



23. What Is Hinduism And How Does It Relate To Christianity?

Hinduism is the name given by Westerners to the mass of ancestral belief and custom, social as well as religious, practised in India from time immemorial. It is older than any of the other religions to be considered in this series, except perhaps Judaism. It may be compared with the polytheistic religions of the Greeks and Romans, the Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians, and the ancient religions of the near-Eastern contemporaries of the Hebrews.

The beginnings of Hinduism lie in the worship, by the original inhabitants of India of the powers of nature. Invaders from the north brought their own social structure and beliefs. The social structure crystallised into the rigid divisions of caste - the Brahmins or priests, the Kshatriyas or Warriors, the Vaisyas or Farmers, and the Sudras or servants. Only members of the first three castes can be initiated into the full practice of Hinduism by a Brahmin. They are then said to be 'twice-born'. What follows is a brief summary of the developed set of beliefs sometimes called 'Brahminism'.

There is one supreme god, known as Atma or Brahman. It is neither masculine or feminine, and is completely unknowable. It is all that really exists. It manifests itself and may be worshipped as Brahma (Creator), Vishnu (Preserver), or Siva (Destroyer). Most Hindus are devotees either of Vishnu or Siva.

All the gods may manifest themselves in human forms as 'avatars', which may themselves be worshipped. Thus, Rama and Krishna are avatars of Vishnu. But Hinduism also embraces the many other nature-gods worshipped by the people of India. All are, ultimately, manifestations of the three emanations of Brahman. By faithfully observing the rituals and precepts of Hinduism, the devout Hindu will eventually be reborn as a Brahmin. Once he fully realises his own identity with Brahman, he will be released from the cycle of separate existence.

The Hindu holy books are: the Vedas or hymns, written down about 1,500 BC; the Brahmins or ritual instructions (1,000-650 BC); the Upanishads (mystical works - 400-200 BC); and the Bhagavad-Gita (200 BC) The latter, incorporated within the Mahabharata, the great Indian epic, sets out the way

one should behave and think to escape the cycle of reincarnation.

One must live appropriately to the caste into which one is born; one must be devoted to Krishna, trusting him totally; one's actions must be guided by the inherent value of those actions, not by any benefit hoped for. There are three ways of gaining liberation from reincarnation: the way of knowledge; the way of action (for its own sake); and the way of devotion.

The true answer to the question, 'How does Hinduism relate to Christianity?' is, 'Hardly at all'. Hinduism is not, at heart, a set of beliefs but a way of life. Hinduism is amorphous, Christianity highly structured; Hinduism holds that, ultimately, everything is God; orthodox Christians would deny this. Hinduism, lacking a creed, is inclusive; it can absorb many beliefs and practices that, historically, Christians have found abhorrent.

Most Hindus have no difficulty with the concept of Jesus as God incarnate. They cannot however accept the exclusivity of the claims of Christianity. Yet, while there is much in Hinduism that orthodox Christians find unacceptable, the concept of a transcendent God underlying and pervading the whole of creation remains attractive.

The Hindu greeting, '*Namaste*', meaning 'I recognise the god in you' is, we may hope, one that we will all ultimately be able to use truthfully to each other.

In later articles, we shall look at some very different religions which have reacted to Hinduism.