

AREOPAGUS SEMINAR

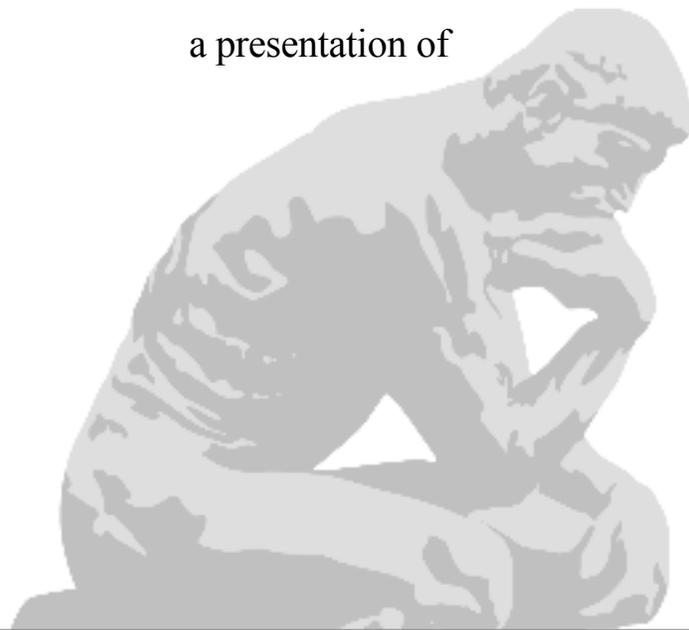
World Religions Library: WR1

What Every Christian Ought to Know About

HINDUISM

Second Edition

a presentation of



ACT  ACADEMY FOR
CHRISTIAN
THOUGHT

*An educational ministry to renew the mind and develop a comprehensive worldview
for a responsible proclamation of the Gospel*



An educational ministry to renew the mind and develop a comprehensive worldview
for a responsible proclamation of the Gospel.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. ... Acts 17:16-23 (NIV)

The Areopagus of Paul's time was the market-square where city leaders would gather to debate issues of great importance in Athenian life. As Paul saw the great number of idols, and the competing worldviews present in Athens, he was compelled to preach Jesus Christ his relevance to all cultures and peoples. Areopagus Seminars provide Christians a theological-safe-space to better understand critical issues facing the Christian faith as well as the impact of history, philosophy, culture and the sciences on the Christian faith. Knowledge of our intellectual history helps us sidestep pitfalls of the past, that we may contribute to a surer foundation for those coming after us, even as we stand upon the shoulders of those who came before us. This equips us to articulate an informed and comprehensive worldview by which to present a responsible proclamation the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The goal of ACT is to prepare believers to engage the urgent issues of our times and persistent questions of all ages. The manuals will form the core of your *ready reference library* as you equip yourself to tap the storehouse of saving knowledge that we call the Christian Bible. Each seminar is available as full-text lecture notes in a manual with bibliography and on CD.

I am very thankful for Ron's double commitment to international students and to the development of the Christian mind. He is a gifted and dedicated young man and we at All Souls Church in London are glad to support his ministry The Rev. Dr. John R. W. Stott

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Mission

To develop a comprehensive worldview for a responsible proclamation of the Gospel

Vision

By equipping Christians for a life of learning by study, growth by discipleship, & obedience by evangelism

Goals

1. Explore how the Christian life may be enriched by a deeper understanding and responsible interaction with every field of human inquiry within their cultural contexts.
2. Create a 'theological safe space' to transform and renew the mind.
3. Serve as a resource to equip the Church for productive growth, effective witness and caring discipleship within the marketplace of ideas.

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- 6) International Ministry (IM): Sharing the primary research developed by ACT through speaking & preaching engagements in Asia, Africa, & Europe.

Principal Instructor: The Rev. Mr. Ron Choong

Ron is an ordained minister and founder of ACT. He read English law, international politics, the natural sciences, the humanities & Christian theology at institutions in Malaysia, Great Britain and the United States. An apologist and evangelist in New York City since 1990, he also serves an international summer teaching ministry. Ron holds the B.A., LL.B. Hons., M.Div., Th.M., and S.T.M. degrees from Open, London & Yale Universities as well as Princeton Theological Seminary, where he is completing a Ph.D. in philosophy of science and theology. His research interests include the emergence of human intelligence, moral cognition and the doctrine of the imago Dei.

PREFACE

In his essay “Why I am not a Christian”, the atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell claimed that religious conviction is culturally embedded and nationalist to boot. Indians tend to be Hindus, Arabs tend to embrace Islam and Jews will be Jews. There is some descriptive merit to that observation but it has no prescriptive or normative value. Our cultural condition is just that, a conditioning, not a determination. Russell overreached his argument. How did I, a Chinese living in Islamized Malaysia, come to embrace Christianity, the religious faith of the West? Ought not I be a Daoist, a Confucian, a Buddhist or a Muslim rather than a Christian? For me, it was the specific yet universal message of the gospel that liberated me from Russell’s hogwash.

Christians have enough to learn about the Bible without spending time on other religions. How did my interest in Hinduism emerge? It was at Princeton Theological Seminary, a Christian institution of higher learning charged with preparing men and women for ministerial service that I encountered advanced courses in Hinduism. A professor dedicated his academic life to teaching the subject! I seized the opportunity to study with Charles Ryerson, III, a mildly eccentric Christian historian of religion whose interest in Indology made him a minor celebrity among several generations of his students. After his retirement, he was succeeded by another eminent scholar of the east, Richard Fox Young, who spent many years in India and in Japan. His different approach to Hinduism further enriched my sensitivity to and knowledge of this ancient complex of beliefs. I have hardly begun to scratch the surface. I am no expert and have only begun at the beginning. I invite you to join me in exploring this world religion whose teachings have so influenced the cultures of the world well beyond India.

I shall consider my modest goal a success if the reader achieves a deeper appreciation and a stronger love for Hindus, many for whom religion is an unquestioned way of life and not just for individual selves but for their communities.

This seminar is neither a polemic against Hinduism nor a theologically ecumenical statement to erase the distinctives of each religion. It is attempt at a fair description of Hinduism as it understands itself.

I alone bear the responsibility for any inadequacies of expression. Such are the limitations of writing about a confessional faith one does not hold to. I do not claim to have found a perfect balance but assure the reader that much care has been taken to offer a sincere assessment with no unkindness intended.

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DID YOU KNOW THAT ...

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DID YOU KNOW THAT IN HINDUISM ...

1. ... there is no identifiable founder for these religions of India and Nepal?
2. ...popular practice is based on the ancient *Vedas*, many gods are worshipped while philosophical practice is based on the *Vedanta*, Brahman is the only reality?
3. life is a cyclic flow of many existences or rebirths (*samsara*) influenced by the consequences of one's actions (*karma*) from which liberation (*moksha*) is achieved by enlightenment through the acquisition of knowledge (*jnana-marga*) ?
4. ...the way of knowledge towards liberation involves acknowledging the illusory nature of perception and the proper understanding of reality by the practice of *yoga*, the meditation with mantras (*om*) and asceticism?
5. ... the doctrine of *karma* is inconsistent with Mahatma Gandhi's ethics and the struggle for equity (not equality)?
6. ...material reality is illusory so that scientific knowledge or material progress poses a philosophical challenge?
7. ...no other religion can be tolerated?
8. ... its status as a world religion is a nineteenth century development?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Goal: *To understand the main teachings of Hinduism in conversation with Christian beliefs.*

HINDU BELIEFS

- 1. Goal of Hinduism:** To achieve union with **Brahman**, the ultimate reality and absolute spirit. Hindus disagree on whether Brahman is unity or pantheist, or polytheist.
- 2. Popular (Vedic) Hinduism** encourages the worship of deities and gods, including Vishnu, Shiva and Devi. **Philosophical (Vedantic) Hinduism** claims that there is one God (Brahman) and we are part of it. All other gods are merely manifestations of Brahman.
- 3. Who are we?** In the beginning, there was the One (Brahman). Creation is the division of the One into the gender pair. As the male changes into another species, his partner changes into the respective female counterpart. This explains the diversity of life. Since we are at least part of the creator, our souls are eternal and can neither suffer nor die. The effects of joy and suffering are both illusory.
- 4. What is our future?** The doctrine of *Karma* states that our lives are subject to the moral consequences of all our actions, so that suffering may be a result of past sins. *Samsara* means that we keep in being born and dying is an endless series of lives until we achieve reunion with Brahman and escape this existence of suffering, or *maya*. This escape is called *moksha* and often translated as liberation. The final goal is *nirvana*, or eternal bliss.

The Global Influence of Hinduism

Hindu teachings are found deeply embedded in the world of entertainment, professional sports, the visual arts, peace studies, and in science education and research, especially in the fields of cosmogony and spacetime studies. Christianity must respond to the challenge of Hinduism at our doorstep with responsible engagement. We begin with a deeper appreciation of the complex philosophical foundations which form their structures of belief and practice.

INTRODUCTION

Hinduism is practiced by a billion people, most of whom live in India, the world's largest democracy. It possesses a rich history of reflection about the common questions of human existence. Hinduism is no longer a foreign religion and has shaped American life and thought in many ways. Christians who proclaim a universal message ought to understand something of Hinduism to better understand their own faith beliefs

The appeal of Hinduism is that it easily adapts to changing circumstances and offers a compelling explanation for the inevitable suffering of all sentient beings. The suggestion of universal tolerance and unlimited seconds chances for life's mistakes are extremely comforting.

Why should Christians study Hinduism? All learning is comparative, so we learn something about ourselves when we study something that we are not. The key concepts separating Hinduism and Christianity are the doctrines of creation and salvation, and the implications of *karma* (action), *samsara* (reincarnation) and *moksha* (liberation).

Hinduism rejects the authority of Jesus as the sole redeemer of the world since it claims that all beings are equally divine. This undermines the supposed tolerance of Hinduism.

Hindu pantheism does not qualitatively distinguish creator from creation while Judaic monotheism and Christian trinitarianism certainly do. Making this distinction in a responsible manner is a crucial Christian apologetic task today.

Here are some definitions to distinguish Trinitarian Christianity from other religions:

1. Religious belief: Metaphysical convictional beliefs about the nature of reality.
2. Theological belief: Religious belief in at least one transcendent being.
3. Monotheism: Theological belief in a single, supreme god of ultimate power.
4. Trinitarianism: Belief in the God revealed as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, yet who 'is one' in a triune fellowship (unique to Christianity)

Hinduism considers ignorance of reality to be the reason for evil and suffering.

Hindus need to consider the possibility of a world made 'good' but went wrong. The power of choice included the capacity for sin. Christians are to commend Hindus for their beliefs that life is contingent and that salvation comes from the *one, true God* but we ought to invite them to consider worship of the **God who created rather than the God who is creation**.

1. HISTORY

Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world with about one billion believers, or about one out of every six people. What is the history of the term Hindu and Hinduism in relation to India? Which word came first, India or Hindu? In fact, it was the word hindu which gave birth to the name India and not the other way round.

1.1 HINDU, HINDUISM & INDIA,

Hindu is a Persian word derived from *sindu*, the Sanskrit word for river. Hindu or *sindu* also came to refer to the valley through which the Indus river in northwest India flowed. The Greeks hellenized the name *hindu* to *hindia*, from which western European languages derived the now modern name, India.

India became known as the land of the Hindus, who practice Hinduism. Although the great majority of Indians are Hindus and most of the world's Hindus live in India, not all Indian philosophies and religions are Indic. Non-Indic Indian philosophies and religions include Jainism, the path of the jinas, or victors, a monastic tradition, (~550 B.C.), Buddhism (new dating of ~450 B.C.), Sikhism, the religion of sikhs or disciples, founded after the death of Guru Nanak (~1540 A.D. The last guru died in 1707), and Indian Materialism, which, though virtually dead, was a sophisticated system of anti-Vedic "empiricism".

After the Muslim invasion of India, the term *Hindustan* (land of the Hindus) was used to describe India. *Hindu* took on a religious connotation and referred to non-Muslim Indians¹.

In summary, the word *sindu* (river) became *hindu* (valley in northwest India) which became *hindia*, then *Hindustan*, and now India (the entire subcontinent). Hinduism came to be known as the religions of all non-Muslim Indians. Indian Hindus prefer to think of their religious traditions as *Sanatana Dharma* (The Eternal Law).

By the 16th century, westerners began to distinguish between Indians (cultural group) and Hindus (religious identification)².

In the late 18th century, the 'Hindu religion' came to the west with the arrival of orientalism into its universities. Sanskrit came to be seen as the common parent of both Greek and Latin³. This notion gave birth to the Indo-European language tree. The field of comparative

¹ Jean-Christophe Demariaux, *How to Understand Hinduism*, (London: SCM Press, 1995), vii.

² This resolves the confusion that continues to exist in Judaism and its relationship to ethnic Jews.

³ Demariaux, *How to Understand Hinduism*, ix.

linguistics has identified the various branches of Indo-European languages, such as Celtic, Germanic, Hellenic, Indo-Iranian, Romano-Italic and Slav, as representing different degrees of development of a common original stem⁴. Indology greatly influenced European scholars such as Artur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Schlegel.

Hinduism is a name coined by westerners in the early nineteenth century to describe the wide range of beliefs, practices and cults of the Hindu, as opposed to Indian peoples.

1.2 ROOTS OF HINDUISM

Hinduism has its roots in the interrelationship of two basic cultures⁵:

1. the ancient Dravidian civilization of the Indus valley from around 3000 B.C., and
2. the Indo-European vedic Aryans who brought their religious beliefs to the Indus valley around 2000 B.C. The religion of the Aryans is described in the writings of holy men contained in the **Vedas**⁶ (knowledge or wisdom) composed between about 1500 and 400 B.C. They form the basis for Hindu beliefs.

Subsequently, other religious writings such as the major **Upanishads** known as Vedanta (*Post-Veda*) came to be considered inspired. Later **non-Vedic Hindu writings**, including the renowned Bhagavad Gita (*The Song of the Lord or The Mystic Doctrines sung by the Blessed One*⁷), are of lesser authority but are widely popular.

There is no universal creed or canon for all Hindus. However, to be a Hindu is to minimally accept the Vedic writings as somehow of divine revelation.

⁴ Demariaux, *How to Understand Hinduism*, 11.

⁵ Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 50.

⁶ I shall use the convention in western translations of Hindu texts of adding the 's' to designate the plural form, hence Vedas, Upanishads, etc.

⁷ Franklin Edgerton, (trans. and interpreted) *The Bhagavad Gita*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944), 105.

2. THE SCRIPTURES

Hinduism has been cumulatively expressed in their Scriptures, which include the Vedic (*Vedas*), Vedantic (*Upanishads*) and Epic (*Bhagavad Gita, Mahabharata, Laws of Manu, and Artha-shastra*) sources .

2.1 VEDA

Veda or wisdom is the name given to a diverse collection of literature composed in Sanskrit (a sacred language of Hinduism) as early as 1500 B.C. by a priestly class.⁸ It is revered as *sruti* (divine revelation) and considered the source of *dharma* (duty, teaching).⁹ All Hindus share this reverence for the Vedas as authoritative. It may be divided into four broad branches:

- (a) **Rg Veda**
- (b) **Sama Veda**
- (c) **Yajur Veda**
- (d) **Atharva Veda**

Each Vedic branch has four sections:

- (i) **Samhita** or ‘collection’ of liturgical formulae called *mantra*
- (ii) **Brahmana**, a prose text of ritual exegesis¹⁰ which explains the meaning of the liturgy¹¹
- (iii) **Aranyaka** (Forest Books), composed in the forest, they are the concluding part of the *brahmanas*. They form a transitional link between the *bramanas* and the *upanishads*
- (iv) **Upanishad**¹², partly included among the Brahmanas

During the centuries before the Christian era, the Upanishads became detached from all the branches of the Vedic corpus and came until the generic title Vedanta (end of the Veda), suggesting an eclipse of the ancient writings by these later works.

⁸ Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 37.

⁹ Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 11.

¹⁰ Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 36.

¹¹ Patrick Olivelle, (trans.), *Upanisads*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xxx.

¹² Olivelle, (trans.), *Upanisads*, xxxii.

2.1.1 The Rg Veda: The Rg Veda comprise 1017 hymns in 10 books. This work of antiquity (c. 1500 B.C.) celebrate the activities of several gods. But when any one of them is worshipped, he is considered the chief creator-god of the universe. To exalt one among several gods is henotheism¹³. It is unlike the monotheism of modern Judaism and Islam, which recognizes the existence of only one God or the trinitarianism of Christianity, which describes the unity of the Godhead. The Vedas call humanity to devotional acts of sacrifice, prayer and obedience to please the deities, achieving salvation for the pious. Its creation myth involves the idea of primeval incest rather than any ultimate beginning as in Christianity.¹⁴

2.1.2 The Sama Veda: The Sama Veda is purely a liturgical collection of melodies ('saman'). The hymns in the Sama Veda, used as musical notes, were almost completely drawn from the Rig Veda and have no distinctive lessons of their own. Hence, its text is a reduced version of the Rig Veda. The nine books of song may be found in about.com¹⁵.

2.1.3 The Yajur Veda: These sacrificial formulae form a liturgical collection made to meet the demands of a ceremonial religion. The Yajur Veda practically served as a guidebook for the priests who execute sacrificial acts muttering simultaneously the prose prayers and the sacrificial formulae ('yajus'). There are no less than six complete recessions of Yajur Veda - Madyandina, Kanva, Taittiriya, Kathaka, Maitrayani and Kapishthala. The full text may be found at hinduism.about.com.

2.1.4 The Atharva Veda: Spells and incantations. These form the beginnings of Indian medical science. The ritualistic religion of the Vedas would soon be challenged by the meditative practice of the Upanishads (itself a part of the Vedas), in which the inward journey of the self is a mystical attempt to achieve salvation by untying the knots which bind humanity to the physical world. This was a shift from physical sacrifices to meditation.

¹³ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, (eds.), *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 4.

¹⁴ Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, (trans.), *Hindu Myths: A Source Book Translated From The Sanskrit*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), 25.

¹⁵ <http://hinduism.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ&sdn=hinduism&zu=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.sacred-texts.com%2Fhin%2Fsv.htm>

2.1.5 The Upanishads: The Upanishads are anonymous literary works within the Vedic corpus. Composed between 800-400 B.C., the word Upanishad has its root in three terms: *upa* (near), *ni* (down), and *sad* (to sit)¹⁶. They imply **sitting down for secret teaching at the feet of the teacher**, to be passed on from the wise to the learner. With the Upanishads, there is a turn away from the hymnology of god and goddess to a search for the ONE universal reality that sustains the flux of being. This was a major shift from polytheism to monotheism. The Upanishads seek to discover the unchanging in all that is changing. One of the prayers (of *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad*) reads “From the unreal, lead me to the real, from darkness, lead me to light, from death, lead me to immortality.”¹⁷

The Principal Upanishads (*Vedanta*) include thirteen works¹⁸ :

1. *Brihad-Aranyaka*
2. *Chandogya*
3. *Taittiriya*
4. *Aitareya*
5. *Kaushitaki*
6. *Kena*
7. *Prashna*
8. *Maitri*
9. *Mandukya*
10. *Katha*
11. *Shvetashvatara*
12. *Isha*
13. *Mungaka*¹⁹

These works serve as the foundation for the philosophy called the **Vedanta** (“the end of the Veda”). There are about 200 lesser Upanishadic works that date back to the medieval period.

As *Vedanta*, the Principal Upanishads present themselves as the hidden true meaning of

¹⁶ Ian P. McGreal, (ed.), *Great Thinkers of the Eastern World*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 155.

¹⁷ McGreal, (ed.), *Great Thinkers of the Eastern World*, 156.

¹⁸ Brihad-Aranyaka, Chandogya, and Kaushitaki, are anthologies. See Olivelle, (trans. from the original Sanskrit.) *Upanisads*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xxxiv.

¹⁹ McGreal, (ed.), *Great Thinkers of the Eastern World*, 155.

Vedic religious practice. This was ancient Hinduism's first great reformation. Hinduism underwent many such changes. Others include the reformation which gave birth to Buddhism and the Renaissance of Hinduism which gave rise to Hinduism as a world religion in the 19th century.

The Vedic external acts of piety were rejected and the search for the infinite in the finite, the eternal in the temporal, and the absolute in the relative, became the ultimate goal. This longing to find rest from the restlessness of the human condition began to focus on the self and to ignore the universe of matter. The fulfillment of this longing for ultimate reality (the self or soul of the universe) is called Brahman.

Hinduism may be said to have undergone at least three major reformations:

1. Upanishad Vedantic Reformation (which led to monotheistic Philosophical Hinduism)
2. Buddhist Reformation (which led to Buddhism)
3. Renaissance Reformation (which led to Global Hinduism)

2.2 VEDANTA

Brahmanism, Religion of the Upanishads

The central concept of the Upanishads is that of *Brahman*²⁰, the “holy power which informs and animates the whole of reality” and came to be known in western eyes as being akin to the name of God²¹. This reformed Hindu religion of the *Vedantic Upanishads* became known as Brahmanism, and for many people, replaced the older Vedic religion.

The Upanishads affirm that all 33 gods of the earlier Vedic period are subordinate to the one absolute Lord (*parameshvara*) named **Brahman**, the source of all being²², the ground of **Atman** (the Self/Soul). The individual and the world are manifestations of the same **Absolute**. Absolute/Brahman/God is therefore the source and at one (not necessarily one²³) with the human soul (Atman). This does not of itself imply that the individual *is* the absolute but that the individual *is a manifestation* (not creation) of the absolute.

This is no semantic dance, but a distinction between

- **pantheism** (Divine creation and God are essentially the same)
- **panentheism** (Divine creation is a part of God) and
- **biblical creationism** (Divine creation is distinct from and is not a part of God).

Hinduism speaks of **avatars** or manifestations of God. While manifestations are appearances such that they are representative of a subject for the purpose of adapting to the tools of perception, they are not the totality of the subject. Hence for example, Lord Krishna, one of the Hindu gods, as an avatar or manifestation, is not himself the full Godhead *in toto*.

Whether Hinduism subscribes to a pantheistic or a panentheistic philosophy is still a matter of debate, but it does not accept the incarnation of the fullness of God as a fully divine-human being. This is an important distinction between Hinduism and Christianity because much has been written about the possibility that Jesus is yet another avatar of the God Vishnu, just as Krishna was the 8th and the Buddha the 9th avatar. There is even discussion about the

²⁰ Ninian Smart, *Religions of Asia*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 49.

²¹ Smart, *Religions of Asia*, 50.

²² McGreal, (ed.), *Great Thinkers of the Eastern World*, 156.

²³ This complex notion denies the Western view that Vedantic Hinduism is pantheistic. Rather, it is closer to panentheism.

possibility that Jesus Christ is in fact Krishna (Chrishna) reincarnated.

Jesus Christ is not an avatar of YHWH. He is eternally the second person of the triune God who does not exist otherwise. While *avatars* come and go, the second person (Logos) is eternally God. While the Christian proclaims “Thou art God”, the Hindu, as an enlightened self, looks to the self, to others and to the entire universe, sees Brahman and proclaims “*Tat tvam asi*” (That art Thou)²⁴. For the Hindu, there is really no other than oneself since all other selves are merely representations of the single self.

This also mean that the notion of prayer bears a different expectation. Hindus in fact do not pray to another, but to a shared self.

The secret teachings of the Upanishadic Vedanta include:

2.2.1 Rebirth, or for most, redeath: Failure to reach Self dooms one to repeated death.

2.2.2 Identification: Knowledge that we are one with Self/Atman.

2.2.3 Devotion, bhakti: The practice of devotional acts to achieve salvation through proximity with Self. This is done by worship and obedience to the avatars or manifestations of God.

2.3 THE EPIC LITERATURE

The epic Indian literature includes:

1. **Mahabharata** (The Great Story of the War), composed of over 100,000 verses (*slokas*) and divided into 18 books, which includes the Bhagavad Gita. It was originally written in 7000 verses by Vyasa (meaning ‘an arranger’) between 1000 - 500 B.C. and compiled with additions over several centuries with elaboration by Vaisampayana²⁵.
2. **Ramayana** (The Acts of Rama), composed of 24,000 verses divided into 7 sections (*kandas*), attributed to Valmiki from as early as the first century A.D.
3. **Laws of Manu**
4. **Arthasastra of Kautilya**
5. **Puranas**

²⁴ McGreal, (ed.), *Great Thinkers of the Eastern World*, 157.

²⁵ Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 105.

2.3.1 Bhagavad Gita in the Mahabharata

“He who reads this sacred dialogue of ours, by him I consider myself worshipped through the sacrifice of knowledge, and the man who listens to it with faith and without scoffing, liberated, he shall attain to the happy realm of the righteous.”

- Bhagavadgita XVIII, 70f²⁶ .

The **Bhagavad Gita** (Song of the Lord) is the chief devotional book for most Hindus today. It is part of the **Mahabharata** epic, found in chapters 25-42 of Book VI (*Bishmaparvan*) of the Mahabharata. The Gita (Song) comprises 700 verses in 18 songs²⁷ and may be considered the “New Testament” of Hinduism. It records a conversation between the warrior-prince Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna in which personal devotion to deity is endorsed as a way of salvation for all classes of people, and not only for the priests as in Vedic teaching.

Lord Krishna declares:

“Those who worship me with complete discipline and who contemplate me, whose thoughts are constantly on me - these I soon raise up from the sea of death and rebirth.”²⁸ ”

The central teaching in the Gita is the importance of devotion to God, or **bhakti**²⁹.

In a battle against his enemies, Arjuna was stunned to learn that some of his kinsmen and intimate friends were lined up on the opposing side. Horror stricken, he told Krishna, his charioteer, that he would rather lay down his arms and be killed than to kill. Krishna then offers a monologue where he details a worldview in which wisdom consists in realizing that the self or soul (*atman*) is permanent and independent of the body; it neither kills nor is killed; it takes no part in either the actions or the sufferings of the body, there is no reason to grieve for either the dead or the living³⁰ .

As an act of grace, Krishna declares himself an *avatar* (incarnation) of the Supreme God

²⁶ Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, Second Edition, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 99. The blessing is in the reading and listening of the scripture.

²⁷ Demariaux, *How to Understand Hinduism*, 44.

²⁸ Smart, *Religions of Asia*, 52.

²⁹ Smart, *Religions of Asia*, 53.

³⁰ Klostermaier, 103.

Vishnu and permits Arjuna to participate in the mystical revelation we call the Gita³¹. The Gita (song) ostensibly proves to Arjuna the necessity and propriety of his participation in a epic battle because of the nature of existence and devotion to God (bhakti) as the path to salvation³². It is a mystic poem dealing with the nature of the human body and soul, of humanity's relation to God, and the ways by which we may attain salvation³³.

The Gita's point of view is unrelated to logic and it rejects rational analysis or knowledge as salvific. It turns to the emotional and concrete rather than the abstract because it is easier for the masses to identify with. This simplifies the notion of salvation and made the Gita immensely popular with the ordinary person. For the Gita, a man is as he feels. If he feels united with God, he is. If he is not yet, he shall be.³⁴

The Gita may be summarized into several topics: The pessimism that all empirical existence is evil, transmigration of the Soul and Body, the nature of God and self, action (karma) and rebirth (samsara), salvation as release from the chain of existences by the way of knowledge, the way of disciplined activity, the way of devotion to God (bhakti), and practical morality.³⁵

2.3.2 Ramayana

The **Ramayana** is also known as The Acts or March of Rama, in defense of *dharma*, written by Valmiki, is composed of 24,000 verses (*slokas*) divided into 7 chapters (*kandas*). The story is of a prince Rama, brother of Bharata and Lakshmana. Rama refused the attention of a demoness and in revenge his wife Sita was abducted by the demoness' brother Ravana. Rama and Lakshmana enlisted the help of the monkey king Hanuman and successfully rescues Sita.

An excellent brief synopsis of the Ramayana may be found at the Syracuse University website.

“Retiring King Dasaratha of Ayodha chooses his son Rama as his heir. His wife Kaikeyi asks that he appoint another son Bharata, instead. Kaikeyi pleads that he owes her two favors, and she feels misfortune will come upon her if he doesn't crown Bharata king and banish Rama to the forest for fourteen years. The king reluctantly agrees, so Rama goes with his beautiful wife, Sita, and his brother Lakshmana, leaving their riches to live a simple life.

³¹ Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 105.

³² Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 189.

³³ Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 189.

³⁴ Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 194.

³⁵ Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 190-192.

In the forest the three meet the demoness Surpanakha who falls in love with Rama. Rama refuses her advances and Laksmana wounds her. She flees to her brother Ravana, ruler of the island kingdom of Lanka. After hearing Surpanakha's report of the beauty of Sita, Ravana decides that he must have Sita and changes himself into a wandering holy man to find her in the forest. When Rama and Laksmana are distracted, Ravana carries Sita off to Lanka.

Sita mourns in Ravana's garden in Lanka, while Rama and Laksmana enlist the services of Hanuman, the monkey king, to help them find her. Hanuman, able to make himself larger or smaller, starts his search for Sita by taking a giant step to the Island of Lanka. Carrying Rama's ring he finds Sita and identifies himself as Rama's messenger. Sita is delighted, but Hanuman is caught and Ravana sets Hanuman's tail on fire. Hanuman escapes and sets fire to Lanka.

Rama, Laksmana, Hanuman, and his monkey army lay siege on Lanka. The monkeys make a bridge to Lanka, and after a long battle with spears, bows and arrows, Rama kills Ravana. Sita, however, is not received by Rama unreservedly; he questions her chastity after having lived in the house of another man. When he asks her to undergo the test by fire; she agrees. Proving her chastity by remaining unscathed by the fire, she rejoins Rama. Later, Rama abandons her to maintain the sanctity of public opinion and she goes to live in the ashram of sage Valmiki and bears twin sons Lava and Kusa, who as young men became reunited with their father, the god-king Rama."³⁶

2.3.3 Laws of Manu

Also known as *The Code of Manu*, this is a metrical work of 2685 verses which deals with religion, law, customs and politics. It is a ***dharma-sastra*** and promotes the fourfold order of society as a means of social cooperation for the common good.

Rather than being subject to the station at one's birth, Manu prefers a functional basis so that each one has to perform the function in life for which he is best suited by nature. We go through four stages of development and seek the four supreme goals of life: *dharma* or righteousness, *artha* or wealth, *kama* or enjoyment, and *moksha* or spiritual freedom.

Manu is important for the high place it gives to women, "Where women are honored there the gods are pleased"³⁷.

³⁶ <http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/maxpages/special/ramayana/story.htm>

³⁷ Radhakrishnan and Moore, (eds.), *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, 172.

2.3.4 Arthashastra of Kautilya

One of the four aims of the Hindu life is *artha*, or material advantage. This includes political and economic power. **Kautilya** is the minister of the first Mauryan empire and wrote this treatise on politics and diplomacy around 320 - 300 B.C. While *dharma* deals with man in society from the religious and moral perspectives, *artha* considers it from the political and economic perspectives. For Kautilya, economic wealth is the most important of the four aims of life because we are dependent upon it to live. Matter matters. It permits us to seek the other three aims of life, *dharma*, *kama*, and *moksha*.

Although Kautilya suggests that the state is established by the weak as a protection against the strong, he prefers a monarchy to a republic.³⁸

2.3.5 Puranas

Puranas are oral traditions from 'stories of the ancient past', written down into a vast body of complex narratives with genealogies of deities and kings up to the Guptas, cosmologies, law codes, and descriptions of ritual and pilgrimages to holy places. There are 18 major *Puranas* and 18 related subordinate texts known as *Upapuranas*.³⁹

³⁸ Radhakrishnan and Moore, (eds.), *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, 193.

³⁹ Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 109.

3. PRACTICES & BELIEFS

Householder & Renouncer

Hinduism is a largely orthopractic religion. Correct beliefs in the sense of rational and logic thought is less important than correct physical and emotional worship. While Christianity teaches worship with the body, the emotions and the mind, Hinduism is about the form of rituals. There are two forms of Hindu ritual and Hindus may participate in both.

The distinction between **practical religion** and **soteriological religion** is between appeasement and mysticism. The first concerns Hinduism as a resource to deal with the challenges of life while the second involves the quest for liberation from this life. They are best expressed by the lives of the householder and the renouncer.

The **Hindu householder** is knitted into the social fabric of everyday life and performs ritual obligations to service three debts (*rna*):

1. the debt of vedic study (*rsi*), as a celibate student (*brahmacharin*) to the sages;
2. the debt of ritual to the gods (*deva*) as a householder (*grihastha*); and
3. the debt of begetting a son to make funeral offerings to the ancestors (*pitr*).

Only after these worldly responsibilities are performed can the householder embark on the obligation to withdraw from the world to reflect (*vanaprastha*) and seek liberation as a **Hindu renouncer** (*samnyasin*)⁴⁰

Hindu worship may be either by viewing images and idols at the temple (*darshan*⁴¹) or by ritual practice of worship (*puja*).

⁴⁰ Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 13-14.

⁴¹ Diana L. Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, Third Edition, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

3.1 FOUNDATIONAL DOCTRINES

3.1.1 Karma

Karma, which means action, but the religious concept has more to do with the results or consequences of actions. Every thought and action results in certain consequences born by the actor or thinker. All suffering is due to one's own past actions, whether in this or in a previous life. Some Hindus believe this implies strict determinism or fatalism and that one must simply resign himself to living out his *karma*. However, most Hindus believe that although our present status is determined by our past, we can influence our future by conducting ourselves in a proper manner in the present.

Some observers have equated the doctrine of *karma* with the statement in Galatians 6:7 that "whatever a man sows, that he will also reap." While it is certainly a biblical teaching that our actions have consequences, this is not the same as believing that every experience in life is a consequence of one's own past actions. This is definitely not a biblical idea since the notion of divine and salvific forgiveness absolves us from some of the consequences of sin while *karma* cannot be affected by the work of someone else, such as a redeemer.

3.1.2 Samsara (transmigration)

The second core doctrine is *samsara*, which means transmigration⁴² of souls, which explains life and death. Since it is impossible that all of one's *karma* be experienced in one lifetime, the Hindu scriptures state that after death individual souls are reborn in this world, into another body - human or otherwise. The nature of one's rebirth is determined by the *karma* resulting from past actions. Closely associated with the doctrine of transmigration is that of *ahimsa* or non-injury to living things. This is the core moral value of Hinduism, the protection of all life (which is ultimately divine), and is the main reason why some Hindus are vegetarian.

3.1.3 The Varna (Caste) System

Around 500 B.C. more writings were added to the Hindu scriptures to establish the *varna* or caste system, closely associated with *samsara* or transmigration. Accordingly, there are four

⁴² Often translated as reincarnation, it actually refers to the soul moving on from one body to another, hence transmigration of souls.

basic castes or social classes and thousands of subgroups within the castes called *jati*⁴³. Each has its own rules and obligations pertaining to nearly every facet of life.

The four major castes represent the body parts of the creator-god Brahman: head, arms, thighs and feet. At the top are (1) the *Brahmins* or priests (so called because they aid the people in worshipping Brahman). Second in rank are (2) the *Kshatriyas* or warriors and rulers. Third are (3) the *Vaisyas* or merchants and farmers. Salvation through union with Brahman is possible only for these three castes, who are called the twice born and are considered Aryan stock from Europe. To be twice-born is to undergo a coming-of-age ceremony around the age of 12 during which males undergo re-birth. Below these are (4) the *Shudras* or laboring class. They cannot be twice-born and are regarded as of Dravidian or non-Aryan (non-European stock). Thus the invading Aryan races from Europe imposed a rigid system of privilege to limit diluting their perceived superiority by reducing intermarriage with the local dark-skinned Dravidians. Of course, it did not really work. Outside the caste system are (5) the *Untouchables* or outcasts. Though outlawed in India in 1947, it stubbornly persists in the countryside. One's caste is determined at birth by his or her own personal *karma*. Therefore, attempts to bring about social change or to improve one's social position would appear to run contrary to the law of *karma* and the caste system. The most significant force for change in the way the Untouchables are treated has been the influence of Western Christian missionaries.⁴⁴

3.1.4 Maya and Moksha

Maya refers to the reality of our experience (the veil of this reality that hides the Absolute) and *moksha* refers to the release or liberation from such existence as we now experience. The chief aim of the Hindu is to experience release or liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth caused by *karma*.

3.1.5 Summary

Hindus seek *moksha* from *maya*, i.e., liberation from *samsara* (this cyclic existence of suffering) due to *karma* (the consequences of our actions) by the practice of *bhakti* (devotion) and *ahimsa* (non-injury to life) within the strict **caste-system** of one's station in life from birth.

⁴³ <http://uwacadweb.uwyo.edu/religionet/er/hinduism/HORGS.HTM>

⁴⁴ Vishal Mangalvadi, "Can Hindutva Survive the Persecution of Christians in India?" in *Mission Frontiers*, March-April 1999. p24.

3.2 GOD & CREATION

Hinduism rejects an eternally absolute God **distinct** from creation. Everything that pertains to Hindu thought is discovered bottom-up rather than disclosed top-down. As such, new additions to older versions of religious thought is not so much welcomed as permitted and expected. In this manner, the *Vedas* were superseded by the *Upanishads*, which were themselves imposed upon by the *Bhagavad Gita* of the *Mahabharata*.

3.2.1 In the Vedas

Early portions of the Hindu scriptures known as **Veda** describe a number of deities who for the most part are personifications of natural phenomena, such as storms and fire. An extensive system of priestly rituals, prayers, and sacrifices was eventually developed which served as means of obtaining the blessings of these gods.

3.2.2 In the Vedantic Upanishads

Later portions of the Vedas called the **Upanishads** reflect a significant departure from the Vedic view of the divine. Here are some doctrines:

1. There exists just one ultimate reality beyond our comprehension called Brahman. Though Brahman is impersonal in nature, it is sometimes referred to in personal terms by the name of **Isvara**.
2. The core of our being (*atman*) is identical with this ultimate reality. Atman is Brahman; all living things are Brahman at their innermost core!
3. Intuitive knowledge of the oneness of all things rather than ritual sacrifice, came to be endorsed as the way of contact with divine reality.
4. The material world (including our conscious personalities) is less than fully real. The word *maya* is used to designate the power by which God, or ultimate or eternal reality, brought this less than real world into existence.

The orthopraxic focus of of Vedic worship is replaced by the orthodoxic focus on knowledge of the Vedantic Upanishads.

3.2.3 In the Gita

From the reformations initiated by the Upanishads (Vedanta) and the Gita, two major streams of Hindu thought and practice grew and developed. **Vedantic notion of Brahman** [not Brahma] (Absolute Spirit) became the more intellectual and philosophical stream that emphasized devotion to the oneness of all things, and the prominence of **bhakti** in the **Gita** offered a stream that emphasized personal devotion to a god. The Gita has predominated among the common people of India to this present day.

Chief among the gods so venerated are the **Trimurti**:

- **Brahma** [*not Brahman*] (the creator),
- **Vishnu** (the preserver), and
- **Shiva** (the destroyer).

In India there are many temples devoted to *Shiva* (or to one of his “wives,” such as *Kali*), or to *Vishnu* (or to one of his ten incarnations known as avatars). All in all, it is often stated that Hinduism claims 330 million gods and goddesses!

There is a widespread recognition that none of the personal gods of Hinduism is in any way exclusive or unique. They are all simply different ways of conceiving of the one reality behind all things - Brahman [not Brahma].

3.3 PRACTICE: FOUR GOALS OF LIFE & FOUR WAYS OF SALVATION

Yoga and meditation are central to the Hindu search for salvation!

The chief aim in Hinduism is to gain release from the cycle of reincarnation caused by *karma*, the consequences of past actions, in this or in previous lives! Let us look at the primary ways in which Hindus seek to achieve this salvation - liberation from earthly existence.

3.3.1 Four goals of the Hindu life (PMML)

In the course of many lifetimes people may give themselves to any of these goals: Pleasure, Material wealth, Moral duty, and Liberation. **Pleasure (*kama*)** seeks enjoyment, particularly through love and sexual desire, *kama*. **Material wealth (*artha*)** seeks material wealth and success. **Moral Duty (*dharma*)** renounces personal pleasure and power to seek the common good. **Liberation from this existence (*moksha from maya into nirvana*)** is the final aim in life and entrance into another realm of existence, *Nirvana*. Moksha can be achieved by different paths.

3.3.2 Four paths to Moksha, or salvation

1. The way of works or ***karma yoga***. This is a very popular way of salvation and lays emphasis on the idea that liberation may be obtained by fulfilling one's familial and social duties thereby overcoming the weight of bad karma one has accrued. *The Laws of Manu* lists many of these rules, including certain rituals that may be conducted at various stages of life.
2. The way of knowledge or ***jnana yoga***. The basic premise is that the cause of our bondage to the cycle of rebirths in this world is ignorance or ***avidya***. According to the predominant view, our ignorance consists in the mistaken belief that we are individual selves and are not one with the ultimate divine reality called Brahman. This ignorance gives rise to our bad actions, which result in bad karma. Salvation is achieved through attaining a state of consciousness in which we realize our identity with Brahman. This is achieved through deep meditation, often as a part of the discipline of yoga.
3. The way of devotion or ***bhakti yoga***. This is the way most favored by the common

people of India as it satisfies the longing for a more emotional and personal approach to religion. It is self-surrender to one of the many personal gods and goddesses of Hinduism. Such devotion is expressed through acts of *puja* or worship at the temple, in the home, through participation in festivals in honor of such gods, and through pilgrimages to one of the numerous holy sites in India. In the way of devotion, one is focused on obtaining the mercy and help of a god in finding release from the cycle of reincarnation. Some Hindus conceive of ultimate salvation as absorption into the one divine reality, with all loss of individual existence. Whereas others conceive of it as heavenly existence in adoration of the personal God.

4. The way of meditation or *raja yoga*, “the royal road”. This makes use of meditative yoga techniques. *Raja yoga* is usually viewed as the highest way, but for the majority of people who cannot become wandering monks, the other ways are considered valid.

4. HINDUISM & CHRISTIANITY

Although there is no “Hindu orthodoxy”, there is a common set of core beliefs shared by all Hindus, as well as a reliance on the Veda as authoritative. Christianity regards the Bible as the primary and canonical authority and the inspired message of God for humanity. The teachings are mutually exclusive but the subjects they respond to are in many ways, more similar than they are different.

4.1 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HINDU THOUGHT FOR CHRISTIAN FAITH

Christianity is founded upon the imperative to proclaim to everyone and make disciples of all nations. This mandate is central to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This means that it is the privilege and duty of every Christian to bear witness to every Hindu, all one billion of them. But first we have to ask, who are they and what do they believe?

Hinduism is a family of gradually developing beliefs and practices. Its pliable and adaptive nature gives it the potential of syncretizing Christian beliefs if such beliefs are not founded and grounded upon doctrines which are apologetically anchored and theologically thought out. This means that Hindu philosophical and theological teachings can appear so close to Christian doctrines that it may be taken to either mean the same thing or to refer to the same idea. This is the effect of syncretization, when different ideas and meaning merge, combine or are fused to emerge as novel ideas that are not representative of the initial ideas. One example is the idea of the Hindu-Christian, an ideological oxymoron that exists in practice among less than careful practitioners of faith.

Reasons why Christians ought to know something of Hinduism include:

4.1.1 The imperative of responding to Hindu criticism

When Christian missionaries and evangelists share the gospel with Hindus, they are effectively telling them that they have been deceived by their loved ones into believing lies about reality and God. This is a bold and mighty affront unless we know what we are talking about. We may begin by first learning something about this ancient culture to first ask if and why we

respond to Hindu teaching as we do. Only then may we begin to say with any level of credibility that we have examined Hinduism and found it lacking. If the cure to this inadequacy is the Gospel, then we ought to be able to articulate what is missing in Hinduism.

Since the act of making disciples of all nations begin with apologetics, followed by evangelism and then mission, we are duty-bound to first

1. know something about our target audience, then
2. receive fair criticism graciously and seriously,
3. examine the merits of the arguments against the Christian faith, in order to
4. strengthen our defenses.

4.1.2 Hinduism is the wellspring of New Age thinking

Hinduism's eclectic nature has the potential to unite the non-Christian religious world. This makes it one of the most powerful opponents to the Christian message and a worthy one at that. We must be unafraid to take on this challenge.

We now find Hindu doctrines deep inside the gatekeepers of Western culture, in Hollywood and within the corridors of power at our communications and media networks, indelibly stamped into our educational philosophies, and presumed to be integral to contemporary moral and ethical thought. Hinduism has even entered the sports culture and influenced the philosophy of competition, such as the curse of jinx. Since professional sports is one of America's most successful export, its public image abroad assists in shaping world opinion about the West and ultimately, about Christianity.

4.1.3 Hindu philosophy employs the same Greek philosophy of the New Testament.

The Christian faith has been greatly understood in the New Testament through the lens of Greek philosophy. The existence of a world religion such as Hinduism whose ideas have taken hold in the West invites Christians to consider how its teachings compare with those of Christianity. This is important in apologetics, evangelism and missions because each of these enterprises use the same philosophical tools to express truth claims derived from the Bible.

It is our responsibility to have some understanding of why Hinduism is an inadequate expression of God. Failure to do this consigns us to a theological shouting match with our Hindu friends and we miss the opportunity to assess Christian doctrines in the marketplace of ideas.

4.2 THE APPEAL OF HINDUISM

The appeal of Hinduism to Western culture is not difficult to comprehend. It offers a friendlier and apparently tolerant religion which is almost immune from criticism. It empowers people by claiming that we are all essentially divine. In its Western form it claims an advance over the Christianity by being non-exclusive and hence, no message of fire and brimstone. Its popularity as Transcendental Meditation in the 1960s and the Free-Love movement embraced by the hippie generation as well as the Hare Krishna movement at American airports in the 1970s has left an indelible mark in American culture. The Ayurvedic ‘medicine’ of holistic healing promised by the telegenic Deepak Chopra who used his Western medical credentials to make his case for a non-Western approach seems lost on his fans. His attempt to claim the chemistry of ancient Hindu pharmacological practices has not convinced the majority of the Western medical fraternity. While this in itself is irrelevant to his claims, Chopra clearly utilizes the benefits of the title M.D. for scientific credit.

4.2.1 Spiritual Evolution

Just as modern science emphasizes our physical evolution, so Hinduism emphasizes our spiritual evolution and is comfortable with evolutionary thinking. This contrasts with Christianity’s public image of being anti-science and the unfortunate misapprehension of the pertinent issues regarding the creationism-Darwinism debate. The true culprit is not the general notion of biological evolution but rather the Darwinian philosophy of Natural Selection.

4.2.2 Immanent Divinity

Much of modern psychology emphasizes the basic goodness and unlimited potential of human nature. Hinduism extends this and emphasizes our essential divinity as well. With no ontological distinction between creator (god) and created (man), there is no need for the notions of sin, forgiveness, redemption or hell.

This immanent divinity of humanity by which humans are considered divine is attractive to many people. In one fell swoop it does away with guilt. Hinduism can be seen as progressive and humanitarian when in fact it is merely humanist. Humanitarianism is compassion for humans while humanism is the ideology that man is the measure of all things and God (as distinct from man) does not exist. While Christianity privileges humans among the animal kingdom, Hinduism

considers humans the equal in dignity of animals. The net result is that sometimes, *humans are treated with less dignity than some animals*. There is no escaping the logic. To confer human rights on animals is to confer humans with merely animal rights.

It is important for Christianity to reclaim its role as custodian of the earth's resources, because humanity as the crown of creation ought to mimic the generosity of God to value life and not tolerate killing for sport. Paradoxically, it is the Christian teaching about the primary dignity of the human race as the crown of creation that in fact offers the best protection for everything else that lives. This is not to say that Christianity objects to all killing of life forms. No, the very nature of life demands that death is a prerequisite of life so that some die in order that others may live. Rather, a Christian doctrine of life demands a serious balance between necessary and unnecessary suffering and death of non-human life forms.

4.2.3 Relativism as Tolerance

As postmodern philosophy emphasizes the relativity of all truth claims and the inaccessibility to absolute truth, so contemporary Hinduism appears to tolerate many contradictory religious beliefs. The erroneous view that relativity leads to tolerance, and thus a virtue, embraces Hinduism for its apparent tolerance of differences. In fact, Hinduism is intolerant of any view which impinges on its claim as the religion of choice for the peoples of the Indian subcontinent. This is why classical Hinduism is neither missionary nor evangelistic. Conversions of Hindus to either Christianity or Islam is still often met with violence especially in India. It was the Hindu Renaissance of the 19th century which promoted a new kind of Hinduism for the West, one which claims to be tolerant and scientific.

4.2.4 Spiritual Prioritization

Hindu emphasis on the primacy of the spiritual over material reality which adopts Greek philosophical bias, appeals to many who are disillusioned with the excesses of material pursuits found in the West. However, spirituality should not be confused with transcendence. In Hinduism, nothing exists which is other than the being of which man is part - there is in fact no god! The spirituality of Hinduism is transcendentally bankrupt. The priority given to spirituality in Hinduism does not correspond to the Western view of transcendence. Hindu spirituality is ultimately and essentially humanistic and materialistic because there is nothing to transcend.

4.3 HINDU & CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES COMPARED

How do the major doctrines of Hinduism and Christian compare? Can one be both a Hindu and a Christian? Is it possible to align oneself to Hinduism as an ethnic Indian while claiming to be a follower of Christ?

The Hinduism of the ancient Vedic texts is different from the Vedantic Hinduism of the Upanishads and both are different from the Hinduism of the Gita practiced by most modern Hindus in India today. And all three differ from the Hindu Renaissance which came to the West, introduced and shaped since the 19th century. However, we may make a comparison by taking into account the common elements in much of Hinduism.

There are four non-negotiable doctrines which every Christian ought to hold to as a Christian. The doctrines of

- **God as creator**
- **Alienation by sin**
- **Salvation by grace**
- **Jesus.**

These automatically require the doctrines of the trinity, of the canonical scriptures, of eschatology etc.

4.3.1 God & Creation

In the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*⁴⁵ **Brahman** (God) is without a fixed form, an abstract, eternal being with no attributes but who takes the form in a trinity⁴⁶ as well as millions of deities.

1. God and creation as one. This need not mean that the material universe is eternal, but rather that the universe came about as an issue of or as an exercise of the supreme power. Christianity teaches that God is one and distinct from creation.

⁴⁵ Francis X. Clooney, S. J., *Hindu Wisdom for all God's Children*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 1.

⁴⁶ Yes, the concept of three gods represented as one and vice versa is not unique to Christianity even if the actual meaning of the Christian triunity is.

2. In the beginning, there is only self which rather than created the universe, was the universe, while Christianity speaks of God as prior to the beginning of our physical reality. In Indian thought, the beginning always follows on something that has gone before⁴⁷. The universe is either eternal or self was itself created.⁴⁸
3. Christian teaching is that God freely created the universe for a purpose: relationship with it. Hinduism does not speak of such relations since all of physical reality is in fact ontologically one with its source: any notion of fellowship or relationship is not one with another but rather one with itself.
4. Christianity conceives of God as infinitely holy and righteous; the One to whom we as His creatures are accountable for the way we conduct our lives, but Hinduism does not distance the divine from the profane in terms of righteousness or holiness, but rather in terms of ignorance and spiritual blindness.
5. In Christianity the triune God was in perfect fellowship and has no need but in generosity, wanted to create other than itself to share joy in fellowship. In Hindu teaching, the original self or 'Person' was alone and in creating, it expanded itself into multiple selves of its own nature. This lack of fellowship is a problem in monotheism.
6. Why did the self become many selves, you might ask? Hindu theology teaches that the "Person" was alone. Since there was no one else, there was no fear of another. However, there was also no joy since there is no one to rejoice with. The Person desired a second⁴⁹. Creation began. Thus need caused creation. Another story tells of "Existent" who thought to itself, "Let me become many. Let me propagate myself"⁵⁰. One of the Vedanta texts, *Vivekacudamani* (The Crest Jewel of Discrimination), composed around 800 A.D., describes the **evolution of the self** as a movement in four stages:

⁴⁷ Clooney, *Hindu Wisdom for all God's Children*, 4. See *Chandogya Upanishad* 6:2.1, 3, 4.

⁴⁸ Clooney, *Hindu Wisdom for all God's Children*, 3. See *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* 1.4.1-6.

⁴⁹ Clooney, *Hindu Wisdom for all God's Children*, 4.

⁵⁰ Clooney, *Hindu Wisdom for all God's Children*, 18.

- Stage one is the initial crisis when the self is dissatisfied with itself.
- Stage two is the realization of what the self is not.
- Stage three is the realization of what the self truly is.
- Stage four is the realization of this self-knowledge in a changed way of life.⁵¹ This is the celebration of true self-awareness.⁵² Nothing much matters anymore. Misery can now be blissful. No longer need we sweat the small stuff, and everything is small stuff. With **plurality**, the self can no longer retreat to self-contentment. The merit seen in this ideology is that Hinduism confronts personal self-interest with selflessness. We ought to be caring to others because they are part of us.⁵³

In Christianity, generosity caused creation. In Hinduism, necessity which caused creation. For Christianity, creation is not part of God but derives from God's power. Can it be argued that if nothing except God exists before creation, then creation must necessarily be from God in the sense of being a part of God?

This is where Christian cosmogony departs from Hinduism. The Christian God is capable of bringing into existence something which is not Himself but yet which did not exist before creation, i.e., *ex nihilo*. There is speculation that although matter did not exist prior to creation, energy did and creation is merely the conversion from energy to matter, as per $E=mc^2$. While this is a possible scientific explanation for a theological doctrine, it is a theologically insufficient explanation since this would merely shift the burden of explanation one step back, by demanding that energy is eternal. If energy is eternal, might energy not be equal to God? This is the task of philosophy: to test the claims of both science and theology for consistency and coherence.

In Hinduism, the fact that *atman is Brahman* is a great comfort. While the experience of suffering appears real, it is in fact, illusory and there is no final punishment. As for creation, it is merely manifestation of the one being.

⁵¹ Clooney, *Hindu Wisdom for all God's Children*, 20.

⁵² Clooney, *Hindu Wisdom for all God's Children*, 27.

⁵³ Clooney, *Hindu Wisdom for all God's Children*, 5.

4.3.2 Sin, Grace or karma?

In Christianity sin is a central doctrine which affirms our helplessness and dependence upon God for salvation. Sin is the source of our alienation from God and is expressed in our rebellious will against God. Knowledge alone is insufficient to cure us of this defect. We need the transforming power of God to change the way we will.

In Hinduism, sin does not exist. Good and evil are relative terms. This is because man is divine and is one with God but he is ignorant of this fact. His focus on this temporal and material world blinds him and gives rise to acts that result in bad *karma*, trapping him in the cycle of reincarnation. Human evil and wickedness is due to ignorance rather than sinfulness.

Has knowledge of the good ever caused people to refrain from doing the bad? No, but the kind of ignorance Hinduism calls attention to is not observational ignorance or even ignorance of reflective knowledge but rather ignorance of revealed enlightenment. Hinduism relies on the doctrine of *karma* which serves to explain the human condition of suffering. It is also *karma* that acts as a sanction against improper behavior.

4.3.3 Jesus and Salvation or Moksha to Nirvana?

Hindus believe that Jesus was a mere human and could not have died for the sins of anyone. Jesus may be one of the many incarnations of God, but not of the essence of God since a transcendent god does not exist. They object to the doctrine of the Trinity because it seems incoherent. Do Christians worship one or three gods? The answer is that Christians worship the **God who is one**: Father, Son and Spirit, in holy communion, bearing a unified and common will. This **volitional unity** sets Christianity apart from monotheism, henotheism, tritheism, and polytheism. Hindus do not seek salvation because there is nothing to be saved from. What they do seek is liberation (*moksha*) from the cycle of reincarnation. This is **achieved by our own efforts**, i.e., good works, knowledge through meditation, or devotion to a deity.

Christians acknowledge our sinful condition and seek deliverance from God by grace through Jesus. In certain Hindu groups there is a similar emphasis on God's grace (probably from past Christian influence). But Hindu teaching about grace has no need for an atonement for sin. In the gospel God became a man, died a sacrificial death on the cross, and forgave the sins of those who place complete trust in Jesus. For Hinduism, we are justified through self-control. The personal effort of *moksha* enables one to enter the state of *nirvana*.

4.4 A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO HINDU SOTERIOLOGY

Soteriology is the doctrine or teaching about how one might be saved or liberated. Both Hinduism and Christianity describes its own understanding of soteriology. Hinduism teaches that

all is not right with the world and with human existence in it,

and

the ultimate remedy to the human dilemma is spiritual in nature

From the above, Christians may conclude in agreement with Hindus that humanity needs salvation or liberation. The question is liberation from what? For the thoughtful Hindu, it is not just liberation from existence *per se*, but from existence in this reality as we know it.

Hinduism teaches that human knowledge is veiled in ignorance. Then how do we know this teaching about human cognition being veiled in ignorance is not itself veiled in ignorance?

This is the dilemma of postmodern relativism. Ultimately, Hinduism privileges a foundational authority, whether the ancient **Veda**, the **Upanishads**, or the **Gita**.

Christianity describes a God who does not privilege specific groups of people, period in history or economic classes, i.e., it does not privilege geography, history or acquisition of material. This contrasts with classical Hinduism and its intolerance of non-Hindu gods among the peoples of India. How does the Hindu claim that *we are all one with reality* square with the reality that racial, economic, and linguistic demarcation remains a signature feature of Hinduism?

Hindu soteriology is an effort of the pious seeking to satisfy the ethical demands of God while Christian soteriology demands human surrender to God who alone can save by taking on our sin in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity.

5. HINDU RENAISSANCE AND GLOBAL HINDUISM

In the 19th century, Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) began what Gavin Flood calls the Hindu Renaissance⁵⁴, a religious and political movement which fueled the Indian nationalism of the 20th century. This paved the way for the development of Hinduism as a global religion with a distinct identity. Hinduism may be practiced under the **Brahmanic**, the **Renouncer**, or the **Popular** tradition. The Brahmanic orthopraxy possesses the master narrative for all traditions⁵⁵ and it is this which permits any notion of an identifiably Hindu religion.

5.1 BRAHMANIC TRADITIONS

There exists three Brahmanic systems of Hinduism:

1. **VAISNAVA** focused on the deity **Vishnu** and his incarnations. In the Shiva trimurti, he is considered the creator of the world as Brahma, preserver as Vishnu, and destroyer as Rudra.⁵⁶
2. **SAIVA** focused on **Shiva**, (tantric forms emerge from this system) Lord of Benares.⁵⁷
3. **SAKTA** focused on the Great Goddess or Maha **Devi**,⁵⁸ each with its own sacred texts under the rubric of Hinduism. Devi is sometimes called by its most important manifestation, **Durga** the warrior goddess.⁵⁹ For the Saktas, Devi is the real ultimate power and the other male gods are merely her instruments.⁶⁰ She is the creator, preserver as well as consumer of the cosmos.⁶¹

Devotees adopt one of these traditions, each of which is linked to a major god, which is then considered the supreme Lord, delegating the other gods to inferior positions. Hence, a worshipper of Vishnu considers Shiva and Devi minor deities.

All of them accept the influence of the **Vedanta**, which became the philosophical basis for the Hindu Renaissance during the 19th century and forms the foundation of the world religion called modern Hinduism. The brahmanic tradition is the tradition of the Hindu Householder.

⁵⁴ Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 250.

⁵⁵ Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 16.

⁵⁶ Klostermaier, 239.

⁵⁷ Klostermaier, 261-262.

⁵⁸ Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 174.

⁵⁹ Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 175.

⁶⁰ Klostermaier, 279.

⁶¹ Klostermaier, 278.

5.2 RENOUNCER TRADITIONS

Renouncer traditions may have originated outside the vedic tradition in the *sramana* movements from which Buddhism and Jainism are a part, but became incorporated into the mainstream vedic tradition. Each became a reformed versions of classical Hinduism of sorts.

For the renouncers, yoga (to control, to unite)⁶² is the method for attaining liberation. Today they include

- **Sramana,**
- **Buddhism** and
- **Jainism.**⁶³

5.3 POPULAR TRADITIONS

These are geographically bounded local expressions. Their languages are the regional vernacular rather than the scholarly Sanskrit of brahmanic traditions and they are less interested in asceticism than that their crops grow, their children are healthy, and that they are protected from evil spirits and demon possession.

5.4 HINDU RENAISSANCE

The Hindu renaissance tends to downplay the differences between the theological traditions and to relegate ritual to the popular level, below the ethical spirituality of the Upanishads and the Gita. It is characterized by

1. an emphasis on reason to establish the truth of the Veda
2. the rejection of iconic worship for being idolatry
3. the rejection of the caste-system, child-marriage, and *sati* (widow-burning)
4. the construction of Hinduism as an ethical spirituality, equal or superior to Christianity and Islam⁶⁴

⁶² Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 94.

⁶³ Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 17.

⁶⁴ Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 251.

5.4.1 Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833)

Also known as the father of modern India, founded the Brahmo Samaj movement modeled on the Christian reform movements, but dedicated to the reform of Hinduism. For Roy, God is a transcendent, immutable being who is the creator of the cosmos, but who cannot be known in his essence which is ineffable. All religions are essentially one and differ only in the inessentials, he taught. This gave Hinduism the reputation in the West, of being a tolerant religion. God can be known through reason and observation of the natural world, thus adopting the tools of philosophy and science. His ethical religion strongly resembled the Deist religion of Enlightenment Europe. He rejects the doctrines of *karma* and *samsara* as well as the puranic and tantric rituals for being superstitious and incompatible with reason. After his death, he was succeeded by Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905) and Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884). Although Brahmo Samaj had little effect on the popular, village Indians, it was successful among the emerging educated middle classes and paved the way for a sense of Hindu national identity.

5.4.2 Dayananda Sarasvati (1824-1883)

Sarasvati was born in Gujarat and was influenced by Roy. He rejected the *Saiva* tradition of his youth and sought a return to the a purer form of early Hinduism of the Veda. Rejecting the epics and puranas as contaminants in Hinduism, he accepted the teachings of the *dharmasastra* such as the *Laws of Manu* and founded the Arya Samaj in Bombay to promote his Hindu reformation. His religious teachings were shaped to become a political force against the encroachments of Christianity and Islam. It attracted the merchant classes and became popular among Hindus in South Africa and Fiji. He claimed that all modern scientific discoveries are previewed in the Veda. The Arya Samaj is highly nationalistic in character and is intolerant of other faiths and views.

5.4.3 Ramakrishna (1836-1886)

This Bengali Hindu mystic became a priest of the Kali temple near Calcutta. His extreme devotion caused others to think he had lost his mind when he received a vision of the Goddess. When his child-bride came of age at 17 she set out to be with him. Upon meeting her, Ramakrishna began to worship his wife as a manifestation of the Goddess. She served him at the temple until his death. He studied under two teachers, the female tantric initiate Bhairavi and the naked *sadhu* (holy man) Totapuri. After he learned to experience unity with the Absolute, he began to have visions even of Jesus and practiced the paths of other religions, including Christianity and Islam. He then declared **the unity of all religions. All religions are different paths to the One, eternal, undivided being which is absolute knowledge and bliss.**

Among his listeners was a young man, Narendranath Datta, who was strongly influenced both by western science and philosophy. Datta had a profound religious experience and fell into a trance when Ramakrishna put his feet on his chest. This prompted him to abandon his career in law to become a disciple of Ramakrishna. Datta became a world-renouncer and took on the name Vivekananda.

5.4.4 Vivekananda (1863-1902)

Swami Vivekananda is arguably the most important figure in the development of modern Hinduism and Hinduism in the West. He achieved a similar vision as Ramakrishna at Cape Comorin at the tip of India and resolved to bring his vision of Hinduism to the world. He promoted the vedantic philosophy that the divine, the absolute, exists within all beings regardless of social status. Humans can achieve union with the divine. On a social level, seeing the divine in others will promote love and harmony.

Vivekananda was invited to Chicago in 1893. He was the first effective proponent of Hinduism as a world religion and stayed on in the United States to found the Vedanta Society in New York in 1895. That same year, he returned to India to found a monastic order called the Ramakrishna Mission. Vivekananda stressed **Hinduism as a scientific religion** which greatly attracted India's English-educated middle classes. His ideas fed those of another great Indian lawyer-reformer, the Gujarati, Mohandas Karmachand (Mahatma) Gandhi (1869-1948)⁶⁵.

⁶⁵ Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 259.

5.5 HINDUISM IN THE WEST

How did Hinduism get to the West? Believe it or not, it began with missionary activity of the Christian West upon India. Vasco da Gama of Portugal opened the seaway from Europe to India arriving near Calicut in 1498. In 1606, Roberto de Nobili (1577 - 1656) engaged the Hindu scriptures in his attempt to convert Hindus to Christianity.

By the 18th century, with the establishment of the discipline of Indology, Europe boasted dozens of ‘Orientalists’ who were fluent in Sanskrit, the holy language of Hinduism. This study of India’s culture and religions first brought Hindu thought to the West.

The **pantheism** of Hinduism influenced German philosophers including J. G. Herder (1744 - 1803), Friedrich Schlegel (1772 - 1829), Georg W. F. Hegel (1770 - 1831), Friedrich Schelling (1775 - 1854), Artur Schopenhauer (1788 - 1860), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900). They were less concerned with the accurate or faithful readings of the Hindu texts than they were with using Hindu philosophy to support or contribute to their existing ideas. This legacy is found in the novels of Hermann Hesse (1877 - 1962) and Carl Jung (1875 - 1961).

The impact of Latin Christian missions, although tainted by the forced re-baptism of Mar Thoma Christians of the Syrian rite, did leave its mark. Many Hindus from Roy to Vivekananda to Gandhi to Radnakrishnan tried to integrate what they found most attractive in Christianity into their own vision of Hinduism. The ethics of the Gospels and social concern of Christian missionaries were not lost on the reformers⁶⁶.

In the 1960s, the Beatles from Great Britain went to India and were taught transcendental meditation (TM) by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. They brought TM to the United States and other Western countries through their music. The popular vedantic motto that has fully penetrated Western philosophical consciousness is “All approaches to God are true and valid”. This was the very central claim made by the eminent philosopher of religion John Hick⁶⁷ who taught and influence generations of philosophers who teach at the world’s finest universities and seminaries today. He often quotes from the *Bhagavad-Gita*.....”Howsoever men may approach me, even so do I accept them; for, on all sides, whatever path they may choose is mine”. This has become his mantra and the lens by which he judges all religious truth claims.

⁶⁶ Klostermaier, 47.

⁶⁷ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, Second edition, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

6. HINDUISM IN AMERICA

In the United States, Hinduism registers over 1.5 million observants, and form the fifth largest religious group. How did Hinduism come to America?

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1832), a leading American exponent of transcendentalism, steeped himself in Hindu thought and came up with his concepts of the Oversoul and self-reliance which bears remarkable similarity with Hinduism. The vedantic texts made an impact on the New England Transcendentalists, including Henry David Thoreau (1817-1962), who was inspired by the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* when he wrote *Walden*. Their interests influenced the Unitarian Association, which was itself aligned with the Brahma Samaj of India. At the invitation of the Unitarian Association, Protap Chunder Mozoomdar became the first Hindu to offer a public lecture about Hinduism in the West in 1883 at the home of Emerson's widow.⁶⁸

6.1 VIVEKANANDA

In September 1893, the powerful orator Swami (master) **Vivekananda** (1863-1902) delivered a remarkable speech at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, which was organized by the Presbyterian and Roman Catholic Churches. He effectively ignited Hinduism's coming of age in America. Here are his speeches which charmed the West:

Addresses at the Parliament of Religions Response to Welcome ***Chicago, September 11, 1893***



Swami Vivekananda [1863-1902]⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 269.

⁶⁹ <http://www.ramakrishna.org/sv.htm>

Sisters and Brothers of America,

It fills my heart with joy unspeakable to rise in response to the warm and cordial welcome which you have given us. I thank you in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world; I thank you in the name of the mother of religions, and I thank you in the name of millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects.

*My thanks, also, to some of the speakers on this platform who, referring to the delegates from the Orient, have told you that these men from far-off nations may well claim the honor of bearing to different lands the idea of toleration. **I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true.** I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth. I am proud to tell you that we have gathered in our bosom the purest remnant of the Israelites, who came to Southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which their holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny. I am proud to belong to the religion which has sheltered and is still fostering the remnant of the grand Zoroastrian nation. I will quote to you, brethren, a few lines from a hymn which I remember to have repeated from my earliest boyhood, which is every day repeated by millions of human beings:*

“As the different streams having their sources in different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.”

The present convention, which is one of the most august assemblies ever held, is in itself a vindication, a declaration to the world of the wonderful doctrine preached in the Gita:

"Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me."

Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But their time is come; and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honor of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.

ADDRESS AT THE FINAL SESSION***Chicago, September 27, 1893***

The World's Parliament of Religions has become an accomplished fact, and the merciful Father has helped those who laboured to bring it into existence, and crowned with success their most unselfish labour.

My thanks to those noble souls whose large hearts and love of truth first dreamed this wonderful dream and then realized it. My thanks to the shower of liberal sentiments that has overflowed this platform. My thanks to this enlightened audience for their uniform kindness to me and for their appreciation of every thought that tends to smooth the friction of religions. A few jarring notes were heard from time to time in this harmony. My special thanks to them, for they have, by their striking contrast, made general harmony the sweeter.

*Much has been said of the common ground of religious unity. I am not going just now to venture my own theory. But **if any one here hopes that this unity will come by the triumph of any one of the religions and the destruction of the others, to him I say, "Brother, yours is an impossible hope."** Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid.*

The seed is put in the ground, and earth and air and water are placed around it. Does the seed become the earth, or the air, or the water? No. It becomes a plant. It develops after the law of its own growth, assimilates the air, the earth, and the water, converts them into plant substance, and grows into a plant.

*Similar is the case with religion. **The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian.** But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.*

*If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world, it is this: It has proved to the world that **holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church** in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, **if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart,** and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written in spite of resistance: "Help and not fight," "Assimilation and not Destruction," "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension."⁷⁰*

⁷⁰ <http://www.ramakrishna.org/chcgfull.htm>

The keynote of his message is: “Truth is one: Sages call it by various names.” Its four cardinal points are

1. non-duality of the Godhead,
2. divinity of the soul,
3. oneness of existence, and
4. harmony of religions.

All four points contradict Christian orthodoxy. The Christian God is not one god but triune, the soul is not divine but created, existence is not unified because God is eternal, and religions are not in harmony precisely because Hinduism and Christianity, for example, are mutually exclusive. The very claim of Vivekananda to recognize the integrity of Christianity denies the integrity of the Hinduism he espouses.

The following is taken from the Ramakrishna⁷¹ website:

*Religion, in the light of Vivekananda's Vedanta, is the manifestation of the divinity already in man. The central theme of Vedanta is harmony of religions. This spiritual harmony is to be realized by deepening our spiritual consciousness. Vedanta asks a Christian to be a true Christian, a Hindu a true Hindu, a Buddhist a true Buddhist, a Jew a true Jew, Moslem a true Moslem. The message was timely and powerful. America had received a rude shock from the Civil War and its aftermath. Science had already shaken the very roots of religious beliefs and dogmas, and the ideas of Darwin were challenging conventional American thought and religion. Americans were looking for a philosophy that could harmonize science with humanism and mystical experience, and Swami Vivekananda's words gave them hope for the fulfillment of their spiritual aspirations. The message was powerful not because of its dialectical superiority or philosophical subtlety, but because of the personality of Swami Vivekananda. The message was an ancient one, but it bore a fire of conviction that was new. One familiar with the life of Swami Vivekananda will recall that his Master, Sri Ramakrishna, saw in him the power and potentiality of a great world teacher. Before the Master passed away, he prophesied: "Narendra (Swami Vivekananda) will teach others Very soon he will shake the world by his intellectual and spiritual powers."*⁷²

Note the confidence with which this form of Hinduism assesses its impact on the Christian West. Vivekananda was the most powerful Hindu evangelist to America, invited and

⁷¹ Sri Ramakrishna is Vivekananda's teacher and master.

⁷² [http://www.ramakrishna.org/sv sa.htm](http://www.ramakrishna.org/sv_sa.htm).

welcomed by the Presbyterian Church to preach the Hindu message from Chicago.

In 1976, the memory of Vivekananda was celebrated in Washington, D.C. during the American Bicentennial Celebration. Here is how the Ramakrishna website described it:

On the occasion of America's Bicentennial Celebration in 1976, the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C., mounted a large portrait of Swami Vivekananda as part of its exhibition "Abroad in America: Visitors to the New Nation," which paid tribute to the great personalities who visited America from abroad and made a deep impression on the American mind. Among those honored in the exhibition, some influenced art or literature, some science, education or social reform.

But Swami Vivekananda touched the very soul of American people. The commemorative volume of the exhibition says: "The Swami charmed the audiences with his magical oratory, and left an indelible mark on America's spiritual development." This is no exaggeration. Swami Vivekananda was the first Hindu monk from India ever to visit America. Guided solely by the will of Providence, he embarked on this journey to the new world. The unknown wandering monk, lost in the streets of Chicago, suddenly became famous after his first day's brief address before the Parliament. A select audience of nearly 7,000 enlightened representatives of different branches of American thought became thrilled to hear his message and welcomed him with sustained and thunderous applause. He captured the hearts of the American people. Crowds gathered in the streets of Chicago to see the picture posters of Swami Vivekananda placed on billboards around the city, and lecture bureaus vied with one another to enlist him for lectures in different cities. Leading newspapers and journals published his words in bold letters. Some of these newspapers described him as the "cyclonic Hindu," some as "prince among men" or "Brahmin monk," while others chose to designate him by such epithets as "warrior prophet" and "militant mystic." Contemporary leaders of American thought who met him were entranced by the radiance of his spiritual personality and his powerful message.

Professor John Henry Wright of Harvard University told Swami Vivekananda:

"To ask you, Swami, for your credentials is like asking the sun about its right to shine."

After hearing Swami Vivekananda, the correspondent of one journal wrote:

"The impertinence of sending half-educated theological students to instruct the wise and erudite Orientals was never brought home to an English-speaking audience more forcibly."

Professor William James referred to Swami Vivekananda as *"the paragon of Vedantists."*⁷³

Swami Vivekananda's powerful arguments began the slow erosion and decline of missional evangelism in India among the 'enlightened' leaders of many mainline churches of America.

⁷³ [http://www.ramakrishna.org/sv sa.htm](http://www.ramakrishna.org/sv_sa.htm)

6.2 THE HINDUIZATION OF AMERICA

Hinduism was also transmitted to the United States through the Theosophy movement. **The Theosophical Society** was founded in 1875 in New York by the Russian psychic madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott to promote and explore esoteric knowledge. The society moved to India and made its headquarters in the city of Madras. The society went on to influence poets such as Y. B. Yeats and novelists such as Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood.

Later theosophists such as **Jiddu Krishnamurti** (1895 - 1986) who was educated in the West by Annie Besant (who succeeded Madame Blavatsky), became famous and attained a wide following in the West for his dialogues with physicists such as David Bohm as he sought to integrate Western science with Eastern religions.

Other Hindu teachers in America who gained large intellectual following include

1. **Sawan Singh** (1854-1948) taught 'God-realization' through the yoga of inner sound. His disciple Dr. Julian Johnson, a Protestant preacher, brought the Radhasoami Satsang movement to the West
2. **Aurobindo Ghose** (1872-1950) the English-speaking politician and philosopher who introduced 'integral yoga',
3. **Ramana Maharshi** (1879-1950) lived in India but attracted many western disciples,
4. **Paramahansa Yogananda** (1890-1952) founded the Self-Realization Fellowship in California
5. **Maharishi Mahesh Yogi** founded the Transcendental Meditation movement
6. **Maharaji**, the teenage guru, founded the Divine Light Mission (Elan Vital)
7. **Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada** brought the Hare Krishna movement to the West in 1965
8. **Swami Muktananda** founded Siddha Yoga
9. **Bhagavan Shree Rajneesh** fused Hindu mysticism with western psychotherapies

Other gurus remained in India but nevertheless influence their western disciples:

1. **Anandamayi**, regarded as a living deity and identified with the Goddess Durga
2. **Satya Sai Baba**, famous for his magical powers
3. **Swami Sivananda**, who taught Neo-Vedanta
4. **Swami Chimayananda**, another Neo-Vedanta guru

7. HINDUISM IN SCIENCE, EDUCATION, MUSIC & THE MEDIA

In 2004 the movie *What the Bleep do we Know!?* was screened. The main thesis of the film is that **science** shows why classical Hindu pantheism is correct, although it is not mentioned by name. This docudrama starring Marlee Matlin explores the implications (not meaning) of quantum mechanics (freedom), neuroscience (chemical influence on human behavior) and psychology (emotional consciousness) to conclude that there is no divine being called God, that religion is an inadequate and frightful description of reality, and that we are in fact evolving gods. Jesus and Buddha are *avatars* of Hindu gods which precede and invite us to follow them. This brilliant conjecture enjoys the seeming support of modern science because many scientists testify to this conclusion, and the insights of wise people, including a theologian, because many articulate pronouncements feed on the despair of the postmodern person and the accompanying skepticism about organized and institutional religion. The description of the film is “Science and spirituality come together in this mind-bending trip down the rabbit hole”

In the world of **education** many Hindu scholars are active in the science and religion movements. They include Varadaraja V. Raman, Ashok Kumar Malhotra, K. Ramakrishna Rao, K. Vasudeva Rao, Sukalyan Sengupta, D. T. Singh, A. R. Singh, M. I. Singh, W. A. Singh, and others who attempt to either make science subservient to Hindu thought by synthesizing the various accounts which appear to correlate or comport to each other, or else, make Hindu a scientific religion. This is usually done by first drawing attention to the apparently long antagonistic history between the Christian church and modern science. A commonly used straw man is the Copernican and Galilean cases as well as perhaps Sigmund Freud’s contest of wills at Vienna. Many inaccurate details are glossed over because the primary goal is to establish Hinduism as a tolerant and enlightenment religion that has come of age.

The **musical world** has always been influenced by religious philosophies and indeed, much of the history of music moves in tandem with the history of religious thought, from the psalms of Judaeo-Christianity to the chants of Tibetan Buddhism. Most of what we call classical music in the west were generated by Christian piety and patronage. Music was used by the Mar Thoma Christians in India to preserve their liturgy when they were persecuted by Latin missionaries.

Here in America during the twentieth century, many songs were dedicated to Hindu thought. Think of George Harrison's "My Sweet Lord" and you might be forgiven if you are thinking of Jesus. He was in fact singing to the Hindu deities. Take a look at the lyrics and note the chorus in parenthesis:

MY SWEET LORD by George Harrison⁷⁴

*My sweet lord Hm, my lord Hm, my lord
I really want to see you, Really want to be with you
Really want to see you lord, But it takes so long, my lord, My sweet lord
..... (cont'd)
Hm, my lord (hare krishna), My, my, my lord (hare krishna)
Oh hm, my sweet lord (krishna, krishna), Oh-uuh-uh (hare hare)
Now, I really want to see you (hare rama), Really want to be with you (hare rama)
..... (cont'd)
My, my, my lord (hare krishna), My sweet lord (hare krishna)
My sweet lord (krishna krishna), My lord (hare hare)
Hm, hm (Guru Brahma)
Hm, hm (Guru Vishnu)
Hm, hm (Guru Devo)
Hm, hm (Maheshwara)
My sweet lord (Guru Sakshaat)
My sweet lord (Parabrahma)
My, my, my lord (Tasmayi Shree)
My, my, my, my lord (Guru VeNamah)
My sweet lord (Hare Rama)*

The **media** is strongly influenced by Hindu doctrines, from 'the force' featured in the two Star Wars Trilogies by George Lucas, to the Matrix trilogy, to countless science fiction movies. *What the Bleep do we Know!?* is perhaps among the best docudrama made in which scientists who are atheists or otherwise non-Christian are given a mass media platform to make descriptive conclusion prescriptive dogma. Others include magnificently filmed productions sponsored by PBS, National Geographic, Discovery and A&E. They introduce theological themes under the rubrics of science, culture, anthropology and archaeology among other disciplines. Many of these programs are not particularly anti-Christian but they draw much inspiration from Hindu doctrines.

⁷⁴ <http://www.lyricsdepot.com/george-harrison/my-sweet-lord.html>

CONCLUSION

As with any Christian encounter with the world's great religions, the central issue of contention is the **divinity of Jesus** as described in the gospel. Hinduism cannot tolerate the Christian claim that Jesus is divine and the only savior of humanity. The differences between Christianity and all the great religions of the world hinge on Christology. Christians ought to safeguard our articulation of Jesus in the context of what the Trinity means: it does not refer to monotheism. Why does Hinduism reject so strongly the divinity of Christ? The *Upanishads* claim that every human being can achieve what Jesus did on the Cross. Perfect humanity and perfect divinity are essential components of the human race. The sacrifice of Christ was therefore unnecessary and scandalous. The collective karmic debt of the entire human race from the past to the future cannot be erased by the act of any one person for another. Karmic debt is not transferable.

A second issue is that of **transcendent love**. Without a love that can change circumstances, Hindus turn to justice. The finality of death and the intensity of human suffering adds to the despair which prompted philosophers to account for the meaning of life in terms of justice and love. Where no overriding divine proclamation of love is evident, justice becomes the virtue of choice. It is through the lens of justice that Hinduism finds its foundation: the doctrines of *karma* (which assures us that 'the wages of sin is death' and that 'God will not be mocked'), *samsara* (which gives us hope that our squandered opportunities in life will not end in the final curse but will result in yet another opportunity to seek liberation), and *moksha* (the ultimate desire for release from the endless cycle of rebirths and redeaths).

Christians ought to be RAW witnesses: Ready, Able and Willing to proclaim the gospel.

- To be Ready involves the sacrifice of expectation and ego to establish a priority for apologetic evangelism and missions.
- To be Able involves taking the time and effort to learn something about the religions of the world, in this case, Hinduism, that we may be equipped for the daunting task of inviting others to transform their worldviews.
- To be Willing is to make the intellectual determination overcome internal obstacles and will the right and the good because we are redeemed children of a generous God.

The RAW witness is generous beyond belief!

What to tell a Hindu about Christ

1. Hindus and Christians both acknowledge the contingency of life and seek salvation from future suffering.
2. Hinduism teaches that salvation comes by living virtuous lives and acknowledging that reality is one.
3. Christianity teaches that salvation comes by receiving the promise of everlasting joy and rest in the presence of the divine by the power of the Holy Trinity.
4. The gospel is the most promising hope for Hindus who seek a comprehensive understanding of the salvation and future of humanity.
5. Why should Christians tell Hindus about Christ? Is the gospel true? Hinduism claims that truth is one. But if Christianity is true, Hinduism cannot be. The best reason to bear witness to anyone about anything is because it is true. It is impossible to be an effective witness if we do not really believe what we witness to. Discovering the world of Hinduism for the purpose of bringing the gospel to our Hindu friends and loved ones forces us to confront the challenges of Hindu thought for a more robust Christian belief.

Hindu teachings confront our presuppositions about Christianity and the Gospel, prompting us into developing a comprehensive worldview by which God's revelation through the Scriptures may be offered as the worldview of choice for everyone - **because it is TRUE!**

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APPENDIX A: HINDU GODS THROUGHOUT THE AGES

The Vedic Period

1. **Agni** (the sacrificial fire and many-tongued mouth by which the gods eat the sacrifices)⁷⁵
2. **Indira** (creator)
3. **Varuna** (creator)⁷⁶
4. **Usha, the Dawn** (symbol of youthful loveliness)⁷⁷
5. **Soma** (a hallucinogenic drink made from a plant)⁷⁸

The Later Gods

1. **Brahma**-the creator, **Vishnu**-the preserver, **Shiva**-the destroyer
2. **Sarasvati** (Brahma's consort), **Lakshmi** (Vishnu's wife), **Kali/Durga** (Shiva's consort)

The Ten Avatars of Vishnu

1. **Matsya**
2. **Kurma**
3. **Varaha**
4. **Nara-Simha**
5. **Vamana**
6. **Parusha-Rama**
7. **Rama-Chandra**
8. **Krishna**
9. **Buddha**
10. **Kalki**

⁷⁵ Ainslie T. Ambree, *The Hindu Tradition: Readings in Oriental Thought*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 20.

⁷⁶ Ambree, *The Hindu Tradition*, 23.

⁷⁷ Ambree, *The Hindu Tradition*, 16.

⁷⁸ Ambree, *The Hindu Tradition*, 21.

APPENDIX B: FAMOUS HINDUS IN HISTORY

1. **Ishvarakrishna** (350-425)
2. **Haribhadra** (700-770)
3. **Shankara** (788-822): Most famous renouncer-philosopher of the Advaita Vedanta school. For him Brahman alone is god. His elitist flavor may be contrasted with Ramanuja's more popularist expression.
4. **Ramanuja** (1017-1137): For him, Brahman encompasses all other gods, a panentheist 'all is in God'. Brahman has existence outside the world but not apart from the world.
5. **Jayatirtha** (1365-1388)
6. **Guru Nanak** (1469-1539) Founder of Sikhism
7. **Sri Krishna Chaitanya** (1486-1533) The object of devotion of the Hare Krishna movement although he was not its founder.
8. **Ram Mohan Roy** (1772-1833)
9. **Swami Narayan** (1781-1830)
10. **Sri Ramakrishna** (1836-1886) Considered the most recent reincarnation of the god Vishnu
11. **Rabindranath Tagore** (1861-1941) Nobel Prize winner for Literature in 1913
12. **Swami Vivekananda** (1863-1902) Introduced Renaissance Global Hinduism to the West
13. **Sai Baba** (d. 1918)
14. **Mahatma Gandhi** (His real name is Mohandas Karamchand)(1869-1948): Founded a non-violent liberation movement
15. **Aurobindo Ghose** (1870-1950)
16. **Ramana Maharshi** (1879-1950)
17. **Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan** (1888-1975) Professor of Philosophy at both Calcutta and Oxford, he also rose to become President of India
18. **Ma Ananda Mayi** (1896-1982)
19. **Bengali Abhay Charan De** (1896-1977) founded the Hare Krishna movement in New York City in 1966.
20. **Maharishi Mahesh Yogi** (His real name is Mahesh Prasad Varma) (1917-1990): Founder of Transcendental Meditation (TM)
21. **Deepak Chopra** (1947-): Ayurvedic (life wisdom) medicine. It is mostly developed in the 1980s by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi who brought Transcendental Meditation to the western world and its treatments are primarily of dietary and herbal.

APPENDIX C: SALVIFIC VIEWS

What are the various Christian positions regarding the agent of salvation? Christians say that only Jesus saves. What is the scope of this statement? Can those who have not heard the gospel of Jesus articulated directly to them also be saved? Or is salvation dependent on the opportunities made available to those who receive the gospel by the agency of humans? The following is a brief survey of the three main salvific views open to Christians.

1) **Exclusivist**:

1. The unique authority of Jesus by which to assess all other faiths.
2. The proclamation of the historical death and physical resurrection of Jesus.
3. Salvation comes through repentance and faith in Christ's work on the cross.
4. General revelation in science and philosophy and pre-Christian revelation are excluded.

2) **Pluralist**:

1. All religions are salvific despite their mutually exclusive truth-claims.
2. No one religion can claim to be the sole salvific agent for humanity.
3. Human experience is the ultimate criteria of religious truth.

3) **Inclusivist**:

1. The unique authority of Jesus by which to assess all other faiths.
2. The proclamation of the historical death and physical resurrection of Jesus.
3. Universal provision implies universal access: the cross is ontologically but not epistemologically necessary.
4. The theological Jesus alone is redeemer but salvation is not limited to the historicity of Jesus, who can save beyond the limitations of the spacetime continuum. It is open to Jesus saving humanity beyond the constraints of his earthly life in Palestine and beyond the limitations of human evangelistic efforts but rejects Karl Rahner's notion of 'anonymous Christians', or the claims of Swami Vivekenanda and Nurcholis Madjid that Christians as anonymous Hindus and Muslims. It excludes Judaism (denies the messianic status of Jesus), Hinduism (denies the ontological distinction of God), the Buddha (denies the insufficiency of morality), or Islam (denies the divinity of Jesus).

APPENDIX D: GLOSSARY

1. **Atman:** The ‘self’ of an individual which is eternal. In Advaita Vedanta, the self is regarded as identical with Brahman.
2. **Avatar:** Descent or incarnation of God (notably Vishnu) in such persons as Rama, Krishna, and Kali.
3. **Bhakti:** Warm devotion to God.
4. **Buddha** (Siddharta Gautama): Born in Kapilavastu, India in 480 and died in Kushinagara in 400 B.C., he is regarded by Hindus as one of the avatars or incarnations of God. His *sutras* (dialogues) form part of the *Tripitaka* (Pali canon), the Buddhist sacred Scriptures.
5. **Brahma:** One of the three members of the Trimurti
6. **Brahman:** The sacred power which is both in the sacrificial process and in the cosmos: hence the term is used for the Divine Being.
7. **Dharma:** The pattern underlying the cosmos and manifest in the ethical and social laws of humanity. Comprises elements of truth, duty, ethics and law.
8. **Jati:** Caste, a group with whom every individual identifies in marriage, work and in eating.
9. **Kama:** Pleasure
10. **Karma:** The law which governs the effects of deeds both in this life and in subsequent lives within the operation of rebirth (redeath) or reincarnation.
11. **Maya:** This world of reality which veils us from the Absolute. All that is not Brahman is maya. It is from existence in this realm that Hindus seek relief. Contrary to popular belief, Hindus do not seek annihilation but a transfer to another dimension, to another reality beyond this, where suffering does not exist (at least not in this form).
12. **Puja:** Worship.
13. **Sannyasin:** A Holy person who has left ordinary duties as determined by dharma and jati behind, often as a wanderer.
14. **Yoga:** To control, to unite. From the word ‘yuj’, which implies both the yoke and bond of discipline. The way to achieve enlightenment. To know the beyond that is within. Methods of meditation, sometimes involving physical as well as mental discipline. Yogic practice seeks to detach oneself completely from *maya* and attach to *atman* so as to bond with *Brahman*.

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