



A GLOBAL GOSPEL IN A WORLD OF RELIGIONS

Part 5: Hinduism

We now turn to sharing the gospel with Hindus. Recapping from earlier, Hinduism is the religion of over 915 million people in 51 countries, representing over 1,200 people groups, and 90% of them have not been reached with the gospel.

Debunking Myths

Many people think all Indians are Hindus, which is not true. Yes, the majority of Hindus do live in India. Yet India is on the way to becoming one of the largest Muslim countries in the world. Many Indians are Sikh, Jain or followers of Christ.

The second myth is that Hindus pray to cows. The cow is revered in Hinduism as a source of food and a symbol of life. As a result, the Hindus do not kill cows or eat beef, although Hindus do rely on cows for dairy products and other uses. But that doesn't mean Hindus pray to cows. Some would say Hindus don't worship cows as much as they deeply respect them and hold them in high esteem.

The third myth is that people often think Hinduism is a religion, with a certain founder, a clear authority, a common creed and consistent beliefs. In reality, as we're about to see, Hinduism is much more complicated than that. Various Hindus believe a variety of different things.

Who Are Hindus?

So, who are Hindus? Interestingly, "Hindu" was a catch-all term used by the British which originally referred to a geographic area of the Indian subcontinent where people practiced innumerable diverse and seemingly contradictory religions.

This simply goes to show that Hinduism is actually a complex set of religions. It's pantheism mixed with polytheism. Pantheism is the belief that god is everything and everything is god. "Pan" means all, and "theism" refers to god.

Polytheism, on the other hand, is a belief that many different gods exist. It's commonly said that there are over 330 million gods worshipped in Hinduism. And many of these gods have their own set of beliefs and practices. So there's a mixture: everything is god alongside all kinds of gods. It's a difficult thing to define and understand, particularly from a Western mindset, and holds perceived contradictions.

In addition, Hinduism contains sacred writings from different gurus. There are specific sacred writings, or sacred scriptures so to speak. The Vedas are inspired sacred writings for Hindu belief. Different people across the Indian subcontinent worshipped different gods through different rituals. Hindu spiritual leaders started developing common beliefs and practices and wrote them down in the Vedas.

Those writings were composed from about 1800 B.C. to 500 B.C. They contained hymns, prayers, mythical stories, mantras, praise songs, guides for the priests, instructions on how to worship and meditate, and philosophical teachings. Gandhi said, “Truth is a sovereign principle, and the Bhagavad-Gita is the book par excellence for the knowledge of truth.” This is the most popular writing in Hinduism.

But then based on the teachings in these books, different gurus helped to lead and guide the Hindus practices in different ways. They would interpret, emphasize or apply different things from the Vedas, developing a diversity of practices depending on how each particular guru led and guided those around him.

One other complex dimension in Hinduism is the blending of communal culture with individualistic belief. Community is very important, and the Hindu culture is infused with the historical system of castes. A caste basically is the class of society into which you are born and from which you can never leave—or at least it is very hard to leave. This social stratification is less in force now than it has been in the past. The Indian constitution actually now forbids discrimination on the basis of caste. But it is still pretty firmly and practically fixed in Hindu culture.

Starting from the top, there are the Brahmins, which include the priests, genealogists, astrologers and traditional physicians. Then you work all the way down to the lowest caste—which is technically no caste, or casteless—which are the Dalits, the Untouchables. Dalits have the dirtiest, filthiest jobs—if they have any job at all. They are marked by extreme poverty and lack access to clean water, health care, education. As a whole, they lack dignity and are functionally perceived as being subhuman.

This communal culture is strong in Hinduism. Yet, at the same time, worship is more individualistic than it is congregational. You have all kinds of different individual people worshipping individual gods with different beliefs and practices associated with different gods. You have individual shrines and idols in their individual homes.

Considering the Hindu World

So to review, “Hindu” originally referred to part of the Indian subcontinent. Hinduism represents innumerable diverse, even seemingly contradictory practices. Hindus practice their religion however they want, whenever they want, and to whatever degree they want. That makes Hinduism very difficult to define. So for a few minutes we have to take off our predominantly Western eyeglasses and try to imagine a way of looking at reality that’s very different from the way we look at things.

If we're patient, if we persevere here, our goal is to see the world as more than a billion people see it. In spite of these complexities, there are certain beliefs that unite most Hindus. We're going to camp out on those, step into their shoes, and see the world through the lens of two foundational beliefs in Hinduism from which these seemingly diverse and contradictory practices spring.

What Do Hindus Believe?

At the core of what Hindus believe are two common beliefs. One is samsara, or reincarnation; the other is moksha, or salvation. We'll take them one at a time.

Samsara (Reincarnation)

Samsara (reincarnation) is the process through which every atman—an uncreated, eternal soul—must pass. The atman must pass through this process until they reach moksha (salvation). In Hindu thought, think of a cyclical, non-linear view of physical life. Linear thought sees life as a line: we're born, we live and we die. Cyclical thought sees life in this way: we're born, we live, we die, we're born again, we die again, and on and on and on. Hindus have a cyclical view of life in which every atman, or soul, is trapped in an endless cycle of living and dying and living again in a universe that is cyclical. The universe is perpetually beginning and ending and beginning again. Progression in the cycle is based on past cycles. Past lives determine present lives, and present lives determine future lives.

This leads to the Hindu notion of karma: basically, “What goes around comes around.” Your next life will be lived as a reflection of your present life. Your present life is a reflection of your past life. Think about that especially in a caste system. If somebody is living right now in a low caste, the untouchable sub-human state, what does that say about their past life? They're experiencing that “What goes around comes around” concept. Those who are more well off are experiencing the fruit of their past lives—which apparently were more noble. So the cycle continues—not just through a few lives, but atmans endure suffering through hundreds, thousands, or even millions of physical lives before reaching moksha—salvation.

Moksha (Salvation)

So moksha is liberation from samsara—liberation from this cycle of reincarnation. Remember, a religion diagnoses the human problem. The human problem here is that the atman, the soul, is trapped in physical samsara, reincarnation, and is in need of escape. We want to get out of the cycle. That's moksha. There are three paths to moksha, each of which approaches this problem in different ways, from different vantage points.

The first is dharma, which is the way of works. In Hindu thinking, dharma sees the human problem as basically moral. We need to change our behavior. Dharma, then, is the religious, social and moral duty we need to observe. Think of a code of conduct we need to live by. That code or moral duty varies from person to person and from caste to caste. You do what's right for your life and your family and your caste. As you do, your good dharma, your good works, create good karma. Good works in the present lead to good results in the future. What goes around comes around. So one path to moksha is dharma, the way of works.

But then there is also the way of jnana, which is the way of knowledge. Jnana sees the human problem as being intellectual rather than moral. There's one ultimate spiritual reality that exists, which is Brahman. Now, when you hear the word "Brahman," think ultimate spiritual force and reality over everything. It's similar to the concept of a supreme God—which is why some would say Hinduism is not ultimately polytheistic, because there's a singular spiritual reality above all. But the difference between a supreme God and Brahman is that Brahman is not personal, but rather impersonal. This is not going to do it justice, but in a sense think of "the force" in Star Wars. So Brahman is ultimate spiritual reality—the essence of the real. Our problem, then, is ignorance of that which is real. Every atman, every soul, is ignorant of Brahman and in need of the knowledge that everything—including our souls—is Brahman. Brahman is the only thing that is real.

So we need to see ourselves and the world around us as the illusions they are, and Brahman as being the reality it is. How do we get there? Jnana involves continual meditation and introspection, until we realize our soul is one with Brahman. We meditate on the nature of reality until we finally realize that everything is Brahman—even our individual selves—which is ultimately a renunciation of self, and reunion with Brahman and ultimate reality. That's jnana.

Then there's bhakti, the way of devotion. This views the human problem as basically spiritual. Many different gods exist, and each one of them may be a manifestation of Brahman, the ultimate spiritual reality. And among all those gods—millions, or even hundreds of millions of them—there are three major gods.

One is Brahma, the creator of life. A second is Vishnu, the sustainer and protector of life. Vishnu has many names and has appeared as many avatars, or incarnations, including Krishna and Rama. Vishnu is believed by many to have come to the earth at least nine times. One of those was Krishna, who is the hero of the Bhagavad-Gita. Then the third major god is Shiva, the destroyer of life.

As you look at these three major gods, you can see the cycle of reincarnation in them: creation of life, protection of life, destruction of life—then start the process over. But no matter how many gods one believes in, or whoever those gods are, bhakti emphasizes love and devotion to a god or gods with a view

toward moksha. So if you express love, devotion and worship to a certain god or gods, then you can experience salvation.

This again is why Krishna would be so prominent in Hindu thought, because Krishna is believed to have been an avatar, or incarnation, of Vishnu. If you're devoted to Krishna and serve him well, then you can be released from samsara. When you put this path up against the other paths—like endless meditation and jnana—you begin to realize why bhakti is actually the most popular of all paths to moksha among Hindus.

Now, along those paths there are important practices for Hindus to participate in. One of these is yoga, a path of mental, physical and spiritual discipline that leads to moksha. So yoga is not just a popular fad trend in physical fitness. Yoga is a Hindu practice which uses the body to clear the mind and connect to Brahman on the path to moksha.

We don't have a lot of time to camp out here on what might be controversial, but suffice it say, the physical activity of yoga is designed for spiritual reasons, and those spiritual reasons are antithetical to the gospel. Self-identified Christians who practice yoga may ask, "Isn't it good to empty my mind and focus on the spiritual?" Well, if you're Hindu, yes, but not if you're a follower of Christ. The Bible never beckons followers of Christ to empty our minds. Instead, we are to fill our minds with God's Word and the truth of the gospel revealed in Scripture. That is opposite to the purpose of yoga.

Then you have mantras, which are prayers, chants or utterances which aid in meditation and worship. You have ritual bathing that some Hindus do daily before their devotions. Millions of Hindus bath periodically in rivers with cleansing power. Kumbh Mela is their festival that's going on right now. Millions of people are flocking to the Ganges River to bathe in it, to be made spiritually clean through it. Then you also have numerous Hindu festivals that celebrate different events in history, or express devotion to a god, and all kinds of other festivals.

How Do We Share the Gospel With Hindus?

Now that we're clear on Hinduism—and all of you are saying, "Yeah, I totally get all that"—here are some exhortations.

Listen Carefully

First, much like we talked about with Animism, listen carefully. Seek to understand as much as possible where your Hindu friends or neighbors or acquaintances are coming from. Proverbs 18:2 says, "*A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.*" So don't be a fool.

Look Expectantly

Listen carefully, and then look expectantly. I always think about Indians, specifically Hindus in India, when I read John 5:17-20:

But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel."

During my first time ever to be in India I was encouraged by that text. We were going out to a park with tons of people in a mostly Hindu area, and as we went there, people were encouraging us by saying, "We believe God is working in different people's hearts out here. Your goal is not to go out and try to start something. Your goal is to join what God is already doing. He's drawing people to Himself. So start conversations, get to the gospel, and see who is open to hearing the gospel."

That's why we need to look expectantly. We have the Spirit. We are working with God in what He's doing in neighbors and nations around us. So look expectantly for opportunities to share the gospel with Hindus, believing that God is working to draw people to Himself.

Pray Boldly

Listen carefully, look expectantly, and then pray boldly. Remember Elijah in 1 Kings 18. He was surrounded by people who were worshipping all kinds of false gods—namely Baal, the Canaanite god of rain. He stood up, prayed for God to show His glory among His people, and God did. So do this. Pray boldly for Hindus. Pray Psalm 115:3-8:

Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.

And pray for Hindus using Isaiah 41:21-24, where God says to the false gods:

Bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob. Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen. Tell us the former things, what they are, that we may consider them, that we may know their outcome; or declare to us the things to come. Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; do good, or do harm, that we may be dismayed and terrified. Behold, you are nothing, and your work is less than nothing; an abomination is he who chooses you [talking about false gods].

So pray boldly for Hindus to see that there's only one God above all gods, and He alone deserves to be worshipped. Pray boldly for Hindus, and pray boldly with Hindus. One of the most common refrains

you'll hear in testimonies of Hindus who have come to faith in Jesus revolve around answered prayers, where Hindus were prayed for in the name of Jesus, and this opened them up to the possibility that Jesus might be God, and therefore became open to the gospel. I've never had a Hindu person reject my offer to pray for them. So pray to the one Creator God in the name of Jesus.

Point to Jesus Continually

In this way, as you pray for Hindus, point to Jesus continually. It's interesting. Gandhi once said, "I shall say to the Hindus that your lives will be incomplete unless you reverently study the teachings of Jesus." Well, there's a good starting point. "Would you be willing to study the teachings of Jesus with me?" And then study together His unique nature. There's a sense in which Hindus have a category for incarnations or avatars of specific gods who come to us.

But there's work to be done in showing that Jesus is not just another of many avatars or many gods. Listen to this comment: "[A Hindu] would find it easy to accept Christ as a divine incarnation and to worship Him unreservedly, exactly as he worships Krishna or another avatar ('savior') of his choice. But he cannot accept Christ as the only Son of God," which is who He is. So you might start with the notion of an avatar, or incarnation, but you can't stay there. Your goal is to get to the unique nature of Jesus as the one Creator—God with us.

How do you do that? Here's a question you might ask someone who is Hindu: "Do you know of any stories in Hinduism about various gods that have come to life?" Obviously, you then listen to that person, trying to look for and understand categories that connect to the truth of the gospel. You next begin to cross the bridge. "Can I tell you a story in the Bible about how the one true God came to life here on earth?" Talk about the unique nature of Jesus.

You should also discuss His exclusive claims. A common mantra in Hinduism is that "Many faiths are but different paths leading to the one reality, God." Obviously, the gospel denies this. Jesus clearly teaches that He is the way to God. So how do you communicate this supremacy of Jesus in that way?

Here's one possible question to ask: "Have you ever met a guru who died and days later came back to life?" You're creating a category here in your bridge to cross. "I know Somebody Who in some ways is like your idea of a guru." That word is key, because much like we talked about avatars, incarnations, Jesus is not a guru in the exact same sense that Hindus think about gurus. "I know Somebody Who in some ways is like your idea of a guru, but who died and three days later came back to life. Can I tell you about Him?"

Then begin to talk about the supremacy of Jesus in His resurrection from the dead. This begins to shift the focus of the conversation from reincarnation to resurrection. Jesus is the One Who has proved

that He knows the way to salvation and to heaven. This focus on Jesus' exclusive claims is key, because at some point in conversation with a Hindu, we've got to get to the fact that Jesus is not just one among many gods that we might follow. Jesus is the God who alone is worthy of following. So we're not leading Hindus to add Jesus to a pantheon of gods, but to lay aside all other gods to follow Jesus. In order to get to that point, at some point we must communicate His exclusive claims.

We need to talk about His unique nature, His exclusive claims and His comforting promise. Dive into Matthew 11:28-30 with a Hindu friend or neighbor or acquaintance. Think about these words in light of a perceived endless cycle of work and meditation and devotion, all in search of relief from that cycle. Jesus says, "*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*"

Oh, that's good news. So ask this question, "What must a Hindu do to be saved from this world of sin and suffering?" That question might lead to some of the paths described above—dharma, jnana, bhakti—but then begin to cross the bridge to the gospel. "Can I share with you what God has done? Not what we can do, but what God has done to free you and me from sin and suffering in this world?" Then begin to talk about this gift He gives us described in Ephesians 2:8—a free gift that we can actually receive.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).

By trusting in God and His grace, we are guaranteed His rest. So study Jesus. Point to Jesus in these ways in particular.

Proclaim the Bad News Clearly

As you share the gospel with somebody who's Hindu, make sure to proclaim the bad news clearly. We saw that all these paths to moksha, or salvation, in Hinduism are based upon how one identifies the human problem. The key is to make sure from the beginning that the problem is clear. This is such an enlightening quote from Gandhi. He said, "For it is an unbroken torture to me that I am still so far from Him, who, as I fully know, governs every breath of my life, and whose offspring I am."

So he felt the clear distance between him—a supreme God, or gods—which is what the gospel confirms. "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23). We're separated from God. Hinduism feels that, whether it acknowledges one supreme God or many gods. So then ask your Hindu friend or neighbor or acquaintance, "Is it possible that we have incorrectly diagnosed the problem in and around us? It may be that in a world of many gods there is actually really only one God, and that our

ultimate problem is actually not ignorance or even bad works, but the reality that we've turned aside from the one true God and worshipped all kinds of other gods instead?"

There are many Scriptures that describe times when people were confronted with that question: is it possible we've incorrectly diagnosed the problem in and around us, and is it possible we've completely missed the solution right in front of us? Is it possible that we're prone to pray to gods that couldn't save, when the one true God has made a way for us to be saved? Isaiah 45:22 says,

*"Turn to me and be saved,
all the ends of the earth!
For I am God, and there is no other."*

And 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 says,

"For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come."

Proclaim the Good News Joyfully

So we should proclaim the bad news clearly and then proclaim the good news joyfully—all the good news of the gospel. We want them to be glad in the one true God forever. Think about this. In the context of Hindu thought, affirm their worth as people uniquely created in the image of God—not as an animal or anything else, but as an individual loved by God and created to know God. Affirm their worth spiritually as souls who are loved by God.

Also affirm them physically. In Hinduism there is a definite emphasis on the soul, whereas the body is more expendable. But the gospel affirms the value of not just the soul but the body. Jesus' resurrection and our bodily resurrection demonstrate that our bodies are not just disposed of when we die. Rather, they're going to be resurrected. So hear these words in light of a worldview that says once you die, your soul moves on but your body is gone totally. First Corinthians 15:51-57 says:

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Read that to them, and then say, "That's really good news!"

So affirm their worth—not just spiritually but physically. Show them hope. There's an Indian folk song that says, "How many births are passed, I cannot tell. How many yet to come, no man can say:

But this alone I know, and know full well, that pain and grief embitter all the way.” Ah, there’s better news than that. To any man or woman caught in the seemingly endless cycle of pain, grief and suffering, distant and disconnected from God, here’s the good news of the gospel: you can know God now.

According to Jeremiah 9:23-24, the highest of all privileges is available today—now. You can know the one true God. He is personal. He speaks (Genesis 1:3). He’s grieved (Genesis 6:6). He’s not distant from us. He reveals Himself to us (Exodus 3:15). He lovingly and faithfully provides for our needs (Exodus 16:12). He’s jealous for our affections (Exodus 20:5). He detests evil (Leviticus 20:23). He reigns over all (Psalm 2:4). He will protect us (Psalm 59:9). He’ll save us, quiet us with His love, and rejoice over us with singing (Zephaniah 3:17).

Look to this God. He’s personal. Trust in Him. He’s personal—and God is pursuing you. This is why Jesus came to seek us and to save us. It’s not about us making our way to Him through this path or that path. But He’s made a way to us. I remember actually talking with a Hindu and a Buddhist person sitting outside a temple one day in Asia. As we were talking there, they were both talking about all kinds of different paths that ultimately lead to god—or whatever you want to call him.

I’m listening and listening, then finally I said, “It sounds like you guys picture god—or whoever it might be or whatever gods there are—on top of a mountain, and we’re all at the bottom of the mountain. You may take this path up, and I may take this path up—but in the end, we’re all going to be in the same place.” And they said, “Exactly! You understand.” And I said, “Well, what if I told you that the God at the top of the mountain didn’t wait for us to make our way up to Him, but He actually came down to us and brought us to Himself?” They said, “That would be great news.” I said, “It is great news.”

God is pursuing you. He doesn’t want any of us to perish. He wants us to receive His salvation. So this is the gospel for the Hindu. You can know God now, and you can be saved forever—saved from sin and suffering and evil and death forever. *“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life”* (1 John 5:13).

As I was working on this, I was reminded of, Ronnie, a friend and brother who came to Christ from a Hindu background. I asked him about his story, just to make sure I had the details right. He came to the United States back in the fall of 2008 to get a degree in mechanical engineering. A local pastor invited him to church. He said, “I didn’t go. Six months later he invited me again, and this time I went—just to make him feel better.”

He said he started praying to Jesus and prayed continually for months. None of his prayers were answered. So he asked the pastor, “Pastor, I’ve been praying to Jesus for months, and none of my prayers are answered.” He was eagerly waiting for him to say, “Continue to fast or pray until God answers your prayer.” But instead, the pastor said, “Ronnie, don’t seek God for all these things. Seek His Kingdom first. He’ll give you all these things in His time.”

He said, “These words touched my heart. Coming from a Hindu background I was never told to seek God for Who He is. I was always told to worship gods for money, good schooling, jobs, etc. I shared this with my Christian friend, and he said, ‘It’s from Matthew 6:33.’ That led me to read the Bible.” So fast forward through studying the Bible. He came to the point where he said, “I understood my own sin and my need for a Savior. I learned all that Jesus did on my behalf on the cross. And in that year I committed my life to the Lord Jesus. God’s process of bringing me to Himself has been painful, yet I rejoice with the psalmist who said, ‘He rescued me because He delights in me.’” He’s experienced all kinds of opposition from his family yet he rejoices in Jesus Christ.

Just to finish that story out, he was at Secret Church 14 two years ago in Birmingham, and he met a girl who was visiting from out of town. They stayed in touch, began dating, and then God used some circumstances at Secret Church 15 last year to lead them to getting engaged. So now they’re getting married a few months from now. So you never know what God is going to do through Secret Church!

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