

Hinduism

Hinduism, widely practiced in India, is a pantheistic religion based on a right behavior-oriented life (Dharma) that allows one to become one with the God force (Brahman) and escape the material realm (moksha).

History

Sanskrit is an ancient Indic language of India, in which the Hindu scriptures (*Vedas*) are written. *Shindu* is a Sanskrit word meaning “the Indus River.” The word *hindu* is a Persian word meaning “the people and culture of the Indus River region.”

A people group known as the Harappan civilization (named for one of its chief cities) lived along the Indus Valley. They are thought to have originated as early as 7000 BC and to have reached their height between 2300 to 2000 BC.

Between 2000 and 1500 BC, a migration of Indo-Aryan speakers from northern Asia came into India and began to assimilate with the native population. The beliefs of these two cultures began to mix and evolve into what we know as Hinduism. Between 1900 and 700 BC, they wrote down their beliefs, known as the Vedic writings, which became the basis for Hinduism.

The priests became known as Brahmins and controlled the culture and beliefs of the people. In the 500s BC, the Brahmins established a rigid caste system known as *Varna* (“type,” “order,” or “class”). No one can move up or down in this caste system within their lifetime. Only reincarnation allows one to change his or her caste.

The Hindu caste system (from highest to lowest):

- Brahmins (priests)
- Kshatriyas (nobles and warriors)
- Vaisyas (merchants and artists)
- Shudras (farmers)
- Outcast (the poor)

Today there are about 1 billion adherents to Hinduism, making Hinduism the world’s third-largest religion. About 80 percent of India’s population regard themselves as Hindus, while 30 million more Hindus live outside of India.

Writings

The Four *Vedas* (“knowledge” or “wisdom”) are the most holy writings and were written between 1500 and 500 BC. Hindus consider the *Vedas* revelations from the god force (Brahman) after intense meditation.

There are four *Vedas*:

- *Rigveda*
- *Yajurveda*
- *Samaveda*
- *Atharvaveda*

Each Veda has been subclassified into four major text types:

- *Samhitas* (mantras and benedictions)
- *Aranyakas* (rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices)
- *Brahmanas* (commentaries on rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices)
- *Upanishads* (discussions on meditation, philosophy, and spiritual knowledge)

The *Itihasa* (“history”) contains two epic poems of India’s history and culture.

- *Ramayana Epic* is an ancient Indian poem that narrates the struggle of the divine prince Rama to rescue his wife Sita from the demon king Ravana.
- *Mahabharata Epic* is a legendary narrative of the Kurukshetra War and the fates of the Kaurava and the Pāṇḍava princes. It also contains philosophical and devotional material.
 - *Bhagavad-Gita* (contained in the Mahabharata) is set in a narrative framework of a dialogue between Arjuna, a Pandava prince, and Lord Krishna.

Beliefs About God

There is only one supreme and absolute force, called Brahman.

Brahman is an impersonal, unknowable, and indescribable force. Nothing can be truly said or thought of Brahman.

Brahman is all that exists. Brahman is everything, and everything is Brahman.

Brahman does not have authority over the universe and therefore does not make moral demands.

There are 330 million avatars (“descent”), manifestations of Brahman. Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma are the three major avatars that form the Trimurti (“three forms”).

Vishnu is the preserver and sustainer of creation and is often seen as the same as Brahman. All of creation emanates from his dream. Brahma is the creator god, who brings new life into existence.

Shiva is the destroyer god, who removes old or decayed life from creation.

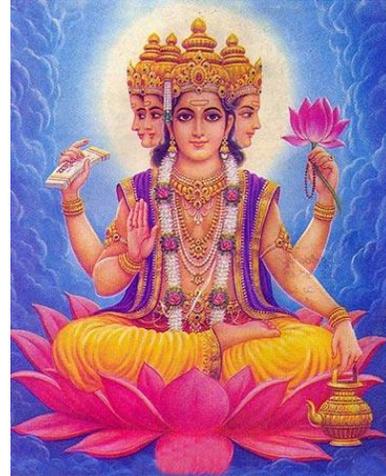
Shiva and Brahma together maintain the balance of creation, making sure there is not too much of one thing or another.



Vishnu is the preserver and sustainer of creation.



Shiva is the destroyer and the transformer of creation.



Brahma is the four-faced creator of creation.

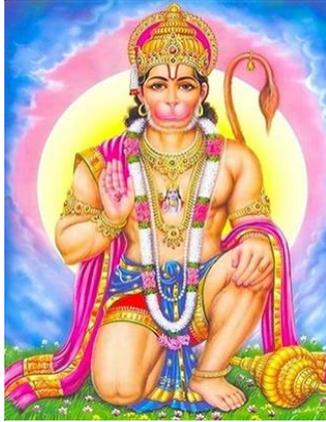
There are many other gods that have gained popularity in Hinduism.



Krishna is the eighth and most powerful avatar of Vishnu. He is the god of compassion, tenderness, and love.



Ganesha is the son of Shiva and is the lord of success and knowledge and the remover of obstacles.



Hanuman is the god of strength, perseverance, and scholarly devotion.



Rama is the seventh avatar of Vishnu and the god of truth and virtue.



Lakshmi is the goddess of material and spiritual wealth and prosperity.



Durga is the protector of the righteous and the destroyer of evil.



Saraswati is Shiva's daughter and is the goddess of knowledge, art, and music.



Kali is one of the wives of Shiva and is the goddess of death, the destroyer of evil.

Beliefs About the Material Realm

Brahman did not create the world; creation exists within Brahman.

The material realm is known as *maya* (“illusion”) and a prison that must be escaped.

Nothing material truly exists; it is all an illusion.

Thus, everything in the material realm is temporary, changing, and unreal, and one’s perceptions are misleading.

This is compared to a dream that seems so real, even to one’s five senses in the dream. One would swear that what is happening is real until they wake up and realize it was all a dream, an illusion. Because nothing is real, the material realm is not orderly or rational.

Beliefs About Humanity

Humanity is an extension of Brahman, and humanity is one with Brahman. Humans are Brahman and are *in* Brahman.

All humans are thus the same being because everything is Brahman. Because everything is an illusion there can be no distinction between individual beings since they are all in Brahman.

Since the material realm is an illusion, the material part of humans is also an illusion. Therefore, humans have only an eternal, uncreated, and spiritual being called the atman (“inner self or soul”). The atman is the only true self and is divine, and ultimate reality is found within.

Beliefs About the Problem with the World and Humanity

Humans have the ignorant belief that they are individuals and not one with Brahman, the ultimate divine reality. They believe that the illusion is real and that they are a part of the illusion.

This ignorance regarding oneness results in bad karma, or bad actions. Karma (“action” or “deed”) is the unalterable consequences that are attached to every thought and action and result in merit or demerit attached to one’s atman.

At its most basic core, karma is not about right and wrong since there is no morality; Brahman makes no moral demands, and everything is an illusion. Karma is then how the universe expects one to act within their caste system in order to maintain the balance in the universe. If you are born into the Kshatriyas caste, then you are expected to fight wars and kill, which is the universe’s way eliminating the things that bring an unbalance—like too many people or other living organisms. If you are born into the Vaisyas caste, then you are to create and build, which maintains the balance. The universe knows which caste people need to be reincarnated into in order to maintain the balance. Thus, good karma is being true to one’s caste system. Many Hindus do think of karma as morality or right and wrong, only because it is difficult for humans to not think in those terms.

After each life and death, the atman is repeatedly reincarnated into the material illusion, either to suffer because of their ignorance and bad karma or to achieve the next step toward escaping the illusion. The wheel of reincarnation is called samsara (“wandering”), a cycle of re-imprisonment in the illusion of the material realm of suffering.

Unlike how the Western world views it, the idea of reincarnation is not a good thing but a prison; one continually reenters the illusion and a life filled with pain and suffering.

Karma determines the kind of good life or suffering life into which a human is reincarnated. If one built up enough bad karma in the previous life, then one will be born into lower caste and a life of suffering. This life of suffering is meant to pay for and rebalance the universe of the bad things one had done in the previous life.

Therefore, acts of compassion toward those who are suffering are discouraged in Hinduism because that person must suffer, and helping them would only prolong the person's suffering into the next life. Also, the person trying to help would have just earned bad karma.

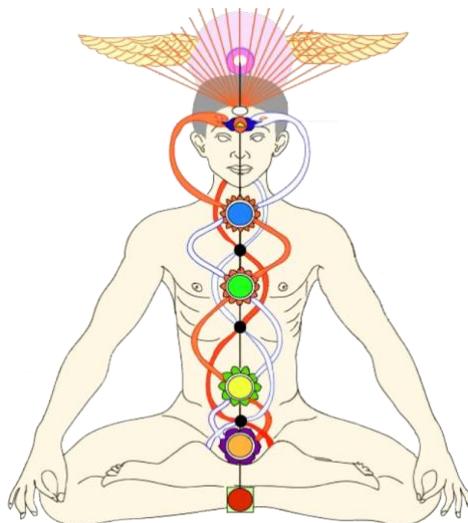
If one built up good karma in their previous life, then they will be born into a better life or higher caste. With enough higher reincarnations, they will eventually be able to escape the illusion.

Beliefs About the Solution to the Problem

Humans need to find enlightenment, the self-realization that they are one with Brahman. One must fully accept that they are one with Brahman and intellectually and emotionally detach themselves from the material illusion. Allowing anything in the illusion to affect one emotionally means that one still believes the illusion is real and therefore will be unable to escape it. Only when one completely accepts to the core of their being that everything is an illusion, demonstrated by being unaffected by the illusion, can one escape.

Moksha (“to free”) is the liberation from the illusion and suffering and union with the Brahman. One is then reabsorbed into the Brahman and loses all individuality.

Hindus believe that it takes millions of reincarnations to achieve moksha. Moksha is achieved on one's own through Yoga meditation (“yoked or united with Brahman”). Yoga is a stretching, breathing, meditation exercise performed to open one's chakras (“wheels”) and to achieve moksha. By balancing two streams, known as *ida* (“mental”) and *pingala* (“bodily”) currents, the *sushumna nadi* (“current of the Self”) rises, opening, and passing through one's chakras. This is also known as awakening the kundalini (“serpent”). There are seven chakras, starting at the base of the spine and ending right above the head. The sixth chakra opens the third eye to all wisdom and the seventh chakra is the crown where one achieves Moksha.



There are three paths to moksha:

- **Inana** is the path of obtaining knowledge through yoga meditation. For men only.
- **Dharma** is the path of works based on the obligations of one's caste.
- **Bhakti** is the path of total passionate devotion to one of the gods through offerings and prayers. This is the most popular way.

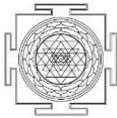
Symbols



The Om (or Aum) is the sacred sound symbol that represents the ultimate reality (Brahman). It is chanted during yoga meditation to help one focus and connect with Brahman.

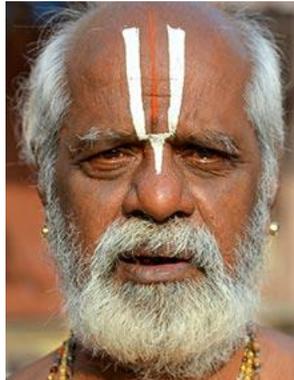


The swastika symbolizes good fortune, harmony, truth, and purity of soul. The four arms represent the four directions and the four Vedas.



The Sri Chakra Yantra is a mandala of nine interlocking triangles. The four upright triangles represent Shiva or the Masculine. The five downward triangles represent Shakti, or the Feminine. Together they form a womb symbolic of creation and non-duality.

The tilaka is a mark worn on the forehead as a sign of spiritual devotion.



The bindi is a dot worn on the forehead of a woman to denote marriage or a festive occasion.



Witnessing

Witnessing often seems scary, but try to remember you are just sharing who Jesus is to you in your life. It is important to remember that it is not your job to answer all their questions and convert them. It is your job to share who God and Jesus Christ are as you know them now at this point in your life and how they have been involved in your life.

Witnessing to Other People in General

First, pray for wisdom, pray for them, and pray for the leading of the Holy Spirit. Even if you just met them, you can still ask for God's leading in a brief prayer.

Don't be afraid of them or make it awkward. Remember that they are people with many of the same fears and desires that you have. They may look culturally different and sound different as they express their worldview, but at the core of their being, they are a person who wants to be loved, feel safe, and have meaning in their life. They have come to believe that the worldview they have will fulfill those needs. That is really the only thing that makes them different from you.

Second, the most important part is to love them and listen to them. Many non-Christians complain that Christians immediately share the gospel without really getting to know them. Most people do not feel like people really listen to them and get to know who they are. It is important to realize that most witnessing is the result of building a relationship with people and being involved in their life. Take the time to really listen to their desires and fear and draw them out with questions. Sometimes you will find that their beliefs are based more on childhood experiences or being hurt by other Christians than the evidence or benefits of their religion. Understand that you may be in for the long haul, and it may take many conversations and years to lead them to Christ. You may not even see them become a Christian, but God will use you as well as many others to lead them to Christ, which may happen at the influence of another Christian long after they are out of your life.

Even if you know a lot about their religion or have met a lot of people from their religion, do not assume you know what they believe. Not everyone of the same religion necessarily has the same beliefs. Ask them what they believe and why they believe what they do. Pay attention to what they emphasize or what they spend the most time talking about because that usually is the most important thing to them. That will be the most rooted belief that will be the hardest for them to shift their perspective on. Remember not everything they believe is wrong or bad. Compare it to the basic affirmations of the Christian faith, not your personal belief preferences.

Third, it is better to start with asking them questions about what they think about Christianity than telling them what it is and why it is right. You may find that many things they believe are correct. Ask them who they think God and Jesus are. What do they think is wrong with the world and how it should be fixed? Do they think they are a good person, and why? What do they think will happen to them when they die? If you can affirm them in that belief or talk about how you believe that too, then you are starting on common ground with them, which will make you less hostile and help them feel more connected to you and more comfortable to share with you. Then you can lovingly point out the differences between what they believe and what the Bible says. Frame it as Jesus being so much more rather than "this is right" or what you have to believe.

Fourth, get them to think about how their worldview corresponds to reality. Ask them in a curious and loving way, not in a debating way, about the contradictions in their belief systems. Listen for internal contradictions as they explain their beliefs. You must listen to what they are saying and ask questions. Sooner or later you catch on to inconsistencies. Inconsistencies usually arise when discussing the relationship between their beliefs and reality. In a loving way confront them on these inconsistencies in order to show them that their beliefs do not correspond with reality. You are trying to help them step outside their belief system and see it from a different perspective. Ask them to explain how they can embrace these contradictions. Ask them the questions that you have always had about their religion or the things that do not make sense to you.

Do not get distracted by the bizarre or fringe beliefs that other people have. Focus on the majors: who God is, humanity, the problem with humanity and creation, and most importantly the solution to the problem with humanity and creation. The focus should always be on who Jesus is and His work on the cross. Share with them how Jesus provides a better relationship, path, and future.

Finally, share your story with them. They may be able to argue with beliefs, but they cannot argue against your own story. Tell them about your life before Christ, how you came to know Christ, and how He changed your life. And most importantly, tell them how Christ got you through and is getting you through your struggles. Remember, people of other religions do not have a personal relationship with a being that is all powerful and can get them through anything. They are all on their own in dealing with their struggles. Your personal stories are the most powerful tool you have in witnessing to others, for this is where Jesus becomes real in the everyday lives of everyday people.

Witnessing to Hindus

One of the difficulties of witnessing to Hindus is that they believe everything is god and therefore the same. That means they do not see their religion as any different from Christianity. The words one uses to describe God and salvation will be understood in a completely different way in their mind, so often they will hear you as agreeing with their faith. This also means they will not see a need to convert since everything is one already. The one major distinction they will see between them as Hindus and the Christian is that the Christian, seen mostly through the culture of America, is obsessed with materialism, which is a part of the illusion, and eats lots of beef; the cow is one of their most sacred gods/animals, thus the eating of beef is extremely offensive. Do not ask a Hindu to what caste he or she belongs, assume all Hindus believe or practice the same things, or invite a Hindu over for dinner and offer them meat or eat meat in front of them.

Because the word *god* does not mean much to a Hindu, because everything is god, His [can we say “Yahweh’s”?] uniqueness and love will not make sense to them. Since their gods are mythical and they believe in reincarnation, the best place to start is with the historical Jesus of Nazareth, who was resurrected and is the only one who can free them immediately from the suffering of reincarnation for their karma. Emphasize the exclusive forgiveness of Jesus and the fact that you know Jesus as God and have an intimate relationship with Him—a radically different concept from how they understand their avatar gods. Also, share that you will be with Jesus forever as opposed to being absorbed.

Questions you can ask

- What's your spiritual background?
- Do you ever feel stereotyped because you are a Hindu? How does that make you feel?
- Would you tell me what you love about Hinduism and why you are excited to be a Hindu?
- Which parts of Hinduism are the most difficult for you to accept or practice?
- What do you base your view of God on?
- Do you believe all religions/paths lead to God? Why or why not?
- What purpose do good and evil serve, based on Hindu beliefs?
- What do you think happens after we die?
- What do you believe about Jesus Christ?
- Do you think there's a difference between a "religion" and the "relationship" with God that Jesus talked about?

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