

A Brief Introduction to Hinduism

By design, I began writing this chapter in a particularly auspicious place: sitting on the roof of my hotel in Varanasi, India, looking out over the Ganges River.



Figure 1.1. On the banks of the Ganges, Varanasi, India, March 2012

The city of Varanasi (formerly called Benares) is one of the holiest cities in India, believed to have been founded by the god Shiva. It is sanctified by its proximity to the river Ganges, which is worshiped as a goddess who has the power both to purify sins and release a soul from the cycle of birth and death.

Millions and millions of pilgrims come here every year to bathe in the purifying waters, to die and be cremated on the banks of the river, and to worship in the temples scattered throughout the city. Though certainly touched by modernity, Varanasi continues to present an ancient face of Hinduism; and it was there, walking among sadhus, beggars, and pilgrims, that I began to think about how to introduce Hinduism to Christians. It is no easy task.

Of the five major world religions (Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam), it is certainly the case that Hinduism is both the least known and the least experienced by most Americans. This state of ignorance cannot continue, however, as the Hindu population both in the United States and worldwide continues to grow. Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world, behind Christianity and Islam. The majority of Hindus are located in India (95 percent, according to one source¹) and Nepal, a secular state though constitutionally Hindu, but Hinduism is on the rise in the United States as well, primarily due to immigration. According to the Hindu American Foundation, “From 1,700 people in 1900, the Hindu population in America grew to approximately 387,000 by 1980 and 1.1 million in 1997. As of 2008, the estimated U.S. population of Hindus of Indian origin is approximately 2.29 million (mainly of Indian and Indo-Caribbean descent). Estimates are that there may also be as many as 1 million practicing American Hindus, not of Indian origin, in the U.S.”² In addition, the website for Diana Eck’s well-regarded Pluralism Project (based at Harvard University) lists 723 Hindu temples and centers in the United States, and notes that there is a Hindu center and/or temple in every state, with the exception of Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Vermont.³

HINDUISM: A WAY OF LIFE, NOT A CREED

Of all the major world religions discussed in this book, in my view, Hinduism is the most difficult for Christians to engage with and understand. Partly this is because the basic assumptions Christians make about what a religion is—the characteristics it has, the role it plays in one’s life, and the questions it both asks and answers—simply do not fit Hinduism very well. Here is one example. Instinctively, when Christians begin to learn about another religious tradition, they want to know what the practitioners believe: their basic confessional statements, their unifying doctrines, etc. Frustratingly, however, Hinduism

1. Mark W. Muesse, *The Hindu Traditions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 6.

2. http://www.hafsite.org/resources/hinduism_101/hinduism_demographics.

3. <http://pluralism.org/directory/index/?sort=state%2Ccity%2Ctitle&tradition=Hindu>.

simply does not have any of those things: rather, by definition, Hinduism is *not* a belief system. In fact, the Supreme Court of India, in the course of a ruling on a particular case, declared as one of its seven characteristics of a Hindu (listed in full later in the chapter): “In distinction from followers of other religions, one does not believe in a specific set of theological or philosophical conceptions.”⁴ Instead, as one Indian told me while we were touring the Taj Mahal, Hinduism is a “way of life.” What does that mean?

Simply put, it means that Hinduism is more about how one conducts one’s life than about what one holds to be true. That is, Hinduism is more about “orthopraxis,” right actions, than “orthodoxy,” right beliefs. Or, as Axel Michaels says, “Belief is secondary to behavior.”⁵ So, where what makes one a Christian is one’s belief in Jesus Christ (and, correspondingly, baptism), what makes one a Hindu is being born and raised in a Hindu family and living one’s life in accordance with specific religious customs, as expressed in a specific geographic, cultural, and familial context. One of the consequences of this is that Hinduism is not a missionary religion and does not actively seek converts. On the one hand, this is because many Hindus recognize other religious traditions as valid spiritual paths; and on the other, it is because many argue that only “Hindus by birth” are true Hindus. It also means that “Hinduism” as a whole is difficult, if not impossible to define. Let me explain.

The first thing that must be emphasized is that Hinduism is not one single religion, the way Christians understand the meaning of that term. Instead, it is more accurately seen as a medley of religious traditions that originated in India, best described not as “a monolithic entity but rather a conglomerate of religions that share certain traits in common.”⁶ As one scholar describes it: “What we label ‘Hinduism’ ranges from monotheism to polytheism, from monism to materialism and atheism; from nonviolent ethics to moral systems that see as imperative elaborate blood sacrifices to sustain the world; from critical, scholastic philosophical discussion to the cultivation of sublime, mystical, wordless inner experiences.”⁷

Not surprisingly then, Mark Muesse opens his introductory textbook on Hinduism with the following sentence: “As strange as it may seem, most Hindus

4. Taken from *World Religions*, ed. Thomas Robinson and Hillary Rodrigues (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 175

5. Axel Michaels, *Hinduism: Past and Present*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 14.

6. Steven Rosen, *Essential Hinduism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 17.

7. *World Religions Today*, ed. John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd Lewis, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 303–4.

do not think of themselves as practicing a religion called Hinduism.”⁸ Such a statement is unthinkable for Christians, who by definition self-identify with the religion that carries the name of the one they confess as God incarnate, savior, and lord. “Hinduism,” however, is an umbrella category that was applied to a variety of traditions in India after the fact: the term didn’t even exist until the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, when the British coined it to categorize the religious traditions they were encountering in colonial India. The word *Hindu* has been around much longer, since the twelfth century or so, and was first used to describe the people living around the Indus River, now located in Pakistan. Over time, this whole region of India came to be called “Hindustan.” However, what is important for our purposes is that, initially, the word *Hindu* did not have any particular religious significance. Instead, in the course of a few centuries, a purely geographic descriptor was morphed into a religious descriptor—and not by the people themselves, but by outsiders: hence the word itself has no inherently religious characteristics. In essence, then, the word *Hinduism* is a somewhat artificial designation, coined by scholars in the West to try to name and categorize Indian religion on the model of Christianity.⁹

For this reason, all definitions of Hinduism are long, complicated, and consume several pages of almost any introductory text. Here is part of the problem: “in India, we are dealing with various religions that belong to one geographically definable cultural space, influence one another, and sometimes overlap, but that often differ considerably from one another in their founders, holy writings, doctrine, divine worlds, rituals, languages, historical conditions, and supporters.”¹⁰ Even though Christianity comprises a wide variety of traditions and expressions, all Christians still ground their faith on the same historical figure—Jesus; the same text—the Bible; and to a large, though not universal extent, the same confession—the Nicene and/or Apostles’ Creeds. Hinduism cannot claim any corresponding universal as a core principle of identity. In fact, when it comes right down to it, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam actually have more in common than many of the traditions subsumed under the category of Hinduism.¹¹

Let me make that comparison explicit. Imagine that a scholar from the East had come to the Middle East around the tenth century, and determined

8. Muesse, *The Hindu Traditions*, 1.

9. Steven Rosen notes that the very concept of “Hinduism” as a world religion only developed with the British colonization of India in the nineteenth century. *Essential Hinduism*, 23.

10. Michaels, *Hinduism: Past and Present*, 17.

11. *Ibid.*

that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were all variations of the same religion simply because they all were founded in the same general area, and they all had their roots in the same mythology, sharing similar stories, and similar ideas about the world, God, and humanity. An umbrella term might be created to categorize and group them together, based on simple geography: Jordanism or Euphratesism. To some degree, this is what happened in India; and now we are left with a word that is almost impossible to do without, and yet we must recognize that it does not carry the specificity of meaning once assumed. In light of this, many scholars would agree with the statement that, “Today without wanting to admit it, we know that Hinduism is nothing but an orchid cultivated by European scholarship. It is much too beautiful to be torn out, but it is a greenhouse plant: It does not exist in nature.”¹²

HINDUISM’S ORIGINS

So how and when did Hinduism begin? While there is no shortage of historical scholars, sages, and teachers in Hinduism, there is no historical founder of the religion as a whole, no figure comparable to Jesus, the Buddha, Abraham, or Muhammad. As a consequence, no historical founder means that there is no firm date of origin of Hinduism, either. Scholars agree that Hinduism is the oldest living major religious tradition, but beyond that simple fact there is much debate, since it is clear that what we today call Hinduism is made up of different beliefs and practices that were handed down orally for millennia before they were finally written down. Thus, as the oral transmission of tradition is notoriously difficult to conclusively establish, there are wide variances even among scholars as to when certain texts, specific practices, and key doctrines originated. For example, the earliest known sacred texts of Hinduism, the Vedas, date back to at least 3000 bce, but some date them back even further, to 8000–6000 bce; and some Hindus themselves believe these texts to be of divine origin, and therefore timeless.

Related to this, it is also worth mentioning here that there is no designated religious hierarchy that determines official Hindu doctrine or practice. Thus there is no one who can speak for Hindus as a whole, and no single authority regarding what is “truly” Hindu or not. This means that many of the natural questions Christians might want ask about Hinduism—“What do Hindus believe about life after death?” “What do Hindus believe about abortion?” “What are the most important practices in Hinduism?”—have no simple answer. You may well get ten different answers from ten different Hindus on each of

12. Quoted in Michaels, *Hinduism: Past & Present*, 12.

these questions. There simply is no one authority that establishes “orthodox” Hindu belief and practice. This is not to say, however, that there are no recognized general characteristics of Hinduism. For example, here is one list of principles that, by practitioner consensus, characterize one as “Hindu”:

- Belief in the divinity of the Vedas
- Belief in one, all-pervasive Supreme Reality
- Belief in the cyclical nature of time
- Belief in karma
- Belief in reincarnation
- Belief in alternate realities with higher beings
- Belief in enlightened masters or gurus
- Belief in nonaggression and noninjury
- Belief that all revealed religions are essentially correct
- Belief that the living being is first and foremost a spiritual entity
- Belief in an “organic social system.”¹³

A similar list comes from the Indian Supreme Court, which produced the following set of workable criteria as to what it means to be a Hindu:

- The Vedas should be accepted and revered as the foundation of Hindu philosophy.
- One should have a spirit of tolerance, and recognize that the truth has many sides.
- One accepts belief in recurring cosmic cycles of creation, preservation, and dissolution.
- One accepts belief in reincarnation.
- One recognizes that there are numerous paths to truth and salvation.
- One recognizes that although the worship of idols may be deemed unnecessary, there may be many deities worthy of worship.
- In distinction from followers of other religions, one does not believe in a specific set of theological or philosophical conceptions.¹⁴

As should be clear from the emphasis on tolerating the different beliefs of others, respecting the pluriformity of truth, and recognizing the diversity of belief and practice, any talk of Hinduism as a whole needs to keep this internal multiplicity in mind at all times. All this has led one scholar to suggest the following metaphor: “If the essence of Hinduism could be summarized in a few words, those words might be ‘structured diversity.’ We might think of Hinduism as a

13. Rosen, *Essential Hinduism*, 18.

14. *World Religions*, ed. Robinson and Rodrigues, 175.

rainbow in which all the different colors are represented, but in which each of these colors has a very distinct place in the spectrum.”¹⁵

DO HINDUS HAVE A BIBLE?

As I already noted, there is no single, authoritative text in Hinduism that functions like the Bible for Christians, or the Qur’an for Muslims. Instead, there are several different collections of texts, all grouped under two main categories. The first and most important is called *shruti* (“what is heard”)—this is analogous to what Christians understand as divinely revealed scripture, and, like in Christianity, this category of texts, which includes the Vedas and the Upanishads, is the most authoritative. The second category is called *smṛti* (“what is remembered”)—for Christians, this is more like biblical and theological commentaries by the early church fathers, Vatican documents, etc. Their authority is secondary to *shruti*. Interestingly, however, it is the *smṛti* texts that are more popular and widely read and actually have more practical importance for the daily life of a Hindu. I will say more about these writings, particularly the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, below.

First are the Vedas. They are the oldest Hindu sacred texts and have the most wide-ranging authority. They are believed to have been written anywhere from 1800 to 1200 bce, but the dating of these texts is very difficult. Certainly they existed in oral tradition long before they were written down, and even now, their power is derived in being spoken and heard, not by being read. According to tradition, their recitation can be properly performed only by Brahmins, the guardians of their secrets and power, who historically have used very complicated mnemonic techniques to ensure a perfect recitation every time of long, complicated sections of text.

In the narrowest sense of the term, “Veda” refers to the four *samhitas* (“collections”) of sacred texts of ancient India. They are the oldest body of literature—not just religious texts—and “according to traditional belief, the Vedas have no authors and existed prior to this world’s creation.”¹⁶ The most important of the Vedas and the most well known in the West is the *Rig Veda*, which comprises a large collection of hymns praising various gods and goddesses, and tells various stories of creation.¹⁷ Again, speaking as broadly as

15. James Robinson, *Hinduism*, Religions of the World (New York: Chelsea House, 2004), 11.

16. Muesse, *The Hindu Traditions*, 42.

17. For an accessible introduction to the *Rig Veda*, see the Penguin Classics edition (September 2005), trans. Wendy Doniger, which contains 108 of the over 1,000 hymns that make up the collection.

possible, it is fair to say that the Vedas are the collection of writings held to be the basis of true belief and practice among most Hindus.

Next are the Upanishads, which do not share the Vedas' focus on ritual and sacrifice but instead describe a more philosophical and theoretical approach to the practice of Hinduism.¹⁸ They were written roughly between 800 and 400 bce, around the same time that the Buddha lived and taught, and Mahavira founded Jainism. It is not a coincidence that the key teachings of the Upanishads have certain important similarities to the teachings of both of these religious founders. The primary emphasis of the Upanishads is that the self (*atman*) is identical to the Ultimate ground of reality (*Brahman*), and the person who realizes this sacred truth (through disciplined practice and meditation) finds liberation (*moksha*) from the endless cycles of rebirth (*samsara*). In the Upanishads themselves, Brahman, the Ultimate Reality, is not personified or personalized; however, some later schools of Hindu thought did personalize this unified One Supreme Being, most typically as Shiva, Vishnu, or the Goddess.

The rest of the writings fall into the much larger and broader category of *smṛti*. This category includes the two great Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The *Mahabharata* is the oldest, and has existed in various forms for well over two thousand years. It is the longest epic poem in the world, and is said to have been written by the great sage Vyasa. However, it is clear that the epic as we have it today has been redacted by many hands over the centuries, so again, definitive determinations of both date and authorship elude scholars. The main plot narrative concerns the rivalry between two sets of paternal first cousins: the five sons of Pandu (the Pandavas), led by Yudhishtira; and the one hundred sons of blind King Dhritarashtra (he and his sons are called the Kauravas). However, within this overarching story, the reader finds elaborate asides on philosophy, ethics and politics, and other stories only tangentially related to the main characters.¹⁹

The most well-known portion of the *Mahabharata* is the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which is perhaps the most well-known and widely cited book in all of Hinduism. If any single text can be compared to the New Testament, it is this one; in fact, it is the second-most translated text in the world, after the Bible.²⁰ The story can be summarized quickly. After years of trickery, intrigue,

18. Here I would recommend the Oxford World's Classics edition (June 2008), trans. Patrick Olivelle, which contains twelve principal Upanishads.

19. A good introduction to the *Mahabharata* is R. K. Narayan's *The Mahabharata: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

20. *Modern Indian Interpreters of the Bhagavadgita*, ed. Robert N. Minor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 5.

and behind-the-scenes maneuvering, the Pandavas and the Kauravas found themselves on the brink of all-out war. The two massive armies faced off on the *Kurukshetra*, “Kuru’s field,” for what everyone knew would be the decisive battle for the entire Indian kingdom; and it was clear, even before the battle began, that the death-toll would be monstrous. At the very moment the battle is to commence, Arjuna, the Pandava champion, loses heart: looking out across the field of battle he sees cousins, friends, and mentors, and the thought of killing them overwhelms him. He sits down in his chariot, discouraged and refusing to fight. At this point, the god Krishna, who is acting as Arjuna’s charioteer, preaches to him the most famous sermon in Hinduism, explaining to him why it is his duty to fight, and why fighting in the battle would be an act of great religious significance. In the course of this sermon, Krishna reveals his true self to Arjuna: Krishna himself is the one supreme reality—creator and destroyer of all. Arjuna then goes on to fight, helping his brothers win the war, and the kingdom.

The *Ramayana* is the other most important epic poem in Hinduism. In his book *Arrow of the Blue-skinned God*, Jonah Blank writes, “Imagine a story that was the *Odyssey*, *Romeo & Juliet*, the Bible, and a Hollywood blockbuster all rolled into one. Imagine a story that combined adventure and aphorism, romance and religion, fantasy and philosophy. Imagine a story that could make young children marvel, grown men weep, and old women dream. Such a story exists in India, and it is called the *Ramayana*.”²¹ Its earliest form is a Sanskrit poem attributed to the sage Valmiki, and scholars believe that it was composed sometime between 500 bce and 400 ce. However, as with other texts, Hindu tradition places the date of composition much earlier.

The story itself is about Prince Rama of Ayodhya and his wife Sita, her capture by the demon Ravana, and her subsequent rescue by Rama, his brother Lakshmana, and their monkey helper Hanuman.²² More broadly, however, the story models proper *dharma*—that is, the proper actions and behaviors one should exhibit to maintain or uphold one’s place in the world, and support the proper functioning of the cosmos as a whole. Rama, Sita, and the other main characters all exemplify proper *dharma* through the way in which they live as a husband, a wife, a brother, a king, a son, and so forth. In all of their

21. Jonah Blank, *The Arrow of the Blue-skinned God: Retracing the Ramayana through India* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), ix.

22. The Penguin Classics edition (August 2006), as told by R. K. Narayan, is a good first introduction to the text.

relationships, they demonstrate ideal social behavior. Thus, people today still model their own behavior on that of Rama and Sita.²³



Figure 1.2. Images of Rama and Sita from the Hindu Temple and Cultural Center, Columbia, SC.

Finally, I want to mention the Puranas, a series of texts that describe specific gods in great detail, specifically Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma, along with the way in which they are to be worshiped, and what rewards devotees can expect to receive from them. As with the other sacred texts in Hinduism, a date of composition for the Puranas is difficult to establish, given their long oral history. One scholar summarizes the problem this way: “On the whole, it is meaningless to speak of ‘the date’ of a Sanskrit *purana*, because many

23. This is, of course, problematic for women, as Sita’s primary role is that of submissive wife; and there are many places in the epic in which feminists critique her role. See, for example, R. P. Goldman and S. J. Sutherland Goldman, “*Ramayana*,” in *The Hindu World*, ed. Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby (London: Routledge, 2004); and *Playing for Real: Hindu Role Models, Religion, and Gender*, ed. Jacqueline Suthren Hirst and Lynn Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). I also recommend viewing the marvelous film “Sita Sings the Blues,” available for free viewing or download at <http://www.sitasingingtheblues.com/>.

generations of bards, etc., have been involved in the accumulation of material which at some stage has been given a name . . .”²⁴ While the list of Puranas is vast and varies widely, the major Puranas are typically listed at eighteen, and these books are subdivided into three sets of six books each, with each set corresponding to one of the three gods mentioned above, although many texts also are devoted to worship of the goddess.

DO HINDUS BELIEVE IN GOD?



Figure 1.3. A mass-produced image of the god Shiva. The Ganges River, personified as a goddess, descends to the earth, as Shiva first absorbs the weight of her descent in his hair.

Without a doubt, the answer to this question is “yes”—and more specifically, an emphatic, exuberant, multifaceted yes. But at the same time, that “yes” cannot at all be interpreted in the way Christians typically understand either the question

24. Freda Matchett, “The Puranas,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 132.

or the answer. One scholar uses the lovely phrase, the “sheer exuberance of Hindu theism,” and goes on to recognize that the characteristic “energy and inventiveness” Hindus display when it comes to Hindu theistic practice well may be “the greatest stumbling block for those outside the traditions. They often ask, Why do Hindus worship so many gods?”²⁵ I find this a succinct and clear way of stating the problem: there are so many different gods (or manifestations of the one universal reality), so many different ways of worshipping those gods, and such a lack of concern on the part of Hindus about which god is the best/highest, etc., that many Christians don’t even recognize Hinduism as a theistic religion, instead seeing Hindus as simple idol worshippers. This could not be further from the truth.

Instead, it is fair to say that Hinduism encompasses a lush, expansive understanding of the divine—richer by far than the narrow, shallow range of conceptions, images, and language typically used for God in the Christian tradition. There is a simple, yet profound reason for that: “To Hindu ways of thinking, the ultimate reality is so far beyond our imagining, so complex, so utterly rich in potential, that a single image or even a mere handful of images will not do. If the absolute must be portrayed, then many, many images and symbols will be more successful than just one or a few.”²⁶ Simply put, in Hinduism god is neither one nor many, but both; god is not male or female, but both; god is not formless or embodied, but both. Let me say more about that.

In order to appreciate a Hindu understanding of god, one must first move beyond the “either/or” of monotheism and polytheism: that is, one must let go of the idea that there are only two options—either people worship one god (monotheism) or they worship many gods (polytheism). Instead, in Hinduism, it is both/and: Hindus not only see no contradiction in believing that there is one god and believing that there are many gods, but for some, the tension between the one and the many actually generates deeper insight into the true nature of the divine than either one could produce on its own. There are different names for this “both/and,” each of which has a slightly different connotation: *monolatry* is used to describe the worship of one greater god among many lesser gods; *kathenotheism* or *henotheism* is used to define the worship of different gods, but only one god at any given time (one god during one season or festival, for example, and another during a different time of the year); and finally, *polymorphic monotheism*, which refers to the worship of one

25. Muesse, *The Hindu Traditions*, 130.

26. *Ibid.*, 132–33.

supreme god who reveals him/herself in many forms in different times and places in the world.²⁷

Part of the reason for this complexity is that the histories of the various gods in Hinduism are long and intricate, and the depiction of many, if not all, the major deities has evolved over time, differing greatly depending on which sacred texts are being cited. This chronological diversity is accompanied by an equal geographical diversity: depending on where one is located, the actual worship of the different deities also varies—not only across the globe, but even from north to south India. Finally, as noted above, the theology that informs people's understanding of the various gods in Hinduism is polyvalent: some people believe that all gods are simply different faces of the same one Supreme Being; others reject all personified forms of this one; some are devoted to one god exclusively; and others worship many different gods simultaneously.

Naturally, then, Hinduism accommodates a vast assortment of dynamic and multifaceted concepts of god. For the most part, they can be categorized under two broad headings: *nirguna* Brahman, a formless, impersonal supreme reality without qualities or attributes—comparable in some general way to what Christians call an *apophatic* understanding of the Divine (God is limitless, immortal, formless, invisible, etc.); and *saguna* Brahman, the personified, personal form of the supreme reality—what Christians call a *kataphatic* understanding of the Divine (God is an all-loving father, a merciful judge, a gentle shepherd, etc.). Let me stress that these are not two different realities, but rather two different ways of perceiving the one true ultimate reality: the first is perhaps more the subject of philosophical and intellectual speculation and meditation; and the second is more the object of adoration, sacrifice, and devotion. However, in light of the fact that most, if not all, Hindus do worship some embodied, personal form of God, and certainly any visit to a Hindu home or temple bears this out, it is worth expanding on the notion of *saguna* Brahman, the idea of a personified god in Hinduism, using the god Vishnu as our example, one of the most important and widely venerated gods in Hinduism.

Unlike Christianity, which is grounded in a linear understanding of time, Hinduism has a cyclical understanding of time, in which the universe continually cycles into and out of existence, over many eons. In most descriptions of this process, instead of there being one single divinity behind it all, there are three: Brahma is the creator, the one who brings the universe into being; Shiva is the destroyer, the one who, at the right time, causes the universe to fall into nothingness; and during the in-between time stands Vishnu

27. Ibid., 25.

the preserver, the god who sustains the universe and protects it from evil while it is in existence. Together, these three gods make up what is sometimes (somewhat confusingly) called the Hindu “trinity,” but the more accurate name in Hinduism is *trimurti*, which translates roughly as “three faces.”

As should be expected, there are different understandings of what these gods represent and how they function. Some Hindus see all three gods as simply manifestations of one Supreme Being that is above all personification, but they still honor and worship the different manifestations individually as genuine representations of god—although it should be noted that today there is hardly any direct worship of Brahma alone. By contrast, both Shiva and Vishnu, as well as the goddess, who is personified with different names and in different forms, have millions of followers who worship him/her as the single supreme deity, the highest embodiment of the divine.

According to Steven Rosen, “two-thirds of the known Hindu world identifies themselves as Vaishnavas,”²⁸ that is, worshippers of Vishnu. Vaishnavas believe that Vishnu is the personal embodiment of the Divine—the highest form of the one supreme god himself who is the ground and source of all being. In terms of Hindu iconography and statuary, Vishnu always is depicted with dark skin—typically blue. He usually is shown with four arms, one holding a lotus flower, another holding a conch shell, another holding a disc or wheel, and the final arm holding a mace. Sometimes he is shown resting on the coils of a many-headed serpent, called *Sheshanaga*, and sometimes his consort, Lakshmi, is rubbing his feet—or sometimes she is sitting next to him. He also is depicted riding his “vehicle,” the great eagle *Garuda*. Hinduism knows no prohibition against imaging the Divine, and in no other religion in the world is there such a profusion of depictions of the gods, in all manner of art forms, in all possible materials, from great stone statues to children’s comic books.

One distinguishing aspect of Vishnu’s mythology that makes him particularly interesting for many Christians is the doctrine of the *avatar*. *Avatara* is a Sanskrit word that refers to a divine incarnation (literally it means “one who descends”), and it is almost always associated with Vishnu. The word *incarnation* must be read and interpreted by Christians with care, however. Certainly, it is true that there are some general similarities with the concept of incarnation in Christianity, insofar as both refer to a divine decision to “come down” and dwell in and amidst creation. Nevertheless, there are many important differences as well, most notably the fact that unlike Jesus, whom Christian tradition affirms was truly fully divine *and* fully human, the *avatar* is more correctly viewed as

28. Rosen, *Essential Hinduism*, xvii.

a disguised appearance of the divine, something akin to the Greek god Zeus coming down from heaven cloaked as a mortal, but ready and willing to throw off his human camouflage in a moment's notice if the need arises. Further, while Jesus is believed to be the unique incarnation of God, Vishnu is believed to have many, many different *avatars*.

The purpose for this “divine descent” is also different in Hinduism, having nothing to do with a doctrine of sin or human alienation from God. Instead, Hindus believe that at various times in the endless cycles of history, Vishnu descends into the world in the form of some created being in order to save and preserve creation from a particular demonic force that is threatening the very existence of the cosmos. Tradition holds that there are ten primary *avatars* of Vishnu, the stories of which are told in elaborate detail both in the Puranas and in a variety of other sacred Hindu texts.

The ten are as follows: first, the fish, Matsya, who saved the world from a great flood; second, the tortoise, Kurma, who allowed the gods and demons to churn up valuable objects from the ocean of milk from a pivot resting on his back; and third, the boar, Varaha, who also rescued the earth from a flood by raising it up on one of his tusks. Fourth is the man-lion, Narasimha, who came to deliver the world from a terrible demon who had obtained from the gods a special boon that prohibited him from being killed by either a god, an animal, or a human—Narasimha was a combination of all these, and thus succeeded in destroying the demon. Fifth is the dwarf, Vamana, who confronted another demon who had conquered the entire universe. He begged the demon-king for just as much land as he could cover with three of his dwarf steps, and the king, scoffing at such a request, granted it; imagine his surprise when the dwarf covered the entire universe in his first two steps, placing his last step on the king's own head. Sixth is the man called “Rama with the axe,” Parashurama, who was a hero that destroyed the entire *Kshatriya* class of warriors who were exploiting others.

The next two *avatars*, numbers seven and eight, are the most famous. First is Ramachandra—simply called Rama, the hero of the aforementioned *Ramayana*, who embodied in his person perfect obedience, dharma, filial love, and righteousness. He is still seen as the example *par excellence* for human conduct in Hinduism today. The eighth *avatar* is Krishna, who is not only viewed as the perfect and highest incarnation of Vishnu, but for many of his devotees, the relationship between Vishnu and Krishna is reversed, with Krishna being worshiped as the one supreme god and the source of all other incarnations, including Vishnu himself.²⁹ Finally, the last two *avatars* are ninth, the Buddha—in this way, Hinduism was able to enfold Buddhism as a whole

under its large umbrella; and tenth, Kalki, the form of Vishnu who is still to come, and whose arrival will signal the end of the present age. It is a rare temple or home altar that does not contain an image of either Vishnu, his consort Lakshmi, who is herself the goddess of wealth, light, and fertility, or his *avatar* Krishna.

HOW DO HINDUS MARK TIME? SAMSKARAS AND FESTIVALS

One of the main practical functions of any religion is marking the passage of time—both for a people as a whole, and also for individuals: the ritual of the Jewish Bar/Bat Mitzvah and the Christian rite of Confirmation are two familiar examples. Hinduism is no different, and Hindu families practice a variety of *samskaras* to celebrate the various rites of passage in their life together. The number of *samskaras* varies widely, with the highest number being prescribed for Brahmin males, and the lowest number being performed by Dalit families with the fewest resources. These rites are performed by a Hindu priest, either at home or at a temple; and, at least in the United States, the fees for these services typically are listed on the temple websites.

As in Christianity, the most important of the *samskaras* are those related to birth, marriage, and death—although there are many other rites marking the healthy development of a child. In fact, many of these rites also are performed by Indian Christians, and they are considered ethnic customs rather than religious celebrations. In this case, Hindu prayers and offerings are replaced by Christian prayers and Bible readings. So, for example, many Christian families mark the *annaprashana*, the first solid food given to a baby, by inviting family and friends to the home and asking a pastor to provide a blessing. There is a *samskara* for the naming of a child, the child's first haircut, and the beginning of studies, just to name a few.

Of all the *samskaras*, however, marriage, *vivaha*, is one of the most important, celebrated lavishly over a period of days by Hindus and Indian Christians alike, with some common elements, and some regional variants. Arranged marriages still are common in India; by this I mean that the families of the two parties agree that a match would be harmonious, and then introduce

29. Edwin Bryant notes that “the Krishnaite theologies that emerged in the 16th century, initiated by influential teachers such as Vallabha and Chaitanya, find grounds to hold that it is not Krishna who is an incarnation of Vishnu but Vishnu who is a partial manifestation of Krishna. These sects extol Krishna as the supreme Absolute Truth from whom all other deities, including Vishnu, evolve, and the *Bhagavata Purana* is presented as the epistemological authority in this regard.” “Krishna in the Tenth Book of the *Bhagavata Purana*,” in *Krishna*, ed. Edwin F. Bryant (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 112.

the couple. In most situations it is more of a suggestion than a demand, though, as typically—at least in urban settings—the prospective couple is given time to get to know each other and agree to the match.

For Hindus, astrological charts are consulted, gifts are exchanged between families, a dowry is discussed (debate continues about whether the wedding jewelry—ostentatious and costly—is the bride’s property or the groom’s), offerings are made, and a sacred fire is circled by the couple either with seven steps or seven times. In addition, extravagant meals are prepared: for the immediate family, for relatives, for close friends, and finally, on the main day of the wedding itself, for a huge number of guests.³⁰ A wedding is the time for pulling out all the stops, and the family will celebrate to the absolute limit they can afford, including saris woven with gold thread, expensive gifts, and rich food. Here is one such example: “In 1995, the prime minister of Tamil Nadu, J. Jayalalitha, distributed more than ten million U.S. dollars for her stepson’s wedding, which was attended by two hundred thousand guests serviced by six thousand cooks.”³¹

After the wedding, the bride often will move in with her husband’s parents where she is subject to her mother-in-law, and still today, multiple-generation homes are common. As an institution, marriage is, in practice, obligatory: divorce is rare, as is not having children and staying single. Marriage continues to be a foundational practice in Hindu families, and, in fact, this is true in most Indian families, Hindu or not.

The last important *samskara* to mention is the funeral. Cremation is the norm for Hindus, although certain categories of people, including *sadhus* and young children, typically are not cremated. As I mentioned previously, the Indian city of Varanasi is one of the most auspicious places to die and be cremated, and it is believed that dying here immediately liberates one’s soul from the cycle of birth and death. Thus at two specific *ghats* (a series of steps leading down to the river) on the Ganges, cremations occur continually. The Manikarnika Ghat is the largest and the one where most cremations take place.

As you approach Manikarnika, the first thing you notice, after the smoke and the piles of burning embers, are the immense piles of wood: not only up against the buildings, but even in boats moored just off the shore. There are several places that have large scales where the wood is measured and purchased: different kinds of wood are more expensive than others, with sandalwood being the most expensive because of its fragrance. The wood is always purchased here,

30. For a table of events that make up the course of a Hindu wedding, see Michaels, *Hinduism: Past and Present*, 116–18.

31. Michaels, *Hinduism: Past and Present*, 119.

and then, after the haggling, the men who work the scales carry the wood down to the cremation area itself. The process of the cremation itself is polluting, as it involves contact with a dead body. Hence, it is only the “Doms,” one particular Dalit caste, who manage the whole business of cremation, with the exception of firstborn sons and relatives who also take part in the specific rituals of the cremation itself. Women typically are not allowed to be involved in either the funeral procession or the cremation itself, although while I was in India I did see one woman, clearly grief-stricken, participating in the cremation of her husband, until family members finally, literally picked her up and carried her away.



Figure 1.4. Wood being carried to a cremation, Varanasi, India, March 2012

Once a person dies, she is anointed at home, and wrapped in layers of colorful cloth—mostly shades of orange, as this is the color associated with holiness in Hinduism—along with marigold garlands. Then, she is carried on a stretcher made of bamboo poles and straw through the streets, accompanied by chanting, singing, and drums, and brought down the stairs, straight to the Ganges. The body is submerged there, and certain rites are performed. Then, once the pyre is

ready, the body is brought over to it, and all the cloths are stripped off, until the body is left wrapped in only a thin white sheet. The body is then placed on the pyre, and more wood is piled on top of it. At this point, a small pile of long grass is lit, and the oldest son (typically) circles the smoke around the head, and then circles the corpse with it as well. Finally, the lit grass is shoved under the pyre at the feet, where the wood then catches fire. It takes several hours for a body to burn, and even then, not all the bones are consumed. That which remains, larger bones as well as the ashes, is taken down and thrown in the Ganges. This whole rite is believed to free the soul from the body, and ensure a safe transition into either heaven, or the next life.

Finally, let me just briefly note that in addition to these *samskaras*, there are dozens upon dozens of Hindu festivals. Indeed, *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* writes that: “It is said that Hindus have a festival for every day of the year. That is a serious underestimate.”³² There are some Hindu festivals that are celebrated throughout the country, and many more that are primarily regional. They mark specific seasons, specific events in the lives of the different gods and goddesses, and specific concerns of life—wealth, health, fertility, etc. It is impossible to describe or even summarize them all, so let me just mention two that are perhaps the most well known in the United States. First is *Divali*, the festival of lights that falls somewhere in October or November. (Hinduism follows a primarily lunar calendar, like Judaism, so the specific dates of each festival vary from year to year.) Divali honors Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and good fortune, and it lasts roughly four to five days. Families often visit the temple during this time and make offerings to her there, but they also worship her at home, perhaps even arranging a special place on their home altar for her. Doors are left open to welcome her into the house, and the whole period of celebration is a time of great joy, in which Hindus fill their houses with light.

The other main festival is called *Holi*, and it is lots of fun, celebrated with great abandon and gusto all over India—particularly in the north, in Indian communities in the West, and even on some Western college campuses. It inaugurates the coming of spring and is celebrated primarily by throwing colored paste and water on anyone who happens to be out walking around. It, too, is celebrated over a period of days.

Holi has a variety of myths and traditions behind it, two of which are worth mention here. The story is told that one day Krishna was complaining to his mother that his skin was dark while his beloved Radhu had such fine pale

32. “Festivals and Fasts: Hinduism,” *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, ed. John Bowker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 342.

skin. His mother told him that if it bothered him, he should rub colored paste on her—playfully, of course—to darken her skin. This he did, and from this childish prank, a festival was born. Because of this legend, that Holi is celebrated with particular enthusiasm and verve around Mathura and Vrindivan—Krishna’s birthplace and the place where he spent his childhood.

The more popular story, however, has to do with the triumph of good over evil. It is said that once there was a very wicked king (Indian mythology is full of wicked kings—foils for the good deeds of gods and their devotees) who demanded that everyone in the kingdom worship him. All obeyed him, save one, and the irony is that the one who defied his command was his own son, Prahlad, who was a great worshiper of Lord Narayana. This infuriated the king, who instructed his wicked sister, Holika, to take Prahlad onto her lap and step into a giant fire. The king knew that she had received a boon and would escape the fire unharmed, while Prahlad would be destroyed. She received just payment for her wickedness, however: unbeknownst to her, the boon was only valid if she entered a fire by herself—it was ineffective if she went in with another person. Thus she was immolated, but Prahlad, who chanted the name of Lord Narayana the whole time, came out unscathed. The festival thus takes its name from her name, Holika, and celebrates both the downfall of wickedness and also the faithfulness of devotion.

That story is recalled in the large piles of wood that are built at various points in cities and villages—sometimes right in the middle of the road. In them are placed small images of Holika and Prahlad. On the eve of the primary day of the festival, after much singing and dancing to Bollywood Holi songs played over loudspeakers, bonfires are lit and the whole pile is reduced to ashes. Holi is a particularly raucous celebration for boys of all ages, who can be seen wandering the streets covered in color, some carrying plastic water guns, purchased specifically for this holiday. Many shops simply close down, and most women stay indoors—at least this was the case in Varanasi, where I celebrated Holi in 2012. At my hotel, they encouraged us to stay indoors, and kept the door locked until around 4:00 p.m., when it was again safe to venture outside.



Figure 1.5. A woodpile with images of Holika and Prahlad, Varanasi, India, March 2012

WHAT DO HINDUS THINK ABOUT SALVATION?

In Hinduism there are what we might call penultimate spiritual goals as well as an ultimate spiritual goal, and Hindus strive after both, driven by two factors.

Hindus, like Buddhists, believe in a cyclical, rather than linear pattern of time and the universe. This means that they do not believe that the universe began at one discrete point of time and will end at another discrete point of time; instead, they believe that the universe cycles in and out of existence, through a series of eras, each of which has a different name and different characteristics. Along with the universe itself, all beings also cycle in and out of existence, from birth to death to rebirth: this is the doctrine of reincarnation.

The cycle of reincarnation is driven by *karma*. Literally, karma simply means “action,” but in Hinduism, it has come to describe the belief that one’s actions in the present have an unavoidable consequent effect on the destiny of the soul in the future. That is, the consequence of one’s actions always boomerangs back onto the self—this is called “the fruiting of karma,” and it is inevitable: “karma always returns to the agent who created it, no matter how long it takes.”³³ In other words, in this lifetime you produce good karma or bad karma, and you will live out the ramifications of that karma in your next lifetime. Thus, one of the main soteriological goals of Hinduism is to produce good karma, which ensures a positive rebirth. The way to produce good karma is to act rightly; the question then becomes, how does one know what the “right actions” are? This is where the idea of *dharma* comes in.

Dharma refers to the proper duties/actions that are appropriate for one’s caste. This means everyone’s dharma is different, depending on gender, birth community, work, etc. There are a variety of texts that describe the different dharmas, and they each explain that every individual must do those actions fitting for his/her caste, and only those actions. Only in that way are people able to generate good karma. Meritorious actions, then, are not universal; ironically, if you are a Dalit, it is karmically more beneficial for you to do the actions appropriate for your caste, like carrying dead bodies and preparing cremations, even if they are not as ostensibly meritorious as the actions appropriate for a Brahmin; for example, learning Sanskrit and chanting sacred passages from the Vedas. Instead, it is believed that if you perform the actions appropriate to your station in life, you will continually move up the anthropological hierarchy in subsequent births, eventually being born as a Brahmin and attaining liberation, even if this takes many lifetimes.

With this cosmological and anthropological background in mind, let me describe the different means by which Hindus seek salvation—more typically called “liberation” in Hinduism. In *World Religions Today*, a popular college textbook, Hinduism is characterized with the phrase “myriad paths to

33. Muesse, *The Hindu Traditions*, 69.

salvation.”³⁴ What this means is that there are many legitimate ways to seek liberation, and different ways that one might live one’s life in pursuit of liberation. Indeed, one also might pursue some combination of paths, or at various stages in one’s life pursue different paths. One is not better than another: they are different ways of attaining the same end. The first path is called *karma-marga* or *karma-yoga*, which represents the path of duty or action. As I said above, people who follow this spiritual path are concerned with the proper religious actions. This includes sacrifices and other ritual performances that honor various deities, and also individual or family rites that mark important life transitions. The second is called *jñāna-marga* or *jñāna-yoga*, which represents the path of knowledge. This is the path of realizing the truth of all existence—what is illusion and what is real. Typically it also includes physical and mental disciplines, such as physical austerities and meditation. The third is called *bhakti-marga* or *bhakti-yoga*, which represents the path of devotional participation.³⁵ This path has its roots in popular devotional movements, and is grounded in expressions of love to one’s chosen manifestation of the divine, or to one’s guru. In this form of Hindu practice, god’s grace ameliorates the strict causality of one’s own karma and can bring the devotee liberation. Again, one path is not necessarily better than another—although practitioners within each camp might argue the superior virtues of their path over and against the others. Instead, the particular way in which one chooses to live out one’s faith often is determined by family, social status, personal disposition, and geographical location. What this means is that there are many different ways to live life as a “faithful” Hindu, and even within one lifetime, a person can choose radically different lifestyles.

HOW DO HINDUS PRAY?

One major difference between Hindus and Christians is that there is no weekly worship service, no set day or time in which a community is called to gather publically. Although most Hindus do visit temples regularly, or at least occasionally, praying and making offerings there, a “good” Hindu need never worship in public. Instead, all worship can be performed to icons in the home shrine, which is why the home is a very important place of worship in India.

The best word that describes and summarizes Hindu worship is *puja*. The word itself means respect, homage, or worship. Most—if not all—Hindus have

34. *World Religions Today*, ed. Esposito et al

35. Michaels, *Hinduism: Past and Present*, 24. Sometimes this list is described as various “yogas”—that is, disciplines, which often includes a fourth: *raja-yoga*, the way of mental focus and concentration. This is how the *Bhagavad-Gita* describes the various paths of salvation, for example.

small altars at home on which they place pictures and/or statues representing different deities, including those to whom the family is particularly devoted. (These are called *ishtadevatas*, one's personal god.) Each morning, one member of the family, usually the father or the mother, will perform a short puja at the altar. This may include saying prayers, lighting a lamp, burning incense, making offerings of fruit and flowers, and ringing a bell. The goal in this worship is to please the gods through all five senses—hence the incense, colored lights (this is the reason you often find Christmas lights hanging in American Hindu temples year round), bell and/or music, and food. The same thing happens in temples, although the rituals are much more elaborate there, and are done at various times throughout the day. This is because in a temple, the deity is believed to inhabit the images full-time, not just merely when invited to be present, which is what happens in a home puja: the deity is invoked, worshiped, and then the divine presence withdraws.



Figure 1.6. A modest home altar in Hyderabad, India, March 2012

By contrast, in the temple, a particular ritual involving the images has occurred called a *murti-puja*, which serves to invite the divinity down permanently into a particular image. This means that the image (the embodiment of the divine) must be tended to every day—morning, noon, and night. Priests live full-time at the temple in order to perform the daily pujas, which include waking, feeding, bathing, clothing, and worshiping these divinities. These services usually are open to the public (again, schedules of pujas in temples in the United States typically are posted on their websites), but whether or not anyone is there, the priest performs the rituals: the god is there, even if no one else is. In India, many temples even close for a few hours each afternoon, so that the deities may take a rest from their devotees.

After the priest performs the puja, on behalf of the god he returns to the people some of what they first brought as offerings—food, flowers, etc. This is called *prasad*, that is, grace, goodwill, or blessing. In this way, the things that were offered are then received back by the devotees as a blessing. So, for example, small morsels of food are eaten, flowers are worn in the hair, incense is wafted around one's body, holy water sipped, and colored powders are mixed with water and used to make a *tilak*, a mark in the center of the forehead above the eyes.

WHAT IS THE CASTE SYSTEM?

As the last point in this chapter, I want to briefly mention the caste system, since this is something many Christians have heard of, but often do not fully understand. The caste system refers to the different *varnas* in Indian society—*varna* means “color,” and each caste is symbolized with a different color. These represent the four original classes of society. Traditionally in Hinduism the caste system is believed to be of divine origin, related to one particular creation story, told in the Vedas, in which the world is created through the dismemberment of the primordial man called *Purusha*. In the myth, he was ritually sacrificed, and from the pieces came the entire cosmos, including all human beings. One is born into one's caste, and caste identity is indelible and unchangeable.

Brahmins (white) are the highest caste: they are the priests and the teachers, the religious—though not the political—leaders of Hindu society, and they are said to have been created from the head or mouth of *Purusha*. The second caste is the warrior caste, called the *Kshatriyas* (red). These are the kings, the only caste allowed to rule, and they are said to have been created from the arms. The third caste is the merchant caste, the *Vaishyas* (yellow), the craftsmen, farmers,

and traders of Hindu society, created from the thighs—note how we are moving down the body. Finally, the fourth caste is the worker caste, the *Shudras* (blue or black). They are the lowest caste, the peasants and servants, and they were created from the feet. Within each of these castes are thousands of subcategories, called *jatis*, or “birth communities” that specify rank and place in society more specifically, usually based on regional classifications.

Glaringly absent in this schema are the Dalits, the “outcastes”—so called because they fall outside of the caste system. They also were called “untouchables,” referring to the fact that, in Hinduism, their very being is polluting, and therefore caste Hindus are not permitted even to touch them. Traditionally, Dalits have worked in ignominious, jobs dealing with the dead (like cremation, mentioned above), animal disposal, cleaning of human waste, and tanning leather. Historically, Dalits have suffered terrible discrimination: they were not allowed inside temples, they were not allowed to use common wells, and they even had to live outside the village boundaries. They could be killed without fear of punishment, and were considered less than human in many ways, practically, at least, if not theoretically. Thus it should come as no surprise that Dalits have converted en masse to both Buddhism and Christianity; today, roughly 95 percent of Indian Christians come from the Dalit castes.

Caste is so deeply woven into Indian society that even today it continues to play an important role in the daily lives of Hindus. It is true that the Indian constitution abolished untouchability—note, not caste in general—and made it illegal to disadvantage people because they were Dalits. However, in fact, caste discrimination is still alive and well in India, particularly in rural villages, where Dalit women especially continue to suffer persecution and violence. At the same time, though, particularly in the cities, economics trumps caste, and Dalits have access to both education and the lucrative occupations such education brings, including careers in engineering, medicine, and technology.