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Christianity and World Religions Part 3 – Hinduism
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Today we are continuing in this series of messages that was began two weeks ago called Christianity and Religions of the World. This series is very important set of messages that we hope will allow us to get a handle on the other major religions of the world. In this day when we have a global economy and labor market, you will likely have a coworker, boss, family member, or other acquaintances that are of a different faith than ours. Our hope is to gain a better understanding of people of other faiths so that we converse with them and shine the light of Jesus Christ to them. Today we will continue in looking at the Hindu religion, their history, their beliefs, and the similarities and differences that exist between it and Christianity.

As we begin today let me start out with a disclaimer. I believe Aaron stated something similar the last couple weeks. And it goes something like this. I am not an expert on Hinduism, nor do I play one on Television. I have researched many websites, books and listened to other sermons that deal with the Hindu religion. The Hindu faith is rather complex, and would most likely take a lifetime to truly understand completely. In fact some of you may know more than I do. I am simply going to share with you that which I do know.

Background

Lets begin with some background information. Hinduism developed in India and was shaped mainly from the people known as the Aryans. The word Aryan means “noble people”. There is some debate as to where these people originated, but regardless, some things about these people are clear. The Aryans were noble people, warriors, and highly educated. They had a well developed sense of theology and culture which traveled with them through Europe and Asia. The Aryans developed a pantheon of Gods that have similarities to the ancient Greek and Roman Gods.

The Aryans had influence in India dating back to 3800 bc to about 2200bc. For a sense of a timeline, remember from last week that we can date Abraham to 2000 bc, Moses to around 1200 bc, and King David to around 1000 bc. In fact, at the time that David was writing the Old Testament Psalms, the earliest Hindu scriptures, the Vedas, were also being written down.

Just as we do with our Bible, the Hindus regard a number of books from a wide variety of time periods as sacred texts. There are many more sacred texts in Hinduism than there is in Christianity. The Vedas are considered to be writings that come directly from God and are the highest written authority in Hinduism. The Rig-Veda, for example, has 1,028 chapters, or epic poems that are generally the length of our psalms. They include some stories that are mythological along with some that are historical recorded facts. Some focus on the relationship of the Gods with nature and to human kind, while others describe the human condition and in what direction, or what things, we should strive for. Many of the poems are quite beautiful. The Rig-Veda is just one of four Vedic books, which the Hindus believe were given to Vedic sages directly. These Vedas were passed down in oral traditions until around 1000 bc, when they were finally written down.

The Upanishads, are inspired by God and are more like a commentary on the Vedas. These texts were reflections of the Vedic sages and were written from about 800bc and continued into the period after the time of Christ.

Finally, the Hindus revere a book of poetry called the Mahabharata. This book is the longest poetic work in human history and includes more than 100,000 verses. Within this book is a smaller story called the Bhagavad-Gita which is said to contain the essence of the Vedas. The Bhagavad-Gita is the most prominent of the Hindu texts, and it is said, that no Hindu home is complete without a copy of it. The Bhagavad-Gita is a story of Lord Krishna, who is a human incarnation of one of the Gods, talking to Arjuna. Arjuna is a human being representing all humanity. Arjuna is struggling on a battlefield and is asking Krishna questions like "What is the meaning of life, and what are we to do with our lives?" Krishna responds by calling Arjuna and all humanity to a life of self sacrifice and to the pursuit of wisdom. These are similar things that Jesus calls us to.

This is just a small sample of the background of the Hindu religion.

Beliefs

It is impossible for me to explain all of the Hindu beliefs in this sermon. I will just be mentioning a few of them and say that you may want to examine others on your own.

Many would consider Hinduism to be polytheistic because there are as many as 330 million gods and goddesses. Yet, when a Hindu speaks of God, they speak in the singular, and their sacred scripture says that there is only one true God. The Hindu word for this one true God is Brahman. Brahman is the God above all, and is yet in all. He is unknowable, without personality, and is holding all wisdom. He is the God of complete bliss and our soul is actually part of him. The picture is of a God that is a life force and not a personal being.

And then there is a different side to the one true God. On one hand you have an impersonal, unknowable Brahman, and on the other you have a God that is personal and knowable through the many different gods and goddesses. These gods and goddesses make the unknowable God, knowable. It is also true that some Hindus worship before statues, or idols, of these gods, and offer sacrifices to each god. But the well informed Hindu believes that these are just different manifestations of the one true God.

The next aspect of the Hindu beliefs deals with the human soul. It is believed that your soul is actually God within us, and it longs to be reunited with God. This "God within" is called **Atman**. Now, because a divine God is within us, we are not marred by sin, just ignorance. We don't fully understand reality or what it really means to be human.

Anand Bhattacharyya is a leader of a Hindu temple in the Kansas City area. In an interview with another pastor, Adam Hamilton, he describes the human condition this way. "We are not born sinners, because we have divinity in ourselves. We have the divine spirit in us, through which we can do great things. But we are ignorant of that. That's why we do bad things."

So then, our struggle is not with sin, but ignorance. When we do bad things, even when God is in us, we do them because we do not fully understand or recognize the truth. We

are unable to see spiritual truths and recognize our destiny, therefore the path to salvation, is to obtain knowledge.

To a Hindu we can achieve salvation through the gaining of spiritual knowledge. This spiritual knowledge is what will ultimately set us free. There are some words that I would like to touch on now, that are essential to the Hindu beliefs, **Dharma, Karma, Reincarnation, Moksha, and Nirvana.**

Dharma means “duty”. By doing their duty and searching for spiritual knowledge the Hindu believes they can be released from this cycle of death and rebirth and achieve salvation. **Karma**, or the law of Karma, refers to deeds or thoughts. Hindus believe that throughout life we do good and bad things as well as have bad and good thoughts. The results of these actions or thoughts deposit good or bad karma into something like a spiritual bank account. Just like the karma that Aaron discussed last week. Upon death, we are then reincarnated in to another life that is determined by the amount of good verses bad karma that we had acquired through our previous lives. The fact that there is suffering is explained through the bad actions or thoughts, karma, that we have built up in prior lives. As a Hindu, your goal in this life is to gain more good karma so that you are progressing towards spiritual knowledge that will someday set you free from the cycle of death and rebirth.

Just as the Buddhist that Aaron talked about last week, so to do the Hindus believe in reincarnation. In a nutshell, **reincarnation** is the cycle of death and rebirth that over thousands or millions of cycles, allows you to be united with the one true God. The Hindu beliefs on reincarnation have some similarities, and differences than what we discussed last week. They believe that through the cycle of death and rebirth, along with the practice different yogas, you continually move up through a spiritual caste system, until the time comes when you are released. This is where there is a noticeable difference between Buddhist reincarnation, and the reincarnation of the Hindus. Remember that in Buddhism, this release is seen as an extinguishing of you and your soul. The Hindu belief is that your soul, which is divine, is to return to the one true God like a rain drop returns to the ocean. You, or your soul, is absorbed or united with God. The ultimate goal is to unite your soul with the eternal soul.

What happens when we have finally enough spiritual knowledge, and rid ourselves of the bad karma in our lives, and are released from this cycle? Well, to a Hindu, we receive salvation, or “moksha”. **Moksha** is the release from this human condition of suffering and ignorance on earth. Once we are released, we unite our soul with the soul of God in a state called “**nirvana**”. Some Hindus believe that when this stage is complete, that there is nothing left to the individual. The individual is simply absorbed into God and nothing is left. Other Hindus believe thought that rather than joining the eternal spirit like a drop water enters the ocean, that we are more like a fish that retains it's identity that is in the ocean but is separate from it.

Differences between Christianity and Hinduism

These are some basic understandings of the Hindu beliefs, now let us take a moment to see where the Christian gospels differ from Hinduism.

When we read about the God of Hinduism and about the God of the Christian Bible, we see some similarities, but some even greater differences. The true nature of God in the Hindu faith, is that God is everything and in everything. Everything that is, is an aspect of God. God is unknowable, impersonal, and can only be understood through the portals or icons of the gods and goddesses. In contrast, the Christian view of God is one of a God who created all things, but is not all things. We are the handiwork of God. The human soul is not God, but is created in the likeness of God. Also, we believe, God has created us to be in relation with him here on Earth. In fact, the entire Bible show story after story of a God who wants to be with and serve us. It is us who deny him and stray from him. It is us who abandon him and curse his name. In spite of all these things, he still sent his son to die on a cross for our sins. This truly is a sign of a personal, relational God.

There are other differences as well when it comes to our respective perceptions of God. In Hinduism we see that in order to relate to God, people worship and turn to statues and idols. Where in the Bible it clearly states: **"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God,..." Exodus 4:4-5** Why would God command this of us? There are two reasons that I see. One is that I believe that we are incapable of fully comprehending the glory and majesty of God, and to create a statue, or idol, of him would pale. And secondly, God knows that we tend to forget that icons are meant to be a representation of the creator, not the creator himself. We are meant to worship only he who creates us, not his handiwork.

Finally, lets look at the differences in how Christians and Hindus look at life after death. In Hinduism you die and are reborn into a cycle where your ultimate goal is release into nirvana. So, you essentially have multiple chances to get things "right." Scripture tells us that we are born once. What we do in this life determines what we do in the next. Essentially we get one shot, to get things right. Also, remember that in Hinduism, your soul is actually part of God which makes you divine. Therefore sin is not the human condition, rather ignorance is. Scripture tells us that we are born sinners. The apostle Paul rights about this sin in Romans 7: 6-8. **The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind^d is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.** Paul describes the nature of man is sin, and that a soul filled with sin is separated from God, while a soul filled with the Holy Spirit is given peace and life abundant. Not life abundant upon death, but life abundant here on earth. I would like to share the testimony of a man in the church that I believe shows this abundant life. **(David Hamilton Letter)**

I do have an appreciation for the Hindu faith and its people. The Hindu emphasis on duty and pursuing goodness and their dedication to meditation and quiet prayer, are qualities that we should all strive to emulate. All of these things we share. However at the heart of the two faiths there is a distinct difference on the view of why we are here, and where we are going. You see, salvation is not achieved from the building up of good karma or works. Salvation was achieved on the back of Jesus. God grants us salvation and paid the ultimate price for it. He wants us to be in relation with him bad enough that he would take on all our sin, or bad karma, place it on his back and make the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf. So that whoever believes in Jesus Christ shall not die, but have everlasting life in heaven, and abundant life on earth.

