

Our Neighbor's Faith – Hinduism (Vedanta)

History and Description¹

When talking about religions, sometimes people use the word “faith” as though it were interchangeable with the word “religion” – a synonym. However, “faith” has a connotation and an implication that you have faith *in* something or someone. This can apply more naturally in religions like Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. However, for teachings like Buddhism and Hinduism, the word doesn't fit as well.

All of this is to say, it is good to recognize that different religions have different goals, different starting places, different worldviews, and different outlooks. To talk about “salvation” or “redemption” would make little or no sense to individuals who come from a religious background that doesn't have “sin” as part of its vocabulary. As we have these conversations, we look to draw parallels and learn from other traditions; however, we must be conscious of our differences as well, especially when the amount of overlap is slimmer.

That being said, Hinduism dates back four to five thousand years, predating Christianity and putting it somewhere alongside Judaism in terms of its origins. Hinduism encompasses many different spiritual traditions and practices, but the various sects are unified by their reliance on ancient texts called the Vedas as the primary source of inspiration and the basis for philosophy and spiritual practice. “Veda” means “knowledge” in Sanskrit, and the Vedas are considered to be timeless truths revealed to anonymous sages. This is one of a number of traits that parallels Buddhism (the central unifying factor being a collection of teachings), which is not surprising considering the geographical overlap of the two religions.

The primary philosophy based on the Vedas is called Vedanta, meaning “the culmination of the Vedas.” There are four Vedas, and each one has four parts. The last and most philosophical part of each Veda contains the Upanishads, which are climactic texts on which the Vedantic philosophy of Hinduism is based.

There are three main schools of Vedantic philosophy, categorized according to how the relationship between God (Brahman) and creation is understood. There is school of dualism, where God and creation are considered separate; the school of qualified nondualism, where creation is seen as the parts and God the whole; and the school of nondualism, or Advaita, where God and creation are seen as united. Each approach tries to address the universal and timeless mystery: the relationship between God, humankind, and nature.

“Brahman” is a term common to all schools of Vedanta, used much in the same way “God” is used in other religious traditions: it refers to the highest, most exalted entity, the Absolute. According to Vedantic philosophy, the goal of life is to establish an ultimate union with this ultimate reality.

In Advaita Vedantism, as taught by Shankaracharya, a seventh-century philosopher-saint, God and creation are united, and this universe that we live in is an illusion of the one reality with which union is the goal. All that we see and experience merely appears to be real. The power of Brahman to project this apparent reality is known as *maya*. Ignorance causes us to perceive what we see and experience as real. (This is the school of thought we'll use for our discussion until further notice.)

¹ Honoring Our Neighbor's Faith, Augsburg Fortress, 2016, pp. 62-66.

Humans' true nature is divine, emerging from Brahman. We fail to realize our own divine nature because we believe what our senses tell us, taking in what seems to be a finite, divided, changing universe that follows laws of causation, and assuming that that is reality. Our genetic programming, as well as our scientific worldview, make us identify with our body and mind, making us feel finite and separated from the rest of the universe, and therefore subject to change, disease, and death.

So, the goal of life as understood by Hinduism is to see through our mistake and realize our true nature. As seen within the illusion of space and time, we are individual souls, or *jivas*, seeking to be reunited with that absolute Brahman, called the *Paramatman*.

This is where the teaching of *karma* comes in. Within this world of time, space, and causation, things appear to work in certain ways. For every action there is a reaction, including our own actions thoughts, and desires. The law of karma states that until one transcends this relative plane of existence and is united with Brahman, every action *will* have its reaction. Our karma (actions) may not bear fruit in this life but may be stored until a future life. At the time of death, if an individual has not yet realized their divine nature, the soul may experience after death heavenly or hellish realms until they reincarnate in a new body.

This apparent universe can be thought of as a dream of Brahman, who has projected this universe and entered into it, just like we might enter a dream world when we sleep. Our dream world often has little reality compared to our waking state. Similarly, our perception of the world has no reality when compared to the realization of God. So, because the world is a misperception of reality, we experience uncertainty about it. We won't get past our misperceptions of Brahman until we move beyond it, where such questions won't arise. So we don't understand that Brahman and the universe are one, but see them as separate, dual, and use the language of Brahman "creating" the world as a divine play (*lila*).

Through our lens of misperception, the One appears manifest as many, and manifests in pairs of opposites. Think of Brahman like a stringed instrument: music is like the creation. The vibrations of the sound occur equally in both directions, as pairs of opposites. The vibrations resonate differently on different planes – such as the world, our mentality, or heavenly places – like octaves of each other.

Some of the Hindu gods and goddesses that you might have heard of are products of these dualities, like Rama/Sita and Krishna/Radha. There are many more. Some sects see god/goddess pairs to personify the three aspects of the manifest world: creation, preservation, and destruction. Other sects see all three aspects in one deity. Whatever the case, all the various gods and goddesses of Hinduism are but aspects of Brahman as seen through maya.

Our *true* nature is infinite, undivided, and unchanging, so we naturally seek to find those qualities within this world. Our yearning for freedom, love, and peace in this world can be seen as our attempt at discovering, respectively, our true infinite, undivided, and unchanging nature. In the world, though, the more we get of one, the less we get of the other two. Only through spiritual practices can one "wake up" to their lost nature and find absolute freedom, love, and peace. Hinduism recognizes that all religious paths can lead one to God, and all the seeming contradictions disappear when the goal is realized.

Here is some general advice on how to "wake up": Remember that your true nature is divine and that, after a series of life cycles through reincarnation, you will reach the goal. Accept

yourself where you are, and go forward from there. Choose the path that best fits your temperament and your natural inclinations, and give your activities a spiritual turn. The goal is to realize or attain your oneness with God, and the two main obstacles are forgetting that the world is God in disguise and thus getting distracted, and letting your ego think you are separate and different from others.

Spiritual practices, or *yogas*, help one realize their true nature. Four common *yogas* are Karma Yoga (pursuing the path of selfless action); Jnana Yoga (affirming your true nature, perhaps with mantras); Bhakti Yoga (developing a loving relationship with a personal aspect of God, relating everything in your life to your chosen deity, performing ceremonies called *puja* or worship); and Raja Yoga (gaining control over the mind through meditation and/or mantras).

All of the preceding comes from the Advaita, or nondualistic, school of Vedanta. The others were qualified nondualism (rather than thinking you are one with God, you think you are a part of God like a spark from the fire), and dualism (you and God are separate, and the goal is to be eternally in God's presence).

Sometimes Hinduism is divided into groups according to which deity is the primary focus of worship (even though all the deities are manifestations of the one Absolute, Brahman). Another variation on Advaita Vedanta is called Tantra, where this world is seen as nothing but Shakti, the power of Brahman (as opposed to a projection/dream), which is Brahman in disguise to be worshiped as Divine Mother.

Hinduism is not a centrally-organized religion. It didn't start from one person or group from which others broke away. Many temples are independent entities. Traditionally, study of the scriptures was done by independent teachers (*gurus*) who had experienced God in a transcendental way, who then would offer initiation into certain spiritual practices. It was primarily one group of Hindus, the Brahman caste of India, who were responsible for learning the scriptures. Most Hindu homes have a family shrine where their chosen deity can be worshiped every day.

There are some Hindu organizations with centers throughout India and the world, with the Ramakrishna Order being one of the largest. It is inspired by Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886), who lived in Bengal, India. He followed all paths already discussed as well as Christian and Islamic traditions and realized the same oneness with God through each, proving that the same goal can be reached by various paths. There are fifteen centers in the U.S. headed by swamis of the Ramakrishna Order founded by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), a disciple of Ramakrishna.

Think back to the different goals of different religions discussed at the beginning – because Hinduism accepts all traditions as valid approaches to God, most Hindu groups have no “missionary zeal,” no need to “convert” others. Vedantic philosophy is adaptable to any culture and country.

Statistics: As of 2010, there were 641,186 practicing Hindus in the United States, in 1,625 congregations. (For comparison, the ELCA was at 4,181,219 and 9,846.)

Experience

Like with Buddhism, there is so much variety and autonomy within Hindu schools of thought and practices, there isn't anything like a "denominational" website to point you towards. If you do some searching of your own, remember to check your sources before getting too deep. There are around a half dozen Hindu centers that show up in a map search of the greater Richmond area.

Do you have any experiences with Hindu practices or worship to share?

Comparison with the ELCA²:

<u>Hinduism</u>	<u>ELCA</u>
1. Understand Brahman as the Absolute; however, Brahman is seen as various manifestations, such as Rama/Sita and Krishna/Radha.	1. Believe in personal, triune God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. These persons remain unchanged through eternity.
2. Believe the universe is an illusion, a misperception of the one reality that is Brahman.	2. Believe all things are created by God and are subject to God. God is separate from creation, which includes humans.
3. Believe our goal in life is to realize that we are one with Brahman.	3. Teach that we are alienated from God, but through Christ's death, we are saved and brought back to God.
4. Believe in karma, the law of cause and effect.	4. Believe that although humans have the freedom to disobey God, all is under the umbrella of God's law and grace.
5. Teach that the path to realizing our oneness with Brahman may take many lifetimes, in which we may take many forms.	5. Teach that we are created as unique humans, and we each have one earthly life.
6. Worship in the form of meditation, repetition of mantras or holy words. Remembering and honoring Brahman with offerings of flowers, food, and incense.	6. Liturgical pattern based on the tradition of the Western church.
7. No overall government. Generally, spiritual direction is provided by the head of the local center, often with an elected board of directors.	7. Interdependent congregational, regional, national, and global expressions of the church are characterized by democratic decision making, strong ecumenical relationships, elected leadership, and an ordained ministry.

What we Lutherans can learn...

Among other things:

1. By placing Hinduism as a kind of mirror alongside Lutheran Christianity, it may help us to better articulate our own sense of the relationship between Creator and created.

² Ibid.

2. Some branches of Christianity seem to focus on one conversion experience in their past that defines the rest of their lives. Christians might learn something from Hindus when it comes to their religious journey being a lifelong search for understanding and enlightenment.

Let's pray:

Almighty and eternal God, gather into your embrace all those who call out to you under different names. Bring an end to fighting between religions, and make us more faithful witnesses of the love made known to us in your Son; we especially pray today for our sisters and brothers in the community of Hinduism. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.