to the land occupied by the people of India.
- Hinduism is more a set of religions, philosophical and cultural worldviews than a religion, per-se. Some suggest it as a category of religions with many fuzzy edges.

Caste System

- Much of Hindu society is structured and suffers from the **Caste system**. Functionally this system determines a person's role and status for the entirety of life. The Caste system is one of three paths to salvation. The purpose of one's life is to pass from the lower castes to the Brahmin (priest) caste. This is accomplished through future life cycles. From there the next step is unity with the absolute.
- As for this life, and to successfully complete one's current caste assignment, one must marry and relate only with members of one's own caste, and stay within and perform the duties of one's caste's occupations.
 - Priest – (Brahmin) most privileged, the protectors, teachers and transmitters of the Veda scriptures. Provide spiritual oversight of society.
 - Warrior – (Kshatriya) provide governance through the roles of kings, princes, politicians, army, police.
 - Merchant – (Vaisya) middle class occupations such as tradesmen and business men.
 - Peasant/slave – (Sudra) farmers, manual laborers.
 - Untouchable (no caste or birth status) - wash clothes, make shoes, cremate the dead. They have no access to religious rituals available to other classes.
- Around 500 B.C. the lower Castes revolted against the abuse of power and the spiritual authority of the priestly class. Though not overthrown, the result was the birth of new religions such as Buddhism and Jainism. It was

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also at this time that the importance of religious rituals, which were controlled by the priests, would decline in favor of the search for **inner divine knowledge**, which became a second path to salvation and could be achieved by the lower castes.

- This new path of inner knowledge was anchored in another set of sacred scriptures known as the **Upanishad**, developed between 800-300 BC. The essentials of these scriptures are:
 - What man sees in the world of time and space are only temporary and with no real meaning;
 - Everything that lives has an individual soul (atman); each individual soul exists, but its goal is to be reunited with the universal soul of Brahman (more on this later).
- Around 700 AD., Hinduism added yet another path to salvation, the path of Devotion, known as “bhatki.”

What About the Cows?

- Cows are venerated not only because of the soul that inhabits them, they also serve multiple functions. Some are religious and some practical.
 - As do all living things, the cow possesses an atman.
 - Cows produce a lot of Dung – for cooking fuel
 - Dung is an important means of organic fertilizer for farming.
 - Dung is readily available and free – in the streets, accessible to the poor.
 - Cows produce milk – a source of vitamins and protein.
 - Killing is taboo so their survival and numbers are assured.
 - Dead animals are a source of food for the outcasts.

Hindu Concepts

- Law of **Karma** and the **Transmigration of the soul**
 - The merits or demerits of good and bad actions accumulate within the individual soul (**Atman**). As the soul attains good karma its chances increase of breaking the birth cycles of one class and being born into a higher class.
 - If the soul accumulates more bad than good Karma, it faces more birth cycles and its unification with the ultimate is prolonged.
- **Freedom** from birth cycles is the ultimate goal of Hinduism. This is achieved once individual soul is **united** with the ultimate soul of Brahman.
- To a lesser degree other objectives of life include righteousness, livelihood, wealth and sensual pleasure.
- **Positive Karma** is built up in three ways:
 - **The Way of Works**
 - ✓ Temple worship: the worshipper comes daily with offerings and sacrifices for the gods and goddesses that live in the temple, where Hindu deities live through images. Priests

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(Brahmin) perform rituals such as waking (bell ringing), bathing, and offering food, incense, flowers and chants to the deity. The people rely on the priests to care for the deity. The temple is the place where power is released by Brahman through the deity for strength to overcome evil, and attain material success and health. There are no sermons or pulpits in the temple. Temple worship is not required, only encouraged, especially during religious festivals and pilgrimages.

- ✓ Worship at home: there is a small altar or shrine upon which the family deity (or deities) is placed for worship. Each day the deity is awakened by a bell, removed from its box, bathed, fed, incensed and communed with through chants and readings. After worship, the deity is returned to its box.
- ✓ Icons, mantras, symbols are used to help worshippers focus the mind on holy thoughts or express devotion to their god.

➤ **The Way of Knowledge**

- ✓ In this view, the path of knowledge is the meaning of all things, the secret to life and the end of life. The key idea is that Brahman is the end of all things and the basis for all things. It is beyond conceptualization, but can be temporarily and momentarily experienced by Yoga meditation. At some point in the practice of Yoga one might be fortunate enough to experience a moment of oneness, freedom, and salvation through a taste of the absolute soul.
- ✓ Four life stages are required to attain Knowledge:
 - **Student** – study of the Veda scriptures and the Upanishad tradition under the guidance of a guru, who instructs concerning the path to life and truth.
 - **Householder** – to wed a woman, raise and provide for a family, and provide for the poor.
 - **Forest dweller** – places his sons in charge of the family, gives his property to them, and leaves to live in the forests, where he will live a meditative and ascetic life away from friends and family, under the spiritual guidance of a guru who will teach him deeper meditative ways.
 - **Ascetic** – learns knowledge and the art of meditative practices. He does Yoga, the art of concentration and self mastery. He may lay on a bed of thorns, walk across burning coals, stare into the sun until blind, or stand on one foot for hours. After a lifetime of learning and discipline, one can become a Sannyasin...holy man.

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- ✓ **Yoga** – the discipline necessary to progress in the path of Knowledge. It leads one to a taste of the ultimate freedom and the end of the transmigration cycle. Yoga is the mystical method of connecting Atman with Brahman. There are four major types of Yoga:
 - Bhakti – the path of love
 - Karma – the path of right action
 - Raja – the path of meditation
 - Jnana – the path of wisdom
- ✓ Some characteristics of Yoga
 - Posture – head erect, spine straight, controlled breathing.
 - Concentration – on sacred symbols and reciting sacred sounds.
 - Feelings – lightness, peacefulness, and exemption from the laws of gravity. ☺
- **The Way of Devotion** – (bhakti) – the most popular practice in Hinduism today, it offers followers an opportunity to follow a deity who is personal and who will give grace to overcome bad Karma.
 - ✓ Vishnu is a god of incarnations. Rama and Krishna are incarnations (avatara) of Vishnu.
 - ✓ Krishna is the most popular deity in Hinduism. When a Hindu gives love and devotion to Krishna (as to others), he makes liberation (salvation) possible.
- Hindu sects have not historically been aggressively evangelistic; however, its philosophies continue to attract many in the U.S. and Europe, and its practitioners spend a lot of money to make it accessible.
 - Examples: Vedanta Societies, Transcendental Meditation, the Harekrishna Movement (ISKCON), The OSHO Movement, The Art of Living Foundation, and the Self-Realization Fellowship.
 - One example, **Vedanta** societies, based on India's Ramakrishna Order, seed Hindu philosophies. Vedanta Centers have resident monks and nuns to provide spiritual guidance to seekers.
 - Vedanta Societies exist across 6 continents. In the U.S. 18 States have Vedanta centers. There are 11 centers in California alone, notably located in politically influential, academic and wealthy communities, including: Berkley, Hollywood, Sacramento, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, and San Diego.
 - **Vedanta - Veda** = knowledge/higher inquiry,
Anta=end/culmination/essence/inside the essence/core.

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Major Denominations

- Hinduism has numerous denominations. The four major ones are: Shaivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Smartha.
 - Vaishnavism – is the largest @ 580 million followers. This is the monotheistic tradition that worships the god **Vishnu** as supreme (or his forms, Krishna and Rama).
 - Shaivism - @ 220 million followers, worships **Shiva** as supreme (both immanent and transcendent).
 - Shaktism – one of the oldest forms of Hindu religion, worships **Shakti**, the divine mother in her many goddess-forms (Kali, Durga, Laxmi....).
 - Smartism – free to choose their deity, but they usually worship five deities in six manifestations of the impersonal Absolute-Brahman (Ganesha, Shiva, Shakti, Vishnu, Surya and Skanda). This denomination dominates in the West. Its doctrine is primarily from the sub-school of Advaita.

Sacred Writings and Sects

- Hindus have a myriad of sacred **scriptures** contained in three primary groupings – means through which wise men have preserved and transmitted their enlightened comprehensions and journeys through the generations:
- The Vedas (oldest/most sacred)– contains the ultimate knowledge of Brahman – the supreme spirit, the eternal, self existent, immanent and transcendent supreme and ultimate reality, which is the divine ground of all being.
 - Sub-schools of Vedantic thought (three of many examples):*
 - Advaita – Brahman is the sole reality and cannot possess any attributes. An illusionary power of Brahman called Maya causes the world to arise. Ignorance of this reality is the cause of all suffering. Only upon this true knowledge can liberation be attained. When a person tries to know Brahman through his mind, due to the influence of Maya, Brahman appears as God (Ishvara), separate from the world and from the individual. In reality, there is no difference between the individual soul (Atman) and Brahman. Liberation lies in knowing the reality of this non-difference.
 - Vishishtadvaita – the main difference from the Advaita school is that in the Vishishtadvaita, Brahman is asserted to have attributes, including the individual conscious souls and matter. Brahman, matter and individual souls are distinct but mutually inseparable entities.
 - Modern – Though Brahman is absolute reality, the world has relative reality. It should not therefore be completely ignored. Conditions of abject poverty should be removed so that people will be able to turn their minds toward God. All religions are striving in

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their own way to reach the ultimate truth. Narrow sectarian bickering should therefore be abandoned, and religious tolerance practiced between different Hindu denominations, as well as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, etc. The place for devotion is to begin meditation on a personal God with form and qualities, rather than the formless Absolute, of which everyone is said to be part.

- The Upanishads – philosophical and instructive, they provide guidance to attaining a state of self-realization. The end of this realization (and all knowledge) is to realize one’s unity with Brahman (the ultimate and absolute reality of all). This state of self-realization is beyond mere intellectual knowledge – it’s a state of transcendent understanding.
- The Mahabharata - an epic of 90,000 double verses, of which the Bhagavad Gita (Celestial Song) is the most popular. It is known as the New Testament of the Hindu scripture and the Gospel of Krishna. The BG tells a young warrior, Arjuna, that though death and killing are unpleasant, both life and death are minor compared with eternal values. Krishna gradually reveals himself to Arjuna as the supreme Lord, and teaches Arjuna to depend on him for liberation.

Uncommon Grounds

- Different Trinities
 - Hinduism has one ultimate formless abstract reality (Brahman) that takes form in a trinity (Brahma- the creator, Vishnu –the preserver, Shiva –the destroyer) and in thousands of lesser deities. The (Brahman) underlies and envelops all. Theologically, Hinduism is “monistic and pantheistic” in that there is one god and all is god, and polytheistic in that there are many gods. Brahman is the same as and yet different than the material universe, depending on the Hindu philosophy one embraces. The biblical revelation teaches one God (monotheistic), self-existing eternally in Three Persons (Trinity), and standing apart from creation which is entirely contingent for its existence on His will.
- Paths to Salvation
 - Hindus select from three paths to salvation, and an unlimited number of life cycles to reach it. The biblical revelation is that each individual has a soul and exists personally in an everlasting state, with one path to salvation - through faith in Jesus Christ, one death, and one judgment. The Bible teaches one path to eternal life – exclusively for those who trust Christ in this life. It also teaches eternal damnation for those who reject Him.

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- Value of Creation
 - In Hinduism, the material world is illusionary, and ultimately meaningless, as well as the individual soul. The biblical revelation views creation as real and a manifestation of the glory and power of God, and the creation of man as the capstone of His work, and the purpose of man as individually accomplishing the work that He has for him in this life. The individual is who Christ died to save, therefore the individual soul has extreme value.
- View of Sin
 - Sin is a relative term to the Hindu. Whatever helps is good and whatever hinders is bad. The laws of Karma will play it out. The individual atman must work its way up with enough good karma to overweight the bad. There is no concept of personal violation against the righteous standards of a holy God, and no need for a savior to atone for sin or restore the relationship...as there is no personal relationship to be restored. In the biblical revelation, sin is a falling short of God's righteous character-standards and a barrier to personal relationship with God, who took the initiative by sending His Son to pay the penalty deserved by the offender. No amount of good works can merit God's acceptance or salvation.

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Discussion Questions

1. From the perspective of someone seeking a deeper spiritual experience, why might the Hindu way be appealing?
2. Tolerance has become a major societal value in western pluralistic societies (i.e., N. America, Europe). In what aspects might Hindu philosophy be more compatible with this value and our culture than Biblical Christianity?
3. How do you view Hindus? Have you known or talked with a Hindu at length? Many are nice, non-violent, vegetarian people who are very sincere about their beliefs, including Jesus as one of many wise men who has informed people about God through the ages. Respond.
4. Talk about ways, as a Christian, you might engage and reach a Hindu with the exclusive gospel of Christ alone? What talking points would you use? What bridges might you build?

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