

ONENESS IN HINDUISM

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Hinduism is not properly understood in the United States. Hinduism is negatively and stereotypically portrayed with an eye for sensationalism. This has been pointed out by Sulekha contributors such as Rajiv Malhotra, Sankrant Sanu, Yvette Rosser and Vishal Agarwal.

Described in this short article are essential features of Hinduism, written in a language for the common person. The concepts described here will help those who seek to explain Hinduism to American audiences. This article grew out of a speech the present author gave at the Unity Church of Christianity in Florida.

Introduction

Hinduism is among the world's oldest living traditions. The Hindu tradition goes back at least 5,000 years, perhaps even longer. Hymns composed in ancient times are recited even today. Example:

*Asato Ma Sad gamaya,
Tamaso Ma Jyotir gamaya
Mritor Ma Amritam gamaya
OM Shanti, Shanti, Shantih*

Lead me from the Unreal to the Real;
From Darkness to Light;
From Death to Immortality.
OM, Peace, Peace, Peace.

Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world after Christianity and Islam. The numbers below are approximate.

Christianity:	1.4 billion (Catholics 800 m, Protestants 400 m, Eastern Orthodox 200 m.)
Muslims:	1-1.2 billion
Hindus:	800 million
Buddhists:	400 million
Jews:	20 million

Hinduism survived 700 years of persecution on the hands of Islamic rulers and Christian missionaries. Under the British colonial rule (1757-1947), the Hindu religion was often debunked as a form of paganism and as being "primitive."

The long colonial rule also impacted the land economically. Put simply, when India was subjugated by Islam, she was the richest country in the world. When the British left in 1947, she was among the poorest.

A revival in Hinduism occurred during the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. Swami Dayananda, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo contributed to this renewal, among others. In spite of the negative portrayals of Hinduism in the media and textbooks, Hindu ideas are in resurgence and have a global reach. The so-called “New Thought” churches in the United States (such as Unity, Unitarianism, Science of Mind, Practical Christianity, Divine Science) derive their essential teachings from Vedanta. This will be illustrated at the end of the article.

SPIRITUAL TEACHINGS

GOD

Hindus worship God as One Reality, One Consciousness.

THE TRUTH IS ONE; SAGES NAME IT VARIOUSLY RIG-VEDA

Behind the diversity of existence, there is Unity; behind individual souls, there is the Self. All beings are unified in that One Self. The ultimate Reality is called Brahman (to grow, to expand). Guru Nanak described it as “Ek Omkar, Sat Naam”—One Reality, eternally True.

The ancient teachers (the Rishis and Gurus) taught that the One Reality and Consciousness is beyond number, gender and definitions. They taught that this reality is seen in the cave of one’s heart, and they described it as *Sat, Chit, Ananda*. Your own inner being, then, is an authentic path to enlightenment.

Hindu thought, based upon inner experience, avers that we can say little constructively about the reality unknowable to the mind: we can say that it exists, that it is conscious, and that its nature is delight

Sat: The one reality is beyond all time and space as a supreme transcendence. What it manifests, whether the macrocosm or the microcosm, is necessarily within its own being, much as an object floats in ethereal space. Sat is absolute, primal existence.

As a manifestation, we can say that the One Reality is self existent without a cause. It just is.

Chit: The One Reality is fully Conscious Power. It is not inert or dead matter. It possesses all knowledge about the past, present and future. It is the source of all knowledge. It is the eye of the eye and the ear of the ear.

The One Consciousness is not a passive reality. It is accompanied with Power. It is *Chit-Shakti*.

Ananda: The One Reality lacks nothing; it contains all and encompasses everything. As it lacks

nothing and possesses all, its nature is one of delight. The state of bliss is an integral part of the One Reality.

CREATION

God is complete in Himself/Herself. He/she lacks nothing. God is not compelled to create. God creates for joy. Creation is an act of Ananda. God fulfills himself in his creation, just as an artist fulfills himself in his creative work.

As God contains all, the creation is more accurately described as a manifestation. God becomes the creation. The creation is His *Lila*, a play. But we should not conclude that it is whimsical. There is a purpose in the cosmos which is both earnest and joyful.

God dwells in each article of his creation He is in us, and we are in Him. Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita that the universe is strung around his neck like pearls on a string.

By me is this entire universe pervaded. All things are in Me, and I in them.

Know that as the mighty wind blowing everywhere rests in the sky, all created beings rest in Me.

I am the Father, the Mother, the Supporter and the Grandsire of the universe.
(BG 9:4, 6, 17)

God is not diminished by his creation. He is full and complete before creation and full and complete after creation. A Sanskrit verse says:

*Om Purnamadah Purnamidam
Purnat purnam udacyate
Purnasya purnamadaya
Purnameva vasisyate*

Om. That (God) is complete. This (Creation) is complete.
From the complete springs forth the complete.
If the complete is taken from the complete, the complete remains.

ONENESS

A fundamental Hindu principle is one of Unity of all created things. Behind diversity, there is unity. Behind individual souls, there is the Self, one with the Divine.

Not only human life but all created life including animal life is a unity. We spring from one source. Differences and divisions are unreal. The belief that we originate from one common source has ethical implications: it leads to a kinder and a gentler world.

By its very nature, Hinduism is not a religion of a chosen people or an appointed community. It rejects the approach which divides humanity into believers and non-believers, kafirs and heathens. It regards such divisions as spiritually untenable. It expresses man's seeking for truth; therefore, it belongs to all.

Hinduism's reach is not limited to humanity; its compassion reaches out to all, human and animal. It teaches compassion for all beings, on all planes.

Vegetarianism. Modern science perceives man as having evolved from animals. Hindu Dharma sees God and the power and presence of God reflected in animals. The Hindu perceives all life to be manifested from one source, and hence all life is sacred. Widespread vegetarianism among Hindus is a practical expression of this belief in the oneness of all life. Vegetarianism grows from ethical and moral considerations.

NO ROOM FOR DEVIL. God is *Ekam Sat, Advityam*--- One Truth, without a Second. There is no room for the existence of Devil or Satan. There is only one power and one presence in the universe, God the Omnipotent.

Hinduism teaches *Advaita*, non-dualism. It says God alone is. This teaching is different from the teaching of "only one god." The concept of "god alone" is different from the concept of "the only god."

Christian and Islamic thought admits of a power co-equal with God, the Devil or Satan. The Satan is believed to be the trickster and a tempter; he is ever ready to delude the Christian flock.

But if God is all powerful, it is not rational to posit a malevolent power co-equal with God. The Abrahamic religions claim that God is both all good and all powerful. But this cannot be. If God allows evil, then He is not all good. On the other hand, if God is unable to remove the existence of evil, then He is not all powerful.

Is Creation Accidental? Material scientists would have us believe that creation is an accident or the work of chance. Vedanta teaches that creation is the work of a Mighty hand. It is not a machine that somehow got started without purpose or goal. Creation is not an "illusion" or Maya. It is not a dream. It carries in itself the Word of God. In the words of Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), the 20th century Indian poet and mystic:

This world was not made with random bricks of chance
A blind god is not destiny's architect,
A conscious power has drawn the plan of life,
There is meaning in each curve and line.

Jesus said a similar thing when he declared, "Your very hair are numbered."

EVOLUTION

Hinduism accepts the notion of evolution. Existence is not a finished product. God did not create the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Existence is a Truth of things unfolding by a gradual process of evolution. "The Truth of Existence is its Becoming" -- Sri Aurobindo.

Evolution is not the evolution of matter but of consciousness. Consciousness is the fundamental thing. Consciousness is the life force, the energy, the motion that creates everything in the universe, from the microcosm (the smallest) to the macrocosm (the largest). There is consciousness in matter, for example in the movement of electrons and protons within the atomic structure. The vegetable kingdom of trees and plants exhibits a certain degree of consciousness. Consciousness evolves into life in the animal. The mental plane in man is the highest expression of consciousness presently. But evolution does not end with Mind. There is the 'Higher Mind.' In deep contemplation, Rishis reach the higher mind.

Man. Hinduism has the noblest, the most sublime conception of man. Man has a Divine origin. All of us come from God. There is the spark of the Divine at the very core of our being.

Man is invested with a soul, called the Atman in Sanskrit. Atman is a spark of the Divine, it is a ray of the all-bright Sun; it is a drop from the celestial ocean. There is no such thing as death for the soul. Being a spark of the divine, the soul is immortal. That which is eternal cannot cease to be. When we die, it is the body that dies, not the soul.

In this view, man has a middle ranking, above the animals but below the gods. Man is a transitional being. He is not a finished product. He is destined to grow into a more complete being, just as a seed is destined to grow into a mighty tree.

In the English language the term "man" is related to "manual," meaning one's ability to work with hands. In Sanskrit, the ancient language of India, man is called "manush," which means "to think." Man is thus a thinking animal. Man in Sanskrit is also called "Purusha," a witness soul.

The Hindu greeting "Namaste" acknowledges divinity in each other.

Sri Aurobindo sings in *Savitri*, Canto 4:

A deathbound littleness is not all we are:
Immortal our forgotten vastnesses
Await discovery in our summit selves;
Unmeasured breadths and depths of being are ours.

Faith. Hinduism teaches that man is the architect of his own life. Man is shaped according to his Faith, his deepest aspirations, and his yearning. Man becomes what he thinks, desires, and aspires to.

In this view, the Spirit exists prior to Matter. If you wish to change your life, you have first to change your consciousness. Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) writes:

The erring race of human beings dreams always of perfecting their environment by the machinery of government and society; but it is only by the perfection of the soul within that the outer environment can be perfected. What thou art within, that outside thee thou shall enjoy; no machinery can rescue thee from the law of thy being.

On this path there is no discontinuity, no break. There is no loss of effort. Even a little bit of faith protects a man from great fear (BG, 2:40).

Ignorance. Even though man is made in the image of God, this knowledge is veiled. Man forgets his Divine origin. This is *Maya*, illusion. In Hinduism, the cardinal problem of humanity is Ignorance, with a capital 'I'. Once I heard a Tampa Unity Minister say: "Human beings are angels with amnesia." This statement by a Unity Minister gives an apt description of the Hindu view of the nature of the problem. Ignorance is removed by going within through meditation and contemplation. It is a personal effort. The Guru can show the way. Several methods or Yogas are developed for self-discovery.

The Hindu prays for light of knowledge: Lead me from the Unreal to the Real; lead me from Darkness to Light.

In Christianity and Islam, the two Semitic religions, man's problem is "Sin." Sin consists in disobedience to God's commandments. On account of the sin of disobedience, man is consigned to Hell in eternity. Hence man needs a Savior.

The aim of yoga is self-realization—to make real the Self.

REBIRTH AND KARMA

The central fact is evolution of consciousness in nature from matter to life, from life to mind, and from mind to Higher mind. If evolution of consciousness is granted as a central fact, then rebirth is a logical necessity. The soul grows through successive births. Perfection is not achieved in the course of a single life-time.

Evidence of rebirth or re-incarnation is not lacking. At least half of humanity believes in re-incarnation. This includes majority of the people in India, China, Japan, and countries of Southeast Asia (Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, parts of Indonesia, etc.). It is also worth noting that pre-Christian Celtic people of Europe believed in re-incarnation. They believed that the soul is permanent and that it does not die when the body dies. The belief in a single life and a single judgment is a Christian doctrine.

Karma. Karma is the theory of Divine or cosmic justice. Good deeds produce good Karma, and bad deeds produce bad Karma. One's present station in life is the result of Karma earned in previous life or lives. Karma explains high and low birth. It offers a reasonable explanation for misfortune. It impels people to do well. Doing well has instrumental value.

Why don't we remember our past lives? What is reborn is the soul, not the outer personality. Memory is a function of the outer personality. The soul carries with it the essence of the life's experience as it moves to a new birth.

Hindu Teachers. The Hindu teacher is a seer, a Rishi, the person who sees, the one who is a witness to the Truth. The teacher is also called a Guru—one who removes the weight of darkness. The representative figure of Hinduism is not the missionary, or a crusader, as in Christianity, or a martyr as in Islam.

Only those who are good, and are men of knowledge and wisdom are regarded as "saints." The characteristic preaching mode of a Hindu teacher (this is true of Buddhist teachers also) is a seated position, in calmness and serenity. He does not prance on the stage. He is not a sales person. He does not use threats of life in Hell to drive home his point.

Hindu Tolerance. By its very nature Hinduism is pluralistic and tolerant of diversity. Hinduism is not organized as a national church. It has no Pope or Ayatollah who exercises supreme religious authority. Hinduism is decentralized and is not hierarchical.

The decentralization is both a curse and a blessing. Decentralization led to extreme diversity and variety. On the other hand, Hinduism survived the Muslim onslaught (1200-1700) because it was decentralized. Muslim rulers could not eliminate Hinduism by killing its head.

Hinduism is not dogmatic. It preaches search for the Truth, not a particular belief system. Gautam Buddha was a critic of Hinduism of his times. He lived and taught up to the ripe age of 80. Other critics of Hinduism such as Sikh Founder Guru Nanak and Jain Founder Lord Mahavira lived full lives and taught without fear of being persecuted. Christianity and Judaism have existed in a predominant Hindu India for 2,000 years without being persecuted.

Pluralism and tolerance of diversity are built into Hindu theology. India's long history is a testimony to its tolerance of religious diversity. Christianity came to India with St. Thomas in the first century A.D., long before it became popular in the West. Judaism came to India after the Jewish temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. and the Jews were expelled from their homeland. In a recent book titled *Who Are the Jews of India?* (University of California Press, 2000), author Nathan Katz observes that India is the only country where the Jews were not persecuted. He describes three Jewish communities that have existed in India for centuries. "The Indian chapter is one of the happiest of the Jewish Diaspora." p. 4.

In the 7th century, Zoroastrians or Parsees from Iran (Persia) entered India to flee Islamic conquest. The Parsees are an affluent community in the city of Bombay in Western India without a sense of having been persecuted. Among the richest business families in India are the Parsees (for example, the Tata family controls a huge industrial empire). Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the powerful Prime Minister of India, was married to Feroze Gandhi, a Parsee (no relation to Mahatma Gandhi).

Hinduism and Other Earth-Based Traditions

Hinduism has much in common with other earth based traditions such as Native Americans, Taoists, Pythagoreans, Egyptians and Shintoists. It sees Divinity residing in Nature, in the hills, on the mountain tops, in the sacred rivers and in the vast ocean. As in other earth-based traditions, placers of pilgrimage are often on hill tops (Kedarnath, Badrinath), ocean fronts (Rameshwaram), forests (Vrindaban), and river banks (Varanasi).

Many of the native and earth-based traditions were obliterated under Christian and Islamic pressure. Examples of cultural groups that have disappeared include: the European Celts, the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Zoroastrians and the Native Americans. The Communists in China are now engaged in destroying Buddhism in Tibet and Confucianism and Taoism within the Chinese mainland. Hinduism is distinguished by the fact that it survived extreme persecution from monotheistic ideologies.

The “New Thought” Movement

As I said at the beginning, Hinduism is in resurgence today. Hindu spiritual teachings have a global reach. The New Thought churches in the United States (Unity, Unitarianism, Science of Mind, Practical Christianity, Temple of the Universe, Divine Science and others) derive a large part of their theology from Hinduism and Vedanta. Chanting and meditation are now commonly incorporated in their religious services.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau are generally regarded as the founding figures of the so-called “New Thought” movement in the United States. They spearheaded the ‘Transcendalist’ movement in the 1830s and 1840s. Many of their ideas were derived from Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita.

Emerson:

‘In all nations there are minds which incline to dwell in the conception of the fundamental Unity. This tendency finds its highest expression in the religious writings of the East, and chiefly in the Indian Scriptures, in the Vedas, the Bhagavat Gita, and the Vishnu Purana.’ . . .

“I owed a magnificent day to the Bhagavat-Gita. It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us.”

Thoreau:

“In the morning I bathe my Intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavad-gita, in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial.”

The Unity Church of Christianity is a New-Thought church. It was founded by Charles and

Myrtle Fillmore in the 1880s. I attend Unity Church Sunday services. Each of the following Unity statements of truth recited at the Church finds its source in Hindu teachings.

1. God is absolute good, everywhere present.
2. Every human being has a spark of divinity within, the Christ Spirit within. Our essence is of God, and therefore human beings are inherently good.
3. As human beings we create our experiences by the activity of our thoughts. Everything that shows up in our lives has its beginning in thought.
4. Prayer and meditation is the best way we can heighten our connection with God.
5. Knowing and understanding Unity principles is not enough—we must also live the truth that we know.

The close association between Hindu spiritual teachings and the Unity principles is quite clear. Be it noted that Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, the founders of the Unity Church, adopted a vegetarian diet. The Church headquarters at Unity Village in Kansas City serves only vegetarian meals. This is in keeping with Hindu veneration for all life.

Sanatan Dharma is not a relic of the past. The Vedic teachings have relevance for modern age.

Satyameva Jayate. Truth verily wins.

Additional Reading

An insightful book on these and related topics is Ram Swarup's *On Hinduism: Reviews and Reflections*, New Delhi: Voice of India, 2000.