



**UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY**

a monthly forum on the third *Saturday* of each month from 6:30 to 7:30 P.M. following Evening Prayer at 6  
 Most Forums are led by Canon Richard T. Nolan.  
*Retired Priest-in-Residence, St. Andrew's Church; Editor of www.philosophy-religion.org*  
 Saturday, February 17, 2007

**Tonight's Topic**

**"AN INTRODUCTION TO HINDUISM"** (including a brief video presentation)  
 [Are there any themes/beliefs/practices common to Hinduism and Christianity?]

**A Prayer To Be Said In Unison**

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who has committed to your Church the care and nurture of all the faithful;  
 Enlighten with wisdom those who teach and those who learn, that, rejoicing in the knowledge of your truth, they  
 may worship and serve you from generation to generation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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**HINDUISM**

There is great diversity among world religions. For hundreds of millions of Asians, their religion - no matter what form it takes - is a vital concern of their daily lives, not a mere one-day-a-week observance. The peoples of non-Western cultures see religion as integrally related to and inseparable from all the other areas of life and experience. They generally look upon their religion as the basis of their culture, which gives form and meaning to the rest of existence. Our attempt here is to understand certain beliefs about the transcendent, humanity, and the universe that have been the

basis of well-established cultures and beautiful art in the Asian world. Asian philosophy is a way of life.

## THE HINDU TRADITION

"Hinduism, literally 'the belief of the people of India,' is the predominant faith of India and of no other nation."<sup>2</sup> Taken as a whole, Hinduism is one of the oldest religious traditions in the world. But it is difficult to study, for it is also one of the most diversified religious traditions. There are divisions and subdivisions into which we cannot go, and you should be aware that we are necessarily oversimplifying in this discussion. The problem is further complicated by the fact that there are no exact equivalents in English for certain Indian terms and concepts.

Philosophy (*darshana*) in the Hindu tradition means "seeing the truth" and applying this truth to the problems of everyday life. Thus, for Indian thinkers, the purpose of studying philosophy is not merely to gain knowledge for its own sake or to satisfy one's curiosity, but to discover and live the highest kind of life, the life that will bring permanent self-realization or bliss. People must recover truths themselves, not just accept them on blind faith or from the testimony of others. Unless people have convictions and live in accordance with them, they are not philosophers.

Hinduism arose on Indian soil and is largely confined to Indian people. India, however, has known other traditions, including Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. What is called Hinduism today has influenced many other parts of Asia and is steadily growing in parts of Europe and the United States.

## HINDU SCRIPTURE

One indication of the difficulty of setting forth the central points in Hindu thought is that there are many texts that, collectively, can be called Hindu Scripture. First, there are the Vedas (literally "knowledge" - that is, sacred knowledge). These are texts written some fifteen hundred years before the common era (B.C.E., equivalent to B.C.). The earliest texts are the *Rig Veda*, a collection of over one thousand hymns addressed to the gods - hymns to Indra, the god of civilization, war, and storm; to Varuna, the guardian of morality; and to many others, most of them now forgotten. Included in the Vedas are the *Brahmanas*, lengthy treatises concerned with the details of the sacrificial ritual administered by the Brahmin class. Finally, in the eighth to fifth centuries B.C.E., there were added to these the most famous of the early Indian writings, the *Upanishads*, which attempted to explain the inner meaning of the reality behind the religious quest in a philosophical manner. All these writings form the essential canon of sacred scriptures in the orthodox Hindu tradition.

In the period following the *Upanishads*, there was, within Hinduism, a great development of devotional religion. This was expressed strikingly in the most famous of Indian scriptures, the *Bhagavadgita*, or "Song of the Lord." There is some doubt as to when the *Gita* was compiled, but it was probably some time during the period 200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. (the common era, equivalent to A.D.)

No other scripture is more widely read in India today. To read the *Gita* is to be introduced to some of the main themes of Hindu thought as well as to some of the main practices of Hindu life. It also introduces one to splendid Hindu poetry and to the god Krishna.

It is convenient to name four major periods of Hindu thought: first, the early period of Vedic polytheism; second, the period of the Vedanta (literally, "the end of the Veda"), with its descriptions of Absolute Brahman; third, a period beginning about 200 B.C.E., with an emphasis on *bhakti* (devotional worship of a theistic god); and last,<sup>3</sup> the modern period, with its response to Western influence.

"During the classical period - those centuries between 450 B.C. and A.D. 600 - occurred the emergence of a Hindu culture that absorbed into itself many different strands of mythology, ritual, and doctrine. This luxuriance of religious standpoints may sometimes baffle the outsider, but it testifies to an important and enduring characteristic of Indian culture - its desire to express and to

nurture as many different approaches to the Truth as possible, and to conserve within itself the multiplicity of cultural influences that have affected the Indian subcontinent.”<sup>4</sup>

## BRAHMAN AND THE SELF

Central to much of Hindu philosophy is the emphasis on the one unchanging reality that transcends space, time, causality, and all particular things. This Absolute cannot be comprehended by human thought or adequately expressed in words and concepts. According to the nondualistic view (which emphasizes the oneness of existence) only Brahman is real, and the individual souls and the universe are illusory veils obscuring Brahman. Other views hold that the self and the physical world may be real, although they are finite and imperfect. There are also differences among philosophical thinkers about whether the ultimate reality is nonpersonal, superpersonal, or personal. But all agree on the possibility of every soul's attaining liberation (*moksha*) from the bondage of the physical world.

Closely allied to the concept of Brahman is the concept of the self, or soul, or *atman*. The true self of each person is identical with Brahman. From the transcendental standpoint, the self is immortal, free, and identical with Brahman. The divine nature of the self is veiled, but not destroyed, by false images and ignorance, for it is ultimately without traits and beyond language. The true destiny of the self is the realization of this identity with Brahman. From the phenomenal standpoint, there are many individual selves, enmeshed in the world of affairs and seeking deliverance from the round of births and deaths. Thus we need to distinguish between the real and the empirical self.

What are the relations among Brahman, the self, and the universe that we perceive? A Hindu scholar says: “Brahman is the sole reality, and it appears both as the objective universe and as the individual subject. The former is an illusory manifestation of Brahman, while the latter is Brahman itself appearing under the limitations which form part of that illusory universe.”<sup>5</sup> The objects of the empirical world, although of a certain order of worldly reality, are appearances in that they belong to the world of cause and effect, to which Brahman does not belong. The individual self, however, is not illusory in this sense. The self is Brahman appearing under limiting conditions. It is not a phenomenon of ignorance the way physical objects are. Through an intuitive, non-logical experience one realizes the identity of the eternal self and Brahman.

## CENTRAL VALUES IN HINDUISM

All Hindu systems of thought seem to agree that there are four main values to be completed and brought to perfection in the course of rebirth. In ascending order of importance they are: (1) *Artha* (wealth) and (2) *Kama* (sensuality). These are the worldly or secular values. They are legitimate if they are kept in their places and do not stifle other values. Material prosperity, good health, and long life are desired by most Indians. However, both the life of activity and renunciation are recognized. (3) *Dharma* (social and individual duties) includes all caste roles and obligations of occupation, gender, kin, generation, and temperament, as well as other ethical responsibilities. (4) *Moksha* (release from finitude and imperfection) is the intrinsic or eternal value, and the supreme spiritual ideal. It gives liberation from the wheel of existence, and cannot be achieved without complete experience and resolution of the other three. Discipline is essential if we are to achieve illumination, and the overcoming of selfishness is essential if we are to realize our genuine self and attain release. Unless a person achieves release in this life, which is rare indeed, she or he is destined to repeat the round of more existences.

According to Hinduism, no soul is eternally damned. The law of *karma*, the law of sowing and reaping, determines the form that will be taken in each new existence. This is the law of cause and effect in human life. Through our conduct we determine our own destiny in that good *karma* is acquired by living up to our *dharmic* duties and bad *karma* by ignoring or violating our given *dharma*. An unethical life may lead to rebirth below the station of the present life, and a life of goodness may lead to a more favored existence or to ultimate liberation from the round of rebirths. Thus, the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth are said to be grounded in the moral structures of the

universe. They permit freedom and ethical advance in that they are under our control and are not determined by cosmic or environmental forces completely beyond our influence.

Because of its intricate dependence on the structure of *dharma*, the theory of *karma* and rebirth determines a person's position in the traditional caste system, in which there are four main castes and many subcastes or divisions within these. The caste system has been under attack in recent decades, having been outlawed in the Indian Constitution of 1949, and various outstanding leaders of Hinduism have called attention to the continued abuses of caste and have worked hard to bring about its practical elimination. Nevertheless, the caste system is highly resistant to change, not only because of the belief that a person's present social status is regulated by the law of *karma* but also because of ingrained social hierarchies based on notions of purity and contamination.

The concept of the four *ashramas*, or stages in the life of the individual, relates the goal of liberation to the needs and tasks of daily life in society. A man's duties are set by the stage of life at which he has arrived. The four stages are (1) the life of a celibate student under the mentorship of a teacher; (2) a long period of householdership, beginning with marriage, when a person assumes the responsibilities of parenthood and other social obligations and when one provides for those dedicated to the spiritual quest; (3) a period of increased religiosity, when householder duties can be passed on to the next generation, during which one retires to the forest with his wife to practice rituals and for meditation and reflection; and (4) by complete renunciation of family and caste and by practicing austerities and rigid self-control, a person seeks union with Brahman. If the person is successful in the fourth stage, struggle and strife cease and he gains peace and freedom through union with the all-embracing World Soul (Brahman). The inner spirit of humanity is the focus of attention, and its development, illumination, and release are the highest values. These stations were primarily for men. At the time of traditional Hinduism, women were excluded from the more rigorous structures of the *ashramas* and received their spiritual merit from working to uphold the *dharmic* obligations of their husbands.

## YOGA

We have already mentioned that, for the Hindu, discipline is essential if one is to achieve illumination: discipline of both body and mind. *Yoga* is a technique of physical and spiritual training by which the bodily and psychic energies are controlled, unified, and directed in order to attain liberation from the world. *Yoga* is the liberating union of the self (*atman*) with the Self (*Brahman*).

In classical yoga, after the yogi has undergone a long initiatory period of training under a master - the guru - no one else need exist in his or her world. The yogi sheds not only material distractions but also psychic hindrances such as memories, desires, fears, yearnings, and the residue of dreams and impressions; all with the goal of liberation. The importance of classical yoga is that it teaches the complete independence and freedom of the self based on the confidence that the individual mind is able through its own powers to transcend the suffering caused by matter, illusions, and supernatural agencies. Only knowledge can bring liberation. Without this goal, everything - study, work, meditation - is valueless.

## RELIGIOUS EXPRESSIONS

Traditional worship of a god in Hinduism is known as *puja*. It can be practiced by anyone regardless of gender, age, or station in life, from the most erudite philosopher to the simplest street sweeper. Because Hinduism is not normally a congregational religion that is practiced in a house of worship by people as a group, the performance of *puja* is left to the individual. Usually there is a *puja* room or niche within the Hindu home, where an image of the god or goddess is enshrined in a painting, a sculpture, or other symbolic referent with flowers, incense, and food. The divinity is invoked with symbolic sounds, prayers, and songs, and often worship includes the use of fire or water. The choice of god or gods, whether it be Krishna, Rama, Shiva, Kali, Shri, or any one of a great variety from the Hindu pantheon, is often a matter of family affiliation or the needs of a given worship. Hindu temples, cared for and presided over by priests, are usually dedicated to a specific divinity and

provide an especially quiet place for individual devotion. Seasonal festivities commemorating local myths and figures are expressive and celebratory affairs, often lasting many days and including people from all social backgrounds. Finally, Hindu worship can take the form of pilgrimage to area shrines or to the holy city of Kashi (modern Banaras) and its sacred river Ganges. Possessing great adaptability and tolerance, Hinduism includes, rather than excludes, unique forms of religious expression. There are a number of reform movements in India today, and some outstanding thinkers have been remolding the Indian consciousness and outlook.<sup>6</sup>

In "The Spirit of Indian Philosophy," Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan,<sup>7</sup> after pointing out the diversity of views held by Indian thinkers, indicates seven attitudes that are characteristic of the Indian philosophical mind. (1) Concentration on the spiritual. Philosophy and religion are closely related. Humans are spiritual in nature and are primarily interested in their spiritual destiny and not in material welfare. (2) Belief in the intimate relationship of philosophy and life. (3) The introspective attitude and concern for the inner life. The inner spirit of a person, the subject rather than the object, is the focus of attention and gives the best clue to the nature of the universe. (4) The affinity with idealism. Because reality is "ultimately one and ultimately spiritual," the tendency is toward nondualistic idealism. (5) The acceptance of direct perception as the only method through which reality can be known. When the mind becomes free from the impurities of attachment and aversion through the practice of yoga or spiritual disciplines, it perceives truth directly, as one perceives a fruit lying on the palm of one's hand. Reason is useful but insufficient; it leads the seeker as far as it can and then bows out. To know reality is to experience it or to become one with it. (6) A consciousness of tradition and an acceptance of the insights of seers who have lived in the past. This has not, however, made Indian philosophy dogmatic or credal. (7) An "overall synthetic tradition." The systems of thought are seen as complementing each other. This stress on the synthetic vision had made possible an intellectual and religious tolerance toward differences within Hinduism and toward other faiths and systems of thought. Hinduism is thus not a fixed and uniform doctrinal system; it is broad, inclusive, and tolerant of different points of view.

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Notes

2. R. K. C. Forman, (ed.), *Religions of the World*, 3rd ed. (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), p. 83.
  3. For a more detailed look at these periods, see Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).
  4. N. Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, 3rd ed. (New York: Scribner's, 1985), p. 126. We advise any student of religion to refer to this book in its most recent edition.
  5. M. Hiriyanna, *The Essentials of Indian Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1949), p. 158.
  6. See V. S. Naravane, *Modern Indian Thought: A Philosophical Survey* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1964).
  7. S. Radhakrishnan, and C. A. Moore, eds., *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. xx-xxvi.
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**Excerpts from *RELIGIONS EAST AND WEST*  
by the late Professor Robert C. Zaehner, University of Oxford**

**The religions of the world may be roughly divided into two types - the prophetic and the mystical. Each type derives ultimately from one nation, the prophetic from the Jews, the mystical from India.** In addition, China must count as an independent religious phenomenon which, however, belongs to the Indian 'type' by which it was profoundly influenced.

**To the prophetic type of religion belong Judaism itself and its daughter religions, Christianity and Islam.** These religions all originated in the Near East, Christianity spreading mainly throughout Europe. Islam replaced it in Asia Minor and North Africa, but its greatest expansion was towards the East when it displaced Zoroastrianism in Persia and made deep inroads into India and beyond. If we speak of 'prophetic' religion as 'Western,' we must remember that Islam constituted an integral part of this 'Western, block, not of the 'Eastern.' The great religious divide is not the Bosphorus which, separates Europe from Asia, but the Hindu Kush which separates the lands of the Muslim Iranian nation from India on the one hand, and the Gobi Desert which separates them from China on the other. Thus, if we persist in using the words 'Eastern' and 'Western' we must understand that in the religious context we mean Europe and the Middle East by 'Western'; India and the Far East by 'Eastern.'

## *GOD AS HE OR IT*

In prophetic religion the first assumption is that of a personal God who rules the universe and who communicates his will to man through Prophets and Lawgivers. This God is directly and personally concerned with the right ordering of this world and with the right and 'righteous' relationships he wishes to exist between man and man: hence he is the Law giver *par excellence*, operating in time and space in a concrete situation the center of which is man. ...he manifests himself in act. As Pascal said, 'he is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the learned.' He is a personal and 'living' God who manifests his will in history.

The God of 'Eastern' religion is the God of the philosophers a - so much so indeed that to call him God at all can only mislead, for he is not a person, it is a principle: it is the principle of unchanging Being which is yet the source of all becoming, the stillness that is yet the source of all activity, the One from which all multiplicity proceeds. In Chinese it is called the Tao, the 'Way,' in the Indian languages it is Brahman, unchanging, One, dependent on nothing, free.

All religions aim at 'salvation' of some sort, and this implies that there is both something or someone which can be 'saved' and also something *from* which it can be saved. For prophetic religion this 'something' is usually sin or evil, for the mystical religions it is the human condition as we know it, subject to birth and death, old age and decay - the tyranny of time and of this world in which we live. This longing to have done with life as lived and experienced on earth are typically and admirably expressed in an ancient Hindu prayer:

From the unreal lead me to the real!  
 From darkness lead me to the light!  
 From death lead me to immortality!

Immortality and the 'real' are one and the same thing: they are not of this world, for they are what does not and cannot change. 'Immortality' does not mean 'life everlasting,' for it does not last at all: it just *is*. It is the real as contrasted with the unreal, the eternal as contrasted with the transient. The essential experience is that of the 'salvation,' or rather 'liberation' of the soul from the bondage of time, space and matter.

What then is the nature of the soul if by this word we understand that thing in man which can be so liberated? It is emphatically not what Christians understand by that word: it is not the responsible element in man which can be 'saved' or 'damned' because salvation and damnation are the reward and punishment allotted to the doers of good or evil deeds. The 'soul' or, as the Hindus prefer to call it, the 'self,' cannot be saved or damned because it has nothing to do with 'doing,' only with 'being.' 'Doing' in Sanskrit is *karma*, and it is karma which binds you to the never-ending round of impermanent existence. 'Liberation' means to have done with 'doing' and having in order that you may simply 'be.'

## *THIS SPACE WITHIN THE HEART*

Brahman is Being: Brahman is consciousness: Brahman is joy. So too, you and I, in our inmost selves, are Being, consciousness, and joy. We do not know this because we are ignorant of the true nature of things: we identify ourselves with body, senses, mind, the 'ego,' or even with what we in the West call 'soul,' of which consciousness is an essential part. This is to fail to see things as they really are; and as liberation means also to free oneself from a false view of things.

Brahman is the same changeless principle which both pervades the universe and dwells in the consciousness of every man. To 'become Brahman' is to realize that one's true being is independent of this world, of mind and emotion and feeling just as much as of the body and its desires. To 'become Brahman' means to realize that the point without magnitude within the human heart is the same as the ground of the cosmos:

As wide as is this space around us, so wide is this space within the heart. In it both sky and earth are concentrated, both fire and wind, both sun and moon, lightning and the stars, what a man possesses

here on earth and what he does not possess: everything is concentrated in this (tiny space within the heart).

This is what is usually called pantheism; but it does not mean that everything is indiscriminately and indifferently divine, but that all things are divine in the sense that the eternal spirit, Brahman, is fully present in them all.

'Liberation' means to *experience* the presence of this unchanging being both in yourself and in all Nature - hence it is possible to say that one's inmost self and the highest Brahman are one: 'This finest essence -- the whole universe has it as its Self: That is the Real: That is the Self: That *you* are.'

This 'Highest Self' is usually regarded as far transcending anything that can be called personality; and the experience of identity with this impersonal absolute means the loss of anything you can call 'I,' the dissolving of the hard contours of personal existence into the wide expanse of unqualified being, just as a river loses its identity once it flows into the featureless ocean. And yet in the ancient Hindu texts Brahman is not always conceived of as being simply the changeless One behind the ever-changing many, for it sometimes appears as the creative ground of the universe, the "Lord" of the universe.

This is indeed the great unborn Self which consists of understanding... In the space within the heart lies the Ruler of all, the Lord of all, the King of all. He neither increases by good works nor does he diminish by evil ones... For it is he who makes him whom he would raise up from these worlds perform good works, and it is he again who makes him whom he would drag down perform evil works. He is the guardian of the worlds, the sovereign of the worlds, universal Lord. Let a man know: He is my Self.

Here the identification of the essence of man and the Absolute which is at the same time God is complete. This is not the Judaeo-Christian God who stands over against you as a judge, it is not even the 'Kingdom of God' that 'is within you;' it is a God who transcends all personal gods and yet is identical with you as you exist in eternity. Moreover, this is not something that must be accepted on faith alone, it is something that all can experience if their dispositions are right and if they are suitably trained. It may sound absurd, but it is an experience that is attested all over the globe and at all stages of human development. Once experienced, this vision of the one undying reality behind all that comes to be and passes away cannot be doubted, for to have glimpsed it, if only for a moment, brings the conviction that death itself is an impossibility. The danger is that it introduces you into a world where all action is transcended and in which there can therefore be neither good nor evil. This too is the experience which the Buddhists call 'Enlightenment.'

The Hindus were and are incurable metaphysicians. Though all admit that this experience is not explicable in words, this did not prevent them from trying to explain it philosophically. Some said it proved that all things are inseparably one and that all multiplicity is an illusion: others went to the other extreme and claimed that there are two orders of being - the eternal and the transient - and that liberation means no more than the final separation of the eternal element from all that is not eternal. All this the Buddha rejected as being irrelevant to the saving experience itself which for him meant the 'snuffing out' (Nirvana) of all worldly existence and the actual experience of 'what is unborn, does not become, is not made or compounded.' This Nirvana, the blowing out of the flame of life and of anything we are pleased to call a 'self' (for the Buddha will have nothing to do with a 'self' of any kind whether individual or universal), is the realization of the Changeless. This again is an experience that may be had here in this life: it is something that is present in all of us. For most of us it is hidden away so that we do not even suspect its existence.

The Buddha, however, is there to show us the way, the Noble Eightfold Path which is the only sure way to the cherished goal and which is based on a strict morality of selflessness and self-abnegation.

### **THE PRISON OF THE WORLD**

Both Hinduism and Buddhism see salvation as a release from *this* world into an unconditioned form of existence in which all change and all action are transcended. That is because they believe in the transmigration of souls, the endless repetition of lives more or less miserable to which, but for the possibility of 'liberation,' there would

be no foreseeable end. Their tendency is to see this world as a prison from which the spirit of man must escape. The Chinese did not believe in transmigration, and their attitude to this world is therefore very different. The Supreme principle is the Tao - the 'Way' - the 'way' things work, that is; and man's salvation consists in his attuning himself to and uniting himself with this Tao. Since the Tao is the principle that makes things what they are, man must not resist it. Like Brahman the Tao is the single reality that operates in all things, though remaining still and unperturbed itself all the time. Hence to be at one with all things is to be at one with the Tao, and through the Tao to share in its immortality. For these Taoists Nature and Spirit are one; you do not have to renounce Nature, only your individual 'self.' Once that is done you will see Nature itself miraculously transformed in the eternal light of the Tao; you will see all things still as separate, but yet in a far deeper sense as one.

When Buddhism came to China it too was transformed: the original rigid separation of eternity from this world of space and time, was abolished. The result was Zen in which 'enlightenment' is seen much as the Taoists and early Hindus saw it - as the realization of the interconnectedness of all things in the one absolute 'ground.' Enlightenment may come after long practice either gradually or quite suddenly. The experience, as with the Hindus, is one of Being, heightened consciousness, and joy. In it there is nothing that a Christian would recognize as God; it is simply the discovery of a changeless principle within yourself, it is your own true being which no one, not even God, can take away from you. 'Salvation' lies squarely in your own hands: and in this surely lies the attraction of Zen and the whole 'Eastern' tradition to post-Christian man. In China this mystical trend, the keynote of which is always unity, left its mark on what until 1905 was the official religion of China - Confucianism - which had previously been concerned very much with this world and with ethics. Despite the mystical influx, however, Confucianism never ceased to mainly interested be in the right ordering of society in this world rather than in individual escape from it. That, it thought, was the higher selfishness; but among the 'Eastern' religions Confucianism was the odd man out.

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from Owen C. Thomas and Ellen K. Wondra, *Introduction to Theology*. 3rd ed. (2002)  
 (Both Thomas and Wondra are contemporary Episcopal theologians.)

### GOD AS PERSONAL

An immediate implication of the foregoing is that God is personal, since personhood or selfhood is involved in spiritual life, or is identical with spiritual life, looked at from one point of view. Nothing comes through more clearly in the Bible than that God approaches humanity in a personal way in the divine words and acts. In revelation, God confronts us as an "I." Brunner has pointed out that more than one thousand sentences of the Bible begin with the divine "I." The personal character of God is underlined by the ideas of the name and face of God. God's personal approach to humanity culminates in the divine approach through the man Jesus. But, in this analogy, elements of finiteness in human personhood, such as birth and death, cannot be applied to God. This raises the difficult problem of conceiving of nonfinite or infinite personal reality. The only personal reality we know directly is finite. Because of this difficulty, some theologians have asserted that God is suprapersonal (beyond personhood). But others have responded that all concepts claimed as suprapersonal are in fact subpersonal or impersonal. Gollwitzer states, "The personal way of speaking is unsurpassable for Christian talk of God ... There exists alongside the personal way of speaking only the impersonal and sub-personal way, but not a supra-personal one."<sup>5</sup>

The theological issue here is that God is self-revealed as personal, and yet God is not a finite object, limited by space and time, but rather non-finite or infinite. Thus any attempt to state the infinite personhood of God must not stress the infiniteness in such a way as to fall into subpersonal categories.

The concern to transcend the personal often derives from the presupposition that the more abstract a concept is, the more spiritual it is, and the more concrete or personal, the less spiritual. From the point of view of the Bible, the opposite is true, as we have seen above. The concrete, anthropomorphic, personal way of speaking about God is sometimes said to be primitive and naive, but it is the only way personal reality can be spoken about, and it is therefore a necessity in our language about God.

If it is objected that analogical application of the term personal to God is too anthropomorphic, one can reply that application of the term personal to humanity is too theomorphic. Only God is truly personal, truly free and responsible, whereas human beings are personal only by way of analogy to God's personhood. Our personhood is only a reflection or image of the divine personhood, and we come to realize our true personhood only through our relation to God.<sup>6</sup>

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5. Gollwitzer, *Existence of God*, 188f.

6. *Ibid.*, 196f.; Barth, *C.D.* II/1: 248ff.

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**The New York Times**  
nytimes.com

September 17, 2005

### FROM: IN NEW YOGA CLASSES, POSES AND PRAYER

When Cathy Chadwick instructed her three yoga students to move into warrior position, she did not remind them to watch their alignment or focus on their breath. Instead Ms. Chadwick urged them to concentrate on the affirmation each made at the beginning of class after she read aloud the prayer of St. Theresa of Avila.

"Good Christian warriors," Ms. Chadwick softly said as the women lunged into the position.

Ms. Chadwick is one of a growing number of people who practice Christian yoga, incorporating Biblical passages, prayers and Christian reflections. Occasionally, teachers rename yoga postures to reflect Christian teachings or, as Ms. Chadwick did with warrior position, include religious metaphors.

Some, like Ms. Chadwick, had taken yoga classes and enjoyed the physical benefits but were uncomfortable with the fact that yoga is a Hindu practice. Others said that yoga allowed them to connect with their spiritual sides, but that it should be filled with their own religion.

"I feel more comfortable practicing yoga in conjunction with my faith," said Ms. Chadwick, whose class meets at Christ Church in this town 30 miles north of Boston. "When I practiced yoga before, I felt I was being asked to open up to a deity, and that deity to me is a Christian deity."

A similar movement is taking place in Judaism, with teachers merging teachings or texts into yoga classes. Many who take part said Christian and Jewish yoga made the physical discipline more accessible to those otherwise unwilling to take a class for religious reasons.

Centers that teach only Christian or Jewish yoga are popping up across the country. Most classes teach hatha yoga postures, gentle enough to be performed by novices.

But critics of the alterations say that yoga is inherently Hindu, and that it is not possible to truly practice it without embracing that element.

"There is an element of superficiality or hypocrisy there," said Subhas R. Tiwari, a professor of yoga philosophy and meditation at the Hindu University of America in Orlando, Fla. "To try to take Hinduism or aspects of Hinduism outside of yoga is an affront. It's an act of insincere behavior."

Douglas R. Groothuis, a professor of philosophy at Denver Seminary, said that yoga was a Hindu practice structured to help people attain a higher spiritual state within, and that was incompatible with Christian teachings.

"I don't think Christian yoga works," he said. "It's an oxymoron. If it's truly Christian, it can't be truly yoga because of the worldviews."

The Vatican has also expressed misgivings about yoga. In a 1989 letter, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, who is now Pope Benedict XVI, said practices like yoga and meditation could "degenerate into a cult of the body."

Even so, the number of people who practice Christian yoga is rapidly growing, said the Rev. Thomas Ryan, a Paulist priest in Manhattan and editor of "Reclaiming the Body in Christian Spirituality."

Father Ryan, who developed many of the Christian yoga techniques adopted by others, said yoga postures were vehicles for people of all faiths to invite spirituality into the heart and body.

"It is better seen as a hardware to which one brings his or her own software and one's own faith understanding to transform the practice from within, so the intention is always critical," said Father Ryan, who is assembling a database of Christian yoga instructors.

Myriam Klotz, a reconstructionist rabbi and co-founder of the Yoga and Jewish Spirituality Teacher Training Institute at Elat Chayyim, a Jewish spiritual retreat center in Accord, N.Y., said she used yoga as a way to integrate the body into Judaism.

"I would like the Jewish experience to be more full-bodied," Rabbi Klotz said, "and yoga is one of the best ways I have found to live a more full-bodied life. I don't mean to create a new Judaism. It's being respectful of the yoga tradition and integrating the Jewish tradition and letting them befriend one another."

For example, if Rabbi Klotz is teaching about the Jewish principle of people being grounded on Earth but stretching their souls up, she has students stand in mountain pose as a physical expression of that teaching.

Stephen A. Rapp, a Boston yoga teacher, developed Aleph-Bet yoga, a series of postures meant to represent Hebrew letters. Mr. Rapp said he saw the connection between poses and letters one day when, after he had shown his children yoga postures, he watched a scribe repair a scroll at synagogue.

For example, Mr. Rapp expresses the Hebrew letter bet in the posture Dandasana, where one sits on the ground with legs and arms straight out in front. Mr. Rapp believes postures are part of a physical yoga system into which spirituality is incorporated.

"It's the thinking about the shape and thinking about the symbol and what it means while also doing this form of exercise," he said. "It gives you a focus, an intention. You really have to have the intention correct in yoga."

But Swami Param, head of the Classical Yoga Hindu Academy in Manahawkin, N.J., said that if people could not acknowledge the Hindu element of yoga, they should not bother studying it.

"As Hindus we have no problem studying other religions," Mr. Param said, "but we give them the respect they deserve."

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#### FROM WWW.PHILOSOPHY-RELIGION.ORG

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are the three monotheistic religions designated as "Hebraic," "Biblical," or "Abrahamic" religions because of their origins in ancient Hebrew Civilization. The Episcopal Church is committed to Hebraic monotheism: the biblical belief in the one and only personal God Who creates the universe and Who invites humanity to enter a communal, covenant relationship with Him. This loving, awesome Supreme Being, self-disclosed in the Bible (especially in Jesus Christ), is not common to all major world religions. For example, classical Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism are not monotheistic. They do not acknowledge as their ultimate reality a personal, revealing, caring, creator *God-Who-Acts* in search of personal, human loyalty. Instead, they embrace other views of non-personal spirituality as ultimate. Some Christian theologians and clergy have rejected biblical monotheism as intellectually inferior; instead, they have embraced what they believe to be more sophisticated views similar to some Asian and non-biblical, philosophical traditions. *The Book of Common Prayer* is thoroughly monotheistic, and its use by non-theistic clergy would be inconsistent with its biblical context.

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#### CORE ESSENTIALS OF PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY [sometimes labeled "classical mysticism" or "mystical religion"] Outline prepared by Richard T. Nolan

Many philosophers, theologians, and clergy/religious leaders believe that all religions are to be understood within the context of some version of the "Perennial Philosophy," that all religions are poetic expressions of the "Perennial Philosophy" and are therefore essentially identical. For a different viewpoint, see the subsites on biblical thought and the subsites containing the writings of Drs. Cherbonnier and Kirkpatrick.

#### References:

A. Huxley, "Introduction" in *The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita* ; A. Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*; L. Loemker, "Perennial Philosophy" in the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*; N. Smart, "Perennial Philosophy" in *The*

*Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*; H. Titus, M. Smith, and R. Nolan, “One Asian View of God” in *Living Issues In Philosophy* [9<sup>th</sup> ed.]; *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* is at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/DicHist/dict.html> .

See also <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/perennial/mysticisim.htm> ; and <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/perennial/contents.htm>

## 1. GOD OR ULTIMATE REALITY

- a. Ultimate Reality, which may be called “God,” is pure non-physical spirituality; God is supra-personal, Wholly Other, Oneness, Being or Non-Being, eternal, absolute, infinite, and transcendent. This concept of ultimate reality may be labeled *Brahman*, sometimes *Nirvana*, sometimes the *Tao*, sometimes the “God beyond God,” sometimes “The One,” sometimes “The Divine Ground.”
- b. All named Gods (whether *Brahma*, *Krishna*, *Allah*, *Yahweh*, the Holy Trinity, etc.) are equivalent symbolic “pointers” to Ultimate Reality.
- c. Some named Gods (e.g., gods of nature, gods of popular mythology) may be less sophisticated, personalized “pointers,” but pointers nonetheless.
- d. The belief that any personalized God [such as in “b” or “c” above] is ultimately real falls short of approaching an understanding of Ultimate Reality as It truly is.

## 2. THE UNIVERSE

- a. The Universe, the visible and the invisible (including time/history), is either:
  - i. an illusion, appearing-to-be-reality [*maya*], or
  - ii. less real than ultimate reality, separate from It, or
  - iii. less real than ultimate reality, flowing from It, or
  - iv. a “fallen” reality, separated from true Ultimate Reality.
- b. The Universe is either neutral (neither good nor bad) or evil/sinful, to some extent.

## 3. HUMAN NATURE

- a. Persons consist of a perishable ego and body plus an eternal soul (or non-soul), which is of the same nature as the Divine Ground.
- b. The body/ego is either neutral or evil/sinful/shackled to some extent.
- c. One’s true reality is trapped, imprisoned within an alienated existence, separated from Oneness.
- d. Death is liberation for eventual reunion/union with God.
  - i. eternal unconsciousness, or
  - ii. eternal beatific vision

## 4. RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

- a. Human reflection and language are limited to the finite world, the Universe.
- b. Human beings can “know” the Divine Ground by direct unitive experience that transcends rationality.
- c. The “mystical experience” may be
  - i. suprarational absorption into or “touching” the Divine Ground [the “dreamless sleep”], or
  - ii. being in the presence of Ultimate Reality.
- d. “Descriptions” of the mystical experience may be expressed by
  - i. total silence [profound enlightenment], or
  - ii. poetic symbols in speech, art, & literature (scriptures), or
  - iii. “negative” language.

## 5. CONSEQUENCES FOR LIVING

- a. The purpose of life is the uniting of one’s true, eternal “self” (soul or non-soul) with the Divine Ground.
- b. Life may be regarded as inauthentic, a shadow, purposeless, and inconsequential.
- c. Some possible values:
  - passivity
  - detachment from material things
  - detachment from relationships with others
  - flow with *maya*
  - all experiences oriented toward the Divine Ground, which alone is real
  - isolation

beyond good and evil

Love the "soul" in everyone.

Be active as long as the Divine Ground is believed to be the only true Reality.

Accept what is.

It doesn't matter.

Longing for the Infinite

## CORE ESSENTIALS OF HEBRAIC/BIBLICAL/PROPHETIC/ABRAHAMIC RELIGION

(outline prepared by Richard T. Nolan)

For elaborations on these themes, see the subsites containing the writings of Drs. Cherbonnier and Kirkpatrick at [www.philosophy-religion.org](http://www.philosophy-religion.org). When compared carefully with versions of "perennial philosophy," the contrasts are evident.

### 1. GOD OR ULTIMATE REALITY

- a. God is "Someone" characterized by purposeful acts; God is a caring intelligence whose actions include creating, self-disclosing, and empowering.
- b. Though personal, God is not confined to mortal limitations.
- c. God, whose names include Yahweh and Allah, is the only God.
- d. In the Bible and Qur'an, God is involved in history, yet sovereign.
- e. Certain Greek-like philosophical reflections on God add a transcendent dimension; the biblical motif focuses upon God's acts, not "location."

### 2. THE UNIVERSE

- a. The universe, the visible and the invisible (including time/history) is real.
- b. The universe is created good.
- c. Certain Greek philosophical reflections on the Bible interpret the very fabric of the universe as having become inherently corrupted.

### 3. HUMAN NATURE

- a. Human nature, endowed with the capacity for intelligent, purposeful and caring acts, is fundamentally good.
- b. Certain Greek philosophical reflections view human nature as having become inherently sinful.
- c. Human beings, whether sinful inherently or by choice are in need of radical or realigning salvation.
- d. Human nature is social or corporate, not individualistic.
- e. Persons have been/are interpreted in various ways, including as
  - i. an animated, organic unity which dies (ancient biblical).
  - ii. a being with a body and a transfigurable ego.
  - iii. a resurrectable being.
  - iv. a body and an immortal soul. [under Greek philosophical influence]
- f. Life-after-death is interpreted in various ways, including as
  - i. not expected.
  - ii. not automatic; it must be deserved.
  - iii. automatic with possibilities of:
    - a. heaven, purgatory, hell.
    - b. continued growth toward greater communion with God.
  - iv. particular (individually when death occurs) and general (corporately at the end of the world).

### 4. RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

- a. Human beings can grow in their understanding of God's purposes for humanity by comprehending the meaning of the:
  - i. Hebrew Scriptures (Judaism).
  - ii. Old and New Testaments (Christianity)
  - iii. Qur'an (Islam)
- b. Continuing sources or religious knowledge vary [as revelation, not introspective enlightenment]

## 5. CONSEQUENCES FOR LIVING

- a. The purpose of life for humanity is covenant living as God's accountable guests, as "children of God."  
[understandings vary]

References: "Fundamental Considerations" by Vinjamuri E. Devadutt at <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/thought/baptist.htm>  
<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/thought/contents.htm> ;

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Excerpted from Richard E. Wentz, "The Ways of the Hindus," *AMERICAN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS* (2003)

### The Shaping of Religion in the United States (with CD-ROM)

Hinduism is an umbrella concept. Hindus are people of great diversity. There is probably no one pattern or system that may be defined as Hindu. And yet we are certainly aware of the fact that the home of Hinduism has been India and that the social expression of religiousness finds a strong embodiment in Hindu identity. After all, Hindus are in conflict with Sikhs and Muslims in various parts of the Indian subcontinent, and in Sri Lanka Hindus and Buddhists have been estranged. This means that the ultimate order and meaning of existence is expressed in being identified as Hindu. There is a Hindu perception of the world. There is the highly philosophical (often atheistic) form of Hinduism; there are high

y devotional and physiological forms of Hinduism; and there is a Hinduism that seeks order and meaning through morality. And, of course, there are numerous versions of each of these. There is the Hinduism of the masses, with their meticulous worship of deities, their dutiful attention to temple ceremonies, and their ablutions in the sacred rivers. And there is the Hinduism of those who seek careful and devout mystical union with Ultimate Reality. On the one hand, there is the austere asceticism of some Hindus who endure rigorous fasting and other subjugations of the body; on the other hand, there is the wisdom and tranquility of the master teacher who responds only to those who are ready to be taught.

When we think about it deeply enough, we begin to realize that all religious traditions encompass a great deal of diversity. Even Catholic Christianity includes the austerity of certain ascetics; the devotionism of the masses; the refinements of philosophies, theologians, and mystics; and the humble service of a Mother Teresa. One of the implications of the word *catholic* is comprehensiveness: the inclusion of many within the one, or *e pluribus unum*.

What then is the central character of Hinduism? First, it is a perception of the world that has been shaped by the topography of India. Hinduism is not a religion with a founder. It is an attitude of religious tolerance and inclusiveness that mingled in the very course of Indian history and geography. As early as the third millennium B.C.E., there existed a settled people who made ritual use of water, venerated the holy *lingam* (phallus) as the symbol of divine originality, and worshiped a divinity in trees and animals. Among these agricultural and town-dwelling inhabitants there existed devotion to the Mother-Goddess and to the divine principles of creation, preservation, and destruction. The great gods Shiva and Vishnu (of whom Krishna was an incarnation) became the objects of this devotion.

These dark-skinned peoples of early India became known as the Dravidians. Contemporaneous with ancient Sumerian and other Near Eastern cultures, they fashioned a multilayered perception of the world, rich in beauty and power, and unconcerned with Western notions of consistency and logic. From these ancient peoples, Hinduism was to derive the principle that the ultimate order and meaning of existence is diverse—it is response to the power of being in whatever circumstances people find themselves. To be religious was to sing, dance, and think with the forces of nature and human experience.

Sometime between the first and second millennium B.C.E., the Dravidians were joined by a light-skinned people, the Aryans, who invaded the subcontinent through the Himalayan passes—perhaps around the time of the Hebrew exodus from Egypt. They brought with them their poet-singers, who transmitted an oral tradition of hymns and prayers that later became the scriptures known as the Vedas. One of these, the *Rig Veda*, is presumably the oldest text among world religions. The Upanishads were a doctrinal interpretation of the Vedas commonly called the Vedanta—"the concluding portions of the Vedas." These sacred texts expressed the religious sensibility of nomadic people, who lived under open skies and venerated the earth, the arch of the

heavens, and the four directions. Without temples, their altar fires were set in clearings prepared for sacrificial offerings of melted butter (*ghee*), soma, grains, and animals from their herds of goats, sheep, cattle, or even horses. There was a kind of reflective spirit at work in the Aryan experience, centered upon the relationship between the human mind and the divine consciousness. Aryan and Dravidian ways mingled to form the spiritual world of Hinduism.

Another distinctive feature of Hinduism is its development of the idea of karma. To the Hindu mind there is a law at work in the essential rhythm of being. In all that is, there is a cause and effect—a kind of interactive energy that is continuously at work. Since time is a cycle and not a linear continuum, conscious existence is merely the centering of the rhythm of cause and effect. What is, is; what will be, will be, because individual existence is merely the consciousness of cause and effect at any particular moment. Of course, this means that one's present thoughts and actions are a result of what has been and will also be determinative of what shall be.

This law of karma relates to a third distinctive feature of Hinduism. At the heart of the Vedantic system, which emerged in India after 200 C.E., is the concept behind the Sanskrit words *tat tvam asi*, which express the notion that reality is one. The self is really ultimate reality. *Tat* (that) *tvam* (thou) *asi* (art) means “that thou art”—you are whatever is. The only thing that really *is* is the rhythm of being. To pretend that you are anything other than the incidence of ultimate reality is to take too seriously your conscious selfhood. To the Hindu, *atman* (self) equals *Brahman* (the Infinite and Absolute Reality behind and beyond all appearances). “You” are identical with that which is ultimate in the universe. That which underlies everything that is, is what “you” really are. This Hindu insight is an illuminating kind of experience, inasmuch as most of us spend a lifetime assuming that the empirical ego is the “real” self.

In order to assist the experience of *tat tvam asi*, the Hindus have devised various disciplines that may lead to a transformation of our selfhood. These disciplines are called *yogas*; they are training methods designed to attain release from the illusions of reality (*maya*) with which we ordinarily exist. Hinduism offers more than one pathway or *yoga*. If we seem to be drawn by a desire to control the functioning of our bodies, as physically active beings, then the way of *hatha* yoga may be for us. We must seek a teacher (*guru*) who may guide us in so disciplining our bodies that we find ourselves at one with the nameless and formless Spirit (*Brahman*).

Some of us are drawn by a desire to use our intellect, to control the mind in its quest for knowledge and understanding. We must seek a teacher who will advise us in *jnana* yoga, a pathway that will help us transcend the self that wants to possess knowledge so that we may find union with the true Self (*Brahman-atman*), which is the truth behind all knowledge. There is karma yoga for the individual who is inclined toward work, achievement, and good deeds. Eventually the karma yogi should achieve such control over deeds that he or she is no longer concerned with the achievements of the empirical self. Instead, his or her actions for good will flow from the eternal Spirit itself.

Perhaps the most prevalent pathway is that of *bhakti* yoga, the way of love, adoration, worship. Here we sense a recognition of the fact that many human beings are well-intentioned, loving creatures who do not have great inclinations for physical, intellectual, or moral discipline. Many of us are immersed in the struggles of daily existence, yet recognize the need to love and to adore others. This inclination to love may be directed toward ultimate reality itself. It may travel through simple rituals performed in temples, adoration given to various deities, and recitation of prayers and chanting of sacred words—it may travel in such a way that it finds itself embraced by love itself, by the heart of the universe that beats in our own hearts. “As the waters of the Ganges flow incessantly toward the ocean,” says the *Bhagavata Purana*, “so do the minds [of the *bhaktis*] move constantly toward me, the Supreme Person residing in every heart, immediately they hear about my qualities.” In some ways, *bhakti* yoga is an acknowledgment of the significance of ritual in human existence. It emphasizes the independent power of the practical mode of religious expression. We are all ritualists who perform actions that signify ultimate order and meaning for us. These actions take many forms but are often directed toward the love of an “other.” How, after all, do we express love? By a gift or offering, by a sacrifice, by words or care or adoration, by a kiss, by an embrace, or by conjugal sexuality (which represents the union of selves). Ultimately and religiously speaking, all love actions move “constantly toward . . . the Supreme Person residing in every heart.”

*Bhakti* yoga is the most universal of paths. In Hindu understanding, all of us are in some way inclined in this direction, even if we are disciples of other forms of yoga. We may all make offerings, call upon the name of an “Other,” and swoon in the ecstasy of love. Whether it is out of fear or duty, devotion is a universal form of human behavior. We pay our respects to something or someone—we are devoted. The true disciple, the dedicated practitioner of this kind of behavior, seeks to perfect and purify his or her motives and acts of adoration and to be a true lover.

The most discussed form of American Hinduism is, of course, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, more popularly known as the Hare Krishna movement. This is an Americanization of a *bhakti* tradition that originated in Bengal, India, in the sixteenth century. It emphasized that love and devotional service to Krishna as the supreme manifestation of God could lead to a realization of the true self (*atman*), which was actually Krishna consciousness. The movement disregarded the importance of caste or station in life and sought to make its teachings available to all people. This Krishna consciousness movement was brought from India to America by Abhay Charan De Prabhupada, who spent most of his later life translating and writing commentaries on scriptural texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita*. Today there are many centers of this movement in the United States, with thousands of devotees.

Central to the raising of Krishna consciousness is the chanting of “Hare Krishna” as part of the practice of *sankirtana*, a form of passionate dance and singing of praises to Lord Krishna. This street dancing has been accompanied by book distribution and a form of preaching that has been shaped by the American propensity for the sharing of “evangelical” messages. Of course, the Hare Krishnas, as they are called, are also known for their distinctive Indian costumes of *dhotis* and *saris*, their shaven heads and sacred neck beads, and their vegetarian food.

The influence of Hinduism in the United States predates the Hare Krishna movement. Joseph Priestley came to America in 1794 from Great Britain. He considered himself a Unitarian and celebrated the “common essentials of all religions” (discussed previously in this chapter). Typical of many representatives of the American Enlightenment, he thought of morality as the sum and substance of religion. Priestley was instrumental in many of the scientific investigations of his era, and his religious thought sought to present a view of Christianity as the culmination of the perennial religious experience. The eighteenth century, as a result of voyages of trade and exploration and the writings of Orientalists like Sir William Jones, was a time of direct discovery of Asian religious traditions. In 1799, Priestley published *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with Those of the Hindoos and Other Ancient Nations*. Perplexed by many of the beliefs and “austere” practices of Hindus, Priestley was interested in certain attributes of Hinduism that could be considered inferior to the greater moral perfection of the biblical traditions.

“As to the natural or moral disposition,” he wrote, “there is no intimation in the Scriptures or the writings of Moses, of women being inferior to men.” In this regard, Priestley was particularly bewildered by the Indian practice of *suttee*, in which a woman burned herself with her husband’s corpse as a ritual embodiment of her oneness with him in paradise. Priestley may be considered one of the forerunners of the study of comparative religions in the United States, a form of religious studies prevalent until well into the twentieth century. Those who used this method of study usually sought to compare other traditions with Christianity, imposing categories like God, creation, and salvation (all derived from Christian teaching) as standards for evaluating other cultures and traditions. This concept of comparative religion was highly suspect after World War II and was succeeded by what has come to be known as religious studies, which seek to investigate religious phenomena from the perspective of the cultural contexts in which they occur.

Many Americans had their curiosity roused at the World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893, when Swami Vivekananda began to speak of the ancient philosophical system called Vedanta, “the concluding portions of the Vedas.” These treatises encouraged an intellectual exploration of the implications of the basic notion of *Brahman-atman*. Vedantic Hinduism became highly speculative and philosophical, tending to ignore or downplay the significance of other forms of religious expression. Many Americans found solace and excitement in these ideas, joining Vedanta societies. In the 1920s, Paramahansa Yogananda arrived from India with an appeal to the American penchant for techniques and results. He was more interested in yogic practices than in Vedantic speculation. Basing his efforts on the ancient yoga sutras (texts having to do with principles) of Patanjali, Yogananda advocated ideas and techniques designed to help direct our lives toward a realization of

the divine joy and power that constitute our true selves. Thus began the work of the Self Realization Fellowship Centers, which represent another form of Hindu religiousness in the American setting.

The great Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, of which the *Bhagavad Gita* is a part, cites 270 places of sacred pilgrimage in ancient India. “Just as certain limbs of the body are purer than the others,” reads the great epic, “so are certain places on earth more sacred—some on account of their situation, others because of the association of saintly people with them, or the habitation of sages in them.” Pilgrimage became a prominent feature of Hindu life, translated to the United States as temples like the Sri Ganesha in Flushing, New York, and the Sri Venkateswara in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, were dedicated in the late 1970s.

There are probably three quarters of a million Hindus in the United States today. Of course, the effect of Hinduism in American religion and culture cannot be measured by a survey of membership, organizations, and movements. Our literature, art, and music have been influenced by Hindu concepts of ultimate reality and self-realization. Even some forms of Christian theology have been influenced by ideas and metaphors drawn from the scriptures and metaphysics of the Hindu world. Americans have always been very utilitarian, seeking schemes, techniques, and systems that will serve their desire for success and achievement. Hindu notions of self-realization are especially open to Americanization. The American is a positive thinker who assumes knowledge of the self is what it needs. To the Americans, self-realization means the acquisition of those qualities and techniques that promise wealth and success as ordinarily understood. The Hindu concept of self-realization, on the other hand, speaks finally of a self that is realized quite beyond our ordinary expectations and desires. Hinduism appeals to the American public religious conviction that there are “common essentials to all religions.” There is, after all, in Hinduism a tolerance of all paths that lead to the good. Hinduism is not one tradition, but many. Its unity is found in the conviction that beneath all diversity there is only one reality. Sometimes tolerance is less an affair of honoring another person and more a failure to achieve any perspective from which to discern or discriminate. What remains to be seen is whether the toleration and civility required of us in a radically pluralistic society has sacrificed the integrity necessary to the good life. We may, after all, respect another person, while discerning the error of his or her ideas and judgment.

### *Recommended Web Links*

- 1) A Hinduism Bibliography (Harvard) - <http://www.pluralism.org/resources/biblio/hinduism.php>
- 2) Hymns from the *Rig Veda* – [http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~wldciv/world\\_civ\\_reader/world\\_civ\\_reader\\_1/rig\\_veda.html](http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~wldciv/world_civ_reader/world_civ_reader_1/rig_veda.html)
- 3) The Gnostic Society Library’s introduction to Gnosticism, a type of “perennial philosophy,” may be accessed at: <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/nhlintro.html/>. Note that classical Hinduism is within this family of philosophy/religion.