

THE MEANING OF HINDUISM

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Basically, Hinduism is the major traditional religion of the Indian sub-continent. But it may be somewhat misleading to use the word 'religion' here in the singular: for Hinduism comprises such a variety of cults, beliefs and institutions that it can equally well be looked on as a network of interlocking religions, and not a single system. For example, many Hindus believe in a personal Creator and Lord; but others believe in an impersonal Absolute. Some worship God in the guise of Shiva, others in the guise of Vishnu. Some believe in the efficacy of sacrificial ritual, others do not. Some aspects of Hindu life are extremely ascetic, as witness the *sannyasin* or holy man who has given up all worldly ties; other aspects are world-affirming, even pleasure-seeking. Some Hindus believe in abstention from meat and alcohol; others do not. Some Hindus practice the veneration of trees and snakes; for others these cults are primitive. It is thus not surprising that many Westerners, conceiving of religion in terms of a unified set of beliefs and loyalties, have been rather baffled by Hinduism.

One main secret of understanding Hinduism is to see it as the result of an interplay of diverse cultural groups, living together over a long period in the Indian sub-continent. In these latter days it is natural to look on the Republic of India as a single nation, and to remember the days of the Raj in which most of the sub-continent was brought together under a single rule. But however natural it may be to look on India as a political entity, in fact the sub-continent is much more like Europe than it is like (say) Britain. That is, just as Europe in the Middle Ages consisted of a variety of emerging nations of differing languages and customs, loosely knit together by the use of Latin as the language of the Church, so India has mainly been a network of regional and tribal groups, with differing languages, only loosely unified by the use of Sanskrit as a sacred and literary language, whose main exponents were the Brahmins. The latter's social prestige enabled a theory of a unified religion to be maintained: provided people recognised the authority of the Vedas as revelatory, they counted as orthodox, however varying their interpretations of the scriptures might be.

It is however only in the relatively recent past, in the 19th and 20th centuries, that Hindus have made a strong conscious attempt to present a unified ideology to the world. Indeed, the very word 'Hinduism', Western in form and tone, implies a conscious unity which is new—being a product of the interplay between Western culture and Christian missions on the one hand and the Hindu tradition on the other. The latter, faced with the challenge, responded by taking over some features of Christian methods and of Western assumptions. Thus in the last century and a half the attempt has been made to present a systematic scheme of Hindu belief, to which the label 'Hinduism' could attach. The predominant motif in this scheme has been as follows.

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First, Hinduism with its wide variety of cults and standpoints can serve as an example of unity in pluralism, namely the idea that behind religious differences there lies an essential unity. Modern Hinduism has tended to stress this, because of its perception that in a plural world of major faiths some judgment about them has to be made—and the judgment that they are all in some sense true is congenial to the Indian spirit. Thus an old Indian story tells of a number of blind men holding different parts of an elephant—one the trunk, another a hind leg and so on. The blind men give differing reports of what they are in contact with, but really it is a single thing. Likewise with religions.

Second, modern Hinduism has drawn heavily upon the influential teachings of Shankara (8th century A.D.), probably the greatest exegete and metaphysician of the Hindu tradition. It so happens that his exposition of the central meaning of the Vedic scriptures (above all the Upanishads) can fit into the scheme of unity in pluralism and that it chimed in also with the dominant philosophy of late 19th century Britain, available to India through the spread of English-style higher education on the sub-continent. Briefly, Shankara's position is that the eternal soul or Self within man is identical with Brahman, ultimate reality. Thus there is but one eternal Self, for there is but one ultimate reality. The realization of this in one's spiritual experience brings about liberation. It followed from Shankara's position that the world of ordinary experience, which we perceive as being plural, containing many things and persons, is an illusion screening us from the perception of the one Brahman. Likewise God, conceived as personal Creator of the world, shares in the essentially illusory character of the creation. Thus at a lower (the ordinary) level of experience men worship God as personal, but at the higher level of realization they pass beyond worship, and realize the identity of the Self (Atman) and Brahman. Naturally, such a brief account can scarcely do justice to the subtlety and power of Shankara's system. The idea of differing levels of truth has been taken up vigorously in modern Hinduism to resolve differences between religious attitudes. Some are at a lower level, ultimately to be transcended. It is on this basis that Hinduism tries to say that all religions which believe in a personal God or gods point beyond to the higher level of awareness of the Self.

Third, though modern Hinduism has incorporated much of Shankara's ideas it has tended to play down the idea of illusion (*maya*). Modern social concerns do not allow of such a world-negating idea, and *maya* is often interpreted to mean simply that this world, as ordinarily experienced, is impermanent: abiding, eternal satisfaction lies at the higher level. Thus existence as we ordinarily know it is not unreal so much as non-eternal.

But although modern Hinduism has stressed the impersonal, ultimate reality lying beyond the concept of a personal God, it is fair to say that a major portion of the Hindu tradition has emphasized the worship of a supreme Lord. Devotion to Him brings salvation, through His grace. Thus a major medieval Hindu school could debate as to whether salvation comes on the so-called cat-principle or on the so-called monkey-principle. The mother cat transports her kitten from A to B by the scruff of the neck. The kitten does nothing. Likewise salvation is totally wrought by God. On the

other hand, the little monkey has to *cling* to the mother's waist when being carried. Likewise, clinging to God is necessary for men's salvation—a kind of 'works', to put the matter into Christian terminology. The ideas of devotion (*bhakti*), grace, personal Creation and so forth are reminiscent of much in the Christian tradition.

However, in order not to mislead it is necessary for me to enter a qualification here. It must be remembered that the Lord is figured very differently—e.g. as Vishnu—in Hindu myth. And indeed there are usually thought to be a whole host of lesser deities who are, as it were, offshoots of the one divine Being. Thus the observer of the Indian scene is immediately struck by the variety of cults and gods and goddesses—Vishnu and his incarnations such as Rama and Krishna, his consort Lakshmi, Ganesha the elephant-headed god, Hanuman the monkey god, Kali the consort of Shiva, breathing destruction as well as creative power; and so on. India is a land not just of villages but also of temples, and there are many gods inhabiting the temples. Regional differences, the mixing of traditions, the weaving of myths—these are factors contributing to the galaxy of gods and spirits. Yet it would be misleading to look on India as polytheistic, even if it superficially seems so. For many Hindus, even the unsophisticated, the many gods are all somehow subsumed under the supreme Lord. Local cults are in this way unified and given a common ultimate focus. (There is here some analogy to the cult of saints in some Catholic countries, such as Mexico.)

A contributory cause of the complexity of Hindu cults is the caste system. This elaborate social framework has evolved over a very long period. It implies that different groups may have their own special cults—so that whom you worship depends to some extent on the social pigeonhole in which you were born. Crudely, caste has two marks: first that members of the same caste do not marry outside the caste (endogamy) and second that they do not eat with members of another caste (commensality). The situation is often more fluid than these two points suggest, and modern conditions have tended to modify caste, especially in relation to the second mark. The caste groups tend to be arranged for practical purposes in an elaborate hierarchy, and strong disadvantages can accrue to members of the lowest groups, especially to the 'untouchables' (whom Gandhi called Harijans or sons of God). However, class and caste do not always coincide: a government minister can be an untouchable, and Brahmins can have menial jobs. Much modern reform by Hindus, however, has endeavoured to raise the status of the lowest groups, e.g. by increased educational opportunity and by getting temples opened to Harijans.

The social framework of Hinduism has a remarkable tenacity, and despite its often manifest injustices, has served to integrate differing groups with varying customs into a cohesive pattern. Theoretically, the social framework has a religious basis—it is part of the 'order' or *dharma* to which men and gods conform and which is periodically restored by God for the welfare of all. Thus it is not easy to separate Hinduism from the fabric of Indian society. It is only recently that (say) Westerners could become Hindus in a sense (such men as Aldous Huxley): typically Hinduism is for Indians. Thus it scarcely exists outside the Indian sub-continent

except in places where there has been a heavy migration of Indians—for instance, Guyana, Kenya, Fiji, South Africa and so on.

All this has meant that there has been strong stress on the necessity of fulfilling one's particular social duties. Thus in the *Bhagavadgita* (the 'Song of the Lord'), the single most popular scripture in modern India, the hero Arjuna is exhorted by Krishna to do battle, for that is his metier as a warrior, even though Arjuna is wavering because the battle about to be joined is against his own kith and kin. The emphasis on social obligations should be remembered, as a corrective to the common picture of Hinduism as world-negating. However, there has also always been a recognized way of transcending social obligations, by becoming a *sannyasin*—one who leaves the world in search of spiritual truth. India has always had a tradition of holy men, often committed to considerable austerities in the quest for realization. An important aspect of the search has been the practice of meditation or contemplation, helped by the techniques of yoga. Very often this seeking for inner illumination, in which one realizes the eternal Self, contrasts with the other-directed character of *bhakti* or devotion, which conceives of the worshipper and the object of worship as essentially distinct. The tension was relieved in one way by Shankara, for the higher truth belongs to contemplation, and the lower truth to *bhakti*.

The social structure and ideas of God or Absolute have to be placed in another context too if we are properly to understand the Hindu world. This other context consists in the belief in rebirth or reincarnation (or transmigration, to use another term again). Though not widely accepted in the earliest period of the Hindu scriptures, belief in rebirth has come to typify nearly all forms of Indian religion. The belief implies that on death one is reborn in another form, maybe animal or divine or in a purgatory. The world of living forms from the high heavens to infernal hellish regions beneath the earth is a continuum, and one can ascend and descend in the scale of life. The virtuous untouchable may be reborn in a high caste: the murderous Brahmin may be reborn in a purgatory. The angry man may be reborn as a fierce animal. And so on. Liberation or salvation is usually conceived as an exit from the cycle of existence, *samsara*—either through one's own actions in purifying oneself or through faith in a merciful Lord who brings the faithful into communion with Himself beyond the realm of *samsara*.

Belief in rebirth gives a very different perspective on life from that which has been most common in the West. Men and animals and other living creatures are not sharply separated, and man is not therefore seen as 'lord of creation'. The problem of life is not death, but rather life itself, for one goes on living in one form or another until one attains liberation. Morality is seen in the framework of *karma*—every deed attracts its reward in this life or the next. The class structure is modified by rebirth, for one is not, on this view, condemned forever to inferiority. And if some teachers say that liberation is hard, only for the few, the ordinary man can still reckon that he may be one of the elite in some future existence.

For those who believe in a single supreme Creator, *karma* is seen as an expression of his will. For those who do not, *karma* is seen as an independent force built into the workings of the world, and to this force the wise man conforms his conduct.

We can now sum up the typical features of Hinduism, as consisting in a particular social fabric (the caste system), determining one's religious and social duties, within the framework of the doctrines of rebirth and *karma*. Though the scriptures have traditionally been the preserve of the upper three classes of traditional Indian society, the so-called 'twice-born' (born twice because of initiation into society as a second birth), the orthodox Hindu recognizes their universal validity. This is one condition of being a Hindu. But as I have already pointed out there are varied interpretations of scripture, ranging from theism to atheism. Predominant, however, have been two theologies—non-dualistic Vedanta as expounded by Shankara and devotional theism.

In view of the complexities of Hinduism, is it possible to make a judgment about its relationship to the Christian tradition? Christians have certainly taken up a number of differing stances—some finding little but idolatry in Hinduism, others seeing profundity in much of India's religion. Leaving aside the ultimate question of truth, it is perhaps useful to see something of typical Hindu attitudes to Christianity, for these necessarily pose questions to us in the understanding of our own tradition.

Most Hindus I have talked to have a strong respect for Christ, and indeed are willing to accept his divinity (that is, within the Hindu understanding of that term). Two things about Christian faith in Christ tend to puzzle the Hindu—first, the claim that Christ is *uniquely* God incarnate (Ghandi once remarked that he would have become a Christian but for this claim—the Hindu is used to the idea of many incarnations); second, the doctrine of atonement: the Hindu sees our problems as less to do with sin than to do with spiritual ignorance clouding our perception of reality. Where Hindus stress faith in a personal God, they do not typically think that a mediator between God and man is needed.

Another question posed by the Hindu relates to the meaning of history. The Christian emphasis on the historical actions of Christ implies a particularity in God's dealings with men which does not accord too well with the Hindu picture of a world constantly being destroyed and re-created.

Also very strongly planted in the attitudes of modern Hindus is the belief that somehow differences between religions can be reconciled. In this respect they react strongly against the exclusive claims of Christianity, especially evangelical Christianity. I remember talking to a south Indian Brahmin who used to attend Christian missionary meetings, though he never stayed for the discussion. He told me that he did not want to get converted, and there was really no point in it, seeing that all faiths point to the same goal—all he wanted to hear was Christ's teachings.

These are some of the reactions of modern Hinduism. They may help to explain the way in which Hindus see their own great diversity as a merit, as a way pointing to the unity-in-plurality which they feel the world needs. How long their position can be sustained is a further question.