

An Outsider's Perspective

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Overview of Christian Approaches to Hinduism

Christian approaches to Hinduism are diverse, but tend to study sacred texts, ways of life, or philosophy. Hinduism resists the definition of religion with which one usually approaches other traditions because it is a tradition full of different, sometimes even contradictory, beliefs and practices. Both the diverse nature of Hinduism itself and Christian apprehension about studying such a broad historical reality have led scholars generally to specialize in only the sacred texts, rituals, or philosophy of Hinduism.

Less doctrinally concerned than Western religions, Hinduism is both the context for meaning in life and the product of meanings discovered, and it is sometimes codified as divinely revealed. It has no one founder, set of creeds, or foundational set of ethical precepts. Thus by choosing what part of this ancient and varied tradition to study, one runs the risk of reducing Hinduism to just a philosophy, set of practices, or specific canon. None of these approaches do justice to the myriad components that form the Hindu religion. Partial approaches may be necessary, but certainly skew the understanding of outsiders, just as studying the New Testament, Roman Catholic sacraments, or Thomas Aquinas out of context would skew the perception

of an outsider seeking to understand Christianity. Yet because Hinduism is such a vast topic—perhaps more so than most religions—a reductionist method of study seems necessary in order to tell a coherent story, rather than assemble a scattered collection of informational sound bites.

Western scholars of religions typically decide to approach the study of Hinduism by narrating its historical development; however, some proceed topically, describing various practices and texts as discrete items that seem able to be rendered intelligible in isolation. Yet, like Christianity, Hinduism integrates textual reading with ritual practice and everyday action in the world such that isolating its components fails to fully portray Hinduism as the believable and pervasive system that millions take for granted. Hinduism is experienced by Hindus as a reasonable, explanatory worldview just as Christianity is experienced by Christians as a reasonable, explanatory worldview.

As is true for all religions, Hinduism appears to its followers not as *an* option among many but as *the* option. Hindus think their religion offers the fullest, most encompassing explanation of the world and religious diversity in the world, just as Christians tend to believe Christianity offers the best explanation of the world and the multiplicity of religions. With its many gods and goddesses, who are understood as manifestations

of Brahman or the ultimate, Hinduism understands the entire world as related to and frequently even manifesting the divine. Far from what is seen as polytheism by Westerners, the multiplicity of gods in Hinduism signals the pervasive presence of the One who is present throughout the world, in all facets of life. Any approach to Hinduism, whether historical or topical, should be seen as but a snapshot of a system of life so pervasive that the believability of other religions seems impossible to its members. Just as Christianity seems the only or obvious choice to many Christians, the collection of texts, beliefs, and practices labeled "Hinduism" appears to be the best and brightest choice for many followers. As with medieval and even Enlightenment Christians, Hindus generally do not know enough about other religions to consider them viable options.

The diversity of religions in the world and within Hinduism itself is better honored by the dialogical method used in this book than by a topical or historical approach. This chapter is a self-conscious simplification. Like all outsider perspectives it cannot fully capture the diversity, dynamism, and experience of Hinduism. The following overview of typical information about and approaches to Hinduism should be read in anticipation of the dialogic process that informs the rest of part 3.

Writing about a religious tradition as though it is a static system either renders it lifeless or makes it obvious that one is an outsider. The description of Hinduism in this chapter reflects the perspective of an interested outsider to the Hindu tradition, and exemplifies how Christians are taught to teach Hinduism. Until recently, training in "Eastern religions" focused on presenting facts, with great attention to dates and figures and individual beliefs, but rarely attempted to help them come alive as reasonable and sophisticated cosmologies. Instead, the training tended to presume that other religions were primitive



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The OM symbol represents the primordial sound of creation. Chanting OM during meditation connects breath and sound and allows one to commune with the vibration of the universe.

and suffered from magical thinking not exhibited in Christianity, which was thought to be more advanced. Yet dialogue with Hinduism, and more importantly with Hindu friends and colleagues, has brought Hinduism alive for me and made clear that this "foreign" religion asks and answers many of the same questions as Christianity. Dialogue with trusted, respected, and most of all loved members of another religion begins the process of bringing an outsider into the fold of a religion that can otherwise only be studied theoretically. The proto-insider status received in dialogue is shared in chapter 12.

The Hindu Way

The notion of *sanatana dharma* provides a good starting point for thinking about Hinduism; few words or practices convey so well the pervasive significance of Hinduism in the lives of its members. *Sanatana dharma* is sometimes translated as "the eternal way," with no beginning and no end. It refers to how the world is caused to be at every moment through its relationship to and

dependence on the divine, and especially to how one's own existence and activity participates in this being. Adherents' participation in the way sustains the order of the world as it goes through cosmic cycles to its next stage. People are but participants in a universal whole—something modern Western individualism has perhaps lost sight of. Every aspect of Hinduism should be understood as related to the perpetuation of sanatana dharma. The creation of texts, reading of texts, meditation, caste delineations, dietary practices, rituals, stages of life, and metaphysical pronouncements all serve and should be conducted in honor of sanatana dharma.

Sacred Texts

Hindus can choose to privilege one set of sacred texts over another. They may disagree about which are most transformative or most important, and may call beloved those containing the most voluminous or most famous stories about the deity around which their bhakti or personal devotion centers. Unlike Christianity, which considers the whole Bible—the Old and New Testaments—sacred and calls Christians to regard all the books of the Bible equally sacred and worthy of attention, Hinduism allows believers to determine for themselves the relative importance of the many Hindu texts.

The Vedas

The Vedas are the oldest collection of writings, thought to have been written down during the first millennium BCE after centuries of oral transmission. They are primarily made up of hymns, rituals, and stories and are one of several collections considered to be pure *shruti*, or

revelation. Those who wrote the Vedas, as well as other texts considered to be *shruti*, are regarded as compilers or collectors rather than authors. Hindus believe that the eternal, or Brahman, literally gave the Vedas as they are; they are not considered interpreted or affected by those who took down the information.

The Upanishads

This collection of the most mystical texts of Hinduism are also considered *shruti*. Unlike Vedic concern with ritual, the Upanishads' primary concern is with right relationship with Brahman, or ultimate reality. Compiled later than the Vedas, the Upanishads direct persons to look inward for transcendent reality instead of outward to ritual practice or devotion. These texts urge hearers or readers to locate Brahman inside themselves as the all-pervading reality. The body and worldly reality are impermanent and will pass away. Only by turning inward does one discover one's true self and the source of that self, joining the two at the moment of discovery. As in all religions, this mystical discovery may occur powerfully and dramatically all at once, with the insight recurring in different circumstances. The Upanishads paint a picture of spiritual practice that transcends the particular details of one's life. Mystical and esoteric, the Upanishads are frequently singled out in the West as the highest expression of Hindu spirituality.

Ramayana

Epics are another important part of Hindu sacred literature. The epic Ramayana concerns dharma, or duty in relationship. It relates the story of Prince Rama, who is an avatar—an incarnation—of the Hindu god Vishnu.¹ Rama

1. The doctrine of Dasavatara, or Ten Avatars, holds that Vishnu has ten earthly incarnations, including five animal and five human forms. Each incarnation is intended to meet a particular spiritual need of that time. The last avatar, Kalki, is a mighty warrior expected to appear in the future to end the current age of moral decline known as the Kali Yuga.

is wrongly exiled by his father because of his stepmother's jealousy, but he loyally obeys his father, despite the injustice of the command. His wife, Sita, and brother, Lakshman, follow him into exile, obedient as brother and wife just as Rama is obedient as a son. Duty in the Ramayana is all about loyalty and doing as one ought, even when doing one's duty seems unjust.

The Bhagavad Gita

The Mahabharata also teaches the reader about duty and is best-known for containing the Bhagavad Gita, or the story of Lord Krishna, another avatar of Vishnu, and the archer Arjuna. An expert marksman, Arjuna finds himself forced to engage in battle with members of his family and community. Knowing that he will triumph and have to kill people he cares about, he turns to his charioteer for support. The charioteer, God in disguise, instructs Arjuna to do his duty, withdrawing his attention from good or bad consequences. Though the text outwardly champions doing one's duty, at a deeper level it explores spiritual attitudes. Expressing the roots of karma yoga or the path of action and bhakti yoga or the path of devotion, the Bhagavad Gita urges people to relinquish the fruits of action, caring not for outcomes but offering everything to the transcendent. With this detached, transcendental understanding comes peace and joy.

Laws of Manu

The Laws of Manu, another key Hindu text, is sometimes viewed by outsiders as antithetical in spirit to that of the Gita. The Laws originated in response to the spread of Buddhism in

the second century BCE, attempting to solidify Hindu ways of life so that the newer Buddhist system would appear a radical departure from Hinduism rather than a variant of Hindu belief and practice.² Especially because Buddhism offered the possibility of men and women becoming monks and nuns, with greater gender and caste equality, the Laws codified gender norms and the duties of the untouchable caste. The Laws deal with social organization and rules for conduct, reinforcing caste hierarchy and responsibilities as part of dharma. Caste rigidly designates one's place in society—whether priest, worker, or untouchable. One is born into a caste and remains there for life, regardless of one's work ethics or level of education. The social and ethical norms that bind a person in his or her caste reflect and enforce a traditional patriarchal and hierarchical culture.

The Puranas

The Puranas consist of eighteen poetic texts, divided equally into three categories, each named for a god: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. The appearance of three gods explains why Christians have, until recently, spoken of a Hindu Trinity. Currently, Christians studying religion usually take care not to project their beliefs on the foreign system being studied, but until recently scholars tended to fit Hindu gods into a Christian framework. This practice misrepresents Hinduism and reflects the belief that Christianity is superior to Hinduism.

One of the most beloved texts in the Puranas is the Bhagavata Purana, which tells Krishna's life story, including the famous tale of him stealing butter as a little boy and running off to

2. Historians believe that the Laws of Manu and the Bhagavad Gita were written as part of a Hindu resurgence against the growing popularity of Buddhism. The Laws of Manu reflects a need to preserve the power and traditions of priestly orthodoxy, and the Bhagavad Gita influences the rise of medieval bhakti traditions. The Bhagavad Gita's teaching of acting in relinquishment also shows the clear influence of Buddhist ideals of freeing oneself of desire.



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Krishna as an infant or young child is a prominent object of bhakti, and worshipers often recite stories about his mischievous antics, such as stealing butter from the neighbors' larders.

the forest to play music and wear flowers. There is perhaps no greater example of and justification for enjoying earthly pleasures than this story, immortalized in Hindu art and song.

Historical Developments

The Vedic Religion

The term *Vedic religion* refers to the ancient traditions that reflect the Aryan migration into the Indian subcontinent (1700-1300 BCE) and that were incorporated into what is now known as Hinduism. The Vedic religion was not a unified, monolithic tradition. It included such a diversity of beliefs and practices that one might question

whether it should be thought of as a single religion at all. Though one ought never to forget that beliefs and practices in Vedic society were incredibly diverse, there are some common elements. The central ceremony in much ancient Vedic ritual life was the fire sacrifice. Controlled by Brahmins, or priests, the fire sacrifice invoked what was thought of as the breath behind all existence. This absolute reality, both formless and not entirely distinct from the self, later came to be known as Brahman. Brahman, or the absolute, proved difficult to worship because of the necessity of priestly (Brahmanic) intercession, so personal devotion to particular gods or manifestations of Brahman came to dominate Vedic practice. Because of the multiplicity of these particular manifestations, Westerners frequently misunderstood Hinduism as polytheistic. The "gods" in Hinduism are not causes of the world, but manifestations of the one cause of the world, Brahman.

Classical Hinduism

The Samkhya System

Samkhya is possibly the oldest philosophical system in India—yet it remains an influential school of philosophy. It predates Vedic civilization and is said to have been founded by the semimythical figure Kapila. Strongly dualistic, Samkhya holds that reality is constituted by two principles: *purusha*, the unchanging self, and *prakriti*, the changing cause of the physical world. Purusha is beyond cause, eternal and free; prakriti is the ordinary, material world. Forgetting purusha or confusing it with prakriti causes suffering. Getting back in touch with the unchanging self beyond the changing material world is the goal of spirituality.

Yoga

Many Westerners associate Hinduism with yoga, understood as an athletic, stretching practice

done in groups. Though it sometimes includes this kind of activity, *yoga* in Hinduism is a much broader term designating spiritual practice meant to discipline the egoistic self. There are many kinds of *yoga*, including *karma yoga*, *bhakti yoga*, *jnana yoga* and *raja yoga*. *Karma yoga* perhaps provides the best way to think about the true meaning of *yoga* since it has so little in common with Western preconceptions.

Karma yoga means "the way of action." One should do everything mindful of and in service to the absolute. Whether washing the dishes or morning devotion, every activity in a person's entire life should be consciously and deliberately lived in relationship with others and with God. The Bhagavad Gita's story of Arjuna and Krishna is considered the foundational text for *karma yoga*, as it teaches that human beings must continue to act in the world, without attachment to outcomes, in the service of God. Far from being an ascetic practice, *karma yoga* directs individuals to go out into the world. As in Christianity, a person should be in the world but not of the world.

Also rooted in the teaching of the Bhagavad Gita, *bhakti yoga* is the type practiced by most Hindus and may feel familiar to Jews, Christians, and Muslims for whom ritual acts of worship take place in specially designated places, with memorized prayers and ordered action. *Bhakti* means personal devotion to one's chosen deity. *Bhakti yoga*, then, describes the life dedicated to the divine through ritual action and prayer. In *bhakti yoga* the self is not transcended, but rather put at the service of the absolute, understood in particular manifestations.

Jnana yoga is the path of rational inquiry and the most philosophical path. The mind is the vehicle of transformation, asking and answering questions and finally coming to understand that the temporal, changing "I" or self-identity is illusory. The subject lies beyond all questioning, all temporality, all being. This is true self-discovery and brings freedom and peace.

Raja yoga is the oldest documented practice of clearing the mind and does so through intense concentration. Unlike the path of action, devotion, or rational inquiry, *raja yoga* attempts to focus a person such that ordinary reality and self-consciousness are transcended altogether. Words cannot adequately describe the state of spiritual absorption attained, but dualities vanish and the seeker becomes one with the ultimate. It is in the tradition of *raja yoga* that one finds the chanting of mantras to quiet the mind, ascetic practices, and breath control.

The Bhakti Movement

The Classical Hinduism that emerged out of the Vedic tradition emphasized *dharma* (duty) and *bhakti* (devotion) over purely philosophical accounts or speculation about the nature of the absolute. The *bhakti* movement that arose between the second century BCE and the sixth century CE retrieved much Vedic practice as Buddhism's popularity declined. Yet these popularized ways were always punctuated by movements of sophisticated philosophical questioning and speculation. The most influential of these philosophical movements is Advaita Vedanta.

The Advaita Movement

Advaita, even more than other philosophical movements, is perhaps the best-known Hindu school of philosophy and the one to which many Christians turn for comparative theological work. Advaita focuses on the Upanishadic teaching that *atman* (the principle of individuation or difference between things in the world) is one with Brahman (the principle and source of reality). Advaita Vedanta, the most influential school of Vedanta, argues that the principle of all reality is oneness. Whereas Vedanta thinking considers self-realization the proper understanding of reality and Brahman, Advaita champions thinking about the meaning of all realities being one.

Advaita's most influential figure was Shankara, who lived in the early eighth century. He held that only Brahman exists and that the visible world is a product of maya (human ignorance) about the nature of reality.

Ramanuja, a well-known follower of Shankara, developed a successful philosophical challenge to Shankara's nondualistic, unified understanding of being. Considered part of Advaita Vedanta, Ramanuja's thought balances Shankara's strong identification of reality and Brahman with an assertion of difference. According to Ramanuja, if everything is Brahman and much human understanding is wrong, then Brahman contains error and ignorance, which is an unacceptable conclusion. Ramanuja thus articulates distinction between the divine and the world and supports the essential duty of bhakti, or personal devotion to God. Bhakti restores right understanding and right relationship with God and protects against the introduction of error into the divine.

Renaissance, Modernity, and Reform

Hinduism has arguably experienced two renaissances. The first, in response to the growing influence of Buddhism, reached the height of its popularity in the third century BCE and is responsible for many of the texts and practices that now constitute Hinduism. The second Hindu renaissance emerged in reaction to British colonization and withdrawal, an occupation that began in the early nineteenth century and ended only in 1947 with the establishment of India as its own republic.

When seen as a response to the development of Buddhism, Hinduism's first renaissance appears to owe much to Buddhism's spiritual challenge. By offering escape from the caste system through monastic life and religious practices that were accessible to all and required no priestly intercession, Buddhism challenged Hinduism to

develop a greater diversity of practices for persons in different situations. The Laws of Manu (c. 100 CE), the Yoga Sutras (c. 300 CE), and the Bhagavad Gita (c. 100 CE) all responded to the challenges of Buddhist understanding and practice, which differed from and began taking over traditional Vedic ways. While the Laws of Manu sought to retain societal structure, the Yoga Sutras responded to the attractiveness and apparent effectiveness of Buddhist meditation. The Gita advocates various yogic paths as different alternatives to the spiritual life, offering a diversity of approaches in the hopes of countering the spread of Buddhism.

In the wake of British imperial power and its eventual withdrawal, Hinduism has again experienced a visible resurgence. Beyond being the pervasive cultural influence in India, Hinduism has spread as a nationalistic as well as liberating movement. Because it has been the predominant religion of India and was countered by Christian missionary activity, Hinduism has become the symbol of a strong India, triumphant over and against imperialistic forces. Because of tension with Muslims, some Hindu nationalists have even engaged in violence. Hindu nationalism is concomitant with the spirit of pride in a culture that was seized and exploited by the West. In distinguishing Hindu-ness from other identities, Hindu nationals seek to define themselves largely by their differences from—and sometimes opposition to—other groups. Chiefly a response to Western colonialism and missionary activity, which resulted in large-scale Indian conversions to Christianity, Hindu nationalism is both a religious and political movement seeking to return India to its ethnic and religious heritage.

Ramakrishna (1836–1886), Vivekananda (1863–1902), and Gandhi (1869–1948) are all well-known figures associated with the contemporary Hindu renaissance: Ramakrishna for his spiritual power; Vivekananda for spreading

Vedanta and yoga to the West, starting with the World Parliament of Religions; and Gandhi for his nonviolent peace work. All three have played a role in the popularization of Hinduism outside India, especially in educated Western circles.

Conceptions of the Sacred

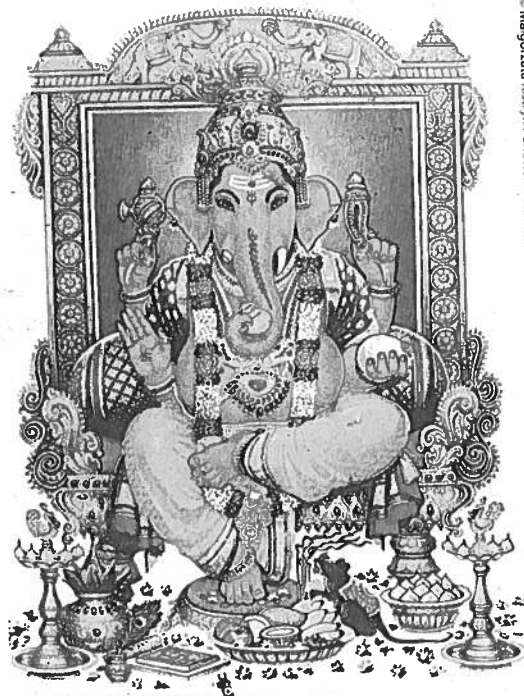
Hindu understandings of the absolute are so diverse as to be contradictory. Some persons believe in a universal, personal God; others in an impersonal principle; and still others in a deity that they consider to be a manifestation of the absolute.

Brahman was the term used to express what was, in Vedic culture, understood as divine breath or the breath of all existence. Brahman is that which is manifested in all the gods, that which causes being. Brahman is that which is everywhere and in everything in nondualistic Advaita Vedanta. In Samkhya and bhakti yoga, Brahman is that which is different from the ordinary world. Perhaps more than anything else, Brahman reveals the radical differences in religiosity encompassed by and expressed in Hinduism—between people who believe all of the world is unified in the being of God and those who believe God is outside the world, as well as between people who believe Brahman is a personal God and those for whom Brahman is understood to be a philosophical principle.

Bhakti is the most common way of practicing Hinduism, and worship is generally categorized into three types—Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism.³ Vaishnavism centers on Vishnu, Shaivism centers on Shiva, and Shaktism on the mother goddess. However, many people,

especially the philosophically minded, think of and worship the absolute as a genderless, ever-present creator as well as destroyer. Not only does the ultimate cause things to come to be, it is also responsible for whatever ends, ceases, or dies. The absolute causes all that is, which is to say that the ultimate in Hinduism is frequently thought of as all-powerful and in control of history. This line of thinking may sound familiar to Christians, who think of God as creator, sustainer, and redeemer.

In addition to Brahman (understood as Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi, e.g.), there are also Krishna, Ganesh, Durga, Yama, Agni, and others.



Hindus often worship Ganesh, known as the remover of obstacles, when beginning a new venture.

3. Each of these represents a family of worship traditions, not just the worship of a single deity. Much as Vaishnavism includes the worship of different forms of Vishnu like Rama and Krishna and their consorts, Shaktism includes the worship of the mother goddess in different forms, including Lakshmi, Parvati, Kali, and Durga.

Merely listing the gods would take pages. Individual gods may serve as the primary or even sole object of worship for many, or they may be part of a pantheon understood as multiple loci of the presence of Brahman. Stories about them may be read literally or metaphorically, as teaching a lesson to or evoking an attitude in followers.

Because of the great diversity in practices and beliefs, gurus or spiritual leaders are highly important in Hinduism. Gurus share their understanding of the ultimate with their followers and teach ways of life that help produce that wisdom. Though historically Brahmins occupied the most valued place in society as teachers and priests, gurus need not come from the Brahmin caste. Westerners may have heard the term *spiritual guru*, but this phrase is redundant because a guru is always a spiritual teacher. Because of the diversity of the gods and especially because understandings of their functions—as links between the divine and everyday worlds, as actual historical figures, and as symbolic images of a divine who remains outside of time—vary so widely, who one chooses as a guru makes all the difference in one's understanding and practice of Hinduism. Christians might follow particular ministers or select churches because of particular priests, but they will learn about the same central beliefs, such as the doctrine of the Trinity and the Incarnation, and will be encouraged to love and serve others. In Hinduism, the guru one follows will radically determine not only which god one most venerates but also how one understands what a "god" even is.

The Role of Humans

Theological anthropology has become a popular religious topic in Christianity. What is one to think of the human person? What is a person's

relationship to the divine? How should the qualities and value of the person be considered, given the belief that people are created by God?

In Hinduism, one's relation to Brahman directly determines what it means to be human; thinking about oneself and thinking about God are intimately aligned. *Atman*, the primary term designating individuality or individuation, is always held in tension with Brahman. A central insight of Advaita Vedanta is that "atman is Brahman." The Upanishadic story of Uddalaka Aruni and his son illustrates this point clearly. The son returns from his religious education claiming to know everything he needs; Uddalaka Aruni teaches him otherwise using a glass of water and salt. Having dissolved the salt in the water, Uddalaka Aruni teaches the boy that there is no difference between the two, and that this is the relationship of the individual to the universal. It is in everything. Everything is in it.

Thinking about what it means to be human necessarily leads to thinking about how to live and act in the world, or ethics. Ethics in Hinduism, expressed concretely and particularly in the Laws of Manu, always results from following dharma, or duty. Acting according to one's place in society is essential and dictates what to do in any circumstance. By doing one's duty (dharma), one establishes his or her karma. Karma is the cosmic force generated by a person's actions; thus, by the law of karma, all actions have their appropriate consequence. This karmic consequence is thought to follow the person from one life to the next, determining that person's life conditions. Good karma helps one to come back as a human being in fortunate circumstances while bad karma places one farther away from not only a good life but from the conditions required to work toward *moksha*, which is the ultimate religious end or liberation from suffering and reincarnation in the world.

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Practices

Rituals pervade Hindu life. From public worship, or *puja*, led by Brahmin priests with Vedic texts, to home routine, deliberate ceremonial activity directed toward the divine is central to Hindu life. There are stage-of-life rituals that range from braiding a pregnant woman's hair to feeding a baby its first solid foods to studying scripture in preparation for marriage and death ceremonies. Yet in between these momentous occasions, or *samskaras*, which Christians might associate with sacraments, are thousands of regular practices that populate daily life. In Hinduism, home shrines and daily home rituals are a central feature. Some Hindus may have a special prayer room in their home or may set aside a corner to display statues and pictures of one's chosen deity. These are used for veneration and

meditation, and worshippers may light incense and candles before them. As in public worship, making Brahman manifest in images of deities (and through senses such as smell and sight, both of which are tapped by the use of incense) is centrally important. Some may practice *prasad*, the offering of food to deities and subsequent consumption of what has then become holy, at home, but it is more often a feature of public ceremony. The diversity of approaches in daily worship and mindfulness may stem from Hinduism's emphasis on ways of life rather than on orthodoxy, which has come to dominate religious thinking and life in Christianity.

The Indian government currently recognizes sixteen Hindu celebrations as official holidays, but Hindus have many more days of celebration including the following: gods' and goddesses' birthdays; Holi, which marks the end of winter



Families may designate a room for *puja* or set aside a special area for an altar to display different icons and images that serve as visual and tangible means to connect with the deity.

and the beginning of spring; Divali, the festival of lights celebrating both (or either) the return of Rama after his exile and the New Year according to some Indian calendars; and Ganesh Chaturthi, which celebrates the son of Parvati and Shiva who was given the head of an elephant to revivify him and who now has the power to remove obstacles.

Social expectations in Hinduism remain firm and perhaps less flexible and diverse than in the modern West. Christian approaches to Hinduism tend to focus on the stringent gender roles for women, as though sexism is a thing of the past in Western culture. Many women in the West, though, continue in traditional roles, taking on the majority of childcare, for example. It remains true in Hinduism, however, that women most commonly do not work outside the home, but remain at the service of their husbands. Because of the complexity of Vedic ritual and because only men are educated to perform it, women's lack of education lowered and continues to lower their social status. Because young women were typically married to older men, women retained childlike status in their marriages. Duties of daughters toward fathers, wives toward husbands, and mothers toward sons are still taken very seriously. With the rise of women's rights movements in India and the dispersal of the Indian population throughout Europe and the United States, however, social expectations are changing.

What has not changed is the centrality of dharma. Hindus think of social order as reflecting and sustaining cosmic order, so doing one's duty—however that is construed—remains of utmost importance. Right governance and adherence to one's caste are essential to the proper working

of society. Just as there is right order among different groups, there is right order in going about one's life. Unlike the West, which puts a strong emphasis and value on youth, Hinduism delineates four stages of life.⁴ Rather than seeing them in opposition to one another, it views all the stages as valid and good—even sacred—times that come with differing sets of obligations. Though these stages apply specifically to the male Brahmin caste, other groups have developed similar ideas. For the Brahmins, the first stage entails being a chaste student. Having studied for roughly the first quarter of life, one is then supposed to become a householder, marrying and having children. After this second quarter of life, one begins to withdraw from the world in favor of meditation and spiritual study. Finally, for the end of life, one is to become a wandering holy person. Though few follow this trajectory to its itinerant end, the logic of activities or stations appropriate to different times of life may hold appeal as an alternative to today's growing American obsession with youth.

Christian-Hindu Encounters

Until the early nineteenth century, Christianity and Hinduism came into contact not as partners seeking information or spiritual exchange but as competitors for devotees. Specifically, Christian missionaries sought out India as a prime location for proselytizing since Indians were learning English under the colonial rule of the British. American Southern Baptists, for example, had a booming missionary program and produced a number of Telugu-language translations of the New Testament. Knowledge of Christian

4. Each stage of life has its own unique set of duties, goals, and ethical norms. Unlike those in the other stages of life, for example, a householder is encouraged to pursue wealth and sexual pleasure within the bounds of marriage. These goals always carry with them certain responsibilities as well, including family caretaking and generosity toward others in society.

missionary history in India has helped fuel a return to native Hindu spiritual practice among Indians who might otherwise be less devout. This religious nationalism has become widely popular, although Indians whose families converted to Christianity under colonial rule more often remain Christian rather than converting back to Hindu devotional practice. Hinduism's emphasis on daily prayer and ritual, especially *prasada* offerings of food to one's deity, rather than a firm set of beliefs may be disconcerting to an Indian Christian, just as it may be to a Western Christian. While Christianity has daily prayer and devotion, Christian ritual is most often practiced only on Sunday under the leadership of an ordained person. Thus conversion back to Hinduism from Christianity may prove challenging to those Indians whose families have been shaped by the Christian primacy of mass and Sunday worship for generations.

In 1893 the guru and scholar Vivekananda introduced Hinduism to the West at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Christian attitudes toward Hinduism have since undergone a radical paradigm shift. While many Christians continue to believe that Hindus must convert to Christianity to attain salvation, a significant number of Christians now either believe that Hindus can go to heaven through the practice of their own religion or that Christianity and Hinduism both somehow put one in touch with an

absolute or divine that exceeds the understandings of each tradition.⁵ The Roman Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II (1962–1965), solidified the teaching that non-Christians could go to heaven through following their consciences and acting justly, thus connecting them to the Catholic Church.⁶ This position is called "inclusivism." According to some inclusivists, from the perspective of Catholic teaching, *pujas*, *bhakti*, *yogas*, and the studying of Vedas, Upanishads, and other sacred texts may put the Hindu on the path to God.⁷

Beyond inclusivism, pluralists believe that at least one, if not all, other religions refer to the same absolute, are similarly right and wrong, and that no one religion has a monopoly on the truth. Enshrined in John Hick's *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, pluralism eschews any one religion's claim to a monopoly on the truth. Though variously construed, pluralism is always a normative claim, going beyond a mere description of religious plurality to hold that there is good outside the bounds of one's home tradition. Clearly, Western attitudes toward Hinduism have changed dramatically since the height of missionary activity in the nineteenth century when thousands of Christians went to India, China, and the southern hemisphere with the primary purpose of converting people who were thought to be going to hell.

5. John Hick's work, especially *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), has crept into much popular Christian spirituality. The generation of scholars who were most active in the 1980s and who are entering retirement (including Paul Knitter, Langdon Gilkey, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Gordon Kaufman) deeply influenced an entire generation of Christians, many of whom now believe that religions are somehow equal, even when they continue to practice their own.

6. See *Ad gentes*, nn. 3, 9, 11, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, May 19, 1991, n. 29; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, July 1, 1991, III, in which it is written "it will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions and by following the dictates of their own conscience that the members of other religions respond positively to God's invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognize or acknowledge him as their Saviour."

7. However, others give a more strict interpretation of the Catholic teaching in these texts, saying that Hindus still need explicit faith in Christ to attain salvation.

Efforts at Dialogue and Comparative Theology in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

Christian theology and philosophy have recently begun paying great attention to religious multiplicity. Because Christians can no longer think of themselves as the majority of the world's population, Christian understandings of God must explain how and why the majority of human beings have either lived before Jesus or in cultures where Christianity is not the dominant religion. Because Hinduism is seen by many Christians as mirroring Christianity in many ways, exploring whether and how there might be religious truth beyond the bounds of the Judeo-Christian tradition constitutes a popular topic of study. Klaus Klostermaier, a Catholic priest and professor who is one of the first to have undertaken the lifelong study of Hinduism, represents the contemporary Christian openness to not only studying, but learning from Hindu tradition and spirituality. For decades, Klostermaier has looked at Christianity and Vaishnavism for similarities in their insights about the nature of life and the divine. Just as Christianity is the practice of religion in relation to a deeply loving, personal God, Vaishnavism connects personal devotion to the divine in ways that can be understood as paralleling Trinitarian understandings of relationship between a person and God and within God's self.

Another Christian pioneer in the field of Christian-Hindu work is Hans Küng. Küng, a Swiss Catholic priest and scholar who was very influential at the Second Vatican Council and who is still writing today, does interreligious work in theology of religions, attempting to explain the diversity of religions as part of the will of God. Like Klostermaier, Küng was among the first to think about Hinduism not as an inferior, primitive religion but as a spiritual

alternative to Christianity that contains wisdom and ways of life that—for the Hindu—are just as obvious, explanatory, and coherent as is Christianity for the Christian. The author of many books, Küng brought Christianity's attention to the problematic nature of its exclusive claim to truth by instead detailing a vision of God that includes the whole of humanity. Although now criticized for imposing Christian categories on Hinduism and thus misrepresenting it, Küng's work remains one of the chief reasons Christians have turned to the study of world religions. Francis Clooney, a Jesuit priest and scholar of Hindu sacred literature, is perhaps the most innovative scholar of Hinduism. The father of the popular comparative theological method known as "tradition crossing," or crossing-over between sacred texts, Clooney's work has significantly changed the methodology used by many Christian scholars doing interreligious work. Informing his reading of the Bible with the Vedas and the Upanishads and vice versa, Clooney examines how different traditions' understandings augment and transform each other—especially the understanding of one's home tradition.

Raimon Panikkar is unique among Christian-Hindu scholars. Born of a Christian parent and a Hindu parent, Panikkar was ordained a priest and only then traveled to India. Upon returning and for the rest of his life, he claimed both his Hindu and Christian heritage and did groundbreaking work in the possibility of pluralism, or the belief that many religions can be true and salvific for their members. His many books and articles have helped to transform the Christian and Hindu landscape into one in which multiple religions are considered equally good and transformative. Panikkar is without doubt one of the Christian pioneers in exploring the practice of more than one religion, a circumstance taken for granted in Asia, where it has been common for centuries.

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