

Hinduism

(part 1 of 4): What is Hinduism?



This is the first article in a series discussing Hinduism from a comparative religions perspective. Although as Muslims we believe wholeheartedly that there is only One God and Mohammad is His messenger, and that Islam is the religion of those who are submitted to God, these articles are not intended to denigrate other religions or their followers. Our intention is, as the title suggests, to compare religions.

Hinduism^[1] is the religion of the majority of people residing in India and Nepal. There are also large numbers of adherents scattered across the globe. Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world with approximately 950 million followers behind Christianity and Islam. It is sometimes thought of as the oldest living religion with elements that stretch back thousands of years, many scholars suggesting that it began more than 4000 years before the Common Era.

Hinduism which derives its name from the Persian name for river, originated in the Indus river valley. It is a collection of practices and beliefs with no single founder, no single scripture and no single set of beliefs. Hinduism is also closely conceptually and historically associated with the other predominantly Indian religions Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism.

Central to Hindu worship is the image, or icon, which is worshipped either at home or in a temple. Worship to them is primarily an individual act rather than a communal one, as it involves making personal offerings to the deity and chanting or repeating the names of favourite gods and goddesses. Water, fruit, flowers and incense are offered and pilgrimage to various stones, rivers, mountains and temples is thought to be seen by the particular deity being worshipped.

Hinduism is frequently described as a polytheistic religion due to the vast array of gods and deities, often based on needs or regions, and worship that almost always focuses on sculptures and images. However there are many who

define Hinduism as monotheistic because of the belief in the supreme God – Brahman, whose qualities and forms are represented by the multitude of deities which emanate from him. Brahman is a Sanskrit word which refers to a transcendent power beyond the universe often translated as God whom it is said, can have unlimited forms and expressions.

There are also those who view Hinduism as Trinitarian because Brahman is simultaneously visualized as a triad. The triumvirate consists of three gods who are responsible for the creation, upkeep and destruction of the world. They are Brahma,(who should not be confused with Brahman, the supreme god energy), Vishnu and Shiva. Brahma is responsible for the creation, Vishnu is the preserver of the universe, while Shiva's role is to destroy it in order to re-create.

Hinduism has many scriptures; the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad-Gita are considered the most important. Most Hindus believe the soul, or atman, is eternal, and goes through a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (samsara) determined by one's positive or negative karma, or the consequences of one's actions. The goal of religious life is to learn to act so as to finally achieve liberation (moksha) of one's soul, escaping the rebirth cycle.

It is difficult to answer the question, is Hinduism polytheistic, pantheistic or monotheistic? We arrive at various answers from various sources, all equally correct according to each understanding of Hinduism. Hinduism worships multiple forms of the one God.^[2] According to the tenets of Hinduism, God is one as well as many.^[3] Hindus believe in monotheistic polytheism, rather than polytheism.^[4] Even though Hinduism is mistakenly regarded by many as a religion having many gods namely, polytheism, yet truly speaking Hinduism is a monotheistic religion.^[5]

Religion Facts^[6] tries to make sense of the differing definitions by saying that, 'Although "monotheism" literally means belief in the existence of one God, the term has come to denote belief in a God who created and is distinct from the universe. Pantheism is the view that God is essentially identical with the universe and totally immanent in the world: God is the universe and the universe is God. Thus pantheism seems to be the most accurate label for Hinduism. The "with polytheistic elements" qualifier is added because the Supreme Being of Hinduism is most often worshipped in the form of multiple deities. However, it must be noted that this is a generalization that does not describe the beliefs of all Hindus. Some regard the universe as created by and essentially distinct from God, and are therefore "monotheistic" in the traditional sense.'

In just a few short paragraphs we have attempted to sum up thousands of years of traditions that have come about via freedom of belief and practice. There are ten basic human values inherent in Hinduism; however there are several entrenched practices that completely go against the tenants of Islam. These include the caste system and the devaluation of women. As mentioned above, Hinduism involves the belief in reincarnation and this too is unable to be reconciled with the teachings of Islam. Until recently Hinduism was

considered the world's most religiously tolerant faith. However mass conversions to other faiths has resulted in incidents of intolerance.

In part two we will discuss the status of women in Hinduism, the painful legacy left by the caste system, officially outlawed in India in 1949, and two glaring doctrinal differences between Hinduism and Islam, the worship of something other than God and the belief in reincarnation.

Footnotes:

[1] Except for specific quotations the majority of the information about Hinduism is obtained from the following web sites.<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/ataglance/glace.shtml> &<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2122.html> & <http://www.religioustolerance.org/hinduism4.htm>

[2] OM, an American Hindu organization

[3] HinduWebsite.com

[4] The Hindu Universe

[5] Sri Swami Chidanda

[6] <http://www.religionfacts.com/about.htm>

(part 2 of 4): Idol worship and Reincarnation

Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world. There are approximately 950 million adherents, most of them in India or Nepal. Central to Hindu worship is the image or icon, and central to Hindu belief is the concept of rebirth or reincarnation. These two fundamental convictions in some ways make Hinduism and Islam polar opposites.

Monotheism versus Polytheism

The most fundamental belief in Islam is the concept of One God. He has no sons, daughters, associates or intermediaries. He does not have partners or underlings; therefore, there are no demi gods or minor deities inherent in the concept of God. He is not part of His creation and God is not in everybody and everything. Praying to images, icons, statues, animals or stones is a grave sin. Believing that someone or something other than God alone is able to affect your life or future is a grave sin. Worshipping something or someone along with or instead of God and not sincerely repenting before death is considered to be the only unforgiveable sin in Islam. The belief in more than one god is called polytheism and the pure monotheism of Islam is directly opposed to it.

Polytheism is the worship of many gods, demi gods or deities and in the modern world it is epitomised in the eastern religions, particularly Hinduism. Hindus believe that everything is god or contains the energy of god therefore is worthy of worship, be it icons or symbols or nature itself. The

multiple heads or limbs often seen in Hindu iconography represent divine omniscience or omnipotence, and the use of animals represent qualities associated with that particular animal, such as wisdom, agility or power. It is not difficult to see that the idol worship imbedded in all branches of Hinduism is very far away from the beliefs of Islam.

Reincarnation

Hundreds of millions of people worldwide believe in reincarnation, or cyclic rebirths based on the transmigration of the human soul from one physical body to another. One of the principle beliefs in Hinduism is that the soul reincarnates again and again until it becomes perfect and reunites with the source – Brahman. The soul enters many bodies, assumes many forms, lives many lives and has many experiences.

Just as a man discards worn out clothes and puts on new clothes, the soul discards worn out bodies and puts on new ones. (2.22 Bhagavad gita.)

Reincarnation is refuted by all the main Monotheistic religions of the world. Reincarnation is against the basic teaching that the soul inhabits one human body, whose life is finite and upon which he or she will be judged, and punished or rewarded accordingly. The religion of Islam unequivocally rejects the concept of reincarnation.

Until, when death approaches any of them, he prays: "O my God! Let me return [to life], so that I might act righteously in whatever I have failed [aforetime]!" Nay, it is indeed but a [meaningless] word that he utters: for behind those [who leave the world] there is a barrier [of death] until the Day when all will be raised from the dead! (Quran 23:99-100)

The words of God, in the Quran are clear. When a person dies, he or she is unable to return to his or her old life. The soul stays in the grave and the person experiences torment or bliss based upon his/her beliefs and deeds until the Day of Judgment. Islam teaches that the purpose of life is to worship God, no matter how short or long the life may be. The soul is part of each unique created individual, it does not move from one body to another and it will never become part of God, who is separate from His creation. The reasons why human beings are not sent to the world over and over again is also explained in the Quran, when God says that if that were to happen they would just do the same things and commit the same sins.

"But if they were returned to the world, they would certainly revert to that which they were forbidden." (Quran 6:28)

Hinduwebsite^[1] explains the process of reincarnation in the following way. 'Hinduism speaks of the existence of heavens above and hells below.

The former are sun filled, inhabited by gods and innumerable divine souls. The latter are dark worlds and populated by all the dark and demonic forces. The individual souls go into these worlds according to their deeds. But they do not stay there permanently till the end of destruction. They go there basically as a consequence of their actions, either to enjoy or to suffer. In either case they learn the lesson and come back to earth to start a new earthly life all over again.’

Islam, on the other hand states categorically that the soul cannot detach from a specially designed body and move on to another body, or upward and downward in a chain of worlds, heavens or hells. For our life on this earth the soul and the body belong together, they cannot be mixed and matched. There is only one soul belonging to one body that will be rewarded or punished on the Day of Judgement, to dwell forever in either Paradise or Hell. This is in stark contrast to Hinduism where heaven and hell are temporary abodes and a soul regains freedom over and over until it reaches self realisation or oneness with the eternal life force.

Hinduism is a group of religious traditions established over a long period of time. There are many different forms of worship, sometimes to personal deities, sometimes in the home, at other times in a temple. Hindus believe that there are many different paths to many different gods but all of them lead to the eternal life force or Brahman. Islam however teaches that there is no true deity but Allah alone. There is nothing like Him, as God says:

There is nothing like unto Allah, and He is all-hearing, all-seeing. (Quran 42:11)

Footnotes:

[1] <http://www.hinduwebsite.com/reincarnation.asp>

(part 3 of 4): The status of women in Hinduism

Hinduism[1] is the third largest religion in the world, with more than 950 million adherents. Although Hindus live predominantly in India and Nepal, they are scattered throughout the world. As we discussed in the previous two articles, in some ways Hinduism and Islam can be thought of as polar opposites. Two of the most basic beliefs of Hinduism conflict completely with the most basic beliefs of Islam. In Islam worship is for One God, Muslims do not worship idols, statues or representations of God. Hindus, on the other hand worship many gods and deities.

Muslims believe that we each have one life, upon which we will be judged, and rewarded or punished accordingly, whereas Hindus believe in reincarnation, the process of rebirth and the transmigration of souls. These two issues were covered in article two. In this article we will talk about the status of women in Hinduism and compare it with the teachings of Islam.

Women in India suffer from a wide range of social injustices and the status of women is usually discussed on a nationwide basis. However it is important to note that more than 80% of Indians are Hindu and the majority of negative behaviours towards women can be attributed to Hindu practices. Indian women rank high in worldwide statistics on prostitution, the murder, neglect and abuse of young girls, the number of women sold into slavery, as victims of AIDS, and living below the poverty line.

Infanticide, the killing of a child soon after birth, has been prevalent in India for centuries. In 1834 it was reported that, “in some villages, no girl babies were found at all; in a total of thirty others, there were 343 boys to 54 girls.” One hundred and fifty years later the killing of girl babies has been streamlined. In a 2007 article, Reuters reported on the high level of female foeticide (the practice of aborting female foetuses) in India. According to UNICEF, ‘A report from Bombay in 1984 on abortions after prenatal sex determination stated that 7,999 out of 8,000 of the aborted foetuses were female.

Reuters also reports that “Around 10 million girls have been killed by their parents over the last 20 years. Female infanticide and foeticide, although illegal, are still prevalent with boys preferred to girls”. A 2006 government survey found that 45 percent of girls were married before the legal marriageable age of 18. India’s adult female literacy rate in 2004 was 47.8%, compared to the adult male rate of 73.4%. What is it about Hinduism that allows such blatant discrimination against an entire gender?

Some argue that the Hindu scriptures allow such practices. An obsession with sons stems from the age of Atharva Veda when it was written “Let a female child be born somewhere else. Here let a son be born” However Hindus believe that all life is sacred, to be loved and revered, and therefore practice ahimsa or non-violence. Although this appears to not make a great deal of sense, it does, in the sense that Hinduism is a mixture of religious and cultural practices. The Hindu religion calls for rituals to be conducted in honour of women yet at the same time, women are denied any form of last rights at death or a fair share in family inheritance. In a letter to an Indian newspaper in 2002 one woman tried to explain the increase in foeticide.

In India marrying a girl off is very expensive and the boy children bring home a bride and a dowry. Also Hindu law requires that only a SON may light the funeral pyre of their mother and father. We all know it is very costly to marry off a girl whereas the marriage of a son brings back whatever has been spent on him since his birth. This is a fact and unless this is addressed to, female foeticide cannot be stopped.

Baby boys are desired, whereas, girl babies are despised. In the Arabian Peninsula before the advent of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, and Islam, baby girls were buried alive. This was an ignorant practice and Prophet Muhammad stated unreservedly that female children are a blessing and that raising them to be righteous believers is a source of great reward. In the Quran, God declares those who despise daughters as evil.

"Whenever any of them is given the glad tiding of [the birth of] a girl, his face darkens, and he is filled with suppressed anger, avoiding all people because of the [alleged] evil of the glad tiding which he has received, [and debating within himself:] Shall he keep this [child] despite the contempt [which he feels for it]-or shall he bury it in the dust? Evil indeed is whatever they decide! (Quran 16:58-59)

The traditions of Prophet Muhammad show very clearly that raising girls is a source of pleasure both in this life and in the hereafter. His beloved wife Aisha relates stories that demonstrate the desirability of female babies.

A lady along with her two daughters came to me (Aisha) asking for some alms, but she found nothing with me except one date which I gave to her and she divided it between her two daughters, and did not eat anything herself, and then she got up and went away. Then the Prophet came in and I informed him about this story. He said, "Whoever raises daughters and treats them generously (with benevolence) then these daughters will act as a shield from Hell-Fire for them."^[2]

"Whenever a child was born among them, Aisha would not ask if it were a boy or a girl. Instead she would ask, 'Is the child healthy (and without defect)?' If she was told, 'Yes,' she would say, All praise is for Allah, Lord of All the Worlds.

A common social ailment amongst the Hindus is the practice of the bride's family paying a dowry to her new husband's family. Although this practice was formerly outlawed in 1961, it is still pervasive.

Islam recognises the difficulties and hardships that dowries cause therefore has no such custom or requirement. Instead Islam has what is known as the mahr. It is a gift of money, possessions or property made by the husband to the wife, which becomes her exclusive property. It is an admission of her independence, and is intended to show the husband's willing acceptance of bearing all the necessary expenses of his wife.

As you can see from two examples, the status of women in Islam is very different to the status of women in Hinduism. While one religion, Hinduism, claims to honour women, it is up to the secular Indian government to make laws forbidding the atrocious treatment Hinduism allows. On the other hand respect for women is enshrined in Islamic law.

Footnotes:

[1] Except for specific quotations the majority of the information about Hinduism is obtained from the following web sites.

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/ata glance/glance.shtml>)

(<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2122.html>)

(<http://www.religioustolerance.org/hinduism4.htm>). (www.religiousconsultation.org)

(www.sanatana-dharma.tripod.com) (www.religionfacts.com)

[2] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

(part 4 of 4): More differences between Islam & Hinduism

Further to our discussion about the status of women in Hinduism mention must be made of sati, the burning of women on their husband's funeral pyre. Sati was prevalent in ancient India, when some women deemed it a great honour to die in this way. By the 10th century sati, was known across much of the subcontinent and it continued to occur, with regional variations, into the 20th century. Wives would self immolate to cast away any sins the husband had committed. This is a voluntary act; however widows were put under a great deal of pressure to do it and were frowned upon if they did not follow the custom.

Ibn Batuta[1] (1333 A.D.) observed that Sati was considered praiseworthy by the Hindus, without being obligatory. The Agni Purana[2] declares that the woman who commits sati goes to heaven. However, Medhatiti[3] pronounced that Sati was like suicide and was against the Shastras, the Hindu code of conduct. This is another example of Hindu scriptures seemingly contradicting each other.

The Islamic Mughal Empire of the 16th & 17th centuries was the first to try to officially outlaw the practice of sati. At first women were encouraged to leave the practice by offering gifts and pensions to widows. Many obstacles to the practice were put in place but sati continued, particularly outside the large cities. In 1663, an order was issued that in all lands under Mughal control, officials should, under no circumstances, allow a woman to be burnt. Despite attempts to eradicate it, the practice of sati continued, especially during periods of war and upheaval. Sadly isolated incidences of sati continue to exist, even though it was officially banned in 1829 and governments since then have continued to make the practice illegal.

Even without the pressure of sati generally Hindu widows are faced with a number of taboos; the higher their caste, the more restrictions a widow faces. When a man dies, his widow is expected to renounce all earthly pleasures. She should no longer look attractive, and is expected to wear a simple white sari for the rest of her life. On news of their husband's death, widows are expected to

break their bangles and can no longer wear jewellery or use sindhoor - the red powder women wear in their hair parting and on their foreheads to denote their married status. Some are expected to cut their hair or even shave their head. A widow from the south of India may not even be able to wear a blouse under her sari.

This is in complete contrast to what Islam says about the treatment of widows. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said that those who take care of the widows and the poor are like those who spend their days fasting or nights praying.^[4] Widows are able to remarry and continue to lead a full and complete life after a mourning period of four months and ten days.

“And those of you who die and leave wives behind them, they (the wives) shall wait (as regards their marriage) for four months and ten days, then when they have fulfilled their term, there is no sin on you if they (the wives) remarry.” (Quran 2:234)

The caste system exists throughout India, despite being officially banned by India's secular government in 1949. It still permeates Indian society affecting the people both directly and indirectly. The caste system is responsible for the often low status of women in Hinduism, and the current level of violence between Hindus and other religions, particularly Islam.

In the beginning, perhaps as early as 1000 BC, each Hindu belonged to one of the thousands of communities or sub-communities (Jats) that existed in India. These communities were originally defined by a person's profession and they were organised into four social castes (Varna). A fifth group called the “untouchables”(dalits) were outside the caste system. A person's caste determined the range of jobs or professions from which they could choose. Marriages normally took place within the same caste or even sub caste. Typically, parents passed on their professions to their children.

Originally people were able to move from one caste to another. However, at some time in the past (estimates range from about 500 BCE to 500 CE), the system became rigid, so that people lived and died in the same group, with no possibility of upward mobility. “The caste system splits up society into a multitude of little communities, for every caste, and almost every local unit of a caste, has its own peculiar customs and internal regulations.”^[5]

The Rigveda, a collection of ancient Vedic Sanskrit hymns dedicated to the gods, defined four castes as, in descending order; Brahmins (the priests and academics), Kshatriyas (rulers, military), Vaishyas (farmers, landlords, and merchants), the Sudras (peasants, servants, and workers in non-polluting jobs). The untouchables, not even considered part of the caste system, work in what are considered polluting jobs and are untouchable by the four castes. In some areas of the country, even a contact with the shadow of an untouchable is considered polluting.

Nowadays practicing untouchability or discriminating against a person because of their caste is illegal. Due to repeated and enforced government warnings and education the caste system has lost much of its power in urban areas; however the tradition is largely unchanged in some rural districts. The secular government of India has instituted positive discrimination in order to help the untouchables and lower castes.

Many untouchables have converted to Islam, in recent years. This has often been motivated by a desire to escape the caste system. Islam is not founded on race, nationality, locality, occupation or kinship. Muslims are bound together by faith and brotherhood. Islam understands that whatever happens in one section of the community will affect all and thus equality is nourished and fostered. In his final sermon Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said, "Know that every Muslim is the brother of another Muslim. You are all equal. Nobody has superiority over other except by piety and good action".

According to Gospel for Asia, untouchables feel that: "The only way for our people to find freedom from 3,000 years of slavery is to quit Hinduism and (the caste system) and embrace another faith." This has generated massive anger and even instances of violence and murder, directed at other religions, particularly Islam.

Hinduism and Islam differ in the most basic concepts; we have discussed some of the most obvious differences, including the belief in One true God as opposed to belief in an assortment of gods, and the differences between the status of women in Islam and Hinduism.

Footnotes:

[1] Arab traveller, writer and explorer. Muslim scholar.

[2] Hindu scripture

[3] Ibid

[4] Saheeh Al-Bukhari

[5] InvestIndia.com