

WHY I AM NOT A HINDU

Yes, like so many others, I profess a love for the Beatles. I'm not a fan of all their work, but I'm amazed at their output, both as a band and as individuals. My fascination with their work was doubly engaged when I became aware of George Harrison's legal battles over his song, *My Sweet Lord*.

The song was on his 1970 album *All Things Must Pass*. While he hesitated putting the song on the album, it became a worldwide hit, quickly rising to number one on charts in the U.K., the U.S., and elsewhere. It was the first number one single of any of the ex-Beatles.

My legal interest arose from the suit filed against Harrison for copyright infringement. It was asserted that the melody had co-opted elements from a song 7 years earlier, *He's So Fine*, written by Ronnie Mack and made popular by the Chiffons. Harrison's defense included a claim that the Christian song *O Happy Day* was his melodic inspiration. *O Happy Day* was no longer under copyright, so it was legal for Harrison to use aspects of that melody.

The verdict came in, and Harrison was found guilty of subconsciously plagiarizing from *He's So Fine*. The verdict carries a layer of irony. *My Sweet Lord* is an homage to the Hindu faith, a faith with the hallmark of assimilating other faiths. In other words, Harrison wrote a song that incorporated the melody from another song, just as his faith he sang to incorporates other belief systems.

There is a second layer of irony found if one dissects *My Sweet Lord* lyrically and considers the message. The song is a Hindu praise and prayer song to the god Krishna. Laced in the song are prayers from the *Vedas*, Hindu scriptures. The song also contains the Hebrew/Christian refrain "hallelujah," a fitting merge of sorts into the syncretism of the Hindu mindset.

We don't often use the word "syncretism" so it is useful to define it. Oxford University Press defines it as "the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought." Such is much of Hinduism, as I will discuss in more detail below. It is why it is hard to define Hinduism. The lack of structure, creed, or settled orthodoxy of Hinduism allows the faith to assimilate almost any worldview or philosophy. You will find practicing Hindus who are atheists, Hindus who believe in One god, Hindus who believe in three gods, Hindus who believe in millions of gods (literally), Hindus who believe in One god who is many gods, and so much more.

In Hindu thought, all different philosophies ultimately lead to the same place, so the religion is able to embrace almost anything. Such an approach is inviting for many. The

entertainers Julia Roberts, George Harrison, Russell Brand, and Jerry Garcia, the football player Ricky Williams, and the writer J.D. Salinger all embraced some version of Hinduism.

Yet it is this approach that stops me in my tracks. I can't be a Hindu. I think truth is more determined and certain, and my truth can't fold into a faith that can also embrace ideas diametrically opposed to those I believe right. It is trying to put a square peg into a round hole. In other words, if Jesus Christ was the God of Abraham incarnated, and if that God said, he alone was God, then I can't embrace a system that allows that alongside other believes that there are millions of gods, or that there is no god. In my rational mind, one needs to be right. Or as my friend David Fleming put it, "If you want to drive from Houston to Dallas, take Interstate 45. I-10 won't get you there, as much as you might like it to. All roads don't lead to the same destination.

WHAT IS HINDUISM?

One might think this is an easy question to answer, but it isn't.

The word "Hindu" stems from a geographical term of those beyond the Indus River. In other words, those who live in what we term India (and part of modern Pakistan and Nepal). For this reason, Hindu is closely tied to the ancient *Sanskrit* language, the language of the ancients from that region. While Hindu is a worldwide religion, it is still concentrated in India and Nepal.

For thousands of years, the Hindu faith existed but was not called "Hindu." That term has just come about in the last thousand years, and most believe it at first referred to a people, not a faith. To the extent we examine Hinduism as the faith of a Hindu people, it is not surprising to see it morphing and changing over the last 5,000 years.

One person's Hindu beliefs can be quite different than another's, even contradictory. There is no set of beliefs or orthodoxy, no national or international structure or hierarchy, no clear set of Scriptures, and no founder. It is almost open season on what one believes when claiming to be a Hindu. In the words of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964),

Hinduism, as a faith, is vague, amorphous, many-sided, all things to all men. It is hardly possible to define it, or indeed to say definitely whether it is a religion or not, in the usual sense of the word. In its present form, and even in the past, it embraces many beliefs and practices, from the highest to the lowest, often opposed to or contradicting each other.¹

¹ Nehru, Jawaharlal, *The Discovery of India* (Oxford Univ. Press 1985), at 75.

To a real extent, one must deal with generalities in discussing Hinduism, being cautious about making absolute statements. That does not leave one unable to discuss the faith, however, for the very nature of a religion that can be all things to all people speaks of a core tenet worthy of inspection. There are also a number of general beliefs that seem common to the great majority of the Hindu faithful. Those are the beliefs we consider here:

Hinduism– Practice Trumps Belief

There is a *Sanskrit* word “dharma.”² The term as used in Hinduism has a wide range of meaning. It references truth, order, law, duty, and even religion. It references the way things are as well as the way things should be.³ Adhering to Dharma is not a question of what one believes. It is a question of how one behaves.

One striking feature of Hinduism is that practice takes precedence over belief. What a Hindu does is more important than what a Hindu believes. Hinduism is not creedal. Adherence to *dharma* is therefore not an acceptance of certain beliefs, but the practice or performance of certain duties.⁴

In the Introduction to a book on a theology of religions, Max Muller explained this, contrasting it to Christian faith. Notable Dr. Muller was a professor in Sanskrit for 40 years at the University of Oxford, and devoted his life to studying the holy writings of Hinduism (and other related religious systems), giving an extra measure of depth to his understanding.

I ventured to tell this gathering what I have found to be the one basic note, the single chord of all these holy books ... the one basic note or chord that runs through all of them is salvation by works. They all teach that salvation must be bought and that your own works and merits must be the purchase price. Our own Bible, *our* sacred book from the East, is from start to finish a protest against this doctrine.⁵

This is why there can be so many views of God in Hinduism. One, three, millions, or none, the viewpoint on God doesn't matter as much as the focus on what you are doing.

² In the television series, *Lost*, the “Dharma Initiative” used the Sanskrit word as the title of a research group/project that were free thinkers working for some goal I could never quite figure out!

³ Johnson, W. J., *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, (Oxford University Press 2009), at 102-103.

⁴ Flood, Gavin, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, (Cambridge University Press 1996), at 12.

⁵ From the introduction to Strange, Daniel, *Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock – A Theology of Religions*, (Zondervan 2014).

Hinduism – Gods

Having said that practice trumps belief, and noting the vast variance among Hindu beliefs on God, there is still some that should be said about the more common beliefs in God/gods.

To my study and understanding, the Hindu beliefs in the gods reminds me a bit of a buffet at a local “Middle Eastern” restaurant. I put “Middle Eastern” in quotation marks because while that is the claim and theme of the restaurant, the food on the buffet exceeds what I would classify as Middle Eastern. It is as if the restaurant started as Middle Eastern, but then as someone suggested another food would meet the public taste, it was added. Then another. Then another. Eventually this “Middle Eastern” buffet had pizza, Chinese food, typical American fair, and more. It enabled the customer to pick whatever the customer wanted, walking away with quite the assortment.

In the same way, Hinduism has developed a customer centered set of options on the gods. Over the 5,000 years of Indian religion that fed the current concepts labeled Hinduism (remember that term has only been used for the last 1,000 years in a religious system that has developed over 5,000 years), the views on the gods has been supplemented more than the buffet options at my local restaurant.

It seems an early view of the gods consisted of a trinity of sorts. Hindu mythology tells of a creator god called “*Brahmā*” (Sanskrit for “grandfather”).⁶ He existed along with “*Visnu*,” who is the preserver god and “*Siva*,” the destroying god. *Brahmā* is not often worshipped, with just a handful of temples dedicated to him in India. Johnson attributes the lack of worship to *Brahmā*’s inability to “save” people.⁷ Notably, “salvation” in the Hindu mindset means an eventual absorption into the absolute or universal soul. (More on that in the section on reincarnation below.) *Brahmā* confers the gift of immortality. He is the reason for the unending soul, but cannot liberate humanity from its existence as humanity.

The trinity (called “*trimūrti*”) itself is not generally a theological concept, but is more an artistic idea that helps express a Hindu idea of tension between finding a unity in the midst of great diversity. There is a Hindu discussion point of the tension between one and the many. In my buffet illustration, it might be the tension between being “food” or “lunch” and being chicken, spaghetti, rice, or borsch.

The later feature of the gods in Hinduism typical figures a countless number of gods. There are often family gods, village gods, and more. When you figure that there are likely 700 million Hindus in India and Nepal alone, that can constitute a lot of gods! K.V. Paul Pillai

⁶ *Brahmā* is not to be confused with other similar words like *brahman*, which can be a type of priest or a priestly ritual, or a power that underlies the universe connecting the various particulars into a whole.

⁷ Flood, at 61-2.

was reared a Hindu, and took his faith seriously, memorizing many mantras and seeking to live holy before the gods. But in college (in the mid-1900's), Pillai's life took a turn and he became a Christian, living the rest of his life as a missionary and teacher of Christianity in India. In his book, *India's Search for the Unknown Christ*, Pillai explained it this way:

For the common man God meant everything to every man, and was at the same time, beyond the grasp of every man. The only alternative for him was to find God in the own mind. This he did, and thus he came to the beginning of millions of gods each in relation to the needs and aspirations of different peoples and different cultures. In other words, God became the product of the fertile imagination of different people in different situations in life. Since there was no revealed God the only alternative for each tribe and each culture was to create a god of its own. So, each man created a god, each in his own image. This is why in Indian religions, there is a popular belief that all religions are the same.⁸

This feeds my analogy of the buffet offering of the Hindu faith. When someone found another tasty or attractive food, it was simply added to the buffet. You pick what you want, and if you search long enough, are almost always able to find something tasty.

Hinduism – Karma, Reincarnation, and Liberation

Deep in the psyche of Hinduism is the thought that life in this world, at least for the masses, is characterized by suffering. Hunger, disease, social turmoil, and the struggle for survival is a historical fact for many. The Hindu explanation for this suffering is rooted in the ideas of Karma, of reincarnation, and the goal of liberation. These three terms and ideas are closely related. They are an interwoven cycle that speak to each person's place and station in the current life, as well as the goal and motivator for living holy and virtuous.

The teaching centers on the idea of "*karma*," a Sanskrit word for an act or action. The law of karma is a Hindu explanation for why there is birth and why there is suffering. We suffer because of our bad acts, in this life or in a prior life. Karma tracks people through each of their embodiments or incarnations. Through virtuous living, people can better ensure a station in the next life that has less suffering than the last.⁹

⁸ Pillai, K.V. Paul, *India's Search for the Unknown Christ*, (Fazl Publishers – New Delhi 1979), at 18.

⁹ This should not be confused with the Christian concept of being "born again" because the Hindu idea is a full human death that releases the soul to come back as a new living entity. Some Hindu writers and thinkers who try to assimilate Christian teaching into Hinduism will use the words of Jesus in John 3 that one must be "born again" as an indicator of the need to work through Hindu's reincarnation process to reach a point of liberation. See, e.g., Richard Alpert's work *Be Here Now* published under his Hindu name Baba Ram Dass.

Here we also understand the traditional thinking behind the Hindu “caste” system. Although the word “caste” is actually of Portuguese origin, it is used more commonly, especially in the West, to reference one’s “*jati*” or position in society assigned by birth. This provided a structure to India’s society that worked quite well for the higher classes! The teaching centered on one being assigned a position based upon the karma or deeds of one in a prior existence. Thus, the higher classes were “purer” and were assigned those positions of less suffering because of their moral achievements in an earlier life, while those in the lower classes who had greater suffering were paying for their moral pollution in prior existences. Some lower classes were servants to the higher caste. Below the servant class were caste levels or groupings that dealt with more base jobs like laundry or barbering. Below that caste were an untouchable group of people holding the jobs of handling sewage, garbage, disposing of dead bodies, etc.

This caste system reinforced a stratified society where the poor were content with being poor, after all, it was their earned lot in life. Should the poor be accepting of their “polluted” status, and live a good, ethical life, then in their rebirth, they might move up in the caste system. Alternatively, should one rebel or seek to live outside their caste, they might end up in their next embodiment even worse off, perhaps in one of the hells thought to exist.

The goal, or “salvation” in Hindu thought is to escape the cycle of rebirth and the suffering of this life through eventual liberation (*mukti*) into the absolute or universal soul. One finds this liberation by achieving a level of goodness, hence the earlier quoted explanation of Dr. Muller that in Hindu thought, “salvation must be bought and that your own works and merits must be the purchase price.”

What this liberation is in reality depends on what Hindu belief wants holds. For the atheist, it might mean a cessation of existence altogether. For those who ascribe a belief in gods (or a God), it might mean some aspect of absorption into a cosmic wholeness or a personal relationship with the gods/God. George Harrison’s song *My Sweet Lord* speaks to this in his repeated lines, “I really want to see you... really want to be with you... but it takes so long, My Lord.”

MY ISSUES WITH HINDUISM

I can’t find a place for me in the “all embracing bosom of Hinduism.” Mohandas Gandhi, typically known by the honorific title of “Mahatma” meaning “venerable,” wrote,

My Hinduism is not sectarian. It includes all that I know to be the best in Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism... Truth is my religion.¹⁰

¹⁰ Kamath, M. V., *Gandhi, a Spiritual Journey*, (Indus Source Books 2007), at 162, quoting Gandhi from his 1921 work, *Young India*.

But that is where I find my issue. For me truth can be fairly absolute. Two plus two equals four, at least in the sense that if I have two apples, and you give me two more, I then have four. I don't find truth in a system that allows me to believe just about anything I wish, while also allowing you to embrace just about anything you wish, especially when I examine the beliefs of, for example, the Christian faith. (Though the same might be said if I embraced the Muslim or traditional Jewish faith. Under any of those belief systems, the syncretism of Hindu thought falls flat.)

With great respect for Gandhi, I must say that the core, and "best," of the Christian faith cannot be found in Hinduism without stripping Hinduism of its distinctive features. Consider several features of Hinduism set out earlier.

Practice versus Belief
Karma, Reincarnation, and Liberation

In Hinduism, practice trumps belief. What one believes takes a backseat to what one does. Everyone is accountable in this life and the next for what she or he does. Whether one believes in God or not, the key is what one does. This sets the stage for each successive life until one finally gets it right enough for liberation.

Not so Christianity. In Christian thought, there is a God of such supreme purity and goodness that no one will ever "get it right." One could live an infinite number of lives, and one would still find an act of selfishness, a deception or lie, a rebellious moment, a sin of one sort or another. No one is ever going to live perfect, and nothing less than purity or perfection will dwell in harmony with the perfect God.

That does not leave a permanent gulf between God and humanity, however. Because in Christian belief, the perfect God became incarnate on this earth as a human and payed the karmic price for all sin. God became the human perfection no one else could ever be. There is a righteousness or purity that comes to anyone who embraces that truth through belief and trust, rather than through achieved goodness or merit. In other words, there is a very real way that you and I are able to substitute the actions of Jesus Christ for our own.

This substitution means that the karmic price of death for our own sins is accorded in the death of Christ. His death substitutes for our own because he had no personal sins which needed to incur such a penalty as death. Similarly, the righteousness that Jesus had, the perfect purity, is also substituted for our unrighteousness.

The key to this substitution is one of entreaty or trust. God stands ready to substitute the actions and justice of the incarnate God (Jesus Christ) for our own inadequacies, but his substitution is based on our willingness to accede to it. We might say, it is there for the

taking! We are to embrace it and take it by accepting it. We simply tell God, “Yes!” The Christian thought is that once one accepts God’s righteousness, then a final rebirth of sorts occurs. It is one where we begin changing, turning from sin and rebellion to a holy and righteous life, but not to earn ourselves a better placement in our next embodiment. Instead, it proceeds from the effects of having the Spirit of God dwell within us.

Jesus set this teaching out plainly in his conversation with a Jewish leader named Nicodemus. It is in this sense that Jesus said,

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God (Jn. 3:3).

Nicodemus was unable to comprehend exactly what Jesus meant, so Jesus explained it further.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (Jn. 3:16).

The Greek word translated “believes” (pisteuō – πιστεύω) means more than a simple mental assent. It includes a trust or conviction that stirs one to action.

Christian thought gives structure to the world as a creation of God, it gives meaning to humanity as creations in the image of God, which also explains why we are morality-based creatures. (God is a moral or ethical being.) Christianity explains the darkness that has invaded everyone’s thoughts and actions in that we have fallen from the Supreme goodness of God and become subject to evil or sinfulness. Christian thought explains our drive to the Divine because we were made to be in relationship to God, yet sin has become an impediment to that fellowship. The impediment of sin was removed, however, by the sacrifice of Christ. In that, we find a restoration of our relationship with God, with the assurance that after this one limited human existence, we will find an eternity in a purified state of fellowship with God.

There is no room for that Christian view to exit within Hinduism. If the Christian view is right, it is exclusively right. In the words of Jesus,

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (Jn. 14:6).

This claim demands that I confront whether or not it is true. It is no longer adequate for me to say, “Well, you might think that true, but I think this is true, and after all, each ends up in the same place.” Nor is it adequate for me to say, Well, what really matters is how we live and how we treat each other.” Christianity makes a dramatically different claim. I need to decide which is true.

The Sourcing of Hinduism

One of the core reasons I am not a Hindu is because I can see and understand where Hinduism came from. Hinduism makes sense to me both as to where it came from, how it was sustained, and how it grew and morphed into what it is today. All of this makes sense to me from within the Christian worldview I hold. In other words, my Christian teaching explains to me the source of development of Hinduism.

Jewish and Christian Scriptures teach that God has revealed truth to humanity through what we call the Bible (Old Testament for Jews, Old and New Testaments for Christians). In that revelation are teachings about God, ourselves, and nature. Because there is revelation on these things, we have certain insights that drive our discussions, debates, and musings. In Hindu thought, there is no revelation from the gods, even though there are holy musings and writings found in various “scriptures.” (There is no agreed set of Scriptures, and various writings are accorded various levels of holiness depending upon the Hindu sect.) As a result, people are left to figure out God/gods, the self, and nature through observation and thought.

The Jewish rabbi and Christian teacher Paul explained that since humanity was made in God’s image, and since the world is a creation of God as well, that everyone has a certain access and insight into God, nature and ourselves by virtue of the created order. There is a level of natural revelation apart from the verbal revelation of the Bible, what Paul would call the “oracles of God” (Rom. 3:2). Paul wrote of this natural revelation in his letter to the Romans explaining,

what can be known about God is plain [lit. “open to general observation”] to them, because God has shown it [lit. “made it open to general observation”] to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived [lit. “understood based on careful consideration”], ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things (Rom. 1:19-23).

There is true insight into God, insight into the nature of people, and insight into nature for those who wish to think and consider it. But without revelation in more specific manner, people struggle to derive a fuller measure of accuracy. So it is with Hinduism.

Without the revelation of Scripture, Hinduism, through careful thought of millennia of wise people, has found layers of truth combined with layers of missing thought. So, we can see in Hinduism the idea of one God, and the idea of multiple gods. Hindu thought recognized that there must be something beyond humanity that infuses our reality with a greater meaning. Yet Hinduism missed the God who not only created, but took an interest in that creation and its creatures, not receiving God’s revelation of such. Hinduism was

left to make gods in humanity's image, rather than understanding humanity as made in God's image.

Similarly, Hinduism was able to understand that there is a cosmic reality to good deeds begetting goodness while bad deeds earn punishment. Hinduism was missing the fuller revelation of the moral God that gave definition to good and evil, and instilled in humanity the moral hardwiring.

I also find the human selfish desires and sin being expressed in the development of the caste system and other practices not delved into in this brief treatment (widow-burning¹¹, etc.). Historic India and much of the East had a difficult existence with rampant suffering, especially in the lower classes. The caste system set up a belief that kept the lower classes subservient and placed in their lower statuses because it was "earned," and failure to live within those boundaries would result in even a worse life next time. Meanwhile, the higher classes were esteemed, and upheld, rather than overthrown, because acts of holiness and goodness in earlier lives justified such a placement. This was a handy system for sustaining the ease of the well-off while keeping the less fortunate "in their place."

If I were a Hindu, and if I were confronted by the Christian truth, I would be in a quandary. I would see the sense in Christianity, and want to embrace it. Yet Christianity (and Islam and Judaism) are arguably the only faiths I could not embrace and maintain my Hinduism. So, I must ask myself, does Christianity best explain the human condition or does one of the other faiths? For me, Hinduism doesn't do it. It is a religion of vagaries that makes sense once one considers the revelation that produced Judaism and Christianity.

CONCLUSION

I do like the song *My Sweet Lord*. The melody, the rhythm, the instrumentation (great slide guitar; and luscious 12-string guitars), all hook me into the song. My problem are the lyrics. I find them coming short of what I know. Harrison speaks of "wanting" to know and see God, when I believe God has made himself known. Harrison "really wants" to be with God, when God stands at the door of our hearts ready to come in. Harrison thinks this will "take so long" when it can not only happen in this life, but happen *now* – at any moment one chooses to put their trust in God's work through Jesus.

Then the chanting prayers of Harrison¹² can become chanting prayers of praise to God and Jesus. Harrison's vedic prayers to the triune gods of Hindu thought (Brahma, Vishnu, and

¹¹ Known as "*sati*," holy women who were faithfully devoted to their husbands would throw themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands in hopes of helping the husband's karma in the next life. See generally, Johnson at 293.

¹² Harrison sang, to Krishna, a composite god who is frequently used in Hindu musical compositions.

Maheshwara – another name for Shiva) can become prayers to the revealed God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

With the assistance of Phil Keaggy, I rewrote the lyrics of Harrison’s monumental song to purify the Hindu elements and make it a Christian song. Phil played all the instruments, sang the vocals, and produced a gem! Should you wish to hear this alternate version, click [here](#).

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:22-23).*

Paul was evangelizing in Athens. While Paul normally went into synagogues and spoke to those already knowledgeable about the God of Abraham and the anticipated Messiah, that was not the case in Athens. Among those polytheists, Paul grabbed the fact that their best thinkers knew they were still in the dark about the ultimate truth of the gods. So much so, that they had manufactured an altar to the “unknown god.” Paul used that opportunity to explain to them the God who revealed himself through the history of Abraham’s seed. Paul instructed them in the way of God. I am appreciative of that story. I want to grow in my knowledge of God, and I want to share that with others.

2. *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn. 14:6).*

Truth is important. Whether we want to know if something is toxic physically or spiritually, it is important that we know the truth. All roads do not lead to the same place, and I want to be on the right road.

3. *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places...to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:3, 6).*

I like Harrison’s call to worship. We are a people made to worship God. With the insight given through Scripture, I will sing my praise to the God who secured my destiny through the substitutionary work of Christ! Praise God!