

Christianity and World Religions: Hinduism

Today is the second in a series of 6 sermons about Christianity and World Religions based on Adam Hamilton's book of the same name. You are welcome to read along in the book for an even deeper experience. Brother Bud's Wednesday Night Life class is studying this book as well. In this week's reading on Hinduism, Adam Hamilton tells the story of a hate crime that happened in 2017 in Olathe, Kansas, near the Church of the Resurrection where he serves as pastor. He told this compelling story:

51 year old Adam Purinto walked into a bar and grill and began to harass two Indian men, engineers who had just gotten off work from a large technology company down the street. When Purinton continued with the verbal assault, restaurant staff asked him to leave. He left, but returned shortly with a gun and proceeded to shoot the two Indian men and another man who came to their aid. One of the men, a 32 year old, was killed.

In the aftermath of the murder, the man's widow made this plea on facebook: "Take some time to understand and embrace diversity in race, culture, and religion," she wrote. "It is in our hands to make our society safe and secure for our future generations and create a fearless world." These were powerful words coming from a woman whose husband had been killed in a racial and likely religiously motivated hate crime. (Hamilton, p. 34).

Certainly, we who follow Jesus are called to love one another and not to hate. Certainly, we who follow Jesus want all people to live in a world without fear of violence and death. And part of making our world a better place can happen when we begin to understand our neighbors -- to learn who they are and what they believe in. So over the next few weeks, the idea will be to learn to appreciate our neighbor and see how we have similarities and how we have differences, so that might love our neighbors more fully.

Today, we are going to learn about Hinduism. You have an insert in your bulletin and if you want to do a pre-test and see how many you can get correctly, you are welcome to do that-to fill in the blanks now. But, I will also walk you through these terms in today's message, and you can fill these Hindu terms in the blanks as we go. Now, first some basic facts. I think it's interesting to know that Hindus consider their faith the oldest of the living religions. Its roots go back to 2-3,000 years before Christ, so 4-5000 years ago, thought to be about the time of Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament. Hinduism originated in what is now India and about 94% of Hindus today live in India. Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world and has over 1 billion adherents worldwide (that's 15% of world's population). "In 2010, the United States had the largest Hindu population **outside** Asia with a total Hindu population of 1.79 million which is about 1% of the U.S. population."

<https://www.quora.com/How-many-Hindus-are-there-in-the-world>

Just as Christianity has sacred texts in the Bible, Hindu also has sacred texts. And here come some vocabulary words for you.

Sacred texts:

1. Vedas - hymns, liturgies, and the process for ritual sacrifices
2. Upanishads - (oo·paa·nuh·shaadz) commentary and summary of Hindu philosophy

Bhagavad Gita - (ba ga vad) most important of upanishads and most important text/contains central tenets of Hinduism

Today we want to get a general idea of the basic beliefs of Hinduism -- We are going to dig into three basics and think about similarities and differences with our own faith.

Basic tenets:

1. **One transpersonal God but multiple deities**

It's a little surprising to learn that Hindus believe in one God because Hindus also speak of many different deities. But the idea here is that the one God has many different manifestations -- there may even be as many as 330 million different manifestations of this one God-- all the deities are different forms of the one god.

Brahman, one god many manifestations - god is manifested in ways that humans can understand- some literal and some mythological

The idea is that God is beyond personal - transpersonal -- God is so above human understanding that it is imperative that God appears in the form of other deities for our understanding. A personal relationship with God is seen as an impossibility.

Two deities that are very important and most recognized in Hinduism are:

Vishnu - who is considered the protector.

Shiva - who is considered the destroyer.

You have probably seen art or statues that depict some of these deities. What I would highly recommend you do is google these deities so that you can see an image of them. Feel free to google away right now if you want to.

Another deity I want to mention that I didn't put on your hand out is Ganesha. **Ganesha** is in the form of a "pot-bellied elephant god, and is the lord of success, knowledge, and wealth. Ganesha is worshiped by all sects of Hinduism, making him [another] important ... Hindu deity. He is typically depicted riding a mouse, who assists the deity in removing barriers to success." So you are going to want to google Ganesha, too.

<https://www.learnreligions.com/top-hindu-deities-1770309>

So first basic tenet - there is one god Brahman, but many different deities represent Brahman.

2. **Reincarnation** - every creature, humans and animals, have a soul and the soul originates with God until ultimately reunited with God.

Adam Hamilton's book describes the process of reincarnation like this:

For Hindus, the soul's journey on earth begins in the form of an animal, or perhaps even a plant. To be reunited with God, the soul needs to gain the spiritual knowledge to let go of ego and of this life and to fulfill its duty to God. The Hindu word for this duty is Dharma. (Dharma is the divine within oneself. It is the duty one has to live in the path that God has set out for a person). A person's dharma includes acts of kindness, compassion, mercy and love. Even souls in animal form have this duty insofar as they are capable of performing it. If the soul lives out its dharma (follows its divine path), it has a chance to be reincarnated into a higher life form." (Hamilton, 39)

Dharma - the divine within oneself/the divine path

In Christianity, the human problem is our sinful nature. But in Hinduism, the problem is ignorance. So “souls strive to gain knowledge, to fulfill their duty to move closer to God.” (Hamilton, 39).

Karma - are the good or bad deeds that follow one into the next life; and could be described as the theory of “what goes around, comes around.”

If a person accomplishes good deeds, that good energy will earn a person a higher form in the next life, and vice versa. Your karma, either good or bad, will follow you into the next life.

The ultimate goal is to achieve:

Moksha - final release of your soul back to God; like a drop of water reunited with the ocean

Nirvana - the final state of being reunited with God

The ultimate goal of this seemingly endless cycle of reincarnation is to experience moksha and attain the state of nirvana--for one's soul to be reunited with God - to become one with God.

3. Nonviolence - ahimsa. This is the third basic tenet of Hinduism. Hindus are not to injure living things, including themselves. And so many Hindus are vegetarians. This belief of ahimsa also leads many Hindus to be pacifists - they don't believe war or violence are ever justified. Mahatma Gandhi is one Hindu who is very well known and highly respected, and he was truly a champion for living out the concept of nonviolent resistance.

Now that we have basic information let's compare and contrast. There are many differences between Hinduism and Christianity, aren't there? But do you also see a few similarities? There are some points of connection that we can make. For example, do you connect with the belief in *ahimsa* -- in nonviolence and non injury? Jesus talks to his disciples about this. He tells them to “turn the other cheek” and to “love your enemies.” Do you remember when Jesus refused to allow the disciples to defend him with violence when the soldiers came to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane? Do you remember when Jesus rebuked Peter for cutting off the soldier's ear, and he even miraculously healed it? Nonviolence is a common belief between the two religions. Mohatma Gandhi's study of Jesus even reinforced his belief in nonviolence. And Gandhi's study of Jesus came to influence Martin Luther King, Jr.'s use of nonviolence in seeking justice for African Americans during the civil rights movement. It's really fascinating how we can learn important things from people of other faiths.

Another thing at the center of both faiths is the belief in one Supreme Being who is powerful, mysterious, and glorious. I want to share this description of the Hindu God, and as I read it to you, think about how it compares to ways that our God is described in the Bible (for instance do you hear similarities with today's Isaiah scripture). This comes from the Bhagavad Gita:

“I see the splendor of an infinite beauty which illumines the whole universe. Is it thee? With thy crown and scepter. How difficult thou art to see! But I see thee: as fire, as the sun, blinding, incomprehensible...Heaven and earth and all the infinite spaces are filled with thy Spirit and

before the wonder of thy fearful majesty the worlds tremble.” (Hamilton, 41, Bhagavad Gita 11:17, 20).

Do you see hear some similarities?

Another connection point we have is the shared belief that we are called to live lives of compassion, kindness, and love. People of both faiths are called to love their neighbors and to care for their neighbors in ways that require a sacrifice.

So, there **are** connection points, but there are also major points of difference. For example, Hindus could not imagine a personal god who cares about individuals. Yet, we believe the opposite. Adam Hamilton points out that for both Christians and Jews from the very beginning of the world, God desired a relationship with humans -- we were created to walk with God in the Garden of Eden. Moses and David spoke with God in very personal ways. And Jesus modeled an intensely personal relationship with the Father. He modeled personal prayer, and he told stories that portrayed God as the loving and merciful father to the prodigal son, and the caring shepherd who searched for the one lost sheep. For Christians, God is personal, and we grow in faith as we draw near to this God who knows us and who wants to be known.

But the really big divergence for me, is in the idea of reincarnation and karma. And this is where today’s scripture from Ephesians comes in.
Ephesians 2:1-10

From Death to Life

2 You were dead through the trespasses and sins **2** in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. **3** All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. **4** But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us **5** even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ[a]—by grace you have been saved— **6** and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, **7** so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. **8** For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— **9** not the result of works, so that no one may boast. **10** For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

You see, we as followers of Jesus believe that the problem is sin, not ignorance. Our problem is that we usually know what is right and what is wrong and yet we continue to do the sinful thing. We continue to separate ourselves from God and go our own way. Sin is our problem. And the thing that this passage from Ephesians points out is that we can never save ourselves by working harder and harder or knowing more and more -- even if we had many reincarnations and many chances to get it right -- our works are just not going to save us. We need a savior. That savior is Jesus Christ. It is not because of our works and our efforts that we reach our ultimate goal of being with God -- it is through the grace of God -- it is through the free gift given by Christ through his death on the cross -- that we are united with God. It is by grace that we are saved for a life of joy here and now, **and also** in heaven when our earthly lives end.

And so it seems to me that grace is pretty much the opposite of karma. With karma, we get what we deserve. But with grace, we receive **what we don't deserve at all** -- by our faith alone the unconditional love of God is poured out on us.

In her book, *The Hiding Place*, Corrie ten Boom [writes about] her Tanta (her aunt) Jans [who had learned] that she only had a few weeks to live. Her family reminded Jans of all her good works. Corrie's father told her that, while many people would go to God with empty hands, Jans would "run to him with hands full!"

But tears came to Jans' eyes, and she said, "Empty, empty! How can we bring anything to God? What does He care for our little tricks and trinkets?" Then she prayed, "Dear Jesus, I thank You that we must all come with empty hands. I thank You that You have done all—all—on the Cross, and that all we need in life or death is to be sure of this." (Dick Donovan).

Because I am a follower of Jesus, my personal belief is that I am saved by the grace of God alone and that we all must come to God with faith in our hearts and with empty hands.

But what a fascinating conversation it would be to talk about these things respectfully with our Hindu neighbors. Adam Hamilton says: "My hope is that we will be the kind of people who understand our faith well enough to have a real dialogue with those of other faiths -- and that we will not feel threatened by their faith but will listen with kindness, compassion and empathy. Along the way, we may find that we have become better Christians." May it be so! May we truly follow Jesus. May we love our neighbors in the same way Christ loves us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen!