

10 The nature of man - What Hindus believe

Hinduism

Hinduism is an ethnic religion, confined to India, or to Indians who have emigrated to other countries and taken their religion with them. Generally speaking, Hindus do not attempt to propagate their faith. Because it is an ethnic religion, Hinduism has survived a variety of influences and yet remains distinct.

Hinduism evolved between 1500 and 500 BC, roughly from the time of the Exodus from Egypt to the return from the Babylonian exile. At about the start of this period, invaders entered the Indus valley in the north west of India (modern Punjab). Their language was Sanskrit, akin to ancient Greek, and they were Aryans - belonging to a fair skinned Indo-European family of races.

Hinduism is the world's fourth largest religion, after Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. There are more than a billion adherents, of whom nearly all live in India, though there are Hindus in Nepal, Bangladesh and the Indonesian island of Bali.

Creation and the caste system

In Hinduism, all human beings are not the same - they belong to different castes, and are regarded as though they were different species, which should not mix or intermarry.

The Rig-veda is an ancient Indian sacred collection of hymns written in the Sanskrit language. It seems to have been composed in India, roughly between 1700-1100 BC - probably around the same time as Genesis.

The basis of the caste system is in a creation story in the Rig-Veda that describes the origin of everything from a giant called Purusha, whom the gods sacrificed and divided until his various parts become the earth, the sun, the moon, the animals, and the different castes of human beings.

There are four castes in Hindu society:

- Priests
- Warriors
- Farmers and merchants
- Labourers, who serve the other castes

are regarded as different species - like cats and dogs, and it is not right or proper that they should mix.

Finally, there are people of no caste, Untouchables.

Some things to discuss

Does the Bible teach that some races are better than others? Can you think of any passages of scripture that explain this? (Acts 17:26 or Galatians 3:28 might help).



How has the Hindu understanding of creation affected their beliefs and the way they live. What can we learn from this?

Think back to the time of the Exodus, when all the nations around Israel worshipped false gods. Can you see any echo of this in the Hindu religion?



Karma

Another major plank in Hinduism is that of constant re-birth. The principle that leads to the notion of rebirth is the doctrine of 'karma' which means action. To a Hindu every thought or deed has consequences; a man's actions in one life, good or bad, bear fruit in the next; and when he dies there is an accumulation of 'karma', merit and guilt, remaining to be worked off. His accumulated 'score' determines his status in the next life, which may be as a priest, an outcast, a woman, a dog or a plant. The law of karma is thus that 'selves are constantly getting the justice they deserve'.



A Hindu temple in northern India

But the fruit of the law of karma is in reality a sort of fatalism. People get what is their karma, and a person's moral and spiritual state are the result of a former life - they are predestined. This leads to an acceptance of poverty, sickness, and the apparently callous attitude to suffering.

Some things to discuss

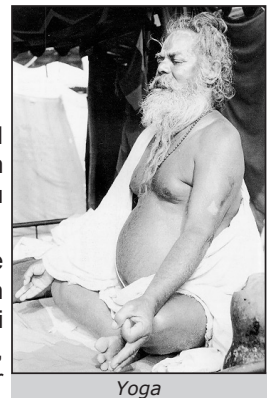
How does the idea of karma compare with what the Bible teaches about salvation?



Nirvana

Hindus believe that rebirth continues until a desire for this world ceases: the goal is 'nirvana', or liberation and release from the endless cycle of rebirth. There are various ways in Hindu philosophy of moving towards nirvana:

- Meditation - 'Closing out all external objects, focusing the eyes between the eyebrows, making equal the inhalation and exhalation of the breath through the nostrils. The yogi who meditates with his senses, mind and reason controlled, who is intent on nirvana and who has cast out desire, fear



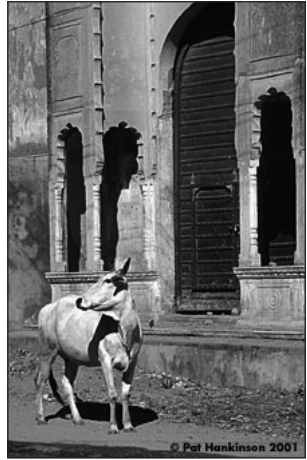
Yoga

and anger, he is liberated forever.'

- Knowledge - 'not the body, nor the mind which receives them, nor even the intelligence which dominates the mind, but the very self behind and within all these'. This sounds similar to the concept of the (personal) immortal soul.
- Action - carrying out the obligations duties of society
- Devotion - the worshipper dedicates his actions and their consequences to an adored god. This is what appeals to most Hindus, and it forms the common impression of what being a Hindu means. It is manifested in gaudy processions, reverencing statues to innumerable painted and decorated gods, Krishna worship, and ecstatic and sometimes violent behaviour.

Sacred cows

In Hinduism, cows are considered sacred they are protected creatures. A cow is symbolic of abundance, of the sanctity of all life and of the earth that gives much while asking nothing in return. Most Hindus respect the cow as a matriarchal figure for her gentle qualities and providing nurturing milk and its products for a largely vegetarian diet. Hindus do not worship the cow, yet it holds an honoured place in society and most will not eat beef in general.



Nirvana - what do you think?

Are Christians called upon to meditate? (A clue: Genesis 24:63, Joshua 1:8, Psalm 1:1-2) How does this compare with Hindu meditation?



What do you think the value of Christian meditating might be?