

Hinduism versus Monotheism

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Today there are about 800 to 850 million Hindus in the world, and most of them are concentrated in India. In fact, historically, geographically and culturally, the idea of Hinduism is closely bound with the idea of India. The diaspora -- the Hindus living outside India -- try to preserve the traditions they took with them from India to their new homes. Any changes or “movements” in Hinduism originate in India.

Hinduism almost defies definition—so much so that a famous Indian author once quipped that Hindus are those that call themselves Hindus. In addition, beliefs and practices vary from region to region in India and, within the same region, from caste to caste, and from even sub-caste to sub-caste. As a result, a Hindu cannot assert with certainty that all Hindus observe any specific ritual or doctrine without exception. Any Hindu who, therefore, ventures to write about Hinduism has to begin with a warning or caveat that other Hindus are likely to disagree with him/her on several points. Hence, I need to emphasize that the following description is *my* individual interpretation, my personal take on what Hinduism is all about.

Let me first attempt to describe what Hinduism is, and then what it is not. Incidentally, it is very important to talk about what Hinduism is not because that is easier to do and also easier for a non-Hindu to grasp because its complexities will become clearer that way. Since most of my readers are likely to be Americans, that is, followers of monotheistic religions, I think that a comparison of Hinduism with the Abrahamic faiths may enrich non-Hindus’ understanding of Hinduism.

WHAT IS HINDUISM?

Even though tradition is more important to Hindus than doctrine (*rudhihi shaastraat baliyasii*), there are some commonly shared beliefs among Hindus. Hinduism works on at least two levels: one is the spiritual or “transcendental” level—the teaching of the *Upanishads* that the individual soul (*atman*) and the universal soul (*param-atman*) are identical. Such understanding leads to salvation or release (*moksha* or *nirvana*) from the round of existences, termed “*samsara*” in Sanskrit. On this level, there is neither god, nor need for one.

On the second, more “practical,” level where most Hindus lead their daily lives, they worship many gods and goddesses. One may trace the origin of these Hindu deities in the sacred texts called the *Vedas*, the *Puranas*, and the two famous ancient epics of India – the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Not monotheism but multiplicity of deities is the reality of Hindu faith. Hindus pray to them and make offerings to them for specific favors, for averting bad luck and disease or achieving sound health and general well-being. In this respect, Hindu deities are rather similar to Catholic saints. Hinduism is

openly and unashamedly transactional: One good turn deserves another. Hindus are constantly striking bargains, entering into contracts, with their gods: “I will pray to you, worship you, make offerings to you, etc. if you grant me such and such boons.” And, in my opinion, that is the way it should be. A character in a famous Sanskrit play of almost 2000 years ago (*The Little Clay Cart—Mruchhakatikam*) says to his friend, “What good is worshipping the gods if they don’t reciprocate, if they don’t show any favors?” This example demonstrates that Hinduism has been transactional for thousands of years, virtually from its very beginning.

This kind of worship also includes the path of strong devotion (*bhakti*) to the deity of your family, your caste, or your personal preference. In devotional songs and prayers, the Hindu devotee looks upon the deity of his personal preference, not as someone to be feared (as the Deity in the *Old Testament*), but to be loved as a friend, a counselor, a mother and, at times, even as a lover. Some gods and goddesses are more commonly worshiped *all over India*, like the elephant-headed *Ganesha* who wards off disasters and the goddess *Durga* (especially in Bengal), also known as the demon-killing warrior deity, *Kali*, in many of her manifold names and manifestations.

Most Hindus (and Buddhists) believe in Karma, the idea that people’s present life is influenced, even determined, by their actions in their past lives. Some Christians may find an echo of predestination in the concept of Karma. But the ideas are different in that people are responsible for their Karma, while God determines arbitrarily (?) who is going to be saved and who is not. Hindus, therefore, do not go through crises of faith as some Christians or Jews seem to go through, troubled by thoughts such as “Why do bad things happen to good people? If God is kindly, why does he allow evil to exist and even prosper?” (Apparently, the notion of “free will” does not squelch such doubts among at least some monotheists). Hindus ultimately hold themselves -- that is their Karma (not deities) -- responsible for what happens to them. They, however, believe that though Karma is destiny its undesirable effects can be mitigated through fasts, pilgrimages, or ritualistic vows.

One must admit that, over the centuries, Hindu upper castes abused and misappropriated the concept of Karma to justify and perpetuate their discriminatory practices directed toward the lower castes and, particularly, to maintain the exploitation, and close-to-slavery status of the former untouchables by arguing that they had none to blame but their own Karma. But when the *Dalits* (the oppressed) began their “revolt” from the early decades of the twentieth century, they were able to argue that it was (now) the upper castes’ Karma to be revolted against, *their* payback or reckoning time.

Besides the all-pervasive power of Karma, other concepts guiding Hindu beliefs and behaviors include the cycle of births, deaths, and rebirths (reincarnation); the sacredness of the cow; four major castes; four stages of life; and four goals of human beings. Westerners are somewhat familiar with the institution of caste. Most of them, for instance, seem to know that many Hindus marry within their own castes, but not many Westerners know about the Hindu goals of life: right conduct or duty (*dharma*), acquisition and consumption of wealth (*artha*), sexual pleasure and procreation (*kama*),

and release from the cycle of birth and death (*moksha*). Moksha can be attained by following any of the four paths recommended by the sages: the Path of Knowledge, the Path of Karma or Action, the Path of Devotion (to one's personal deity), and the Path of Renunciation. Moksha (unlike in the Abrahamic religions) is a result of one's own personal effort, not a consequence of anybody's grace or favor. The *Upanishads* also enjoin every Hindu to venerate his or her mother, father, teacher, and guest (in that order of priority).

The ideal most Hindus strive for is selfless action, duty without hankering after the fruit of action. This is what the *Bhagvad Gita* (*The Song of the Lord*), a didactic and spiritual text many Hindus revere, teaches. How many, however, reach this ideal is another matter. The four stages or passages of life include scholar (when celibacy is recommended), householder, retiree, and renouncer or ascetic, the last stage when all desires are extinguished (Not many, however, achieve this last stage).

WHAT HINDUISM IS NOT: COMPARING HINDUISM WITH MONOTHEISTIC RELIGIONS

Hindu society is hierarchically structured and divided in numerous castes and sub-castes; a Hindu's caste is determined by birth. The origin of castes is mythical and, as such, is inseparably linked with the Hindu religion. Monotheistic societies like Jewish, Christian, and Moslem societies are also divided, but mainly by class. In addition to caste, class too is a divisive factor in Hindu society with attendant intercaste and interclass strife and jockeying for power. However, it does not have doctrinally determined "horizontal" schisms such as Hinayana and Mahayana within Buddhism, Catholicism and Protestantism within Christianity, or Sunni and Shia within Islam. As a result, no war has occurred among Hindus because of differences of dogma or religious ideology. It is true that there were strong tensions until the recent past between, say, the devotees of Vishnu and those of Shiva. Similarly, in the remote past, there were struggles between Hindus and Buddhists. But there are no authenticated reports of any bloody wars on the scale of the wars between Catholics and Protestants or Sunnis and Shia.

Differing interpretations among Hindus themselves of what Hinduism means have been the result of the fact that (unlike Christians, Jews, and Muslims) Hindus do not have one authoritative scripture. They recognize and cite (as expediency dictates or as the mood strikes them) many texts which have gained "scriptural" authority among them over the last several thousand years. The *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the various *Puranas*, a number of law books (*Dharmashastras*), and the *Bhagvad Gita* (referred to above) are some of them. Add to this the fact (which is the case among the followers of other religions too) that the interpretations of sacred texts vary depending upon who is citing them.

Some Hindus maintain that Hinduism is monotheistic, but I think there is some confusion of terms here. What they mean is that some Hindu philosophers (like *Shakaracharya* in the 9th century) propounded a theory more accurately named "monism" (*advaita*). Monism, in rather over-simplified terms, means that the only "reality" is one, namely,

Brahman, roughly translated as “the universal soul.” On the other hand, monotheism refers to the belief in one *God*. Monists (*advaita-vadins*) assert that when one attains the realization that there is “no two,” that there is only Brahman, the question of worshipping any *god* does not arise. “You are It” (*Tat Twum Asi*, meaning “your individual soul is identical with the Universal soul”). But this is the esoteric, transcendental part of Hinduism, the *Vedanta*. Most Hindus do not dwell on this plane. They believe in many gods and goddesses and, consequently, end their prayers or rituals often with salutations to all their gods. From this perspective, Hindus are indisputably polytheists.

When I examine the first two commandments of the *Old Testament* (which form two major articles of faith for the three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam), I’m proud to be either a polytheist or an atheist, depending on what mood I am in. The first “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” will strike many Hindus (including me) as the dictate of a despot or autocrat since Hindus believe in many gods. They want a choice. Hindu gods and goddesses are like candidates running for elective offices in a democracy. They all have to promote themselves by claiming that they are the best among what the market has to offer. Similarly, most Hindus would be very disturbed by a god who subjects a man to an unnatural act just to test his loyalty. I am referring to the story of Abraham in the *Old Testament* where a disaster, a son’s sacrifice, is averted at the last moment. It is beside the point that God sends one of his angels to stop the human sacrifice that *He* had demanded in the first place. At least in the region where I was born and brought up in India, there is a myth, a legend, that one of the gods has been waiting (for “twenty eight eons”) for his devotee to finish massaging his aged parents’ feet. So here is a God of the monotheists, an instigator of a cruel and unnatural act because He wants proof of His devotee’s faith, because he is so insecure as all tyrants are, while in the pantheon of Hindu deities, there is one who does not mind waiting because his devotee is busy fulfilling his filial duties.

In the same vein, in Hindu eyes, the second commandment “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image” is quite unreasonable and counter-productive because Hindus find concentrating on worship much easier when they have an image in front of them. In addition, they will respond, “If God made man (and woman) in His own image, shouldn’t God look like people? Why not then make likenesses of Him (for instance, like men and women with some additional or “superhuman” features)?”

It is important to note that Hinduism is not an institutional religion; it has no Pope, no bishops, no clergy, no mullahs, or no rabbis. Those who chant the mantras and assist at worship in Hindu households on religious festivals or ceremonies such as weddings, or those who narrate and sing the stories and myths of gods and goddesses in temples do not necessarily represent any institutions. These “service providers” are paid fees piecemeal for their work, though some wealthy temples and households “retain” Brahmins for this purpose. Among Hindus, there are no weekly scheduled congregational gatherings. There is no Friday prayer at a mosque or no Sunday service at a church. Hindus go to temples when they want to and not as assemblies guided by “leaders.” For Hindus, a daily worship (*pooja*) in one’s home is the observance that matters rather than attendance at a public place of worship.

As an aside, many Hindus claim to be more “spiritual” than the adherents of other religions. They very carefully omit to define what spiritual means. However, among the Hindus I grew up with (the *Kokanastha* or *Chitpawan* sub-caste of Maharashtrian or Western Indian Brahmins), I have seen some people more materialistic and consumption oriented than most Americans I have met in my almost 45 years of stay in this country.

Part of the freewheeling milieu and open attitudes toward belief and doctrine among Hindus can be attributed to the fact there is no doctrinal rigidity in Hinduism. Hence, there is no such thing as doctrinal *heresy* among Hindus. They do not have to declare that there is no God but God. In fact, they can be atheists and still claim to be Hindus. Nor do they have to recite “The Lord’s Prayer”. One does not have to profess exclusive loyalty to any dogma to be a Hindu. That is why Hindus are not “afraid” to attend a church service, enter a mosque, or go to a synagogue. They are not worried that, as a result, they will lose their anchor, their faith will waver, or they will be lured into another religion.

In fact, over the centuries very few conversions have occurred *voluntarily* out of Hinduism. Most conversions have taken place through force or coercion and bribery. From approximately the 13th century to the 18th century, political power was so closely associated with Islam at least in Northern India that when a Hindu king or a petty aristocrat (*sardaar*) converted to Islam his subjects almost automatically and routinely accepted the new religion. Of course, since India’s independence overt coercion has not been a possibility.

HINDU ATTITUDES TODAY TOWARD CONVERSION

Though bribery in various forms and religious institutions of learning are the prevailing modes now used by non-Hindu missionaries to spread their faiths in India, educated and financially well-placed Hindus of today are proof against bribery because they do not need money that badly. They are generally not likely to convert to other religions because they do not think that any other religion is superior to Hinduism in philosophy, doctrine, or practice. They do not therefore freak out just because they happen to like some practice or idea in another religion. They will continue as Hindus while admiring that one particular idea.

Hinduism is not an evangelizing religion; Hindus do not have proselytizing zeal because they believe that all paths to salvation are legitimate and effective. Prior to the arrival of the monotheists in India (Muslims and Christians), either by means of invasions, through migrations, missionary activities or trade contacts, there was no violence caused by religious strife in India because in earlier eras the outsiders coming in were pagans, who worshiped many gods and goddesses. They were not religious zealots; their deities mingled with Hindu and Buddhist deities. India then was a religious and ethnic melting pot.

Monotheistic iconoclasts (attacking Hindu gods and goddesses) and polytheistic idol-worshippers, however, do not mix well. Acceptance is not a one-way street. A situation where Hindus tolerate other religions while missionaries from other (monotheistic) religions despise Hinduism and go on converting Hindus cannot last forever. That is why it should not surprise anyone that many modern Hindus resist all forms of covert and overt coercion or bribery that Christian and Muslim missionaries have been employing for ages to convert Hindus, especially the poor, to their religions.

Some may arguably maintain that Hindus did not always in the past resist the aggressive and violent encroachments of other religions against them and that a great number of Hindus were lost to the onslaught of other religions. Be that as it may, I for one cannot get over my admiration for the courage of the Hindus of those times. I am astonished by the historical phenomenon that while the expansive Islam totally extinguished the earlier religions from a wide swath of the then known world – from North Africa to West China – South Asians (by and large) tenaciously and bravely, held on to Hinduism in India and Buddhism in Sri Lanka. It is not any ferocious adherence to dogma but the attachment for a unique way of life that those Hindus were defending.

Because modern Hindus do not take that kind of aggression from other religions quietly any more, we hear about clashes in India between Christian missionaries and Hindu activists. Another reason for Hindu resistance to evangelizing efforts is that these conversion activities have resulted in insurrectional tendencies among the converts who have been demanding secession from India and agitating for new sovereign homelands of their own. No patriot or nationalist in India is going to tolerate secessionist talk. Of course, Hindus (especially the upper caste and the rich) cannot disown or wash their hands of their culpability in neglecting or ignoring the wretched poor among their midst who have no other recourse or relief but to go to the missionaries who are ready to lend a helping hand in exchange for conversion.

CONCLUSION

In my judgment, Hinduism has had the following political and economic consequences for India:

After independence, India chose a democratic form of government: Democracy in India is a direct result of Hindu belief in polytheism and acceptance of diversity. For a non-homogeneous country like India, democracy is the most effective and workable polity.

Indians avoid extremes: They reject the run-away, unregulated capitalism on the one hand and the innovation/creativity-stifling communism on the other. This moderation or the middle path is a reflection of Hindu contempt for rigidity of dogma.

India did not build empires: When Hindus and Buddhists migrated to Southeast Asia and built kingdoms (in parts of what are today's Malaysia,

Indonesia, Cambodia and Vietnam) starting around the seventh century, the “mother country” did not keep imperial ties with those political entities.

India has welcomed various followers of non-Hindu religions seeking refuge over the centuries. Iranians or Parsees in the remote past to Tibetan Buddhists under the Dalai Lama in the recent past are some instances. However, from only in the last few decades have Christians in the West begun allowing the immigration of non-Christians (maybe, with the lone exception of Jews) in their countries.

When all is said and done, one observation can be made with certainty about Hinduism: Not just tolerance but accommodation or acceptance of the other is its hallmark. In addition, when several Christian denominations are losing their members and finding it difficult to attract new members and when at least fundamentalist Muslims have to keep Islamic adherents in line with threats of savage punishments, Hinduism has remained dynamic precisely because it allows total freedom of belief and doctrine to those who call themselves Hindus.

NOTE:

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