

# Hinduism

*An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of  
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod  
December 2013*

## ***History, Beliefs, Practices***

### **Identity:**

Hinduism is the world's third largest religion and the primary religion of India and Nepal. The word Hindu originally referred to a society in the Indus (*Sindhu* in the Sanskrit language) River region of ancient India.

### **Founder(s):**

Hindus honor many spiritual teachers, but none are considered founders of the religion.

### **Statistics:**

Approximately one billion people in the world follow Hinduism. The countries with largest Hindu populations are India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Brazil.

### **History:**

Hinduism has roots in two religious systems—the religion of the Indus River civilization and beliefs brought into that region by nomadic Aryans. The Aryan religion was expressed in the *Vedas*, oral teachings later written down in Aryan Sanskrit. Priests—called Brahmins for their devotion to the god Brahman—dominated religious life and developed laws to govern the Aryan people. Over time other religious teachings developed in protest against the Brahmin priesthood. *Yoga* systems, practices of spiritual discipline, opposed the sacrificial system controlled by the priests. *Gurus*, or teachers, became important leaders in spiritual practices. Special devotion was shown to the divine incarnations Rama and Krishna, and various schools of Hindu thought developed.

Groups in the United States influenced by Hinduism include the Transcendentalist Movement in the 1800s, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Transcendental Meditation in the mid-1900s, and the Hare Krishna movement (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) of the 1960s and 1970s. Some Hindu teachings and practices, such as the idea of *karma* and the discipline of *yoga*, have been adopted into popular culture.

### **Texts:**

Important Hindu texts include:

- The *Vedas*, a collection of religious writings in four parts.

- The *Upanishads*, later Vedic writings that present teachings most often associated with Hinduism, such as reincarnation and *karma*.
- The *Ramayana*, an epic poem about the god Vishnu incarnated as Rama.
- The *Mahabharata*, an epic poem presenting the struggle for a throne between two warring branches of one family.
- The *Bhagavad-Gita*, a portion of the *Mahabharata* that presents spiritual teachings in a conversation between the warrior Arjuna, who must face his own kinsmen on the battlefield, and Krishna, an incarnation of the god Vishnu, who serves as Arjuna's charioteer.

## Beliefs and Practices:

Hinduism embraces a wide spectrum of beliefs, from the worship of many gods and goddesses to belief in one Supreme Being. Some Hindus believe without contradiction in many gods *and* in one god, while others consider Hinduism a philosophy or a matter of custom and culture apart from any god at all. Most Hindus reject the caste system associated with the religion. Hinduism by tradition is tolerant of other faiths, yet some Hindus actively persecute or war against those of other religions. This evaluation presents a brief summary of some basic beliefs traditionally held within the Hindu religion.

Although the Vedas speak of many gods, they also describe one infinite and impersonal Being, called *Brahman*. The sacred formula or mantra *OM* signifies Brahman in sound. It is the "mysterious sound of eternity" and the "'Amen' of Hinduism."<sup>1</sup> When described according to limited human understanding as a personal god, Brahman has three primary expressions of himself. When He creates, "He is called Brahmā; when He preserves, He is called Vishnu; and when He destroys He is called Shiva."<sup>2</sup> The personal Brahman is also represented as other deities according to other traits, for example, as a giver of wealth or knowledge. On a popular level various gods and goddesses are responsible for things such as life, water, and fertility, and are often represented with fertility symbols. At times, out of compassion or to revitalize religion, Brahman becomes incarnate. These incarnations, called *avatars*, help people attain perfection through spiritual practices. Rama, Krishna, Mahatma Gandhi, and Jesus are believed to be avatars of Vishnu.

According to one Vedic hymn, creation arose out of the self-sacrifice of the god Purusha, with the four main castes, or divisions, of Aryan society (priests, warriors and rulers, artisans, and laborers) formed from his divided body. Other teachings describe an endless process in which creation exists within Brahman, is projected outward, and finally withdraws again into Brahman, the only existing reality. The material world is considered illusory and unreal: "As a dream exists for the sleeper, the universe exists for God."<sup>3</sup> Brahman, the world soul or *Mahatman*, exists within every person "as the unseen inner self (*atman*). Consequently, the true identity of an individual person and that of the cosmos is one and the same."<sup>4</sup> Brahman is present in all things, including animals; cows, although not worshiped, are considered sacred.

<sup>1</sup> A. R. Victor Raj, *The Hindu Connection: Roots of the New Age* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995), 66.

<sup>2</sup> Swami Bhaskarananda, *The Essentials of Hinduism: A Comprehensive Overview of the World's Oldest Religion* (Seattle: Viveka Press, 2002), 71.

<sup>3</sup> Philip H. Lochhaas, *How to Respond to the Eastern Religions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Raj, 52-53.

The primary goal of Hinduism is liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth to enter union with Brahman, “as rivers flowing into the ocean find their final peace.”<sup>5</sup> In the *Bhagavad-Gita* the avatar Krishna explains, “Just as the dweller in this body passes through childhood, youth, and old age, so at death he merely passes into another kind of body...Worn-out garments are shed by the body: Worn-out bodies are shed by the dweller within the body. New bodies are donned by the dweller, like garments...Death is certain for the born. Rebirth is certain for the dead.”<sup>6</sup>

An individual’s *karma*—moral acts and corresponding consequences—determines the body he or she will be born into in the next life. If the soul acts contrary to its *dharma*, or moral duty, then in the next life it is reincarnated in a lower life form. Acting according to one’s dharma results in rebirth as a higher life form. The moral principles of dharma include abstention from injury to all forms of life, the control of desires, contentment, modesty, gentleness, forgiveness, and truthfulness. Dharma is “the cosmic order of disciplined behavior that is the destiny of each individual to obey in his or her lifetime.”<sup>7</sup> The debt created by wrong behavior in earlier bodies must be paid through rebirth before the individual is liberated to join with Brahman.

Of the many possible yokes or paths—*yogas*—to reach union with Brahman, four are most important: the way of works (work done unselfishly); the way of knowledge (knowing self in order to know the deity); the way of mental concentration (special breathing, posture and meditation); and the way of devotion to a particular god (Krishna is a popular choice, but any deity may be chosen). Worship may involve offerings of fruit or flowers to the god, singing hymns, or reciting sacred texts and may be done at home, at a shrine, or at a temple.

The caste system associated with Hinduism may have developed among the nomadic Aryans to separate local people from the Aryan nobility. There are four castes: *Brahmins*, the priests and teachers; *Kshatriyas*, the warriors and rulers; *Vaishyas*, the peasants, merchants, and artisans; and *Shudras*, the laborers. Outside of these four castes are the “untouchables,” called *Dalits* (Sanskrit for “suppressed” or “crushed”), Scheduled Castes (a government term), or *Harijan* (“children of God,” a name given to them by Mahatma Gandhi). The caste system and discrimination are officially condemned in India.

Hinduism is understood by some of its adherents to be a tolerant religion, viewing other religions as equal paths to union with Brahman. A nineteenth century Hindu mystic, Ramakrishna, wrote: “Many are the names of God and infinite are the forms through which He may be approached. In whatever name and form you worship Him, through that you will realize Him. God has made different religions to suit different aspirants, times and countries...Different creeds are but different paths to reach the same God.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This description is from the Upanishads. Philip Novak, *The World’s Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World’s Religions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Novak, 27-28.

<sup>7</sup> Raj, 35.

<sup>8</sup> Bhaskarananda, 190.

## *A Lutheran Response*

As Christians we believe in the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, worshipping “one God in trinity and the Trinity in unity....the deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is one—equal in glory, coequal in majesty.”<sup>9</sup> The Triune God created the heavens and the earth, not out of His own essence, but out of nothing (Genesis 1:1; Hebrews 11:3; Revelation 4:11). God loves the world He created and desires the salvation of all people (John 3:16; 1 Timothy 2:4). The Triune God spoke by the prophets and “in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son,” Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh (Hebrews 1:1-2; John 1:14).

Although we are reborn spiritually in Baptism (John 3:3-5; Titus 3:5), we do not believe in a cycle of physical death and rebirth. Scripture teaches that “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). Upon dying, we who trust in Christ are “away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). When Christ returns on the Last Day, we will be raised from our graves, our bodies transformed to be “like his glorious body” (Philippians 3:21). Eternal life in the presence of God does not mean disappearing into union with Him, “as rivers flowing into the ocean,” but rather living in “a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13) where, together with the saints from “all tribes and peoples and languages,” we will give thanks and praise to God for our salvation (Revelation 7:9-10).

Salvation is not a result of moral actions. It is the free gift of God through faith in Jesus Christ. God forgives us for Christ’s sake, “canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:14). A former Hindu, who as a university student came to faith in Christ, expressed his new faith using Hindu terms, describing Jesus as the *sanatan sat guru*, the eternal, true, living way. Jesus “paid for karma. He paid our karmic debt.”<sup>10</sup> It is not our moral works that save us, but the mighty works of God, who “delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13-14).

As Christians we reject the idea that all religions are merely different paths to the same God. The Triune God commands, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). There are not many “paths,” but one Way, Jesus Christ, who said: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). In response to those who believe that there are many paths to God, we must be ready to speak of our hope in Christ, “yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15).

Along with most Hindus today, Christians reject the discrimination of the caste system. God’s Word tells us: “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors” (James 2:9). We are to live “as servants of God,” to “honor everyone,” and “love the brotherhood” (1 Peter 2:16-17).

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<sup>9</sup> The Athanasian Creed, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 24.

<sup>10</sup> Ram Gidoomal, in an interview with Andy Crouch, in “Christ, My Bodhisattva,” *Christianity Today* (May 2007), 36.

### ***For Further Reading***

Francisco, Adam. *One God, Many Gods*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008.

Francisco, Adam. *One Word, Many Writings*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011.

Lochhaas, Philip H. *How to Respond to the Eastern Religions*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979.

Raj, A. R. Victor. *The Hindu Connection: Roots of the New Age*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995.

Steinbronn, Anthony J. *Worldviews: A Christian Response to Religious Pluralism*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007.

### ***Links and Websites***

A Lutheran evaluation of the New Age movement

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=387>

A Lutheran evaluation of Yoga

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=402>