

## What is Hinduism?

*Summary: "What is Hinduism" remains one of the most persistent and challenging questions Hindu Americans face. This is a difficult question to answer, given the wide array of practices and different national, generational, and geographical identities and beliefs in Hinduism.*

"It is a truism that many Hindus who live in India go through life without asking themselves what it means to be a Hindu," writes a Chicago woman. "But we who live abroad as minorities in a multicultural setting are forced to ask ourselves the fundamental questions." Among the most fundamental questions is, simply, "What is Hinduism?" Few Hindu immigrants to the United States ever had to answer this question in India where the culture and religious ways of Hinduism are so much part of the fabric of life; very few had to think about how to preserve, define, or explain it.

In the U.S. context, the need to "explain" the tradition comes from many sides. Friends and colleagues ask, "What do Hindus believe?" Visitors to the new temples ask, "What are the basic beliefs of Hinduism?" The second generation of American-born Hindus ask their parents, "What does it mean to be Hindu?" Their classmates at school ask them, "What is Hinduism?" Most of these inquirers do not want a series of lectures or even a twenty-minute explanation. They want to know in brief. Badsah Mukhopadhyay, doing research in the Bay Area where he grew up, writes: "Most immigrant Hindus living in the Bay Area are constantly forced to explain their religion to people totally unfamiliar with the subject. In doing so, they consciously or subconsciously rework definitions to make them both comprehensible to the Western mind and as inclusive as possible of various kinds of Hindu beliefs and practices."

The inevitable abbreviation of a complex and multi-hued tradition is part of the compromise of a religious community living in the diaspora. Because religious traditions are dynamic and in constant process of reformulation in new contexts, deciding which parts of the Hindu heritage to emphasize is an important challenge in America. The challenge is not only to explain the tradition to inquisitive outsiders, but to explain and formulate it for themselves as Hindus in America. Temple newsletters and brochures have brief explanatory essays on religious festivals, scriptures, the gods, and on Sanatana Dharma, the "eternal principles" of the tradition. The book, *Daddy, Am I a Hindu?* (1988) was published by a leader in the New Orleans Hindu community, writing as an immigrant father in response to a set of questions posed by an

American-born child. And the Saiva Siddhanta Church, based in Hawaii and California, published *Dancing with Siva*, a self-described “contemporary catechism” for the Hindu tradition.

Hinduism has never been a “creed” with a specific set of beliefs. However, the demand for a clear, unambiguous “definition” of religion has become ever more insistent with the rise of more fundamentalist voices in many religious traditions. In the U.S. context today, Hindus find themselves articulating Hindu “beliefs” expressed in forms of virtuous actions such as tolerance, vegetarianism, and non-violence. One young man in Denver put it this way: “The essence of pure Hinduism is vegetarianism, truth, non-violence, not stealing, not harming others, and not making others feel they are below you. If you act like you are above someone and make them feel inferior to you, you are not a real Hindu.” There are others, however, who tend to identify Hinduism not so much with beliefs, but with India. “Hindu and Hinduism reflect the culture and ethos of Bharat (India) and hence include Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism,” says Dr. Mahesh Mehta, founder of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America.

The dominant context often shapes how faith is articulated. In Washington, D.C., when the thirteen Hindu temples applied together to join the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, they were asked to formulate a summary of their faith. At the time, the Interfaith Conference was a body dominated by monotheistic religions, “people of the book” which usually indicates Christians, Jews, and Muslims. ICMW’s logo is open book of scripture, surrounded by symbols from each of the member traditions. In this context, Washington D.C. Hindus responded by explaining their faith in a way that seemed to fit the mold of the others. They began, “Although the Hindu religion is strongly monotheistic and follows the revealed scripture (Gita: The Song of God, revealed 5000 years ago by the Supreme Lord Himself), yet at the same time, the distinct feature of Hindu religion is an equal respect for all religions and scriptures.”

To summarize it all briefly, the Northern California Hindu Businessman’s Association has published an information card on which the “Nine Beliefs of Hinduism” are printed. This set of “nine beliefs” was first created by the Himalayan Academy in San Francisco. It is perhaps the most “creedal” summary of the Hindu tradition:

- Hindus believe in one, all-pervasive Supreme Being who is both immanent and transcendent, both Creator and Unmanifest reality.

- Hindus believe that the universe undergoes endless cycles of creation, preservation, and dissolution.
- Hindus believe that all souls are evolving toward union with God and will ultimately find Moksha: spiritual knowledge and liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Not a single soul will be eternally deprived of this destiny.
- Hindus believe in *karma*, the law of cause and effect by which each individual creates his own destiny by his thoughts, words, and deeds.
- Hindus believe that the soul reincarnates, evolving through many births until all karmas have been resolved.
- Hindus believe that divine beings exist in unseen worlds and that temple worship, rituals, sacraments as well as personal devotionals create a communion with these devas and Gods.
- Hindus believe that a spiritually awakened Master or Sat Guru is essential to know the Transcendent Absolute, as are personal discipline, good conduct, purification, self-inquiry, and meditation.
- Hindus believe that all life is sacred, to be loved and revered, and therefore practice *ahimsa* or nonviolence.
- Hindus believe that no particular religion teaches the only way to salvation above all others, but that all genuine religious paths are facets of God's Pure Love and Light, deserving tolerance and understanding.

Even two hundred years ago “Hinduism” was not a Hindu word, nor were there Hindu “beliefs” articulated as such. But the encounter with a credal tradition like Christianity elicited new forms of presenting Hindu beliefs. After all, traditions are dynamic and ever-changing, even when they change into more rigid and static forms, as seems to be happening today. The question “What is Hinduism?” is very much on the agenda of American Hindus.

Beyond the difficulty of explaining what “Hinduism” is, there is the confusion added to the picture by the insistence of many spiritual movements with their roots in India that they are not Hindu. The Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement, for instance, while rooted in an age-old Hindu meditation practice, does not speak of the practice as “Hindu” or even as “religious,” but uses the language of secular science to explain TM. The American adherents of the Brahma Kumari movement, which has its

headquarters at Mt. Abu in India, also do not think of themselves or the movement as Hindu. The same is true of the Siddha Yoga Dham community and its teacher Gurumayi, even though the lineage of revered teachers of *siddha yoga* goes back many generations in India. Their *ashram* in South Fallsburg, New York, includes residents of many religious traditions and observes the religious holidays of many traditions as well.

In some cases, it is the popular image of “Hinduism” as temple-based, oriented toward deities, and absorbed in ritual practices that is being rejected. To some extent, it may be the view of Hinduism as polytheism that is being avoided by steering clear of the term. It may also be that as “Hinduism” becomes more and more circumscribed with “beliefs” and “creeds,” more and more of the groups concerned with *yoga* or meditation practice choose to opt out. Whatever the case may be, the question “What is Hinduism?” is one of the most complex and challenging questions on the American religious scene.