



## Hinduism

### ***A religion with gods, gods and more gods***

In a walled compound in the temple Kalighat in India, a large assembly of Hindu women begins to loudly wail in high-pitched voices. Bare-chested men shout, "Jai Kali! Jai Kali!" ("Kali lives! Kali lives!"). Before them lies the decapitated body of a longhaired black ram hanging limply from a forked wooden stake. The goat's head has been placed in a silver dish to be taken into the inner chambers of the temple and offered to the goddess. Later the body will be cooked and the flesh eaten by the worshippers as *prashad*, food that has been blessed by a deity.

### **A scary religion**

Kali is the wife of *Shiva* (the universe destroyer and one of the three principal gods in modern Hinduism). Like her husband, Kali is considered a ferocious, overzealous deity who often destroys life in an effort to annihilate evil. She is frequently portrayed as an ugly crone with a huge bosom, large hanging tongue and a string of human skulls around her neck. In her many hands she holds numerous weapons and the bloody head of a demon.

The image of Kali is hideous and intimidating, but for some unexplainable reason, her followers consider her a beautiful provider who fulfills the lives of all her devotees. Her supporters, many of whom most likely follow the Hindu doctrine of non-injury to living things — *ahimsa* — are willing to put aside this belief to show their reverence to an idol that can neither hear them nor help them.

As a Christian, it is difficult not to pity them and fear for their souls. God has repeatedly warned against worshipping idols and consuming food sacrificed to graven images. To do so is to deny the one true God of the Bible and enter into eternal death.

The goddess Kali is just one of several million gods and goddesses revered in the Hindu religion. Since there are so many deities, there are also many varied methods of worshipping. Hinduism is complex, constantly changing collection of beliefs and practices that has managed to incorporate aspects of many different religions, including Christianity.

Scientists and historians believe Hinduism began during pre-historic times. Statues discovered in archaeological excavations in the Punjab and Indus valleys (in modern Pakistan) show the early civilizations worshipped idols similar to some gods and goddesses worshipped by Hindus today.

### **Caste system**

Sometime around 2000 BC the inhabitants of the Indus valleys were conquered by the Aryans, a nomadic warrior clan probably from southern Russia and the Baltic. The Aryans brought with them their own culture and religion, and instituted the caste system. In this caste system, Aryans were almost always in the upper classes while the indigenous peoples remained at the bottom.

The early caste system is much like the modern one. Starting at the top are the *Brahmin* who are priests, philosophers, holy men and scholars. Next is the *Kshatriya* class who were originally warrior-rulers, but today include politicians, civil authorities and all the administrative people whom run the country. Below this class are the *Vaishya* who are trades-people. The lowest caste is the *Shudra* who include servants and unskilled laborers.

Outside the caste system are the out-castes. They perform the most menial, dirty tasks. In the original caste system instituted by the Aryans, outcastes were also untouchables. They were considered unclean and the higher castes were not permitted to make contact with them.

Untouchability was legally abolished in India during the 1940s, but outcastes still exist and often live miserable lives in modern India.

For the first few centuries after the caste system was instituted, upward mobility was possible through marriage or accomplishments. This intermarriage caused a blending of the Indus aboriginal and Aryan religious beliefs. Around 800 BC a collection of writings was composed which incorporated both culture's religious beliefs. These writings became known as the Vedas, one of the Hindu scriptures still used today. The Vedas, whose content continued to change up until the 16th century, consist of procedures for ceremonial rites, prayers, teachings and a description of the caste system.

Unlike the early caste system, there is rarely upward movement among the modern caste system. Or to be more specific, there is rarely upward movement during an individual's lifetime. A Hindu can hope to become a member of a higher caste through reincarnation if he or she has lived a good life and fulfilled all of his or her duty (*dharma*) in the previous life.

### **A still evolving religion**

Religious harmony existed for several years after the Aryan invasion. Then around 600 BC many of the previously accepted truths of early Hinduism were beginning to be questioned. This resulted in the formation of several breakaway sects, one of the better-known ones being Buddhism. By the third century BC Buddhism became India's state religion.

The new and popular religion of Buddhism had a big influence on the development of the dying Hindu religion. It wasn't long before Hinduism, in an attempt to attract followers, copied the way Buddhism used art, parables, stories and songs for religious instruction. Buddhism's influence can be seen in the *Bhagavad Gita*, another Hindu scripture created between 500 BC to 100 BC. The *Bhagavad Gita* teaches lessons about duty through a conversation between warrior-prince Arjuna and his charioteer, Krishna. Krishna is an incarnation of *Vishnu*, preserver of the universe and the second main Hindu deity. (The final principal Hindu deity is *Brahma* or *Ishvara*, the creator of the universe.)

By 1000 AD interest in Hinduism was regenerated, encouraged by the use of military force by Hindu rulers to suppress Buddhism.

The existence of Hinduism was once again threatened during the Mohammedan expansion. Around the 11th and 12th centuries Muslims sought to overpower Hindu territories (and in later years conquer Christianity) in order to assert Islam. The Muslims succeeded in their mission, but only in what are modern-day Pakistan, Bangladesh and Kashmir. These areas became Muslim, while Hinduism in India adapted and flourished.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, Hinduism went through a period referred to as the Hindu Revivalism. During this time Christians from Europe were sending missionaries to evangelize to the Hindus. It would appear that the Holy Spirit worked in the hearts of many of those Hindus. Large numbers were converted, resulting in a loss of Hindu followers. In response to the loss of worshippers, Hindu leaders reformed many Hinduism practices, assimilating some Christian beliefs such as our belief in a one, all-knowing God and, by some groups, the concept of grace.

But the Hindu concepts of God and grace are twisted. To the Hindu, grace requires forgiveness but no atonement for sins. Hindus don't acknowledge sin, but believe all the suffering in the world is a result of bad actions, referred to as bad karma. In Hindu grace, it is unclear who offers the forgiveness and why it would be necessary since sin doesn't exist.

### **One god manifesting as many gods**

The Hindu's one, great god is referred to as the Absolute Reality or Brahman. Brahman is a formless, supreme, permanent, never changing force that humans cannot completely understand.

This description could be used to define the only true God of the Bible, but the similarity goes no further.

Brahman in its great wisdom, many Hindus believe, realized that mankind would not be able to comprehend its great power. So it manifested itself in gods and goddesses that would cater to each individual's needs. These gods and goddesses, and their incarnations, manifest a small portion of their "cosmic energy" in images, sculptures, vessels, prints or elements in nature all over the world.

Hindus worship these manifestations in festivals, pilgrimages and ceremonies (*pujas*). The goal of these methods of worship is to pay respect to and make contact with one or more deities. This contact is referred to as *darshan*, literally meaning, "seeing and being seen by god."

Most of these *pujas* occur in homes, temples or shrines. Since so many Hindus worship a personal god or goddess (which explains why there are millions of deities in Hinduism), it is impossible for Hinduism to be a congregational religion. Hindu priests do not compose sermons, but act as a liaison between a deity and devotee by following the guidelines in the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita. Each deity requires a complex set of rituals to be enacted precisely in a show of respect. If the proper amount of respect is not shown to the deity, Hindus believe the punishment is severe and may occur in the present life or in future lives.

### **Three ways to "salvation"**

All Hindus believe in reincarnation (*samsara*) —which is also the most common Hindu belief adopted by New Agers — and their life goal is to stop the endless cycle of birth and rebirth by ultimately reaching a oneness with Brahman. This state of liberation or salvation, referred to as *moksha*, is accomplished in three ways.

The first way is through an individual's actions — *karma*. Hindus believe that every action or thought has consequences that will affect them in future lives. So the goal of all Hindus is to save themselves by overcoming the weight of bad karma through cheerfully fulfilling family and social duties and harming none.

The second way to *moksha* is through accumulating knowledge (*jnana*). Hindus believe that each person's soul (*atman*) is Brahman and the only reason people are chained to the cycle of rebirths is because they are ignorant of this fact. This ignorance must be overcome through deep meditation to allow reabsorption into Brahman, the supreme formless force.

The last way to salvation is through devotion (*bhakti*) to a deity and experiencing *darshan*. The levels of deity devotion vary. Some Hindus give up all worldly pleasures and family relationships to live as ascetics. These ascetics live in abject poverty, without shelter and little clothing. They spend their days praying to their personal deities and gaining *jnana*.

How effectively a person fulfills these methods to *moksha* will influence the form in which he or she will be reincarnated. Sometimes a person can return in the body of an animal. For this reason Hindus consider all animals sacred. The cow, because of its giving nature, symbolically represents all animals and is venerated by Hindus in India.

### **Conclusion**

Although the majority of Hindus are located in India, Hinduism is not as far removed from our lives as it appears to be. In Canada and the United States alone there are over 400 Hindu temples and more being built each day.

As the appeal of Hinduism increases, so does its threat to Christianity. It's a religion that constantly adapts to become what people want it to be. Each day its influence can be felt more and more, as can be seen with the New Age movement that has incorporated many Hindu beliefs.

Rick Rood of Probe Ministries says it best when he writes: "*Hinduism has the potential to serve as a major vehicle for uniting much of the non-Christian world.*" It is a religion of acceptance, tolerating other beliefs, including Christianity, as just another method to go about worshipping the same one God.

Unfortunately, for all their devotion, Hindus do not worship the one true God, but ultimately worship themselves. Hinduism is a religion that focuses on the inner power in people, instead of the power of God. It denies the need for a savior and atonement for sins, teaching that man can save himself.

As Reformed Christians we must realize this and lovingly point out to Hindus the errors of their ways through the use of the Gospel. Then we must pray for them, keeping in mind that salvation doesn't come from our evangelical efforts. We are merely vehicles God uses to bring the truth to others. It is only through the work of the Holy Spirit that Hindus, and other non-Christians, come to know the one true God and only source of salvation.

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