

Understanding Hinduism

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Introduction

Smith (in “Is the Concept of Religion Adequate?” read earlier this semester) warns us that living religious traditions develop and change over time. He also warns us that people who see themselves quite sincerely falling within a given religious tradition do not necessarily agree with others in their tradition, even on matters that are often considered quite central to the tradition. These warnings are particularly important to keep in mind when thinking about Hinduism, for Hinduism is best thought to be a collection of related religious traditions rather than a single, united tradition.

Hinduism has a much more diffuse and divergent history than Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. As far as I can tell there never was a time in Hindu history when the majority of “Hindus” agreed in any detail on what constituted “correct” or “orthodox” religious beliefs or practices. Nor does Hinduism have a single person or collection of prominent leaders who count as its “founders” (unlike Christianity, Judaism, and Islam). There are no generally acknowledged Hindu creeds (like the Christian “Apostles’ Creed”) and no fixed collection of unified sacred texts (like the Hebrew *Bible*, or Islam’s *al-Qur’an*). There is no Hindu agreement on whether to think of the realm of the divine as a set of personal gods, as one personal divine being manifested in many ways, or as wholly impersonal.¹ So, you may ask, What is it that makes Hinduism hang together at all? Is it even an identifiable religious tradition?

To begin to answer these questions, I think it best to very briefly tell the story of how Hinduism came to be, and then to try to extract some themes and threads from that story.

Origins

Coming somewhere out of the regions north and east of present-day Turkey, a group of warrior peoples known as Aryans arrived in the Indian subcontinent about 1500 BCE, bringing with them a collection of religious rituals and social ideals that clearly form at

¹A “personal” god is one that can be thought of in human terms, as having characteristics analogous to those that human persons have: a god with thoughts, and desires, performing actions. An impersonal god cannot be sensibly thought of in these ways. An impersonal god might be thought of instead as a force or power, or some sort of underlying, hidden dimension of reality on which everything else depends. Students in the US are generally much more familiar with the idea of personal gods, and may find the notion of an impersonal god very puzzling. Popular Christianity, for example, conceives of God as extremely personal.

least part of the basis for Hinduism.² It is unclear to what extent the resulting culture was entirely Aryan; perhaps the Aryan influence blended with ideas already present among the people already living on the subcontinent. However, it has been common for modern Hindus to see the Aryan invaders as more enlightened than the previous inhabitants, bringing with them divinely-inspired religious ideas.

The Aryans brought with them the language, Sanskrit, which was used for retelling (about 1200 BCE) the most ancient sacred literature still in existence, the *Rig Veda*.³ The *Rig Veda*, consisting basically of poetic hymns and directions for ritual ceremonies directed to various personal divinities, was designed to be used in worship ceremonies. At some point, this *Veda* was written down; this *Veda* was followed by three more *Vedas*.

The Aryans apparently restructured the social fabric of the region, dividing people into four classes according to the type of work done – a special priestly class, the warriors, the commoners, and the servants. This social arrangement, based at least in theory on occupation rather than on birth, gradually developed into the more recent Hindu caste system, in which one's caste is something inherited from one's parents and where the explanation for why one is born into a certain caste is tied deeply to central Hindu ideas about karma and rebirth (to be discussed later).

The *Vedas* do not present a developed or consistent picture of the gods, or the relation of the gods to human life. Nor do they construct a religious narrative for interpreting life or history. They do present a poetic picture of the origins of the world, but not a detailed account of the structure of reality. They were not designed to present theories or to tell stories. Instead, they were designed to be recited in public religious ceremonies and rituals, and some can be recited to oneself in a meditative action or prayer. In short the *Vedas* really don't form a clear basis for a connected and consistent Hindu theology, but they do provide glimpses of the complex of divine influences and realms, and of human ritual responses to those influences that were part of the ancient Aryan religious tradition.

The *Vedas* have typically been seen by Hindus as sacred, divinely-inspired (*shruti*), even though few Hindus today know very much of what the *Vedas* say, and only brief excerpts are often heard in public ceremonies. Perhaps it would be fair to say that Hindus today respect the *Vedas* for being the original source from which Hindu ideas flowered into current ways of thinking about life, the divine, and spirituality. But to refer to these

²These Aryans are the same peoples that Hitler used to idolize as the noble founders of the true Germanic race. Hitler was, in that case, simply anthropologically misinformed. The Aryans are probably better thought of as a linguistically-defined group rather than an ethnic group or tribe. Hitler's use of the term comes from the discovery in the 18th century that Sanskrit – the language of the ancient Aryans – is an Indo-European language, followed by much speculation concerning the 'racial' or ethnic identity of the original Indo-Europeans and how they ended up spreading their language to so many different parts of Eurasia. Scholars no longer see the phenomenon of language-spread, differentiation and dispersal as involving just migration of a single ethnic group.

³There is considerable uncertainty regarding the date when the *Vedas* were committed to writing. Like the Hebrew Bible, the *Vedas* were initially an oral tradition.

materials as “divinely-inspired” never has meant that they were literally dictated by God; it has meant instead that the materials resulted from the divine spirit operating within the originators of the *Vedas*. Thus, *shruti* refers to a situation in which the human author of the text has the divine spirit in his heart so fully and firmly that the thoughts expressed by the text flow freely from that divine presence, and are fully in accord with the true divine nature. Metaphorically, the divine “speaks” from *within* the inspired person; the inspired person is *not* literally hearing an external voice of dictation. Maybe one could refer to this Hindu view of inspiration as the “inner reflection” view.

In this regard, the Hindu notion of divine inspiration seems quite similar to the *traditional* Christian notion (but not very much like the typical *fundamentalist* notion which tends to treat the human authors more like God’s secretaries). This inner reflection concept of divine inspiration is also found among Muslims: traditional Muslims generally hold that the sayings of Muhammad found in the *hadith* literature are divinely-inspired in much the same way. (But of course this is not the Muslim view about the *Qur’an*.)

From about 1000 BCE to maybe 300 BCE a new form of sacred literature emerged on the subcontinent: inspired by the *Vedas*, but more reflective, abstract and theoretical, the *Upanishads* contain much that we would today refer to as theology – that is, organized philosophical reflections on the Big Questions. The writing of the *Upanishads* suggests that the people of the region spent considerable time and energy thinking about the implications of the prayers offered in the *Vedas*, and trying to develop satisfying answers to the Big Questions that would be consistent with the general tone and drift of the *Vedas*. For almost all Hindus, the *Upanishads* are, like the *Vedas*, *shruti* (divinely-inspired without being dictated by the divine spirit in us).

So, a committed Hindu today might well say that the origins of Hinduism lie in the realm of the divine itself, which has revealed itself to sensitive humans over the centuries and is recorded in the sacred texts, such as the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*. The Aryans, or the Aryans in combination with the preexisting tribes inhabiting the region, were merely the vehicle by which this enlightenment was triggered on the Indian subcontinent.

However, during this early period of religious development in the region, one could hardly say that a clear set of standard Hindu doctrines had emerged, or that a single list of gods was recognized by everyone. Rather, beliefs and practices apparently varied from place to place, and the writers of the *Upanishads* might best be represented as *exploring* theological ideas, rather than laying down some one set of definite truths. This illustrates the development of a religious/cultural pluralism that has today become a common feature of Hindu mentality – as one Hindu student in this course put it to me, “I am aware that other people in the community have ideas about religious things that are somewhat different from my ideas, but that just doesn’t bother me.” Not all Hindus have been that nonchalant, but there has in general been little concern in the last few centuries for trying to enforce detailed religious conformity or orthodoxy, even when adherents of different Hindu views have argued vehemently with one another about their differences. It has not always been this way with Hindus; in the next section there will be more discussion of this matter.

Perhaps it would be good here to mention the relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism, since both spring from the same cultural and religious roots. In the latter portion of the period of time when the *Upanishads* were being composed by numerous

authors (let's say 500 BCE for an approximate, round number) a man who came to be known as the Buddha (which just means an especially enlightened person) was also reflecting deeply on some of the same Big Questions, working from the same general cultural and religious background as those who wrote the *Upanishads*. His thinking about these matters, however, diverged sufficiently from the mainstream that he and his followers began to see themselves as a distinct movement – the movement that became known as Buddhism. This is not the place to go into exactly what distinguishes Buddhism from mainstream Hinduism, but it is worth noting that given the “looseness” of Hinduism with respect to specific teachings and practices, it is even possible to claim that Buddhism is a form of Hinduism. This is particularly appealing to some Hindus today who tend to think of all religious movements arising out of the traditions of the Indian subcontinent as forms of Hinduism. However, since the Buddha was specifically reacting against and rejecting some important aspects of the Vedic tradition, such as the ultimate significance of all gods, I believe it is more reasonable to see Buddhism as a distinct tradition that grew up alongside Hinduism and arose out of the same culture. This is generally the point of view taken by Buddhists.

For over 1000 years (until about 600 CE), Buddhism grew in popularity and influence on the subcontinent. Then its influence in the region began to wane, and by 1000 CE there were not many Buddhists left in India. Buddhism took hold, however, farther to the east and north, spreading to the Pacific and north into Tibet. There are Buddhists again in India today, but many of them are not ethnically Indian – they are refugees from Tibet seeking religious freedom.

Later development of classic Hinduism

For our purposes, it is not necessary to recite in detail the story of Hindu development after 300 BCE. So, I will focus only on some items of importance for understanding the current situation in India. From roughly 300 BCE until about 1500 CE, Hinduism entered what might be termed its classic period, when the main forms of the tradition developed and solidified.⁴ There are two aspects of that history that play a significant role: 1) the creation of additional Hindu sacred texts that resulted in popular religious/cultural development, and 2) the emergence of varying identifiable types of Hinduism, sometimes (misleadingly) referred to today as Hindu “sects”. Since the story of the additional sacred texts is the easiest to tell, I will turn to that first.

Sacred texts

The *Upanishads*, mentioned above, are reflective, philosophical, probing, puzzling – probably not the sort of material that would capture the continued attention of everyday people struggling to put food on the table. It is not surprising, then, that the much more popular religious medium of meaningful story-telling came into play as Hindu religious consciousness continued to develop. There are two great works, written over a period of centuries (maybe 400 or 300 BCE to 100 or 200 CE), included in the group of texts that probably most Hindus recognize as sacred, written as epic poems, depicting the lives of

⁴Or, to be more exact, this period can be divided into the “classic” and “Medieval” periods.

great heroes or divine beings. These epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, appear in multiple versions, and contain many sections or chapters. The first of these epics includes one of the most popular expressions of Hindu spirituality, the *Bhagavad-gita* (i.e., “The Song of the Lord”), which you may have heard about. However, for current cultural and political purposes, the more important epic is the second one, the *Ramayana*, containing stories about the exploits and example of Lord Rama.

Lord Rama on some accounts is a divinely-inspired human hero who works his way through various difficult personal issues, thereby illustrating how a good Hindu should live. But on other very popular accounts, Rama is an incarnation of the great creator god, Vishnu, in much the same way as Jesus traditionally has been said by Christians to be the incarnation of the Creator of the Universe. If one sees Lord Rama in this latter way, he represents what it would be like for divinity to be among us in human form. You will be hearing much more later on about the legendary birthplace of Lord Rama in a place called Ayodhya, since there has been recent controversy over the control of that site, and Hindu “fundamentalists” have been deeply concerned about this issue, in much the same way that a few Christians who take the Christmas stories about Jesus’ birth seriously are concerned that the legendary site of Jesus’ birthplace, in Bethlehem, be preserved as a Christian sacred space.

Finally, in addition to the epics, a number of additional texts were created over the ensuing centuries and recognized by many Hindus as sacred and loosely inspired by personal contact between their authors and the divine. These generally fall into four categories: *Sutras*, *Puranas*, *Tantras*, and *bhakti* poetry. The *Sutras* consist of a large collection of statements or aphorisms about life. The *Puranas* consist of mythological stories, typically about the traditional Hindu gods and goddesses. The *Tantras*, recognized as sacred by only some Hindus, provide direction for ritual and spiritual discipline. *Bhakti* poetry is devotional in character, like the texts of hymns, or of the Biblical *Psalms*.

In the Hindu traditions, one does not find a set list of writings that are generally accepted as the core expression from which everything else within the tradition derives. The *Vedas* are seen as the beginning of the Hindu journey, and are respected as such. But the *Vedas* represent just the beginning of the Hindu spiritual connection with the realm of religious truth and insight. A Hindu today might say that everything about Hinduism flows from the *Vedas*, but not in the sense that one could go to the *Vedas* to look up the authoritative answers to important questions. Rather, everything flows from the spiritual connection with eternal truth or eternal underlying reality first opened up by the *Vedas*. In short, there is no Hindu *Bible* or *Quran*.

Varieties of Hinduism

Paralleling the above-described diversity in sacred Hindu texts, there is considerable diversity between established versions of Hinduism itself. We turn now to a brief discussion of this controversial topic.

Why is this a controversial subject? It is, after all, well-known to contemporary Hindus and scholars that six recognized, rather different versions⁵ of Hinduism developed

⁵These versions of Hinduism are often referred to as “sects” in texts on Hinduism. I prefer to avoid the negative connotations associated with the use of that term, as well as

during the classic period, and that each of these saw significant local variation. These versions stressed different ideas, and disagreed regarding many central claims. Because of this, and because of the lack of a unified set of sacred texts, one might reasonably say that Hinduism is more like a collection of religions than it is a single religion. However, it is important to Hindu “fundamentalists” today to see Hinduism as sufficiently unified around a set of core ideas so that it is possible to say that certain things are essential to Hinduism in all its variations – that is, there must be Hindu fundamentals in order to have a Hindu fundamentalism. So, the “fundamentalists” seek to interpret the historic variations within classic Hinduism in a way that will not undermine the possibility of there being at least some Hindu fundamentals. That is the source of the controversy. For that reason, what I am about to say may not sit well with today’s Hindu “fundamentalists”, who may think that I am over-emphasizing the diversity within the Hindu tradition.

In addition to the six versions of classic Hinduism (each with its own name), with multiple subtypes, there were many Buddhists, as well as adherents of other religious views that emerged from the peoples of the subcontinent. The adherents of one version of Hinduism were often well aware that there were other versions held by other people just down the road, or across the river. Or they knew of Buddhists, Jains, or Sikhs nearby. What attitude did they take toward that situation?

One possible answer that tends to be favored by many contemporary Hindus is this: all these classic Hindus recognized that there are multiple paths to the truth, and that each version of Hinduism, and indeed each religious tradition on the subcontinent, has only a portion of the truth. On this view, all the versions of Hinduism, as well as Buddhism (and now maybe even other traditions such as Judaism or Christianity), are more or less equally valid religious expressions, and all should live in harmony, with mutual respect, since each has a part of the truth, but not the whole truth. Each version should be developed by its adherents as fully as possible, since further revelation is always a possibility, and no one has a monopoly on the truth.

On this view of the situation, there was at least one teaching, one doctrine, common to all these versions of Hinduism – namely, the doctrine that every version is equally appropriate, equally true, equally legitimate, equally worthy of being followed.

However, I have to part company with those who paint this picture of historic harmony and respect within the Hindu tradition. The evidence appears to me not to support the existence of such a teaching in classic Hinduism. It appears that there are a great many *contemporary* Hindus who claim to support such a viewpoint about the legitimacy of various religious traditions, but I don’t believe it was part of classic Hinduism to do so. The *Puranas* accepted by the adherents of one version of Hinduism and rejected by adherents of another version *harshly condemn* the views of the other version, or of the Buddhists. Leaders within Hindu communities devoted to one particular version exercised considerable control over the local adherents of that version, and would ostracize community members who associated too closely with adherents of another version, or with

the suggestion that each of these movements or versions within Hinduism had some definite leader and organization.

Buddhists. Occasionally, rivalries between versions of Hinduism led to persecutions, and even deaths.⁶

Some of the rivalry between the various versions of Hinduism could, I suppose, be explained away simply as the result of human failure to follow the doctrines of the religion, but I believe the causes of the friction run deeper: The idea that everyone has only partial truth doesn't work out very well when the truths claimed by one version flatly *contradict* the truths claimed by another one. If Vishnu is really the Lord of all, then those who say Śiva, and not Vishnu, is the Lord of all are seen to be wrong. Those who think they have the truth on this matter are then not willing to let those who are wrong get the advantage in a public ritual situation where both gods cannot be honored simultaneously. (This, of course, is but one example of how the partial truth theory might in fact not work out well in practice.) Nor does the partial truth theory explain how the *Puranas* particular to one version of Hinduism can be a pathway to the truth when they condemn the other versions of Hinduism and urge the faithful to reject those versions.

There certainly are passages in the *Upanishads* and elsewhere in the sacred texts that can *suggest* a partial truth doctrine to Hindus, along with some sort of policy of religious tolerance, but in actual practice during the classic period one does not see that kind of teaching being promoted (except by an entirely different religious group, the Jains).

Some things can be said in favor of the idea that classic Hinduism generally promoted *tolerance* between its various versions – something weaker than the teaching of *partial truth* picture painted above. I think one might reasonably say that Hinduism has been free of organized efforts to *forcibly stamp out* “incorrect” viewpoints, and has been willing to recognize value in the doctrines and practices of alternative versions of Hinduism. The adherents of one point of view might have argued vehemently that other points of view were wrong on various points, and they might have ostracized those among them who became “contaminated” by too much association with people with wrong ideas, but I don't know of patterns of extermination designed to purify a region or to force people to change their minds. Indeed, it may well be that in many cases the adherents of one version of Hinduism lived and worked near the adherents of another version without any serious conflicts, and without significant attempts at bringing about conversions. It is, after all, possible for me to believe that I am right and you are wrong, but not to try to do anything to change you or hurt you, while nevertheless maintaining a psychological distance from you. I might think my version of the truth is more complete than yours, and that I have no errors in my view, while you do have errors in your view, but that doesn't mean I have to see you as being *entirely* wrong, or “lost”. I just see my point of view as better than yours. Perhaps something like this more accurately reflects the actual historic relationship between typical adherents of the various versions of Hinduism in the classical period and even yet today.

But what of the common view, held about Hinduism today, that Hindus are religiously gentle and open-minded, willing to give credit for legitimacy to almost any religion? This, too, is a version of Hinduism, popularly held by a significant number of contemporary Hindus, just as many non-fundamentalist Christian modernists in the West hold that each

⁶For a summary of this sort of thing, see Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism* (State University of New York Press: Albany, 1989), pp. 53 - 60.

person must find their own way. Whether one describes such a point of view as “wishy-washy” or “open-minded”, it is clear that many modern Hindus subscribe to it, at least if one asks. I am not denying that. What I am denying is that classic Hinduism exhibited a doctrinal commitment to the idea that all pathways are equally fine, or that Hindus in the classic period behaved as though they thought everyone was equally right, because everyone had a part of the truth.

Common Hindu themes

Despite the high level of variability of Hindu teaching and ritual and despite the lack of consensus on a fixed body of sacred texts, there are some important commonalities among classic Hindu worldviews, many of which can still be found among Hindu faithful today. It is these things that one could point to as defining the Hindu traditions.

The transcendent

Hinduisms have always been deeply committed to the reality and importance of the transcendent: life and the universe are not to be understood solely in terms of everyday experience and events, but rather ultimately they are to be understood by reference to something that lies “beyond” or “beneath” the ordinary. Early Hindus understood the transcendent in mythological terms – that is, in terms of a large collection of personal gods and goddesses who were responsible for creating and controlling the everyday world. Various local gods and goddesses were recognized, as well as some more widely-recognized deities such as Vishnu and Śiva. However, over the centuries, the popularity of hundreds of local personal gods and goddesses waned, and alternative views of the transcendent developed.

One developed view holds that there are really *no* personal gods or goddesses at all, but rather that there is an impersonal, transcendent underlying structure to all of reality, on which everything in the everyday world depends. This transcendent nature is referred to as Brahman. This description of Brahman might sound a little bit like the contemporary scientific way of talking, according to which observable phenomena are the result of the activity and properties of a huge number of “hidden” forces and things such as atoms or quarks. However, one cannot find out about Brahman through scientific investigation. Instead, to come into some mode of connection with Brahman, one must engage in a reflective journey within one’s own spirit, perhaps aided by behavioral disciplines such as meditation.

Another point of view about the transcendent holds that the multiple gods and goddesses of early Hinduism are real, but are but “masks” of one personal divine power – guises under which that divinity operates. Perhaps that divine power is seen as basically identical with Vishnu or with Śiva. Thus, Hinduism, despite its history of recognizing a huge number of gods and goddesses, can take much more the form of a monotheism – only one divine personal being, manifested in various ways. Ideas like this seem to have become more popular relatively recently within the Hindu tradition – that is, within the last two hundred years or so – but there are passages even in the *Upanishads* that can be cited to support this perspective.

World order

From the transcendent, a world order derives. That is, there are basic principles that everything about life and the world must follow, because these derive from the transcendent, however the transcendent may be conceived. These principles, built right into the way everything operates, can be ignored only at one's peril.

For example, if one takes the more ancient Hindu myths seriously, the role of the gods and goddesses can be understood in general terms to be the defense of the world order against the forces of evil, as well as to aid with individual local or personal problems. And, in addition, according to some views, the role of Vishnu is to create the entire world order. Alternatively, if one rejects personal gods and goddesses, the world order might be seen as the impersonal Brahman itself. But in any case, there is an orderliness to the world that is beyond the capacity of humans to alter. Instead, it is the place of humans to try to harmonize with, rather than fight against, the underlying world order.

Dharma

"*Dharma*" refers to the appropriate way to live one's life. Various versions of Hinduism do not agree on all aspects of *dharma*, but all agree that there is *dharma*, and that it is important to live according to *dharma*. *Dharma* includes rules about how to treat others, about what one's duties are, about the proper way to worship, about the attitudes one should take toward work, achieving wealth, and so on. In that regard, Hinduism is not different from the other major religious traditions of the world, all of which recommend various particulars about how to live.

However, it is important to note one very important feature of Hindu *dharma*: it is never conceived as a set of divine commands. In Hinduism, the divinities do not issue commands we are to follow. Rather, the rules for living flow directly out of the world order.⁷ That is, *dharma* can never be accused of being a list of arbitrary rules, issued by a despotic divine king. Instead, *dharma* is a set of principles for harmonizing with the underlying world order, so as to live in the most effective way. People can struggle against the world order, but in the end those efforts will come to nothing but grief. *Dharma* tells a Hindu how to avoid that grief.

One can readily guess what many of the principles will look like: Since one can gain understanding of the underlying world order only through spiritual development, such development should take precedence in one's life, which will mean that being overly preoccupied with gaining power or wealth is going to work against a person in the long run. However, some of the common principles of *dharma* are less obviously sensible to outsiders. E.g., because the cow is sacred, it should be treated with respect and not killed. And, of course, ideas about the proper rituals to follow at what times will appear to outsiders to be completely arbitrary.

⁷A similar point of view about the rules for proper living can be found in the Roman Catholic tradition of "natural law" ethics, based on the philosophical theology of the great Medieval thinker, St. Thomas Aquinas. Protestant Christians, and Catholics who haven't been educated in the depths of their own tradition, on the other hand, seem to be more likely to think of the rules as divine commands.

Interestingly, there is not a big concern about keeping sexuality in check within Hindu conceptions of proper living. This contrasts sharply with Christian and Islamic concerns in this area. Nevertheless, patriarchy was fully present in classic Hindu society, and is still quite in evidence in Hindu culture.

An important traditional part of *dharma* in all classic versions of Hinduism revolves around the idea of **caste**. There are four traditional castes, or social classes, with the *brahmin* on top, and the *dalit* on the bottom. (You may have heard of the “untouchables” in India – those are the members of the *dalit* caste.) One is born into a caste; so it is not possible to work one’s way out of a caste during a lifetime. This is part of the world order recognized by classic Hinduisms, and connects with theories of *karma* and salvation, to be discussed below. The idea of caste is under severe pressure in India today, and discrimination based on caste is illegal. Even the “fundamentalist” Hindu leadership claims to renounce the caste system, despite its centrality in classic Hinduism. The basic classic idea, though, is that someone in a lower caste got there by not having lived well enough according to *dharma*, in a previous life, while those in higher castes are in those castes as a result of earlier good lives. So, people so to speak deserve to be in the caste they are in. To see how this works, we need to talk about *karma*.

Karma

What happens to someone who regularly fails to follow the principles of *dharma*? Will the gods punish them? No. Remember, *dharma* is not a set of commands issued by the gods. Someone who violates *dharma* is living out of sync with reality. They are not harmonizing with the way the world ultimately works. What happens when someone does that? Reality bites them. This is not about punishment; this is about receiving the natural consequences of one’s way of life.

What happens to someone who regularly does follow the principles of *dharma*? Do the gods reward them? No. Reality pays them. That is, when a person lives in harmony with reality, then things go well. That kind of life is successful – not necessarily in material terms, but in long-term, spiritual terms. This is not about reward in any literal sense, but about receiving the natural consequences of one’s way of life.

The idea that the very structure of reality guarantees that “good” people ultimately flourish, while those who violate *dharma* find themselves in long-term difficulty is the point of the common Hindu idea of *karma*. In crude terms, *karma* refers to the idea that it is built right into the world’s core structure that you reap what you sow.

Karma is beyond human control. No one can escape. No amount of praying or ritual sacrifice can eliminate its effects. However, if someone who was “bad” sees the light and reforms, then the good consequences of the reformed life begin to accumulate and may in the long run overcome the bad consequences of the bad portion of the life. A bad enough life might lead to someone’s dying and being reborn as a non-human, or as a member of a lower caste. A good life can lead to being reborn into the highest caste, on the way to salvation – liberation from suffering. But, things are not quite as simple as they may seem, for already in the classical period it was *denied* that one need be a brahmin to attain liberation. So, one need not have worked one’s way up into the highest caste in order to be saved. In fact the point of the *Gita* was to make the ideal of salvation/liberation

proclaimed in the *Upaniṣads* available to *everyone*, regardless of caste. So, we need to discuss salvation.

Salvation

Hinduism fairly uniformly share a basic conception of salvation as the goal of human life. But the big question is, Salvation from what? Obviously, being saved from something *bad*. Otherwise, one could hardly call it salvation. However, Hinduism have generally identified human life with inescapable suffering, and have focused on that inescapable suffering as the bad from which one needs to be saved. This view of human life, as associated with inescapable suffering, and thus as something ultimately to be escaped, is classic Hindu doctrine. So, salvation consists of escape from living a normal human life.

Well, then, why not just kill yourself? Would that not get the job done, and bring salvation? No. Why not? Because it is part of the world order that human souls don't die when the human body dies. Instead, they get put into new bodies to live another life, either as a human or as some other living being. *Karma* dictates what kind of body the soul will get. So, if you have lived out of harmony with *dharma*, you may well find yourself worse off than you were before you killed yourself. That is not salvation. You are trapped in the cycle of rebirth.

There is only one way out – only one way to be saved from the cycle of life with suffering, death, rebirth, and life with suffering. The way out is to employ the world order to your own benefit – live in accord with *dharma*, to be sure, and work to release yourself from the psychological/spiritual ties you have with the world. Work to avoid being grasping, greedy, always seeking material things and worldly power, for the more you grasp these things, the more dependent on them you are, and you can never let go of your human life that way.

So, what finally happens to you if you succeed in breaking your worldliness and you live a life in harmony with the world order? According to one important classic Hindu view, to be saved, one develops the enlightenment and spiritual discipline to let go, and ultimately loses one's identity as an individual: you allow yourself to be absorbed, so to speak, in the whole of the universe, completely losing your identity. Then your suffering will end, and your soul no longer will be reborn. This is salvation, or *moksha*. (*Nirvana* is the Buddhist term, not the Hindu term.) On this view, you cease to exist as an individual with your own desires and consciousness when you are saved.

On another, rather different, standard view, it is impossible to follow *dharma* by losing one's involvement in the affairs of the world, so the previously described path to salvation won't work. However, it is possible for one to lose one's *self-interest* even while staying interested in what is going on around oneself. So, on this view, renunciation of one's own individual life means to completely immerse oneself in "acting for God", with no thought of one's own self-interest. Such a person will not withdraw from society, but such a person is not concerned about maintaining their own status in that society; rather, they are thinking only of how to "live for God". If fully achieved, again one has in a sense lost one's own identity, since one is no longer concerned about satisfying one's own desires, but is completely absorbed in living for "God" – which in Hindu terms might well mean living for the sake of the whole universe. Once fully developed, this soul enters into a state of eternal life with God – no more rebirth – for its whole direction has become to live for God.

It maintains a kind of distinct existence, but since it is not associated with a physical body any longer, it is free from suffering and thus enters into a state of pure bliss. The state of being of this soul consists of just pure consciousness – a kind of floating free, free of interaction with the physical world.

In sum, the traditional Hindu conception of salvation requires a loss of individual identity, in one sense or another, with some form of absorption into the whole or union with “God”, so as to escape from the otherwise endless cycle of rebirth and the threats of suffering associated with that.

Devotion

Rituals, sacrifices, pilgrimages to holy sites, prayers – these are the stuff of religious devotion. One can engage in these things without buying into or understanding all the religious theories laid out above. For centuries, many Hindus have done just that. (And haven’t the adherents of the other world religions done the same?)

Having been reared to observe certain religious festivals and holidays, to pray in a certain manner, to engage in certain rituals, a common Hindu may find it satisfying and comfortable to continue, without agonizing over the details of how one might achieve *moksha*. Devotional practice may provide a sense of connectedness with the tradition, as well as a sense of connectedness with something transcendent – something meaningful beyond one’s everyday existence.

The *Vedas* began it all with ritual and hymns of praise so many centuries ago, without a detailed theory of the world or the gods to make sense of the ritual or the hymns. The *bhakti* poetry more recently built upon that beginning. The *bhakti* poetry commonly uses erotic language to describe the experience of the true devotee. The unity achieved in a properly completed sex act becomes a metaphor for self-transcendence and unification with the whole that leads to liberation-salvation.

For how many Hindus is devotional practice merely an empty shell, merely a meaningless habit? For how many is it a vital part of life, giving a sense of meaning and connectedness? I don’t know how to answer such questions. (Of course, similar unanswered questions can be asked about the religious practices of those who adhere to other religious traditions as well.)

Hindu religious leadership

Hindus have followed or been reverent toward the leadership of various and sundry local or community figures, with multiple persons playing leadership roles simultaneously. Among these influential Hindus one finds gurus and storytellers – all self-appointed and carrying authority only by virtue of the perceived power of their messages. There are no formal qualifications or degrees needed to become a revered guru, or religious storyteller. There is no Hindu “church” organization to certify persons as legitimately trained or qualified. (There are qualifications though for membership in the priesthood—and thus authority to carry out rites and rituals, in the temple or privately. One must be of the right birth, and have served an apprenticeship with a qualified priest – often one’s father.)

On the other hand, there certainly have been and still are many influential Hindu organizations with various purposes and organizational structures, and these may form voluntary coalitions when they find that they have similar aims. These typically form

around the leadership of a few concerned and outspoken Hindus who have an religious or cultural agenda to push, such as the renewal of Hindu commitment, or the perpetuation of Hindu reverence for Hindu traditions.

Obviously, then, there is nothing equivalent to a Hindu pope, and there cannot be an all-inclusive Hindu hierarchy for making religious decisions or providing anything like an “official” Hindu position on issues.

The government of India is a constitutional democracy that claims to be secular, although in recent years the relationship between Hinduism and the government of India has become much more contested, since Hindu “fundamentalists” have been elected to major offices and have pushed for policies that align the central government to some extent with their vision of Hinduism. Nevertheless, these elected officials are not generally viewed as religious leaders.

Religious disturbances

For centuries after the original Aryan inflow, the Indian subcontinent developed rich religious and philosophical views from within, giving rise to classic and Medieval Hinduism as well as Buddhism, Jainism, and other traditions. Some of the boundaries between these traditions are obscure, but one thing they all had in common – roots within the Indian cultures – which meant that many of the issues they dealt with and the concepts used to approach these issues was similar. This does not imply that there was agreement in practice or doctrines, but in general terms everyone who knew about traditions other than their own could probably understand what the issues were and could see how the other traditions differed from their own. Buddhists, for example, knew why Hindus were wrong, and vice versa, because all these groups were basically talking about the same topics in the same language even when they disagreed.

All this began to change with the coming of the Muslims as invaders from the northwest, out of what is now Afghanistan. The first signs of trouble came with Muslim incursions in the northwest around the year 1000 CE. But large-scale upheaval arrived in the 13th Century with the coming of Muslim invaders who established a sultanate in significant portions of the northern regions of the subcontinent. The sultanate, however, ruled only in a loose sense, with local Hindu political leaders left in charge of their own regions. The sultanate, however, was followed by yet another round of Muslim invaders in the 16th Century, the Mughals, who overthrew the sultanate and established an effective and impressive dynasty in northern and central India that lasted for over three hundred years. These invasions of the Muslims were quite simply power plays to establish political and economic dominance – they were not religious wars. The Muslims came under the leadership of Arabs or men with mixed Turkish and Central Asian background, some going back to the fierce fighters of Mongolia such as Jenghiz Khan, and they brought Islam with them.

For the most part, the Muslim rulers did not much concern themselves with religious matters, leaving the Hindus to continue the practice of their various versions of Hinduism, but the presence of a new religious ideal among the political leadership, with a new way of thinking about religious issues, and wholly unfamiliar patterns of worship did put

pressure on the local peoples.⁸ Some Hindus openly converted to Islam, although it is difficult to say with what degree of sincerity. Some Hindus ignored the religious ideas of the Muslims and faithfully continued within the Hindu traditions. Much devotional literature came out of Hindu pens during these days. However, the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb (reigned 1658–1707) engaged in religious persecution of Hindus while at the same time extending the boundaries of the empire. He destroyed Hindu schools and temples, and refused to allow Hindus to hold public office.

Still, it was not Aurangzeb whose anti-Hindu acts are most remembered today in India. Rather, it was the first, relatively tolerant, Mughal ruler, Babur, who erected an Islamic mosque in the 16th Century on the legendary birthplace site of the Hindu Lord Rama in the ancient and religiously significant city of Ayodhya. Ayodhya is of cultural and religious significance to both Hindus and Buddhists, and the presence of this mosque, apparently replacing an ancient Hindu temple on a Hindu holy site remains a flashpoint for cultural-religious-political turmoil yet today. Hundreds, if not thousands, of Hindu and Muslim Indians have died in fighting that uses this real estate controversy as a symbol, a controversy which has taken on great symbolic value to present-day Hindu “fundamentalists”. The story that Babur the Muslim invader caused the mosque to be built and the temple to be destroyed remains an unhealed sore within the Indian Hindu community today.

The manner in which Islam arrived in India, as the religion of armed strangers invading the countryside, makes it difficult for Hindus today to be accepting of the legitimacy of Islam, even if in theory the Hindu holds that all religions have part of the truth. It has proved much easier for contemporary Hindus to be tolerant of other versions of Hinduism, or of Buddhism, or Jainism, or any of the other religious movements that grew out of the subcontinent.

The story of the coming of Christianity to the Indian subcontinent differs from the Islamic story, but is in some ways similarly disturbing. Although some Christian missionary work was done in parts of India while the Mughals still ruled in the north, the primary Christian involvement in India did not begin until after the British empire defeated the Mughal dynasty and made the subcontinent part of the British empire. Mughal rule collapsed in 1757 and by a few years later the British had consolidated their rule over the subcontinent, in what is known as the Raj – i.e., British colonial rule, which did not end until 1947 when the subcontinent was partitioned into predominantly Hindu India and almost exclusively Muslim East and West Pakistan. (East Pakistan subsequently became independent, as Bangladesh, and West Pakistan became what is now Pakistan.)

Thus, from the 13th Century, at least large portions of the subcontinent were ruled by foreigners with non-Hindu backgrounds (during the sultanate, the Mughal dynasty, and the Raj). The Raj raised for the first time serious scholarly interest in Hinduism in Britain, an interest which continues today. After becoming familiar with Hindu traditions, some British became fascinated by Hinduism, and perhaps even influenced by it. But the Raj also brought aggressive efforts by Christian missionaries to convert the “lost” Hindus, who were seen by traditional European Christians as being totally ignorant of what is needed

⁸The famous Taj Mahal and a great mosque in Delhi were both built by a Mughal ruler. These are examples of non-Hindu cultural pressures created by the Mughals.

for salvation, totally ignorant of God. The Christian missionary work, despite what may be assumed to be genuine motivation on the part of the missionaries themselves to be helpful to the “lost” Hindus, was closely associated with British rule. For example, the British never tried to administer the country by themselves – they always depended on locals to take care of the details – but locals who converted to Christianity could get an advantage. The association of Christianity with the Raj remains a sore point to this day in India, with present-day Christian Indians seen by many in the Hindu majority as being the product of earlier selling out to outside influences.

Therefore, both Islam and Christianity are viewed by many Hindus today with some suspicion, as the products of foreign invasions. However, since the end of British rule on the subcontinent, the climate within the Christian communities in Europe and the US has changed the nature of Christian missionary work, except for Christian fundamentalists and hard-line evangelicals: Hinduism tends now to be treated with more respect, and many Christian missions in India have more to do with sharing ideas and helping out with material needs than with outright converting of Hindus to Christianity. The climate in India has also changed, making outside-funded mission work primarily aimed at converting Hindus socially unacceptable. These changes have resulted in a reduction of animosity directed toward the small Christian minority in India.

Typical Hindu attitudes toward Islam, however, have become more negative over the last few decades. There are probably a number of different reasons for this, in addition to continuing resentment at the forceful introduction of Islam into the region. For example, most Muslims in India are poorer than average; maybe that can help make them seem distrustful to the folks calling the shots. However, one of the most prominent irritants is the continuing controversy over the state of Kashmir, in northwest India, bordering Muslim Pakistan. When the British pulled out of the subcontinent, they arranged to partition the region along mostly religious lines, with the predominantly Muslim areas going to East and West Pakistan, except that predominantly Muslim Kashmir somehow ended up in India. (The political details regarding how this happened are murky and contested.) Almost immediately, Pakistan invaded, in an attempt to annex Kashmir, but India resisted, and after a number of years of bloody fighting Kashmir remains contested. There is a cease-fire line drawn roughly down the middle of the state, with India controlling the eastern half and Pakistan the western half. There are continuing politically or religiously motivated terrorist attacks in Kashmir designed to destabilize the area and ultimately to discourage India from trying to maintain control of the state. Muslims living in India can easily be seen by Hindus as natural allies of those who are trying to “steal” Kashmir for Islamic Pakistan, just as Japanese Americans were viewed by many US citizens as natural allies of Japan in World War II. The public face of Islamic terrorist organizations in other parts of the world fits into this picture. In this climate, it is easy for Muslims in India to become the targets of suspicion, discrimination, and violence.

In this climate it is understandable why a mosque built by a Mughal ruler in Ayodhya in place of an ancient Hindu temple would be offensive to the Hindu majority. The fact that the mosque sits at the legendary site of the birthplace of the Hindu Lord Rama just makes things worse. So, it is not surprising that the mosque has been the focal point of repeated civil unrest. The mosque itself is now mostly ruined, through vandalism, and many Muslims have been driven from the area by violence directed against them – violence

which the Hindu “fundamentalist” government of the local state did nothing to prevent, and may even have helped to plan.

Hinduism and modernity

We have seen that classic Hinduisms varied considerably, although there were certain characteristic themes that provided a sense of kinship among the varieties of practice, ritual, and thought. In that respect, not much has changed recently – that is, there is still considerable variation in what counts as Hinduism today, although pressures from modernity may have dampened enthusiasm for some of the more theoretically ambitious claims of traditional Hinduism, such as the relation of karma and caste, while creating new concerns.

Although India is a poor country by US standards, industrialization and globalization of the economy have provided economic opportunities and a sense of what is possible for the improvement of the material conditions under which people live. The sense that people might be able to improve their living conditions through economic development – for example, through India’s participation in the computer revolution – undermines the traditional notion of salvation through loss of personal identity and renunciation of material desires. This, in turn, connects with a loss of focus on spiritual growth and more of a focus on this life and what it might have to offer. Accordingly, one of the challenges facing Hinduism today comes from materialism – concern solely with having more possessions, eating better food, staying physically healthier, and the like. Calls for Hindu revival then often focus on the need to become more spiritual, and to harmonize with the way things ultimately work, by becoming a more *dharm*a-centered individual. Notice that this leaves out the traditional story of salvation, and my sense is that the traditional story of *karma* as tied to rebirth and salvation as *liberation from rebirth* have lost their popular punch. The common Hindu today is more concerned with this life than some life to come, and the path to less suffering may seem to come through medicine and an improving economy.

There is a corresponding loss of theoretical religious underpinnings for the caste system. To the extent that the focus is only on this life, one’s caste can no longer be sensibly seen as the result of some previous lives’ accumulations of karmic effects, and to that same extent the caste system begins to look much more like an indefensible system of arbitrary discrimination against the lower castes, and arbitrary exaltation of the upper castes. A practical modern blow to the caste system came with the import of Christian and Western ideas of justice and equality. By the late 19th century many Hindu leaders were very concerned to show that Hinduism was equally committed to social justice. The caste system was made officially illegal when the current Indian constitution was established, and even the “fundamentalist” Hindus publicly renounce the caste system. However, it hangs on in popular culture, in much the same way as elements of racism hang on in the US, despite years of efforts to overcome it through public policy. In that regard Hindu fundamentalism rejects some quite central features of classic Hinduism, and must avoid defining Hinduism’s fundamentals in such a way as to imply that the caste system is legitimate. So, the classic story of *karma* and rebirth drops by the wayside.

Even though the classic notion of salvation as escape from the cycle of rebirth may have suffered at the hands of modernity, there is still room for *karma* and *dharm*a. *Karma*

can be seen as the natural flow of good effects on one's own life and surroundings when one follows the principles of *dharma*, and the natural flow of bad effects otherwise. *Dharma* can continue to be understood classically, as the set of principles for living well, in harmony with the way the universe works, and including a good, solid spiritual connection with the most important levels of reality. So, one finds faithful Hindus today engaging in pilgrimages to holy sites, observing traditional festival days, praying to local deities (often goddesses), and believing that there are principles of proper social living that will bring about good for the community. Some of these principles are likely to be very traditional ones, including some that have no obvious justification, such as the prohibition on killing cattle for meat.

If you were to ask such a contemporary Hindu about whether the goddesses are individual and fully real, or whether they are but "masks" for something greater, I suspect your respondent would not know what to say. The ritual life, the life of devotion, need not be the result of deep theorizing, and need not lead to such theorizing. Rather, the devotional life can be satisfying to a Hindu simply as a way of connecting to "something beyond" – that is, a way of connecting to the transcendent, without much concern for the details. To continue the devotional life is also to identify with one's cultural roots, to maintain a sense of Hindu identity – again, without too much concern for the theoretical details. This can explain why there is not more effort on the part of the followers of one set of Hindu deities to try to convert the followers of some other set. To be sure, there certainly have been influential Hindu intellectuals (e.g., the now-famous Ram Roy) who have reflected on the Hindu tradition in the light of modern knowledge of the great monotheisms (Christianity, Judaism, Islam), and who have suggested that the real meaning of common classic Hindu devotion to a number of gods and goddesses is only understood by supposing these to be aspects of one underlying divinity partially seen in many lights or under many different labels. Probably there are more Hindus now than ever before who have adopted such a point of view, but this rather sophisticated way of talking would not be adopted by the ordinary poor Hindu on the street in India today.

Probably the most popular of the traditional Hindu sacred works today is the *Ramayana*, the story of Lord Rama, told in epic poetry. In 1987, a version of the story was broadcast on Indian television in weekly episodes, gripping the entire nation – at least those who could gain access to a television set, including Muslims. This went on for a year, and proved so popular that an additional half-year's worth of episodes were added by popular request. Here, again, different Hindus see the story in different ways. Some see it as a kind of morality play in which traditional dharmic virtues and vices are illustrated, and the value of a good life promoted. Others see it as more – as divinely-inspired instruction, or as the story of the life of an actual incarnation of the divine Vishnu. It is difficult, though, even if one takes the latter view, to treat the story as literally true throughout, since the story exists in a great many different versions. Perhaps in ancient times when a given Hindu knew of only one version it would have been possible to treat the story literally, but modern communication and education has made that much more difficult.

Nevertheless, all the above detail pales in comparison to the British Raj. The Raj represents by far Hinduism's most potent contact with modernity. The Raj brought with it enormous modern-flavored cultural changes: a) the notion of a nation-state, with a

secular government and a constitution guaranteeing rights of participation in governance, b) the notion of a religion, sharply distinguishing Islam from Hinduism, and Christianity from Hinduism, as “religions”, c) the partitioning of the subcontinent into Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India, with subsequent rivalry between the two and fighting over Kashmir, d) the promotion of Christian missionary work designed to convert Hindus into Christians, e) the beginning of industrialization in India.

Hinduism with its history of individual variation within a very broadly defined, relatively open set of generally accepted concepts has proved to be a friend to some of the modern influences associated with the Raj. That is, despite the deep resentments and the desire for national independence that the Raj generated, Hindus remarkably bought into some significant aspects of British-introduced modernity. Particularly, the idea of a constitutional democracy seemed quite attractive, perhaps because it somewhat accords with the religious and cultural history of India in which many Hindu (and non-Hindu) voices have competed openly for allegiance. Notions of social equality have also fared well, as was discussed earlier in connection with rejection of the caste system.

However, the Raj is also sharply criticized for bringing religiously-based division into the region. The partitioning of the subcontinent along religious lines is deeply resented by many Hindus, especially since it has led to high tension with Pakistan. A cynical observer would note that this resentment might be traced to the Hindu dream of a united subcontinent in which Hindus are everywhere in the majority, and nowhere would Muslims rule. I have no way to tell to what extent the cynic is correct. But it is clearly true that religiously-based tension, which of course is also cultural tension, exists in the region today more than it did before the Raj (and the last years of the Mughal dynasty—which tend now to be forgotten). That tension is especially acute with respect to Muslim-Hindu relations, as explained earlier. So, from a Hindu point of view today, one very distasteful aspect of modernity is religious divisiveness that brings political and social division with it. This divisiveness is perceived as a modern phenomenon, since it appears to have greatly intensified as a result of the Raj, when the distinction between Hindu and Muslim, Hindu and Christian was highlighted and given theoretical “scientific” justification, ultimately leading to the partitioning of the subcontinent.

Suggestions for further reading on Hinduism

David R. Kinsley, *Hinduism: a Cultural Perspective*, 2nd Edition (Prentice-Hall: New Jersey, 1993).

Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism* (State University of New York Press: Albany, 1989). This large text is sometimes a bit heavy-handed, but contains a wealth of useful detail explained in a straightforward style.

Kim Knott, *Hinduism: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1998). Kim Knott was at the time of publication President of the British Association for the Study of Religions, and Head of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Leeds.