

# HINDUISM

by Rev. Peter J. Wilkinson

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Our increasing association with nations near our shores and the people of these countries prompts us to have some knowledge of their beliefs. Hence this pamphlet on Hinduism. It may give you an introduction at least.

## HINDUISM A Catholic Perspective

The immediate impression of Hinduism is most likely to be one of confusion and complexity, growth and accretion, absorption and assimilation, unity and diversity.

For a Christian, accustomed to having one's religion based on the historical "saving events" in the life of the founder, one will find no duplicate in Hinduism.

### HINDUISM AND HISTORY

Hinduism is truly a religion; but not an historical one. That is, it was not founded by any one man of history; it looks neither to the past nor to the future to any factual events in the history of man or the world; it does not have an historical Saviour or Redeemer.

However, it is historical in another sense. Hinduism is a religion which has its origins in 'a certain time and place, and it possesses a treasury of historical development which stretches back over more than 3,000 years.

Hinduism is essentially the religion of a place - Hindustan (India) - and of the people who inhabit that place - Hindus. "A Hindu," writes J. F. T. Jordens, "is a Hindu, not on account of any particular set of beliefs, (nor on account of being a member of a particular sect), but because he was born a Hindu, because he lives in a Hindu social framework and is thus committed to a Hindu way of life." ("*Contemporary India*" in "*Australia's Neighbours*", July-August, 1967, p.1.

Therefore, Hinduism can be said to be almost as much a "territorial" religion as a "credal" one. This is clearly borne out by recent statistics which show that (a) Hindus are to be found in large numbers (over 100,000) in only six countries outside India, Pakistan and Ceylon, namely Mauritius, Union of South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago, British Guiana [now Guyana], Burma and Fiji; and (b) of the total population of India, in 1961, 83.5% were Hindus.

(Footnote:

*World Christian Handbook - 1962*. World Dominion Press, pp. 248-251.

Africa

Kenya 45,304

Mauritius 241,660

Tanganyika [now Tanzania] 24,431

Uganda 20,477

Union of South Africa 180,962

#### America

Trinidad and Tobago 126,345  
British Guiana [Guyana] 115,544  
Surinam 66,000

#### Oceania

Fiji 137,232

#### Asia

Burma 750,000  
Ceylon 1,614,004  
India 303,186,986 {This is an incorrect figure from the 1961 Census.  
It should be 366,526,866.}  
Pakistan 9,770,734 )

But perhaps it were to put too narrow limits on Hinduism to call it simply a "religion". For it is, besides, a way of life, a philosophy of life, a view of life. It has its own rich culture and traditions and a well-developed civilization, with strict social customs and laws, reaching back millennia.

#### **Tolerance**

In fact, if one were to pin down the basic characteristic of Hinduism, it would appear to be its "tolerance"; its ability to accept and absorb into itself its own many varied theologies and beliefs and those of other cultures and religions, often so different from its own, even at times opposed, with which its long history has brought it into contact. From the very beginning this tolerance or process of absorption has prevailed.

#### **ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF HINDUISM**

"Hinduism has not been made, but has grown. It is a jungle not a building." (Sir Charles Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism*", Vol. 1, p. 41. Edward Arnold. 1926.

Unlike the construction of a building which will only occupy a few years at most, the growth - treelike - of Hinduism has been gradual, very gradual, and it continues.

It began probably more than 4000 years ago, in a period which the archaeologists refer to as the "Indus Valley Civilization". This civilization, which was only unearthed in 1922, had its site in the valley of the Indus River. (Note: "Hindu" and "Hindustan" are words derived from "Indus" or "Sindhu" an earlier name for the same river.) It is commonly believed that the people who created this civilization were the forerunners of the Dravidians, or as the archaeologists would call them, the "*Proto-Dravidians*".

It appears that these Proto-Dravidians were immigrants or foreign invaders, who entered Hind or India from the north and eventually penetrated as far south as Ceylon. Doubtless, in their migrations, they intermarried with the primitive peoples they encountered and the resultant culture contained social and religious elements of both.

Certainly the Proto-Dravidians were forerunners of the "*Aryans*", the dominant race of today's India, and their civilization, quite advanced, contained many elements familiar in modern Hinduism. However, their civilization as such did not last, and either by flood or foreign invasion, it was extinguished.

#### **The Aryan Invasion**

In the 2nd millennium B.C., a roving, hard-living, hard-fighting and relatively barbaric people, known as "*Proto-Nordics*", and with a religion of their own, invaded India from over the N-W frontier passes and came into the Punjab.

In their own language they called themselves "*Aryas*" ("nobles", "gentry", "aristocracy") and their religion was contained in their sacred books known as the "Vedas".

### Age of the Vedas

"Veda", a Sanskrit word, means "knowledge" or "transmitted wisdom". The Vedas are sacred books in which are gathered the religious knowledge of their age for the purpose of transmission. This knowledge is regarded as knowledge "par excellence", or the totality of it required to live out one's religious duty.

In the strict sense there are only four Vedic collections (Samhitas):

- 1) RIGVEDA - containing hymns of Praise;
- 2) SAMAVEDA - containing melodies for the Rigveda hymns to be sung during sacrifice;
- 3) YAJURVEDA - containing liturgical and sacrificial formulae - texts and explanations; and
- 4) ARTHAVAVEDA - a popular collection of "magic" formulae, charms and incantations.

However, in a broader sense, the Vedas are understood to contain many other of the sacred Hindu books, namely:

- 1) the SAMHITAS - the four Vedas proper, as above;
- 2) the BRAHMANAS - ritual explanations and priestly theories;
- 3) the ARANYAKAS - symbolic explanations of the sacrifices; and
- 4) the UPANISHADS - philosophic and theological writings on the doctrines of rebirth (*Samsara*), action (*Karma*), liberation (*Moksha*).

The Vedas, with their themes of Ritual, Prayer and Metaphysics, are the touchstone of Hindu orthodoxy. No Hindu system may throw overboard their authority, though they may be accepted or recurred to in varying degrees.

The four Vedas proper were probably written down around 1500-1200 B.C. The other Vedic writings came much later. The Upanishads appeared as late as 800 B.C.

The Hindu attitude to the Vedas is, according to S. Radhakrishnan, "one of trust tempered by criticism, trust because the beliefs and forms which helped our fathers are likely to be of use to us also; criticism because, however valuable the testimony of past ages may be, it cannot deprive the present age of its right to inquire and sift the evidence." (S. Radhakrishnan, "*Hindu View of Life*", pp. 15-16. Unwin Books. 1961.)

The Vedas are sacred for the Hindu because they lead to the Ultimate Good. They are for him "Revelation" (*Shruti*) or God speaking to man. Not in the Christian sense of God speaking *from without*, through a spokesman, e.g. Moses or St. Paul, but God speaking rather *from within* the Hindu sage, through a religious experience or intuition. It is an eternal revelation for him, for it emanates ultimately from God and has an eternal meaning.

The religion of the Vedas seems to be polytheistic - having a multiplicity of non-personal gods connected with objects and episodes of daily life. Some are outstanding, e.g. *Indra*, the god of rain, thunder and war, and protector of the cosmic order; *Agni*, the god of fire and the altar - the priest of the gods; *Soma*, the god of the sacrificial drink; *Varuna*, the god of the sky and protector of the moral order. However, the position of the gods in Hinduism is by no means stable, and their fortunes have fluctuated considerably

with the vagaries of the ages.

According to the Vedas both the world and man are "real" not "illusion" (*maya*). (Note: the notions of real and illusory are fundamental to an understanding of Hinduism.) The world has evolved from primitive elements, and this origin is explained by various myths. Man, composed of body and soul, is formed by the gods. The idea of "creation out of nothing" is not present.

It is very important to realize that in the earlier Vedas, the Samhitas, the doctrine of rebirth (Samsara) or "transmigration of souls" which was later to become the central concept in Hindu religion and thought, is not present. After death, according to the Samhitas, the righteous man is carried aloft by the god Agni to a heavenly world where he enjoys an eternal material bliss with the gods. He also receives a new, more subtle body with which to enjoy its pleasures in companionship with his forefathers. For the evil-doers there is prepared an "abyss" or kind of hell.

The souls of the dead are called the "fathers" or ancestor spirits, who share with the gods a claim to sacrifice.

### **The Great Epics - Incarnational Religion**

But Hinduism is not merely the religion of the Vedas. It is also the religion of the "Epics" and the "Puranas".

The latter are imaginative sacred literature full of weird stories. The former are long religious poems, very important to Hinduism, and written over a long period probably between 500 B.C. and 200 A.D. The two most notable Epics are the "*Ramayana*", which relates the story of the ideal king Rama and his consort Sita, and the "*Mahabharata*", a very long account of the war between two North Indian tribes, the Kuravas and the Pandavas.

Within the Mahabharata there is one canto which contains a profound religious message. It is known as the "*Bhagavad-Gita*" or "*Song of the Lord*", and is the most important single sacred writing of Hinduism. It is an essentially spiritual poem containing the quintessence of the Upanishadic doctrines. But it also contains more. It introduces into Hinduism (a) the conception of a "personal" Lord and master, to whom loving devotion (*Bhakti*) is due; (b) the conception of "avatars" or quasi-incarnations of the gods; and (c) a new dimension to the Upanishadic doctrine of Karma, namely that the ordinary daily life of a person in the world, lived with a certain detachment of spirit, can be good and adequate, and lead to sanctity and the Infinite.

The Upanishads had taught only one way to achieve salvation or liberation, the Way of Knowledge (*Jnana Yoga*):

*"When the wise rests his mind in contemplation on our God beyond time, who invisibly dwells in the mystery of things and in the heart of man, then he rises above pleasures and sorrow.*

*It is the supreme means of salvation: it is the help supreme. When the great Word (i.e. Brahman) is known, one is great in the heaven of Brahman."*

- Katha Upanishad Pt. 2.

But the Bhagavad-Gita, or Song of the Lord, while extolling the Way of Knowledge, puts forward two other ways of salvation, the Way of Action (*Karma Yoga*) and the Way of Devotion (*Bhakti Yoga*).

The Upanishads taught that action (Karma) bound a person to the cycle of rebirth. It was the cause of rebirth. But the Gita now teaches that life, action, work, however humble, can become an act of creation

and thereby a means of salvation. Action can purify the soul and prepare it for final release (*moksha*); so long as it is not bound by one's ego or the desire or expectation of reward. On the Way of Action then, we find the Gita saying:

*"In this world there are two roads of perfection . . . Jnana Yoga, the Path of Wisdom . . . and Karma Yoga, the Path of action . . . Not by refraining from action does man attain freedom from action: Not by mere renunciation does he attain supreme perfection.*

*But great is the man who, free from attachments, and with a mind ruling its powers in harmony, works on the path of Karma Yoga, the path of consecrated action. "*

- Bhagavad-Gita II, 3, 4 & 7.

Finally, the Gita proposes a third way to salvation, the Way of Devotion or the Way of Love:

*"He who offers to me with devotion only a leaf, or a flower, or a fruit, or even a little water, this I accept from that yearning soul, because with a pure heart it was offered with love. . . . Those who worship me with devotion, they are in me and I am in them. For this is my word of promise, that he who loves me shall not perish."*

*"Only by love can men see me, and know me, and come to me. He who works for me, who loves me, whose End Supreme I am, free from all things; and with love for all creation, he in truth comes unto me."*

- Bhagavad-Gita IX, 26, 29 & 31; XI, 54-55.

In the Gita, therefore, Brahma reveals through his avatar "*Krishna*" (a type of incarnate god) that there is a way of salvation open and attainable by all. No wonder then that the Gita has had a profound effect on Hinduism, and particularly modern Hinduism. Mahatma Gandhi, who read it constantly for his spiritual nourishment and as a guide in his highly active life, spread its message to the corners of India and beyond. It is well known, that after the death of his wife, Kasturbai, on the 22nd February, 1944, Gandhi conducted a memorial service for her on the 22nd of every month, by singing prayers and reading the full text of the Gita.

## **Avatars**

In the early Vedas, as we saw, Hinduism had many gods, e.g. Vishnu, Varuna, Indra, Agni, etc. In the Upanishads, there is only one supreme entity, Brahman the Spirit Supreme. The other gods are merely the creations or creatures of Brahman, and they recognize Brahman as the Spirit Supreme.

However, Brahman manifests himself in three great gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. In *Brahma* he manifests himself as the Creator; in *Vishnu* as the Preserver; and in *Siva* as the Destroyer. These gods are, as it were, a Hindu Trinity - one god in three forms or manifestations. Yet, although the different gods of Hinduism are often no more than different names for the one god, it would not be true to say that the average Hindu worships only one god. He doesn't. He worships three gods, the three chief gods who are combined in a trinity.

But the most popular of the Hindu gods are probably Siva and Vishnu, and the avatar of Vishnu, "Krishna".

Siva (Lord of the Dance) is a non-Aryan, non-Vedic god. His roots are in the primitive tribes of the Indus Valley Civilization. He became the "God of Life" (with phallic symbols) and the object of Bhakti or

devoted love-service. He is also recognized as "Lord of the Cosmic Dance" (often depicted as such in statuary, with a multiplicity of arms and encompassed by a circle) and "Lord of the Yoga", and develops into a personified version of the Supreme.

## **The Caste System**

While Hindu doctrine is based on the Samsara-Karma-Moksha triad, and its attitude to God on the Brahma-Vishna-Siva triad, it should also be said that its society is based on the family-village-caste triad.

Every Hindu is born into a caste - the caste of which his family is one cell. In this caste he has a certain position in society which he cannot change.

There are four main castes: *Brahmins* - the priestly caste; *Kshatriyas* - the warrior and kingly class; *Vaishyas* - the trading, merchant, professional class; and *Sudras* - the servant class. Inside these four castes there are innumerable other castes and sub-castes. Outside the castes are the *Untouchables* or Harijans; "Children of God" as Gandhi used to love to call them.

Most Hindus in India live in a village society. In the villages and within the different language areas of India, (Note: there is no national language spoken throughout India) the different castes exist side by side, but have all manner of taboo regarding one another, concerning contact, dining, intermarriage, etc., and arranged according to a strict hierarchy. Caste, therefore, breaks society up into closed segments and sanctions social inequality.

## **Influence of Tradition**

Within the caste, especially on the village level, the grip it has on the individual Hindu and the family is almost total. It not only governs the religious life in prayer and ritual, but also regulates diet, hygiene, social relations, marriage, housing, dress and employment, even down to the most meticulous detail. While then the Hindu law religion (Dharma) as such may be found in the Vedas and the other Sacred Books, it is not through these, nor through the teachings of the Holy-men that the ordinary Hindu lives out his religion, but rather through the prescriptions of his caste, a man-made "Dharma" as it were. And those prescriptions are traditional and strong. "Caste", writes K. M. Panikkar, "is a comprehensive system of life, a religion rather than a changing social order . . ." (K. M. Panikkar, "*Caste and Democracy*", p. 9. London. 1933.)

If we seek the origin and explanation of the caste system, S. Radhakrishnan (S. Radhakrishnan, *Hindu View* op. cit. Chap. IV.) would explain that originally caste referred to colour or race, and was the Hindu solution to the seemingly inevitable problems which can arise from these realities. Of the three solutions available - extermination, subjugation, or harmonization - the Hindus chose the third (or a version of the third) to deal with the problem of social conflict. Harmonization allows each racial group to develop the best in itself without impeding the progress of others.

On the racial side, caste is nothing but the affirmation of the infinite diversity of human groups. Yet, Hinduism was able to weld these different groups together to form; one people, or at least one comprehensive fabric.

## **From Caste to Custom**

Caste became custom, which discouraged indiscriminate racial amalgamation or intermarriage, but encouraged peace and harmony between all. "Caste was also the Hindu answer to forces pressing on it from outside. It was the instrument by which Hinduism civilized the different tribes it took in. On the social side, it was an attempt to regulate society with a view to actual differences and ideal unity." (*Hindu View* p.75) Different groups, with different vocations, e.g. cultural, spiritual, military, political, business, professional, and manual, make up every society. The caste system drew all these groups together to work in harmony for a common end and in a sense of unity, while maintaining the right of each group to pursue its own ends free from outside interference. "The system of caste insists that the law of social life should

not be cruel and cold competition, but harmony and co-operation." (*Hindu View* p.79)

According to the caste idea, a vocation was a *service* with a spiritual aim. The worker, through his work, was to fulfil himself. The Gita taught that one obtains perfection if one does one's duty in the proper spirit of non-attachment.

*"No work stains a man who is pure, who is in harmony, who is master of his life, whose soul is one with the soul of all. Offer all your works to God, throw off selfish bonds, and do your work. No sin can stain you . . ."*

- Bhagavad-Gita v, 7 & 10.

Undoubtedly the caste system has high ideals and many points in its favour. In its traditional structure it is still very powerful in India today. But it also has points against it: it has tended to breed a feeling of inequality, and "it has failed to make room for the high-born incompetents and the low-born talents." (*Hindu View* p.74)

Today, due to western influences, modern industrialization, mass media and democratic institutions, the caste system is undergoing profound changes. Such taboos as inter-caste marriage and untouchability are being weakened. Mahatma Gandhi, in particular, fought against the social rejection of the Untouchables and one of his "fasts to the death" succeeded in breaking the ancient custom of prohibiting them from the Hindu temples.

In the past, the caste system has relied mainly on the village and family life wherein its customs and traditions were handed down to succeeding generations. These two institutions are today undergoing a transformation. In the future they may not be able to carry on the caste traditions. However, with its remarkable resiliency, it would not be too surprising to find Hinduism come up with other supporting structures or even an alternative to caste.

### **Philosophical Hinduism**

From about the 8th century A.D. onwards, there arose in India several great theological and philosophical geniuses who set themselves the task of systematizing the vast, and often confused, mass of religious teaching accumulated up till then in Hinduism. The philosophic views or systems which they formulated are known as the "Darsanas", and are six in number: Samkhya, Yoga, Vedanta, Nyasa, Vaiseshika and Purva Miamsa. Their common aim was to lead men out of the cycle of rebirths.

The *Samkhya* system is concerned with the enumeration and classification of the elements of reality, which it ultimately reduces to two, "*purusha*" and "*prakriti*", which are both eternal. "*Purusha*" consists in Selves or Spirits, and is immobile and inactive. "*Prakriti*" represents "matter" or the potentiality of nature, the fundamental substance out of which the world evolves. But this evolution takes place only under the influence of *purusha*. There is no creation "out of nothing". Samkhya is also atheistic; not because it denies the existence of God, but rather maintains that his existence cannot be proved.

According to the Samkhya viewpoint, to be *liberated* from the bondage of the body, a person must *know* the distinction between purusha and prakriti, the Self and the Non-Self. When this knowledge is gained, the soul is no longer bound by matter and becomes a disinterested spectator of the world, and at death the bond is completely and finally dissolved.

*Yoga* is the way of achieving liberation by means of ascetical exercises of mind and body. It has its roots in ancient times, but its doctrine was particularly elaborated by Patanjali in the 4th century, A.D.

Unlike Samkhya, whose philosophical basis it uses, Yoga does not see liberation coming from knowledge alone, but also through *discipline of the mind and body*. Moreover, Yoga accepts the idea of a personal

God, not as a creator, but as an "exemplar" for those who follow this system.

The goal of Yoga is liberation, not through union with God, but through *isolation of the spirit* which has three grades: concentration (*Dharana*), meditation (*Dhyana*), and contemplation (*Samadhi*).

### **Extracts from Sacred Hindu Scriptures**

*At that time there was neither non-existence nor existence; neither the worlds nor the sky, nor anything that is beyond. What covered everything, and where, and for whose enjoyment? Was there water, unfathomable and deep? Death was not there, nor immortality; no knowing of night or day. That One Thing breathed without air, by its own strength; apart from it, nothing existed. Darkness there was, wrapped in yet more darkness; undistinguished, all this was one water; the incipient lay covered by void. That One Thing became creative by the power of its own contemplation. There came upon it, at first, desire which was the prime seed of the mind, and men of vision, searching in their heart with their intellect, found the link to the existent in the non-existent. . . . There were begetters, there were mighty forces, free action here and energy up yonder. . . . The gods are later than this creative activity; who know, then, from where this came into being? . . . Where this creation came from, whether one supported it or not, He who was supervising it from the highest heaven, He indeed knows; or He knows not!*

- Rig-Veda X, 129. (Translation from the "World's Great Religions". Life, p. 31.)

### **Isa Upanishad**

*Behold the universe in the glory of God: and all that lives and moves on earth. Leaving the transient, find joy in the Eternal. . . . The Spirit, without moving, is swifter than the mind; the senses cannot reach him: He is ever beyond them. . . . To the ocean of his being, the spirit of life leads the streams of action. He moves, and he moves not. He is far, and he is near. He is within all, and he is outside all. Who sees all beings in his own Self, and his own Self in all beings, loses all fear. When a sage sees this great Unity and his Self has become all beings, what delusion and what sorrow can ever be near him?*

*The Spirit is the supreme seer and thinker, immanent and transcendent. . . . He who knows both the transcendent and the immanent, with the immanent overcomes death and with the transcendent reaches immortality . . .*

### **On Transmigration**

*Action, which springs from the mind, from speech, and from the body, produces either good or evil results; by action are caused the various conditions of men, the highest, the middling, and the lowest. Know that the mind is the instigator here below, even to that action which is connected with the body, and which is of three kinds, . . . evil verbal action .*

*. . . wicked bodily action . . . sinful mental action. A man obtains the result of a good or evil mental act in his mind, that of a verbal act in his speech, that of a bodily act in his body. In consequence of many sinful acts committed with his body, a man becomes in the next birth something inanimate, in consequence of sins committed by speech, a bird, or a beast, and in consequence of mental sins he is re-born in a low caste.*

- Laws of Manu 12, 3-9, 11. (Translation by G. Buhler, "*The Laws of Manu*". Clarendon Press. Oxford. 1886.)

## **Yoga**

*Do your work in the peace of Yoga and, free from selfish desires, be not moved in success or in failure. Yoga is evenness of mind - a peace that is ever the same. For work done for a reward is much lower than work done in the Yoga of wisdom. Seek salvation in the wisdom of reason. How poor those who work for a reward! In this wisdom a man goes beyond what is well done and what is not well done. Go you therefore to wisdom: Yoga is wisdom in work. Seers in union with wisdom forsake the rewards of their work, and free from the bonds of birth they go to the abode of salvation: When your mind leaves behind its dark forest of delusion, you shall go beyond the scriptures of times past and still to come. When your mind, that may be wavering in the contradictions of many scriptures, shall rest unshaken in divine contemplation, then the goal of Yoga is yours.*

*Yoga is a harmony. . . . A harmony in eating and resting, in sleeping and keeping awake: a perfection in whatever one does. This is the Yoga that gives peace from all pain.*

- Bhagavad Gita II, 48-53; VI, 16-17.

## **HINDUISM AND OTHER RELIGIONS**

Over its long history, Hinduism has also come into contact with many other religions, and one way or another it has been able to encounter, adapt and absorb into itself much that is found in them, and yet still remain itself.

We have already noted that the very origins of Hinduism were in the Aryan (Vedic) encounter with the Dravidian inhabitants of the Indus Valley. >From the Dravidians, certain deities, notably Siva, and certain forms of worship, e.g. "*puja*" the most common form of religious worship in India today, were introduced and found a permanent place in Hinduism.

### **Jainism**

In the 6th century B.C. Hinduism came into contact with Jainism, a young religion founded by Parsva, a North Indian of the Kshatriya caste, and promoted by Vard-hamma, who called himself "Jaina".

The characteristics and doctrines of the Jains, or devotees of Jaina, were non-Vedic: they denied the Supreme Being; they held the world is eternal; they believed that the aim of the soul is to obtain bliss (*Jiva*) through self-discipline or asceticism; and they took reverence for organic life to the extreme, forbidding the slaughter of animals whether for sacrifice or for food.

It was the influence of Jainism which begot in Hinduism the modern practice of non-violence (*ahimsa*) or harmlessness, so well developed and practised by Gandhi in his struggle with Britain for the independence of India. It is continued even today in India by Gandhi's disciple, Vinoba.

## **Buddhism**

About the same time, another Kshatriya, Gautama Siddhartha, later to be known as Buddha or "The Enlightened One", found his new way to truth and liberation which he called the "Middle Path". Freedom from rebirth, or as he put it, Enlightenment (*Nirvana*), was to be reached by avoiding extremes. He proposed a Noble Eightfold Path - salvation through right conduct - with no place for sacrifices and little esteem for the Upanishadic "Way of Knowledge". Nevertheless, although this new religious offshoot of Hinduism was tantamount to heresy, in so far as it was non-Vedic, it had a tremendous influence on Hinduism. In fact, Hinduism absorbed so much of Buddhism into itself - even to the extent of making Buddha an "avatar" - that Buddhism as a separate religion in India is extremely weak.

## **Islam**

Much later, in the 7th and 8th centuries after Christ, Hinduism encountered another new religion, Islam (or Mohammedanism). But this time the other religion had its origin outside India.

Within a century after the Prophet Mohammed's death (+632 A.D.), Hinduism and India were being influenced by his new, vigorous and proselytizing religion, first militarily, then culturally and religiously.

The Hindus allowed Islam to make converts and to build mosques. They even adopted in many places "Purdah", the Mohammedan custom of veiling women.

In the 15th century an attempt was made to synthesize the two religions; another attempt was made to compromise. Nanak, the founder of the Sikhs, and Kahir, a Moslem or Mohammedan, led the most notable attempts to bridge the gulf between Islam and Hinduism, and their advocacy of "Bhakti" - the Way of Devotion to reach the Supreme - had a lasting effect.

Unfortunately, when the time came in this 20th century for India to obtain her independence from Britain, Hindus and Moslem Mohammedans were not able to subdue their differences and wave after wave of bitter rioting, fighting and slaughter ravaged the angry foes. Gandhi, the Father of Modern India, tried with all his might to reconcile the two religious parties and to establish a united India. But the hatred, bitterness and antagonisms were too great, even for the Mahatma, and when the time for Independence came the Hindus (predominantly) formed India, and the Islamic Mohammedans (predominantly) formed Pakistan. But even yet their differences have not been settled and occasional violence breaks out between the two religious groups.

## **Christianity**

According to a rather tenuous but stoutly maintained tradition, the first contact between Hinduism and Christianity came in the 1st century of the Christian era. It is argued quite strongly by some scholars that the Apostles Thomas and Bartholomew preached the Gospel in India.

With more historical certainty, it is known that about the 5th century the Syrian Church (that is that part of the universal Catholic Church based in Syria) brought a great Christian influence to India, particularly to Kerala and the Malabar Coast. (Unfortunately, that source was soon corrupted by the outbreak of the Monophysite and Nestorian heresies.) From the 5th to 15th centuries this Syro-Malabar Church maintained its faith in isolation and become in that area of India almost a separate caste. (This fundamentally Catholic Branch of the Universal Church was totally isolated from the successor of Peter in Rome and its nearest Christian neighbours were the Nestorians in Persia, then rarely the Monophysites in Syria, and only occasionally the Orthodox in Greece.) However, it did integrate its social customs to a great extent with those of Hinduism. So while religiously these Christians remained distinct, socially they were one with their Hindu neighbours. Unfortunately, for many centuries they lacked a missionary zeal,

which only in recent years has come to life.

### **Francis Xavier**

In the 16th century, Hinduism encountered a new brand of Christianity - that of the Latin rite of the Catholic Church of the Counter Reformation, brought by the Portuguese missionaries and (Saint) Francis Xavier. This period has almost a fabled existence in the annals of Christian missionary expansion, and its successes were, from the Christian point of view, extraordinary. Its influence persists even to this day. But the Church which it introduced into India was largely Western, and foreign; and to that extent it never fully entered into the mainstream of Indian life or reached the soul of the Indian people.

To Xavier, all Hindus, especially the Brahmin caste, were, or appeared to be, "devil-worshippers". This attitude closed the hearts and minds of many Hindus to the Church, if not to the Gospel.

In 1927, Gandhi formulated his attitude to Christ and Christianity thus: "If then I had to face only the Sermon on the Mount and my own interpretation of it, I should not hesitate to say, 'Oh, yes, I am a Christian.' . . . But negatively I can tell you that much of what passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount. And please mark my words. I am not speaking at the present moment of the Christian conduct. I am speaking of the Christian belief, of Christianity as it is understood in the West." (Louis Fischer, "*Gandhi - His Life and Message for the World*", p. 131. Signet Key Books. N.Y. 1954.) Perhaps the attitude of missionaries gave him his basis for such a statement.

### **Roberto Di Nobili**

Although what we would call today the rather intolerant, if not misinformed, attitude of Xavier was common at that time, it would be a major omission not to mention Xavier's fellow Jesuit, Roberto di Nobili. The more tolerant and humane approach of this Italian missionary of the 17th century was first to learn the local language (something which Xavier had never done to any great extent) and Sanskrit (the most important language for religious culture in India), and to make a deep study of the Hindu religion; secondly, he himself became a "sannyasi", a type of "holy man" whom the Hindus consider to have reached the highest stage of the spiritual life and to be above caste. By this approach di Nobili gained entrance to the Hindu heart and even succeeded in winning many Brahmins to accept the Christian faith; a most astonishing achievement at that time.

However, opposition from his fellow missionaries and the suppression of the Jesuits frustrated these new methods of evangelization and the former safer ones were soon re-adopted.

But di Nobili's approach was not entirely forgotten. In modern times there have been notable attempts made to resurrect it. Fathers Dandoy and Johanns, scholars of renown, imitated the great Italian missionary in mastering Sanskrit and the local language, and in seeking a deep understanding of the Hindu scriptures. They even went further and attempted to relate the Vedanta to Catholic philosophy. Others, like Raymond Panikkar and Father Dechanet, continue the task of seeking all that is good and truthful in Hinduism and searching for a meeting-place for Hindu-Christian dialogue.

### **The True Meeting Place**

Others of this 20th century have imitated di Nobili's second step. Fathers Monchanin and le Saux, French missionaries, established a Christian monastery (Ashram) not far from the scene of di Nobili's apostolate and lived the life of the "sannyasi" in the most sincere poverty and simplicity, going barefoot and adapting themselves to the Hindu customs of food and behaviour. Through their prayer and study they concluded that the true meeting-place between Christianity and Hinduism must be in *contemplation*, not merely in thought or scholarship, though these were a necessary prelude and accompaniment.

The aims and ideals of these two men is today being continued at the Kurisalama Ashram, in Kerala, by Fathers Francis Mahieu and Bede Griffiths. In this Ashram the liturgy is that of the ancient Syrian Church, which is more akin to the soul of the people, and the monks have tried to identify themselves as far as

possible with their Indian neighbours in mode and standard of living, in customs and in thinking. Their aim is to make clear to the Hindus (and others) that Christianity has not come to India to impose a Western religion on them, but "to show them that their religion finds its true fulfilment in Christ. Christ has become incarnate in the East, not as a western teacher come to destroy what they have learned from tradition, but . . . as the fulfilment of all their hopes and desires. (Bede Griffiths, "*Christian Ashram*", p. 75. Darton, Longman and Todd. 1966.)

## Vatican II

These methods of evangelization are certainly in harmony with the Second Vatican Council's "*Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*":

*"The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims and must ever proclaim Christ, 'the way, the truth, and the life' in whom men find the fullness of religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.*

*"The Church therefore has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture." ("*Documents of Vatican II*", Ed. W. Abbott. G. Chapman. 1966, pp. 662-663.)*

Father Raymond Panikkar writing on the Hindu-Christian dialogue states: "The deep encounter between Hinduism and Christianity cannot take place either on the profane or secular level of a merely cultural relationship. The real encounter can only take place in Christ, because only in Christ do they meet." (R. Panikkar, "*The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*", pp. 6 and 9. Darton, Longman and Todd. 1964.)

## A Common Quest

Today, as Christian and Hindu try to understand one another and to enter into dialogue, each party must above all seek in the other what is good and true and even common, and use their discoveries to bring them ever closer to one another, in Christ, in their quest for union with God.

But it is not only Christians who have made moves towards understanding and dialogue. Many Hindus have also been active. In fact, some of the greatest Hindu scholars and saints of the past 200 years have been seeking an understanding and tolerance between Hinduism and the other great religions.

Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), a brilliant Bengali of Hindu-Moslem culture and deep Christian learning, formed a Hindu sect known as the "Brahmo-Samaj" or "Society of Believers in One Self-Existent Deity". He wanted it to be an institution where Hindus, Moslems, Christians, Parsees and others could meet in common prayer on the basis of belief in the unity of God.

After Roy's death his sect continued on in small numbers (c. 100,000) but exercised a quite disproportionate influence. Some of the most notable figures of modern Hinduism belonged to it, including the famous Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Tagore, in interpreting Hindu ideas, did so under the influence of Christian theology, yet remaining always a Hindu. The same may be said of Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), another famous Hindu scholar.

Others, who through the reading of the New Testament and various Christian influences, helped the cause of mutual religious respect and understanding were Ramakrishna Parahansa (1836-1886) and his disciple, Narendranath Vivekananda (1863-1902), who founded the Ramakrishna Mission which has done so much

good work among the sick and poor in India.

## **Influence of Gandhi**

Of course, one cannot overlook Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) who had imbued so much of the Christian spirit and teaching, especially that of the Sermon on the Mount, that he would call himself a Christian. Though like his close friend, Tagore, he always remained a true Hindu. He advocated tolerance and understanding between all religions, based on human freedom and love. Of all Hindus who have striven to bring Christianity and Hinduism closer together, it would seem that Gandhi, in his firm but gentle way, has done the most.

### **Extracts from some Modern Hindu Writers**

#### **Poem of Death**

*In front stretches the ocean of Peace.  
O Helmsman, sail out to the open sea.  
You will be my eternal companion -  
Take, O take me in your arms.  
The Pole-star will shine  
Lighting the path to Eternity.  
O Lord of Deliverance.  
Your forgiveness, your mercy  
Shall be my everlasting sustenance  
On my journey to the shores of Eternity.  
May the bonds of earth dissolve,  
The mighty Universe take me to her arms,  
And I come to know fearlessly  
The Great Unknown.*

- Rabindranath Tagore. (From the "*Wings of Death*", translated by Aurobind-Bose. John Murray. London. 1960.)

#### **Love and Respect**

*The need of the moment is not one religion but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of different religions. . . . the struggle must for the moment be transferred to a change of heart among the Hindus and the Moslems. Before they dare think of freedom they must be brave enough to love one another, to tolerate one another's religion, even prejudices and superstitions, and to trust one another. This requires faith in oneself. And in faith in oneself is faith in God. If we have that faith we shall cease to fear one another.*

- Mahatma Gandhi. (Louis Fischer, "*Gandhi*" op. cit., p. 77.)

#### **Hindu Attitude to Religion**

*While fixed intellectual beliefs mark off one religion from another, Hinduism sets itself no such limits. Intellect is subordinated to intuition, dogma to experience, outer expression to inward realization. Religion is not the acceptance of academic abstractions or the celebration of ceremonies, but a kind of life or experience. It is insight into the nature of reality (*darsana*), or experience of reality (*anubhava*). This experience is not an emotional thrill, or a subjective fancy, but is the response of the whole personality, the integrated self to the central reality. Religion is a specific attitude of the Self, itself and no other, though it is mixed generally with intellectual views, aesthetic forms and moral valuations.*

## **Conclusion**

If, as our final word on this great world religion, we should try to sum up its essence and aspirations in a few sentences, perhaps we could do no better than to quote the words of Vatican II on Hinduism, as they are found in the "*Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*":

*"Thus in Hinduism men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an unspent fruitfulness of myths and through searching philosophical enquiry. They seek release from the anguish of our condition through ascetical practices or deep meditation or a loving, trusting flight towards God." Par. 2. ("*Documents of Vatican II*", op. cit., pp. 661-662.)*

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