

CIS Bulletin: The Hindu Vedas

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Hinduism is one of the most diverse of all of the world religions. Hinduism is so diverse that a Hindu may fit into any of these categories and still call himself/herself a Hindu.

1. **Philosophic Hinduism** stresses monism (only one reality), pantheism (Everything is God.), and the divinity of man. God is impersonal and aloof from human problems.
2. **Religious Hinduism** stresses a belief in God(s) and his incarnations, called avatars. It is believed God is incarnated whenever evil threatens to gain control of the earth. Hindu scriptures speak of 330 million gods. Religious Hindus may worship any number of gods, often observing festivals honoring different gods. Note: Hindus increasingly speak of “one god,” when they relate to Christianity, Islam and Judaism.
3. **Popular Hinduism** is influenced by tradition, magic, animal worship, the occult and spiritism. Natural events, such as eclipses and appearances of comets, are seen as divine signs, often evil signs, which require prayers and offering to god(s). Popular Hinduism seeks a god(s) who protects, blesses and brings prosperity, and is indifferent to the authority of Hindu scriptures. A majority of Hindus adhere to this form of Hinduism.
The world’s largest religious gathering was probably a ritual bathing in the Ganges River in 1998 when some 10 million Hindus, some covered only with ashes, plunged into the river in the belief that the waters would bring good luck and free them from the cycles of reincarnation. “I came to do some good and put 10 years of bad luck behind me,” said a 50-year-old widow who rode 14 hours on a train to bathe in the river. The ritual bathing occurs every 12 years. – *The Alabama Baptist*, 07 May 1998.
4. **Cultic Hinduism** emphasizes the necessity of gurus or religious teachers. Recent examples of cultic Hinduism have included Bhagawan Sri Rajneesh, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (Transcendental Meditation), and Swami Bhaktivedanta (Hare Krishnas).
5. **Secular Hinduism** is nominal in belief, agnostic or atheistic, indifferent to religious practices, and motivated by materialistic tendencies.

First Stage: Period of the Vedas

Note: The Vedas can be used as a term to describe all Hindu scriptures or to refer to the four oldest of the Hindu scriptures. Hindus explain this by holding that all Hindu scriptures use or are merely commentary on the first four Vedas.

The Vedas are foundational to Hinduism — however, later scriptures are generally more popular with Hindus today than are the Vedas. Some of the gods in the Vedas have been forgotten.

Strictly speaking, the Vedas consist of three parts: the Samhitas (hymns in the scriptures), the Brahmanas (prose texts), and the Upanishads (philosophical topics). Scholars are uncertain when the Vedas were first written, perhaps as early as 2000 B.C., but certainly before 1000 B.C. They were probably repeated orally, before being written down.

For our discussion, we will take a different look at the Hindu scriptures.

Four Vedas:

1. Rig Veda: a collection of over 1,000 poetic hymns (actually 1,028) to the Aryan gods.

Praising thee with holy prayer, I beg thee,
The sacrificer by his oblation begs thee:
O Varuna, be not enraged, thy words
Are widely heard, so rob us not of life. I, xxiv, 11

The god Indra is especially important in the Rig Veda, because he is believed to have conquered the god of chaos.

The god Agni, the god of fire, is regarded as the god of the priests.

Vishnu, one of the most popular Hindu deities today, is mentioned briefly in the Vedas.

2. Yajur Veda: a collection of rites to be recited during sacrifice to the gods.
3. Sama Veda: a collection of hymns recited by priests during sacrifices, purely liturgical.
4. Atharva Veda: a collection of rituals used in home and popular prayers to the gods, along with spells and incantations to ward off evil.

Whereas the gods who Brahman know
Revere Brahman as the highest, best,
Whoso thus knows them face-to-face?
Is a Brahman-priest who knows.

Second Stage: Priestly or Brahmanic Period (1000-800 B.C.)

The scriptures of this period are the Brahmanas, with Brahmanas associated with each of the 4 Vedas. The emphasis is on sacrifice by priests who can control the gods. The role of priests was so important that salvation depended on paying fees to the officiating priests. Specific rites, daily sacrifices, monthly rituals, and rites for the installation of kings are found in the Brahmanas.

Developments in the Brahmanic period:

1. Restrictions on eating beef introduced.
2. Restrictions on a wife’s eating along with her husband.
3. Reincarnation first clearly stated.
4. Division of people into 4 castes.
 - Priests (*Brahmins*)
 - Warriors, rulers and aristocrats (*Kshatriyas*)
Of the 4 castes, this caste was the most important in Hindu culture.
 - Traders, scribes, skilled artisans and other professionals (*Vaishyas*)
 - Peasants, unskilled workers [*Sudras*] (role is to serve 3 upper castes, who are considered twice born”). This caste may have arisen from slave class.

A fifth group, not one of the 4 castes, are the outcastes or untouchables. In more recent decades, outcastes have been able to attain higher levels of influence. One outcaste, or Dilat, KR Narayanan (d. 2005) was president of India and an Indian ambassador to several countries and to the United Nations.

Third Stage: Philosophic Hinduism (800-600 B.C.)

Philosophical thought has always been popular in Hinduism.

In the Upanishads, there is a development of Brahman, also called Brahma in some sources (formerly thought of as prayer or sacred knowledge) as the one Supreme Being. Brahman is interpreted as “the absolute, infinite, eternal, omnipresent, impersonal, indescribable, neuter Being.” Brahman is formless, essentially unknowable, and a great mystery. The Upanishads often refer to Brahman as “not this, not that,” implying “it” cannot be compared to anything else.

Brahman is often associated with more immanent Atman, meaning spirit, as in Brahma-Atman.

Brahma (also spelled Brahman [meaning “ever growing”]) to distinguish “It” from Brahma, one of the major gods in the Hindu Trimurti) is ultimate reality as opposed to the finite world, which is a dream or illusion (*maya*). Whereas the earlier Hindu scriptures speak more of polytheism, the Upanishads prefer to speak of Brahma-Atman as the only god (monism).

Salvation was attained by a realization that one’s soul or *atman* was, in fact, a part of Brahma, or ultimate Reality. Meditation and the acquiring of sacred knowledge were more important than sacrifice.

Several schools developed to promote the philosophy of the Vedanta, the philosophy being called Vedanta, meaning the “end of the Vedas.” The major ones being:

1. Advaita or nondualism (Samkara, 8th century) is the most influential of the schools of the Vedanta. Brahman-Atman is the only reality; there is ultimately no individual self or soul separate from Brahman-Atman. Absorption or union of the atman with Brahma-Atman results in a complete loss of individuality. Man’s problem is thinking the world is real and different from Brahman-Atman. This problem is caused by *maya*, believing the world is real when it is ultimately illusion.

2. Visistadvaita or qualified nondualism. (Ramanuja, 11th-12th centuries, was probably the single most influential thinker of devotional Hinduism.) He stressed worship of the personal god Vishnu, and spoke of three distinct orders: matter, soul, and God.

3. Dualism (or Dvaita). The key proponent was Madhva, who lived in the 13th century, is said to have walked on water, calmed the rough sea, and became a “fisher of men; obviously influenced by Christians in India.

The 3 schools agreed about reincarnation, authority of the Veda for release from the cycles of reincarnation, Brahman as the cause of the world, and the soul (*atman*) as responsible for its own actions (*karma*).

Karma, meaning “to do or act,” is the law of cause and effort and was fully developed in the Upanishads. Karma is received by choices one makes in many hundreds of lifetimes, and actions in one life determine one’s station in future lives. Following one’s *dharma* or duty is essential to rid oneself of karma. Doing one’s duty was related to the caste system. Following the rules of one’s caste might enable a soul to be reincarnated into a higher caste in the next lifetime; not doing so might result in being reincarnated into a lower caste or even as an outcaste. Karma explained why people are different from one another, why one is kind, talented or wise, and another the opposite.

Related to karma is the concept of **samsara**, literally “to wander across” or “running around.” Often described as reincarnation or transmigration of the soul, samsara holds that a person’s soul or life force does not die when the body dies, but “wanders across” to another time and body, where it continues to live. In Hindu thought, samsara is a curse. The goal is to break free from the cycle of karma and samsara and the burden of human life.

This breaking free from the cycles of life is called **moksha**, meaning “release.” Moksha is achieved when no new karma is produced and following one’s dharma or duty exhausts the old karma. Most schools of Hindu school consider moksha to be a person’s highest purpose in life, and everything one does should bring one closer to moksha.

Fourth Stage: Legalistic Period of the Law of Manu (began about 250 B.C.)

The 12 chapters of the Law of Manu contain wise counsel, for example, respectful obedience to parents and teachers; repentance and confession; fulfilling marriage vows; reverential eating; unresentful, patient endurance of evil.

The Law of Manu, even though it presents a high view of ethics, is unmistakably a Hindu document. It teaches the saving power of the Vedas, the performance of Hindu sacrifices, the knowledge of Brahma-Atman, and final release from reincarnation. Wife beating is allowed under certain limitations. Women are to be under the control of fathers, husbands or sons. Killing cows is a great sin.

Fifth Stage: Period of Personalized Gods (Began about 1 A.D.)

The *Bhagavad Gita* is the most important Hindu writing of this period. It was first translated into English in 1785 and is commonly found in American bookstores today.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is a poem, which starts with a battle scene. A Hindu knight, Arjuna, raises the question of killing people in war. His charioteer, who is later revealed to be the god Krishna, tells of the eternal nature of the soul.

It slays not, and it is not slain. It is never born, and it never dies. Weapons cleave it not, nor does the fire burn it. The waters wet it not, nor do the winds dry it up. Wherefore, knowing it to be such, thou oughtest not to grieve for it. (2:19-25)

In addition, Arjuna is told, his caste position as a warrior requires him to do his duty (dharma) as a warrior.

Krishna declares he became incarnate “for the protection of good men, for the destruction of evildoers, for the re-establishment of piety.” (4:8)

Krishna encourages devotion to him, offers salvation to all who do, including women and low-caste Sudras. (Krishna affirms the 4 castes, saying he created them.)

Epics (Mahabharata and Ramayana) and the Puranas (literally “Ancient Tales”) were written during this time.