

Christianity & World Religions: Hinduism
Ephesians 2:1-10
April 25, 2010

Last Sunday I began a new sermon series that is titled “Christianity and World Religions.” As a starting point for our thinking I tried to address the question of why there are so many religions. I suggested there were three perspectives one can have when considering other religions. Do you remember what they were?

- Pluralist,
- Exclusivist,
- Inclusivist.

We are free to choose which one of these perspectives we want to hold. Personally I lean towards the Inclusivist view. Basically what that means is that Christ is the definitive revelation of God, but God is at work among people of other religions.

It’s not a pluralist perspective where one believes all religions are true, rather you believe God examines the hearts of people of other faiths and see a true yearning for God.

In some religions you will find the extremist who hold their faith is the only true faith. This exclusivist perspective just doesn’t connect with my understanding of a gracious God.

My messages are all posted on our church’s web site. If you want to read more about these different perspectives, I encourage you to go on line. Today we begin looking at the major world religions.

The first religion we will look at is Hinduism.

It makes sense to begin with Hinduism because it is considered to be the oldest living religion. Most historians place the beginnings of Hinduism as far back as 3800 BC. When you consider the call of Abraham took place around 2000 BC, you see how much longer Hinduism has been around.

One unique aspect of this faith is that it does not trace its founding to specific persons. There is no Abraham, no Mohammed, no Jesus, no central figure in Hinduism. Over the years god spoke to various profits. The

stories, prayers and hymns that were given to these men were passed on orally for many generations until they were finally written down. The Vedas and the Upanishads are part of this “Vedic Literature” These writings are considered by the Hindus to be supernaturally inspired and are as sacred to them as the Bible is to Christians.

Though they are sacred like the bible, the Vedic books would not be found in an average Hindu home. There is however another sacred text, the Bhagavad-Gita. This portion of a much larger book of poetry is the most prominent of all Hindu texts. No Hindu home, it is said, is complete without a copy of this text.

If you were to read the Bhagavad-Gita, you would find teachings that are similar to what we find in our bible. There is much we would agree with. At the same time however there are portions of the text that we would totally disagree with.

So what does a Hindu believe? The most common perception is that Hinduism is a religion of many gods. Given all the temple and statues you would find in India you would get that impression. I have a short video that addresses this understanding:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpkIKbfjE8o>

At the core of Hinduism is the belief in one God. The Hindu word for God - at least a word for God - is Brahman. As you might have picked up in the clip, God is above all and yet is in all. God is unknowable, beyond personality, holding all wisdom.

In every living thing there is a part of God. This is called Atman. The ultimate goal is to have this Atman connect with Brahman. What is stopping this from happening is not sin, but ignorance. Salvation for a Hindu is not overcoming sin but one's ignorance.

To help us understand this better let us consider the Hindu concept of the human condition. The goal of life is to reach nirvana. Nirvana is the full attainment of knowledge. When one receives salvation, called “moksha”, one is released from life's sufferings.

How do you attain nirvana? This is where “Dharma” comes in. Dharma can be roughly translated as duty. These are specific social and religious obligations that one is expected to perform during life. Besides these day to day activities of life, there are other tasks one can do that can lead to greater clarity about life and meaning.

As I understand it there are several paths of dharma that can lead to nirvana. One has to do with knowledge. It is getting to a place of self-renunciation, whereby through meditation one loses a sense identity. It is said only the most holy of men can achieve this.

The path of knowledge most often includes the practice of yoga. If you go to the YMCA or other exercise facilities you will find classes in yoga. Where the YMCA yoga is a work out for the body, the main focus on the Hindu yoga is the mind. As one description states: “Yoga is the attempt to control one’s consciousness through bodily posture, breath control and concentration.” I will say more about yoga next week when we look at Buddhism.

Besides the path of knowledge, another path to Nirvana is by the path of passionate devotion to a god. Though there are millions of gods, goddesses and demigods to choose from, almost all Hindus worship Vishnu or Shiva. When it mentioned the four denominations in the video, this is the reason for that split.

Besides the Dharma, there is one other important concept when it comes to whether one is liberated from the body. This is the concept of Karma. Karma can be defined as deeds. All through life you gain positive karma for good acts and negative karma for bad behavior. When one dies his or her karma is evaluated. If there is more good karma than bad, one comes back in a higher form. If you mess up, you come back in a lower state.

As you can hear a major concept in the Hindu faith is reincarnation. The atman keeps being reincarnated in different life forms until it finally achieves Moksha and is liberated. This process is called samsara. An atman can be reincarnated thousands of times. It all depends on the dharma and the karma.

There is one last thing I want to mention about Hinduism and that is its practice of a caste system. Over 90 of all the world’s Hindus live in India.

When I learned about India in school the caste system was part of that discussion. If you remember there are 4 levels in the system. The highest is the priests, the *Brahmins*, then there are the warriors and nobles, the *Kshatriyas*, next are the merchants and artisans called the *Vaisyas*, and finally there are the slaves, the *Shudras*. Even below them were the untouchables. It was only 1947 when the government officially outlawed discrimination against Untouchables.

The Hindu people are very gracious people. This is a religion that is very accepting and tolerable of differing thoughts. As I studied Hinduism I found several major differences that stood out between what it teaches and what Christians believe.

One of those differences is the human condition. We do not believe there is a part of God in every person. We believe there is a spirit, a soul, but that is not part of God. In our reading Paul touches upon the concept of original sin. As humans we have struggle with a sin that is within us. Christ gives us the power to overcome that sin.

As you heard, the issue of Hindus is not sin it is ignorance. With a part of god in them, they cannot be sinful.

Another clear difference concerns death. I remember when I was working with a youth group in Farmington Hills. One lock-in we watched the movie "Defending Your Life". The plot of the movie is when you die you go to this perfect place where you can do anything you want. During your time there your life is reviewed by a panel. If you lived a virtuous life, you would go to a heavenly place. If you failed, you would be sent back and be in a baby beginning life.

After we watched the movie my students were all convinced that must be the way it happens. I quickly told them about our concept of salvation, and how Jesus paid our ticket to heaven. We don't do life over and over, we make the most out of this one time on earth and then we spend eternity with God.

As I think about God, that clarifies the third difference between our faiths. We believe in a God of relationships. Yes, God is all powerful, but at the same time God is present to each and every one of us. Jesus modeled for us the kind of relationship we can have with God.

In Hinduism the average person can't know or relate to God. Only those highest on the reincarnation ladder can experience Brahman. The rest can only dream and hope for the time when they reach that level.

How tough it must be when tragedy or loss comes to a Hindu. As a pastor I have seen people in their darkest moments gain strength and comfort from God. Yes family and friends helped, but it was their relationship with God that made the difference in pulling them through their situation.

As I close I want to make a disclaimer. I have only given you a small portion of what Hinduism is about and it is my perspective. You can't cover a whole religion in about 12 minutes. In fact the 1st vice president of India suggested you can't even define Hinduism, instead it is only to be experienced.

I hope this has been helpful. This knowledge of Hinduism will come into play next week at we look at Buddhism.