

**Christianity and World Religions:
HINDUISM**

Ephesians 2:1-10

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One doesn't normally think about the Kansas City area as being a hotspot of inter-religious conflict. It's middle America. But in February of 2017, in the Kansas City suburb of Olathe, Kansas, a man walked into a restaurant and began to harass two Indian men who were there. They were engineers, stopping off for a drink after work. As the man got verbally abusive, the restaurant staff asked him to leave. He left, and came back with a gun, and shot the two Indian men and another patron who tried to intervene. One of the Indian men, Srinivas Kuchibothla, 32 years old and married, was killed.

Any Christian worthy of the name would recoil at such an unprovoked and hateful act of violence. Whether it was racially or religiously motivated, either way it was horrible. But the amazing thing was the statement made by the widow of the man who was killed. Shortly after his death, she made this plea on Facebook: "Take some time to understand and embrace diversity in race, culture, and religion. It is in our hands to make our society safe and secure for our future generations and create a fearless world."¹ That's a statement that can be affirmed by followers of any religion, and it is the motivation for this sermon series and study. We can understand and embrace the diversity of our world, if we are willing. The safety and security of our world and the well-being of our future generations depends on it.

So today we are going to talk about Hinduism. It is arguably the oldest active religion in the world. It is the third largest world religion, with 1.1 billion people, about 15% of the world's population. Most Hindus live in India, unless they have emigrated elsewhere. There are 2.3 million Hindus in the United States. It is the fourth largest religion in the U.S., and the most highly educated of the religious groups in our country.²

The Hindu religion is written in several different books. The oldest book, which contains hymns, liturgies, and instructions for sacrifice is the Vedas. The Vedas were passed down orally for centuries, but were committed to writing about 1000 B.C., about the time of the earliest Hebrew writings. The Upanishads are the writings that explain Hindu religion and philosophy. They are poems written as commentary on the Vedas. The earliest Upanishads were written about the time of the Hebrew prophets, but they continued to be composed until after the time of Christ. The most important

of the Upanishads is called the Bhagavad Gita. It is a poem about a conversation between a young prince and the god Krishna, the god of love and compassion. In the course of the poem, Krishna covers the central tenets of Hinduism. It's sort of like the Hindu gospel.

So what do Hindus believe? What is taught in their sacred writings?

Many people think that Hinduism has multiple gods, but that's not exactly true. Hindus have many deities, but only one god. The deities are all emanations or avatars of the one god Brahman. Brahman is all-powerful, just like our God, but Brahman is not a personal god. You don't really have a relationship with Brahman. Brahman is beyond personal. But Brahman has many incarnations, and these deities are similar to many of the deities we see in the Greek and Roman pantheons. I mentioned Krishna, the god of love, compassion, and kindness. Another major deity is Vishnu, who is called the protector. He is the god of truth. Shiva is equally powerful and is called the destroyer of all evil. Saraswati is a female deity who is the goddess of music and art. Another god Ganesha looks like an elephant; he is the god of wisdom and intellect. All of these deities (and there are thousands) are incarnations of the big god Brahman. All of these incarnations mean that Brahman is both immanent (right here) and transcendent (everywhere), and that every part of creation is somehow part of Brahman as well.

A second key belief of the Hindus is the reincarnation of the soul. Because everything is part of god, everything living thing has a soul. They call this soul *atman*. The task of the soul is to achieve *dharma*, which is good deeds, spiritual knowledge, doing your duty. *Dharma* is the good stuff, the divine within your self. The human problem is not sin, but a lack of spiritual knowledge; ignorance is what holds us back in the cycle of life. Learning is a slow process; it may take more time than you have in one life.

But not to worry. When you die, you get another life. Your soul is reincarnated into another body—human, animal, or plant—depending on how you lived your previous life. You don't remember past lives, but you get to carry over the spiritual credit from the deeds you did. This is called *karma*, and it can be good or bad. Good *karma* moves you up the ladder; bad *karma* moves you down.

At the end of the cycle, after many lives, if you have attained the perfection of spiritual knowledge, love, and good deeds, you may experience union with the one god Brahman. This moment of release from the cycle of reincarnation is called *moksha*. But because Brahman is beyond personal, it is not like an encounter with a loving, mighty, glorious god. It is like a drop of water falling into the ocean, being absorbed into something much greater than yourself. This non-conscious, non-personal state of being is called *nirvana*. That's the ultimate goal.

One more belief I want to mention is *ahimsa*. *Ahimsa* means non-violence or non-injury. Hindus believe they should live to avoid violence or injury to any living thing because, of course, every living thing is part of Brahman. This leads many Hindus to be vegetarians and pacifists, although neither of those practices are universal among Hindus. But the Hindu belief in non-violence has had the most influence on Western culture, and is one point of connection between Hinduism and Christianity. Jesus also practiced non-violence, telling his disciples to “turn the other cheek” and “love your enemies.” Jesus and Paul both counseled to do good to those who hurt, hate, or persecute you. Jesus suffered violence against himself, yet without retaliating. Christians should understand *ahimsa*.

Another point of connection is the idea of Brahman. Hindus believe in one supreme god over all. We believe in one supreme God over all. The Hindu god is both immanent and transcendent. We believe that God is right here with us and everywhere in the universe. Our God is omnipresent (everywhere), omniscient (all-knowing), and eternal (timeless). Both Christians and Hindus have BIG gods.

The good life of *dharma* should also be very recognizable to Christians. Hindus strive to live with love, compassion and kindness toward all creatures. There is a fundamental respect for all life that is very sympathetic between Hindus and Christians. They may actually do this better than we do. The good deeds of a Hindu are aimed in one direction—good *karma*. It's all about building up spiritual credit so that in the next life you move up toward *moksha*, ultimately into *nirvana*. The Christian's good deeds, on the other hand, don't earn us anything. They are a response to the grace of God that has already been given as a gift.

So now we are getting into the differences between Hindu and Christian thought. Though we both believe in one supreme being god, our God is a personal God. Our God is a Person, actually one God in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God created human beings for relationship. Our faith is a personal experience of a living God.

We see the personality of God most explicitly in Jesus Christ, who is the incarnation of God. Unlike the Hindus, who have thousands of incarnations of Brahman, there is only one incarnation of God for Christians. Jesus is the embodiment of God on earth, the Word made flesh and living among us.

Our God is the creator of the universe, but God is not creation. God is in the world, but the world is not God. Adam Hamilton uses the illustration of a painter, like Picasso. We can look at a Picasso painting and acknowledge the beauty and artistry of the work, but we don't point to the painting and say, "That is Picasso." There is a difference between creator and creation.

Perhaps the most glaring divergence of thought between Hindus and Christians is in our view of salvation. Hindus believe in reincarnation. (Actually, many non-Hindus believe in reincarnation, too. In 2017, the Pew Research organization found that 33% of Americans and 29% of *Christians* believe in reincarnation.³ Since Hindus only amount to less than 1% of the population, that is a bunch of non-Hindus who have adopted a Hindu belief.) Remember, for Hindus, the human problem is ignorance. Throughout your life, you want to be learning, getting better, so that next time around, you are higher up the ladder of life. After many lifetimes, you hope to one day be good enough to be released and be re-united or absorbed into god.

The Christian idea of salvation does not include reincarnation. For Christians, the human problem is not ignorance; it is sin. Sin is our self-centered tendency to rebel against God. We cannot do enough good in the world to earn our way into heaven, because on our own we cannot achieve perfection. But God, in his divine love and mercy, gives us the gift of grace and the forgiveness of our sins. This is powerfully expressed in these words of Paul from Ephesians: "*But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our*

*trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”*⁴

So the good works we do are not to get us to a higher plane of existence; they are a response to the wonderful gift God gives us and we accept by faith: *“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.”*⁵

So when we die, Christians do not believe either that we get another chance or that we are absorbed into the ocean of god-ness. We go to a meaningful existence beyond all suffering, sickness and death. We will be in relationship with a personal God. We will know God, and God will know us. It will not be like a drop into the ocean, but like Jesus promised, a room in our Father’s house. We will be forever home.

There are some beliefs that Christians and Hindus share in common. There are some differences in our faiths. But we can learn from one another, and respect one another, and be better at our own religion because of it.

One of the best-known Hindus of the 20th century was Mohandas K. Gandhi, or “Mahatma,” which means “great soul.” For three decades, he led the people of India in resisting the oppressive colonial rule of the British. In 1947, India finally achieved its independence. Gandhi did not achieve this victory through violence, military action, or civil war. He led the people by the principle of *ahimsa*, non-violence, even against the enemy.

Gandhi was a follower of Jesus. The only picture Gandhi had on his office wall was a picture of Jesus. He wasn’t a Christian, but he saw in Jesus the practical application of the principle of non-violence.

An American Christian who was inspired by Gandhi was Martin Luther King, Jr. As he began to lead the civil rights movement in the 1950’s, King turned to Gandhi to provide the framework of non-violent resistance that was the foundation of the movement. In a 1960 article, King wrote, “In accepting this responsibility my mind, consciously or unconsciously, was driven back to the Sermon on the Mount and the Gandhian method of

nonviolent resistance. This principle became the guiding light of our movement. Christ furnished the spirit and motivation while Gandhi furnished the method.”⁶

Adam Hamilton said, “King, the Baptist pastor, learned the power of non-violent love from the Hindu Gandhi, who himself learned it from Jesus! King became a better Christian by studying Gandhi. And Gandhi became a better Hindu by studying Jesus.”⁷

Another American who was actually friends with Gandhi was E. Stanley Jones, the great Methodist missionary to India. Brother Stanley had a unique way of communicating with the Indian people with love and respect, yet never compromising his Christian beliefs and principles. He held many interfaith conversations through the years of his missionary work in the land of the Hindus. Once he had a meeting with Mahatma Gandhi, and he asked Gandhi how Christianity could become naturalized, a part of the national life, contributing more fully to the national spirit. Gandhi suggested four things:

“(1) All Christians, missionaries and all, must live more like Jesus Christ. (2) You should practice your religion without adulterating it or toning it down. (3) You should emphasize the love side of Christianity more, for love is central in Christianity. (4) You must study more sympathetically the non-Christian religions to find the good in them and have a more sympathetic approach to them.”⁸

This is why we are having a sermon series on World Religions. This is why we want to have conversations and relationships with people of other faiths. Not to dismiss or disprove their beliefs. Not even to convert them to Christianity. Our purpose is to be the best disciple of Jesus Christ that we can be, and to love everyone with the love of Jesus, and to let God give the gift of grace to whomever God chooses to give it. Then we may do what the woman in Kansas City dreamed of, to create a world without fear, where future generations will live together in safety and security. I believe that will glorify God and be a faithful testimony.

¹ Adam Hamilton, *Christianity and World Religions, Revised Edition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), 34.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism_in_the_United_States.

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/01/new-age-beliefs-common-among-both-religious-and-nonreligious-americans/>.

⁴ Ephesians 2:4-9.

⁵ Ephesians 2:10.

⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Pilgrimage to Non-violence” 4/13/1960.

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/pilgrimage-nonviolence>.

⁷ Hamilton, 48f.

⁸ Stephen A. Graham, *The Life and Works of E. Stanley Jones: Extraordinary Man, Extraordinary Mission*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 141.