

# Hinduism

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# Introduction

Hinduism is one of the world's most ancient religions, developing over many centuries in India. The term Hinduism derives from the name of the ancient river Sindhu in India. Just like the river, Hinduism is vast, fluid and versatile. There is not just one founder, but thousands throughout the ages who continually refresh the message of spirituality to meet contemporary needs. It has over 828 million adherents which is about 13% of the world's population.

The resources contained in the list of subjects to the right are a basic introduction to the facts and beliefs of Hinduism. They are a portal or window into the world the Hindu religion and by following the websites and bibliographies, an enquirer may discover more and more about this faith.

The six units are based on the QCA non-statutory framework for Religious Education and the Areas of Enquiry. They provide not only a comprehensive guide to the factual and belief structures of Hinduism but also address the issues that Hinduism encounters as it engages with the 21st century.

## About the Author

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## Beliefs, Teachings, Wisdom, Authority

Interpreting teachings, sources, authorities and ways of life in order to understand religions and beliefs;

Understanding and responding critically to beliefs and attitudes.

### Basic Beliefs

Hindus believe that the underpinning to this world is essentially the spirit defined as Brahman. Hindus believe that this spirit manifests itself as the universe and becomes more visible as living things. The most transparent manifestation of the spirit is men and women. Our essential nature as the spirit is defined as Atman. Religion or Dharma in the Hindu tradition is an enterprise searching for that which holds everything together. Dharma is not a search for God but a search for unity in diversity and that is discovered as the spirit. The idea of ahimsa or the principle of non-violence springs up naturally through this Hindu discovery of unity in diversity because it the same spirit that manifests itself as people and other living things, hence hurting others amounts to hurting ourselves. That is forbidden by the injunction of ahimsa. Hindus also believe in samsara or reincarnation, the cycle of rebirth. This cycle only ends when an individual discovers his or her essential nature as the spirit. This is called moksha, literally meaning destruction of delusion about our true nature. Another key belief inextricably linked to the theory of reincarnation is the law of karma which is the law of causation on personal terms. It simply states that what people set into motion has a habit of catching up with them. People have to bear the consequences of what they do if not in this life then in the next life.

Spiritual knowledge was acquired through meditation. Those individuals who succeeded and came face to face with spiritual truths were called rishis (a Sanskrit term derived from the root 'rish' meaning to see or experience). For perhaps a few thousand years these teachings were passed on orally. This material was written down about three thousand years ago and became the scriptures of authority of the Hindus. These texts are classed as shrutis, or books of spiritual knowledge and are called the Vedas from the root Vid which means to know.

Dharma is practised by manifesting the divinity that lies within through work (karma), worship (bhakti), psychic control (yoga) or knowledge (jnana). This has to be achieved by mastering nature both internal and external. Living righteously, going to temples, worshipping or carrying out rituals, all such activities are seen as valid activities for manifesting the divine in daily life.

The Rig Veda declares: Ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti. "The same ultimate perceived and approached differently by different prophets." This is a declaration of pluralism. It is not a statement of showing respect for other religions but accepting that there can be many ways of perceiving and manifesting spirituality. Mature Hinduism is at ease with teachings of other religions both theistic as well as non-theistic. It also acknowledges that spiritual progress can be made in a non-religious mode through other human pursuits like arts and sciences.

Almost all Hindu movements embrace the idea of pluralism. Different sectarian movements are seen as different pathways promoted by different spiritual figureheads for making spiritual progress. These movements co-exist in a spirit of harmony. The three broad sectarian movements are Vaishnavites, those who relate to the idea of God as Vishnu or his incarnations Rama and Krishna. Shaivites who think of God-head as Shiva and Shaktas, those Hindus who believe in the ultimate reality as mother goddess called Shakti.

Spirituality as underpinning to everything including ourselves is promoted mainly in a theistic mode. Hence building relationship with God is seen as the central aim of the Hindu religion. This relationship is mostly developed through work (karma) and worship (puja). Selfless work or living for the benefit of others in the family and the rest of society becomes a way of acknowledging and manifesting the divinity within all. Devotion to a personal God is seen as a powerful tool for relating to the spirit within. Family values fostered through the spirit of living for others produces cohesion in families and societies. Religious pluralism holds the key to fostering genuine harmony between people of different or no-faith backgrounds.

## Sources of Authority

The authority of the Hindu religion lies with numerous prophets and saints over the ages. These personalities claim first-hand experience of God or the Spirit. The generic title given to these personalities is rishis (derived from the Sanskrit word drish which means to see).

God vision or spiritual experience is the key criterion for becoming a prophet of Hinduism. Authority is not achieved through book learning or intellectual acumen, but only through first-hand experience (Svanubhuti) of God. This distinctive feature of Hinduism allows teaching space to evolve. The message of spirituality can be revived and refreshed in all ages through contemporary personalities. Religious prescriptions are therefore open to revision. Initially the wisdom these enlightened souls offered was passed on orally from one generation to another before being written down. This material forms the basis of scriptures of authority called the Vedas (derived from the Sanskrit word Vid which means to know) the books of knowledge. Even though these texts are excellent depositories of spiritual knowledge they are humble in their claims. One of the key verses declares, 'None of these scriptures are capable of capturing the spirit.' There are many modern proponents of Hinduism. At the head of each sectarian movement we hope to find an enlightened personality. Some ancient personalities like Rama or Krishna are difficult to date historically but then Hinduism also has a host of contemporary personalities.

Spiritual teachers are known as Swamis or Gurus. Swami literally means one who has mastered himself thereby gaining spiritual knowledge. He is usually a monk. Guru means one who has the power to remove ignorance. Hindus have the freedom to choose a spiritual guide for themselves. The guide may be ancient or modern, someone who may or may not be the head of a sectarian movement.

Contemporary Gurus or Swamis may impart their knowledge through darshan meaning personal meetings, or through discourses. Spiritual aspirants are advised to follow the dictum of: pranam – exhibiting a reverential attitude towards the teacher, prashna, meaning inquiring through questions, and seva – looking after the teacher. Some teachers are said to come with immense power. They are called jagatguru meaning world teacher. They have the power of infusing spirituality not only in a sectarian setting but on a national or an international scale.

Individuals are given the choice of evaluating who they consider to be an authoritative figure and fit to guide them. Hindu religion recognises that spiritual progress takes place in stages. There is room from the crudest to the most sophisticated approach for spiritual growth. To an extent the individual's own stage of spiritual growth is revealed by the guru or sectarian movement he or

she relates to. Any one approach is not seen as better than another because all these approaches cater for different needs in a spiritually diverse society.

## Founders and Exemplars

The founders of Hinduism are given the generic title of rishis or 'seers' of God. Spiritual knowledge comes from the spiritual experiences of these rishis. Hundreds of such seers, ancient and modern, have contributed towards reviving and refreshing the message of spirituality throughout the ages. These teachings are contained in scriptures called the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. Many ancient rishis chose not to reveal their identity, and hid behind the generic title of Vyasa, meaning 'compiler', to allow their teachings to merge naturally with existing teachings.

Hinduism continues to produce spiritual giants in contemporary times. In the last two centuries we have:

Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) the personification of Pluralism. He held that religions are not contradictory but complementary and all of them lead to the same goal. He said: "As many faiths, so many paths."

Swami Vivekananda (1886-1902) represents the role of rationality in religion. "Religion cannot be a matter of belief; it has to be a matter of first hand experience." He travelled extensively in the West. He represents the contemporary, comprehensive and comprehensible face of Hinduism.

Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) focused on discovering God within as our essential Self. His central investigation is into the question 'Who am I?' He recommends renunciation and nonattachment.

Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952) was a mystic of modern times and author of the famous text, *Autobiography of a Yogi*.

Anandamayi Ma (1896-1982) was the modern female proponent of Hinduism. As a child she showed early signs of divinity that were observed by her parents and friends. As her reputation grew, she travelled extensively all over India encouraging her devotees to serve others without complaining. She believed that all religions joined into the same path: the realisation of the Supreme.

All of these religious figures promote the message of striving for higher spiritual ideals over secular living. People must live in the world without becoming materialistic. Devoting their lives for making spiritual progress, and eventually experiencing God for themselves, is the aim of human life. Truly spiritual living is service to humanity, and is the basis of morality.

These recent figures show by example how to live in the world without becoming materialistic, and how to devote lives to spiritual progress. For example, Sri Ramakrishna, although a man of God realisation, was married. He treated his wife as the Mother Goddess, and showed every householder the ideal relationship between a husband and wife.

All of these personalities not only use faith to provide meaning to their lives, but insist on first-hand experience of God. This is what makes them wonderful sources of inspiration and spiritual knowledge. Faith is only the start of a religious journey; it is first-hand realisation that is its conclusion. 'Stop not till the goal is reached,' remarked Swami Vivekananda. Moral living is the discipline required to succeed in this journey.

Initially these personalities talk of a stirring within which forced them to look for deeper insight into reality. Some were helped by other enlightened souls; some became their own teachers, some talked about the grace of God or placed greater emphasis on personal effort.

The generic title given to people with authority in Hinduism is Rishi (from the Sanskrit *rishi* meaning one who sees or experiences God). Rishis can be ancient or modern, man or woman, young or old. Many of these personalities chose to remain anonymous and hid behind a generic name Vyasa or 'compiler'. Avatar (literally meaning one who descends) is a title reserved for those personalities who are considered to be incarnation of God on earth. The most famous ancient avatars are Rama, Krishna and Buddha. Most sectarian movements will claim that the head of their movement to be an Avatar. Guru (meaning one who removes ignorance) is a title reserved for spiritual teacher. Swami is the title given to a monk who can also act as a teacher. Acharya is a title reserved for those Gurus who teach by example.

There is a vast array of colourful stories surrounding ancient rishis and avatars. With every telling there will be a tendency for some parts to be added and some parts to be taken out to take into account the changing needs of society. There will be a tendency for exaggerations and supernatural explanations to become incorporated in the narrative. Hinduism can draw on the teachings of modern rishis where properly documented material is available.

## **Visions, Teaching, Swamis & Gurus**

Hinduism has always recognised the contextual element in religious teachings. It recognises that every spiritual personality will offer teachings that are most suited to the needs of a society at that period in history. Hence the teachings of every prophet will reflect a contextual dimension. Recognising the contextual elements in every religious teaching is essential if we wish to reconcile different religious world-views.

Each proponent of religion will invoke and infuse spiritual teaching that fits the need of that society. The ethical and moral dimension of their teachings will necessarily reflect this need and limitation.

Though the teachings and lifestyles of ancient prophets may not necessarily be suited to the needs of modern humans, they are expressions of spiritual aspirations of different ages.

These ancient and modern figures are wonderful role models for the rest of society. They show the need to strive for higher aspirations and experience God personally. A recent day example is Ramana Maharshi. (1879-1950). He epitomised humility and peace, and experienced God as his essential nature. He urged people to seek God through self-enquiry.

Swami Ramdas who viewed God as a personality, Rama, accepted that whatever happened to him, good or bad, was the will of Rama, and taught that people must become an instrument in the hands of God, thereby eliminating the ego. Such God-realised personalities tell people how to make spiritual progress while living in the midst of materialism. They tell humans to live with a spirit of detachment from the world, treating everything as their own but knowing in their hearts that in reality it is all transient. The only reality is God.

Recent figures such as Swami Ramdas (1884-1963) are living example of how faith can destroy the ego, and how God realisation is possible.

Ramakrishna (1836-1886) is another wonderful example of a proponent of Hinduism. He taught that faith or love in God is not something that has to be cultivated; it springs up naturally when one overcomes worldly desires.

## **Ways of Living**

Exploring the impact of religions and beliefs on how people live their lives;

Understanding and responding critically to beliefs and attitudes.

### **Guidance for Life**

Belief in God is considered to be a wonderful starting point in the spiritual journey. Hindu philosophy insists that belief is a mere starting point and should not be mistaken for the destination. Accept the teachings of the scriptures (shruti); test and translate them in your lives (yukti); and this is expected to culminate in first-hand experience of God – swanubhuti.

Many Hindus like to think of God as a super personality. Ingrained in the Hindu psyche is the recognition that as all individuals are different, the way in which each person perceives God will necessarily be different. People impose their own human limitations on this Ultimate Reality so that they can more easily relate to Him. This is the reason for the copious images of God in Hinduism. It is not a polytheistic religion that believes in many almighty Gods, but a pluralistic religion that recognises that the same one Ultimate can be viewed in a variety of different ways.

Recognition that all religions are equally valid pathways to the same Ultimate is one Hindu answer to many of the tensions in the world today. Pluralism is not relativism; it does not suggest that there are plural ultimates, but plural ways to the same Ultimate. God is infinite, and there are an infinite number of ways to reach God.

It may seem as if pluralism is just a way of appeasing all faiths to keep the peace without actually being true. However, Hindus point to a modern-day example to show the validity of different religions: Ramakrishna was able to experience God through a variety of ways in Hinduism, but also found God through other religions such as Christianity and Islam. For him, God-realisation was not the monopoly of any particular faith. He promoted the universality of spirituality, and individuality in a seeker's approach to God.

## **Studying & Interpreting the Scriptures**

The Vedas are the scriptures of authority in Hinduism. The word Veda is derived from the Sanskrit term Vid which means to know. Vedas are books of spiritual knowledge. They contain the utterances of the seers of Hinduism called Rishis who experienced spiritual truths and expressed them as the Vedas. The end portion of the Vedas contains the Upanishads which are the gems of Hindu philosophy. There are eleven main Upanishads. They offer a variety of ideas relating to spirituality. They are poetic expressions about the nature of reality as the spirit (Brahman); the essential nature as the spirit (Atman) and discuss the relationship between Atman and Brahman.

The Bhagavad Gita literally means 'song of the divine', and is a synthesis of the Upanishadic teachings. It reconciles a variety of ideas expressed in different Upanishads and offers the prescription of how to bring religion into our daily lives. It also incorporates the idea of pluralism. It accepts that spiritual progress can be made in a variety of different modes.

Sanskrit (literally meaning sophisticated) is considered to be the mother of many Indo European languages. It is the language of the scriptures of Hinduism. Many hymns found in the early portion of the Vedas called Samhitas are recited at religious ceremonies like worship, rites of passage, or at the time of celebrating festivals.

Historicity of texts. The Vedas were passed on as an oral tradition for perhaps a thousand years before being written down in ancient Sanskrit in around 1000BC.

Hinduism is a living evolving religion; the teachings of modern seers are seen as being as valid as the teachings of the ancient texts. In Hinduism therefore there is less of a fixation on establishing the historicity of some of these texts.

Hinduism has produced spiritual giants in all ages. The prescription they offer for religious living displaces earlier books of codes of conduct. For example the Manusmriti is not used in any Hindu home while the teaching of more recent proponents of Hinduism, such as the Shiksapatri used by the devotees of the Swaminarayan movement, become texts of authority for most Hindus.

The Bhagavad Gita can be taken as an allegory of the human condition. Everyone is Arjuna, faced with the dilemma of discriminating between what is right and wrong. The mind is the battlefield, riddled with potential conflict and uncertainty. Only when people recognise their true self as divine, does this confusion and doubt fall away.

It is not just the Bhagavad Gita that contains allegories and metaphors, but all religious texts. Since ancient times, it has been recognised that a greater depth of understanding can be reached by using figurative language. Its analysis gives the individual a sense of discovery and realisation of incredibly potent and subtle teachings.

Philosophic vs theological interpretation of texts: Hinduism is open to challenges of rationality, so philosophic interpretations are given higher validity. As Shankara, a figure of authority in Hinduism, pointed out, people have to test the teachings of shruti – meaning theological texts, by yukti, meaning rational interpretation, and only accept them if they are borne out by swanubhuti – first-hand personal experience.

## **Life's Journey**

Hindus believe that people are essentially spiritual beings caught on a material journey. The journey ends when they re-discover our essential nature as one with God. This is called moksha (meaning the end of delusion) Hindus believe in reincarnation (samsara). Death is viewed as a comma rather than a full stop. Every activity and effort people have made in this journey will

bear fruit in this or their next life. Hindus see reincarnation as a fairer system and in a unique manner it gives direction in life and comfort in death.

Rites of passage are called samskaras and mark entry into different stages of life. Hindus believe there are sixteen samskaras but today only a few are carried out. A sacred fire called a havan is lit at most of the ceremonials. Worship is carried out through fire which is called the eternal witness to the ritual.

The namakarana or naming ceremony is one of the first rites of passage performed for a child. The paternal aunt has the privilege of choosing a name starting with a letter chosen from an astrological chart. The selected name is then whispered into the child's ear or written in honey on the child's tongue.

The upanayana or sacred thread ceremony marks a child's entry into student life. It involves investing the child with a sacred thread which consists of three strands, representing the three responsibilities he must now bear towards his parents, his teachers and to God. The child is now committed to study and acquiring life skills. He must learn to show respect for his teachers and parents and lead a celibate lifestyle during these formative years.

The vivah or marriage ceremony takes place when the person has completed his studies and begins earning money and is ready to start a family. One of the most important parts of the marriage ceremony is the bride and groom taking seven steps together, called saptapadi. Each step symbolises an aspiration for married life. They include health, wealth, happiness, progeny and lifelong friendship. Marriage vows require the couple to promise to look after each other and their family.

The antima kriya is the final rite or funeral ceremony which takes place after the person has passed away. Hindus believe the body is just an outer garment which has to be discarded for a new body. There is therefore no fixation on the body hence it is not preserved but cremated. Hymns from the sacred text the Bhagavad Gita which talk of the immortality of the Self are recited to comfort grieving relatives.

Indic religions including Hinduism view death in a different manner from atheists or people of Abrahamic faiths. Hinduism does not agree with the atheists that people have only one life, they do not agree with the people of Abrahamic religions that they have only two lives, one on earth and a second in heaven. They have lived many lives before and bring with them mental impressions of their past lives in their subconscious. This shows up as their character in the present life. In a way this system is fairer because it offers measured rewards for measured work.

Rites of passage allow a focused lifestyle because it gives clear marking of entry into different stages of life. Thus a more structured approach to spiritual progress can be put into place.

The word dharma which defines Hinduism is derived from the Sanskrit root dhara which literally means that which holds everything together. Dharma becomes a search for unity that manifests itself as the diversity we experience. Dharma is put into practice by harnessing nature in order to reveal this underpinning. This esoteric definition of dharma is very close to the way science defines itself. Science too is looking for unity in diversity. It looks for patterns in nature and then offers mental models or hypotheses that can explain these patterns. This increases its power of predictability on how things behave allowing us to harness nature for our benefit. Searching for an economic explanation of the world we live in is the common goal of dharma and science.

The role of Belief: Belief is considered to be a good starting point for a spiritual journey but cannot be its destination. Science progresses using a belief system or a hypothesis and continues to evolve by checking these against experience.

Hinduism views the claims of prophets and the sacred writings as a framework upon which the individual can start his 'experiment' to prove the existence of God. Swanubhuti, meaning first-hand experience of God, is considered to be the only way to validate the truth claims of religion.

## **Holy Days and Celebrations**

Celebrations take place to mark historic or mythological events. Some are seasonal and some are meant to enhance human relationships.

Diwali is the most popular Hindu festival and occurs at the start of winter. It celebrates the return of Rama to his kingdom after fourteen years in exile. On the night of his return, there was no moonlight, so the people of the kingdom lit lots of small lamps to welcome him back. This is why Diwali is called the 'festival of lights'. Symbolically this implies moving from darkness to light or from ignorance to knowledge. People light lots of small lamps around the home. A worship ceremony dedicated to the Goddess of wealth, Lakshmi, may be carried out in the home with the family. Money is given to charity, and gifts are exchanged, followed by a lavish feast. This is also a time when business people carry out a ritual called Chopra Pujan or 'worshipping the books' as a way of paying respect to their trade. This is the time of year to inculcate wealth and auspiciousness into our daily lives.

Holi is another popular festival. It heralds the arrival of spring. The narrative that goes with this festival is that on this day, Vishnu saved a child devotee called Prahlad from being burnt alive by an evil demoness called Holika. This is where the word Holi comes from. Traditionally a bonfire is lit in order to remember this event, and foodstuffs such as grains, coconuts and dates are offered to the fire. Children especially are taken to the bonfire to receive the blessings of Vishnu, in the same way that Prahlad did. Holi celebrates the arrival of spring. People throw coloured powder and water at each other to celebrate the arrival of colour on the landscape.

Navaratri is also a major Hindu festival which takes place over nine nights. According to mythology the Mother Goddess fought an evil demon for nine nights, and finally claimed victory on the tenth day, called Vijaya Dashami. People gather together for folk dances over these nine days, and a special worship is performed on the tenth day. Fruit and cooked food are offered to the Mother Goddess and then distributed and shared by all as a way of receiving her blessings. Many people carry out a fast during Navaratri. It is a time to celebrate the victory of good over evil, and is a time to inculcate strength, or Shakti. Strength is a quality particularly associated with the Mother Goddess.

Festivals act to remind individuals of higher, spiritual ideals. They give people the opportunity to perform good deeds such as donating to charity and exercise disciplines such as fasting. They also give the individual the chance to meet members of their family and the community, promoting a shared sense of identity.

## Ways of Expressing Meaning

Appreciating that individuals and cultures express their beliefs and values through many different forms.

### Stories of Faith

The three most important stories in the Hindu tradition are the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Bhagavat purana. The first two are classed as itihās, meaning 'history', the implication being that both these stories have historic bases. However, it is recognised that over time, some addition and subtraction to the narrative may have occurred. It is also recognised that some exaggerations would have crept into the narrative. The third story is classed as a purana meaning a legendary tale.

The Ramayana is considered sacred because it revolves around the life of the great Hindu personality Rama, who the Hindus revere as an incarnation of God on earth, an avatar. Rama represents idealism. Rama lived for higher values rather than property and possession. The story of his life has inspired millions of Hindus. The story travelled far into South East Asia where it continues to be revered by many Hindus as well as non-Hindus.

The Mahabharata is an epic with another sacred Hindu personality, Krishna, also an incarnation of God. He helped the righteous, the Pandavas, to defeat their unrighteous cousins called the Kauravas. However, it is more than a simple story of good over evil. Krishna brought religious principles into the public eye. He showed how these higher ideals can be achieved in people's daily lives. He was the first personality to recognise the role of pluralism in the way one perceives and progresses in a spiritual journey.

The Bhagavat purana focuses mainly on the life and teachings of Krishna. It is religious narrative at its best. It manages to put across extremely subtle ideas of Hindu philosophy in a very accessible form, using stories and sub-stories. Sometimes philosophy and abstract ideas seem dry; narratives are important for making religious teachings vivid and digestible. The power of narrative can never be underestimated.

Hinduism, which is not apologetic about promoting the idea of God with form and attributes, takes full advantage of this by weaving very colourful stories of Gods and Goddesses and putting across subtle principles in an accessible form.

Stories of faith are subject to interpretation. The Hindu narrative has a habit of evolving to take into account the needs of different times. Each narrative will have multiple layers of meaning invoked through plots and sub-plots dealing with a variety of social and ethical issues. Exaggeration too would have crept into some of these stories and the devotees are warned to decide for themselves what aspects to accept as literal truth and what aspects as pure narration. However, there are certain key morals which these stories put across, and it is for us to inculcate them and put them into practice. Narratives are not given the same status as the scriptures of authority like the Vedas. Narratives are recognised as 'man-made' instruments to make abstract spiritual ideas accessible to the lay person.

These stories give vivid examples of how to translate religious ideals into practice. They promote ethical values for the benefit of the individual and the greater society.

## **Symbols of Faith**

The key symbols of Hinduism are aum, the swastika, and the lotus flower.

Om is the sound heard in deep meditation by Hindu sages and seers. It is therefore considered to be the most appropriate name for God. The Hindu mystics claim that it is from this primordial sound, called nada-brahman, that the universe was created.

The swastika is a symbol for good luck. It has four bent arms pointing in four directions. It symbolises drawing in good luck from the four corners of the world. The swastika is visible in Hindu temples and homes as a symbol of auspiciousness.

The lotus flower has a special place in Hinduism. This flower blooms in muddy waters and yet comes out pure and pristine. This is symbolic of spirituality manifesting and blossoming in a mundane world. Just as the lotus flower maintains its purity, though it springs in muddy surroundings, the spirit is not tainted when it manifests in the material world.

The Sanskrit term prati means going towards. From this root is derived the word pratik which means a symbol that leads us to God. This clarifies the important role played by religious symbols – they are relative expressions of the absolute. Symbols also give identity to the practitioners. Some symbols are generic to all Hindus while some symbols identify specific sectarian movements in Hinduism.

## **Creative Expression**

Hinduism recognises that all aesthetic expressions invoke spirituality in a non-religious format. Hence it is very comfortable in using art, music, dance, drama, poetry and literature as a way of invoking the idea of transcendence in religion. The copious use of the lotus flower in images of various deities serves to remind the devotee to remain detached from the world. The swastika is sometimes painted on the palms of deities giving blessings, invoking the idea of auspiciousness synonymous with the forms of deities. The Aum or Om symbol is also used as an art form as well as a representation of spirit in sound. Om is chanted at the start of most hymns and prayers.

Hindus are not apologetic about using images to portray God with form. Hindus do not worship idols or objects, they use idols to worship God. Hinduism has freedom to worship God with attributes (like in the Abrahamic tradition) and with form. Hindus take advantage of the latter freedom to depict God in a variety of colourful forms. Apart from images Hindus use symbols like Om, or Swastika or the lotus flower. Om apart from being a symbol is also a sound. So the use of sight and sound are invoked when using this symbol. Om is claimed to be the sound heard in deep meditation, hence considered appropriate to represent God. Om is chanted during religious ceremonies as a way of drawing our minds to God.

Narratives: As Hinduism is comfortable in relating to God with form and attributes it allows this religion full freedom to come up with very colourful narratives involving a whole range of Gods and Goddesses. Subtle ideas are more accessible through a story format. Hinduism makes ample use of stories, parables and metaphors. Despite all this, the limitations of all such symbolic gestures or narratives is fully recognised in Hinduism. The Kathopanishad boldly declares: No scripture, is capable of capturing the essence of the Spirit.

Architecture: a purpose-built temple has several features that reflect their character as the abode of God on earth. Traditionally the temple has a shikhara or steeple which draws the eye upwards, a way of symbolically drawing us to think of higher things. The entrance to a temple is called the gopuram and is one of the most attractive parts of the temple as it is meant to draw the devotee into the premises. Like the living room in a house, there is an inner chamber called a garbha-griha or 'womb chamber' in which resides the predominant deity of the temple. There is space around the garbha-griha for devotees to circumambulate the central deity as a form of worship. Images of other deities may also be housed along the walls of the temple.

## Expressing Faith through Worship

Private worship takes place in most Hindu home either at dusk or dawn. Communal worship takes place in a temple called the mandir. The mandir is regarded as the home of God on earth hence it is held in high esteem. The temple may be dedicated to a particular deity or form of God being worshipped by a particular sectarian group.

How people worship: Hinduism is comfortable with the idea of God having a form and attributes. Hence the image of a central deity becomes the centre of attraction. Devotees throng to the temple to catch sight of the deity being worshipped. This is called darshan (literally meaning catching sight of). Hinduism is not apologetic about worshipping God through images. They say that as long as we operate in the field of the finite we need finite tools to relate to the infinite God. These images are treated as living Gods; they are bathed, clothed, garlanded and offered food

Every ritual in Hinduism like worship or religious ceremonies or going on pilgrimage fulfils five functions:

1. it acts as a reminder of higher things;
2. it encourages discipline;
3. it acts as a symbolic gesture;
4. it gives identity;
5. the law of karma promises that all dedicated activities including religious ones are bound to produce beneficial results for the devotee.

Rituals are not mandatory. Hinduism offers flexibility to the individuals in what ritual he or she wishes to carry out.

## Places of Worship & Community

The principle purpose of the temple is to be a place of worship but it also fulfils many other roles for its community. It becomes the place to carry out religious ceremonies like marriage or a place to celebrate religious festivals. It is also a place where religious leaders can address the congregation. Many temples are a hive of activity encouraging social services like looking after the elderly or the very young. Many temples hold classes teaching languages, dance, art, music and religion to the youngsters in its community.

## Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is called yatra (meaning a spiritual journey). Places of pilgrimage are chosen because of their geographic significance (like the Himalayas or the holy river Ganges), or their historic and mythological importance (a holy personality may be associated with that place). The key places of pilgrimage are: Varanasi which is on the bank of the holy river Ganges. It is considered to be the abode of Shiva one of the principle deities of Hinduism. Most Hindu religious teachers have either lived or preached in Varanasi. Vrindavan is another popular place of pilgrimage because it is associated with the life of Krishna another popular deity in the Hindu tradition. It is on the bank of the holy river Yamuna. Ayodhya is a place of pilgrimage on the bank of the river Sarayu and is associated with the life of Rama a popular deity in Hinduism.

Reducing distance between humanity and God: the places of pilgrimage are called tirtha (meaning a bridge to cross over to a spiritual plane). The process of going on a pilgrimage is seen as a spiritual journey. One hopes to visit the temples dedicated to the central deity associated with that place and catch sight (darshan) of the deity. The devotee gets a chance to meet holy people who live at these places of pilgrimage and may spend time there carrying out spiritual austerities. Some decide to spend the rest of their lives at these places, hoping that they will reach God when they pass on.

# Identity, Diversity and Belonging

Understanding how individuals develop a sense of identity and belonging through faith or belief;

Exploring the variety, difference and relationships that exist within and between religions, values and beliefs.

## Responsibility, Belonging & Community

The sense of belonging can come from subscribing to a particular religion or sectarian movement of a religion. The sense of belonging can be enhanced by participating in religious ceremonies and festivals. A bond can be built with a temple organisation or a religious teacher. Most Hindu families will subscribe to a particular sectarian movement and may have their personal gurus or swamis on whose guidance they lead their lives.

A Hindu may wear certain traditional dress, such as a sari for a woman, or a tunic and loin cloth for a man. A Hindu may also show his allegiance to a particular movement by marking his or her forehead with a mark called a tilak.

The sense of belonging is enhanced through family get-togethers to celebrate festivals, or participate at weddings or other religious ceremonies, also through visiting the temple for worship or special celebrations. Families travelling together for pilgrimages or visiting religious personalities create a sense of belonging.

It is through such shared belief systems and participating in rituals that the individual feels connected with his family, community and faith tradition. Performing certain activities together such as singing hymns or listening to religious discourses, helps enhance the sense of belonging. Religion is no longer seen as something abstract but something tangible.

The sharing of religious ideas and practices makes the individual feel part of a greater whole. It offers a sense of security in the here and the here-after. Sharing a religious ethos generates visible cohesion in the family and in the greater society. A sense of belonging comes naturally in the Hindu tradition which promotes the idea of seeing oneself in others. Swami Vivekananda said, 'They alone live who live for others, the rest are more dead than alive!'

An individual is expected to put into practice the belief system he or she adheres to. This can be through:

1. ritualistic practices like daily worship, visiting temples, going on pilgrimage, celebrating festivals and participating in religious ceremonies like rites of passage;
2. adopting some of the recommended dietary practices,
3. living by the codes of conduct promoted by specific sectarian bodies.

Commitment can be identified by observing the extent to which the devotees put into practise some of these ideas. Most Hindu sectarian movements offer a great deal of flexibility on what they call externals: ritualistic practises, dress and dietary codes.

## Religious / Spiritual Identity

Hinduism is a flexible and adaptable religion which does not impose rigid prescriptions upon its followers. However, there are certain key beliefs that define a person as being a Hindu: A dharmic lifestyle is a spiritual and selfless rather than materialistic or ego-centred lifestyle. The acceptance of Pluralism, recognising that the path he or she has chosen is just one of the many pathways for making spiritual progress, would mean that the individual is open to the idea of others following different pathways including non-religious ones. Commitment can be recognised in the way these ideals become visible in the way they lead their lives. Leading a disciplined family life and showing care for the elderly; are some of the visible signs of commitment being put into practice. Codes of conduct are not set in stone in Hinduism, they continue to evolve with society so on issues like abortion, euthanasia or genetic engineering, Hinduism is open to a more evolved religious view.

Faiths promote spiritual teachings, the process requires set prescriptions. However these prescriptions must evolve to reflect the changing need of society, bearing in mind the central philosophic tenets of Hinduism. Even though the moral codes evolve they are recognised as valid instruments for infusing spirituality in society.

There are a variety of ways in which a person can express his personal allegiance or views on religious matters. This can be through outward signs of wearing a mark, or visiting a temple, gurus or swamis. The life-style they pursue reflects the status of their personal spiritual journey.

## Foundations of Identity

The Taittiriya Upanishad offers the Hindu insight on what constitutes a personality. Each individual has physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual sheaths. The thread that links all these sheaths is the 'ego.' The physical traits plus the impressions stored in the mind (mostly in the subconscious mind) become visible as the individual. The ego that helps coordinate these sheaths inadvertently shields from us our true nature which is spiritual.

Translating religious ideals into practice begins in the home. Householders are not only expected to look after their children, but also parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts. They are expected to contribute towards the society in general. This is how they are expected to put religion into practice.

Hinduism states that our essential nature is not the body nor the mind, although we often mistake them as such. The religion teaches that our essential nature is the spirit that percolates through the body-mind complex. The Sanskrit term for the essential Self is Atman. Despite the appearance that we are acting in the world, we are essentially the witness and not part of what is being witnessed. There are certain famous Sanskrit aphorisms that capture the essence of this spiritual teaching like 'Tattvamasi' or 'Thou art That' ('That' referring to the Ultimate Reality or God).

The essential Self is called Atman. When Atman is embodied or linked with a body and mind it is called Jiv-atman which is equivalent to the concept of Soul in Abrahamic religions. The Jiv-atman experiences the cycle of rebirth. The soul transmigrates during reincarnation. The process is repeated again and again until the individual gains moksha, literally meaning giving up the delusion of being the body and the mind complex and recognising its nature as the spirit. Hinduism does not have an eschatology as it insists that the resolution of the human condition has to happen here and not in the hereafter.

## Family and Community

Hindu families usually have a shrine area within their homes. An image of the family deity is kept on a raised and decorated platform, and one of the family members usually carries out a daily puja or worship ceremony.

Young children in the family are told the colourful stories of Hinduism as a way of introducing them to the religion. Families may also visit the mandir or temple to catch darshan or sight of the deity, particularly during festival times. This is one of the ways in which the community comes together to practise its faith and create a sense of collective identity. All can participate in communal singing and chanting, listen to recitations from the scriptures and perform or watch plays that re-enact stories of various deities and saints.

The performance of rites of passage, such as the wedding ceremony and the naming of a child, is a way of sanctifying and celebrating transition in life. These are called samskaras and are another way that families express their religious commitment.

Putting religious ideals into practice within the family or community will no doubt have impact on the wider society. Values that arise naturally within Hinduism such as the importance of family, respect, disciplined life-style, when put into practice will impact the greater society. They are bound to be acknowledged, appreciated, and adopted by the greater society.

As well as providing the individual with a sense of identity, belonging to a family and community of faith can help nurture spiritual values which can be integrated in daily life. Religion can become a source of strength and guidance during his lifetime. It can give the individual direction in life and comfort in death. It nurtures higher ideals and aspirations in life.

Family and community faith have been passed down the generations through tradition. The preservation and practice of various elements of faith give it a great deal of authority and importance and fosters continuity. When these traditions and rituals become mechanical and meaningless they lose their potency. It is necessary to recognise that as society evolves, many of these practices need to evolve with time in order for them to continue to benefit its practitioners.

## Hindu Diversity

An individual who belongs to a particular faith tradition or sectarian movement within his faith may use outward signs, symbols and practices to reflect the ethos of that movement. Outer signs like clothing, or symbols marking the forehead, give a sense of identity, belonging, and offer a kind of comfort zone to the individual. This is not to say that external identity is the sole criterion of belonging to a particular faith tradition. At a deeper level, it is essentially the realisation that a particular system suits the spiritual needs of an individual. The ethos of the movement becomes the guiding principle in the way that individual lives his or her life. The need for external symbolism gradually diminishes as the individual makes greater spiritual progress.

Because Hinduism gives freedom to the individual to choose the belief system that suits him or her best, the Hindu religion accommodates a vast variety of perceptions and prescriptions for the spiritual journey. Diversity of ways reflects diversity of temperaments in Hindu society. This is the reason why Hinduism is the host of a vast variety of different sects and movements. The acceptance of diversity of approaches is inherent in the pluralistic tradition of Hinduism.

Hindus in the UK come from vastly varying backgrounds. They come from different parts of India and the world. The largest Hindu community migrated to the UK from East Africa. Many have come from the Caribbean or Sri Lanka. They speak different languages and observe varying religious customs. They bring with them a vast range of Hindu belief systems and practices. The interaction between these different groups is visible at many levels from education to social enterprise. Overall the relationship is warm and receptive to each other's ways. Different sectarian movements build their own temples or community halls. There is a preference to marry within their groups; this is more to do with convenience than discrimination. The world is now a much smaller place and we no longer have the luxury of living in our own exclusive framework of beliefs. We have to accommodate for and give equal recognition to those whose belief systems differ from ours. Unfortunately, a great deal of strife is caused in the name of religion because of the exclusivist agendas of each tradition. The idea of religious pluralism ingrained in Hindu thinking can be extended further to cultivate fruitful interfaith dialogue.

Hinduism challenges exclusivism of every kind including scientific as well as secular ones. Exclusivism promoted in the name of any religion amounts to claiming a monopoly on spirituality. The very act demolishes the potency of spirituality. Insistence on a secular world view too, is an imposition of exclusivism using a different guise.

The secular approach promoting good citizenship sits well with Hindu teachings. Hinduism views this as essentially a spiritual prescription operating in the guise of working for the greater or common good. According to Hindu teachings spirituality has a habit of showing up at the heart of every disciplined human endeavour. In the field of social sciences it springs up as the ideal of promoting good citizenship.

## Meaning, Purpose and Truth

Exploring some of the ultimate questions that confront humanity, and responding imaginatively to them;

The ups, downs and meaning(s) of life's journey.

### Thinking about God

Hindus who like to think of God as a personality, experience awe and wonder at God's creation which is so intricate and well balanced. They express their gratitude and praise by performing various rituals such as the puja or worship ceremony, fasting, celebrating festivals or going on pilgrimage. They accept all the pleasure and suffering they experience as the play or leela of God, as a way to deal with the human condition.

Those Hindus who treat God as an Ultimate Reality which underpins the universe, express awe and wonder differently; they treat everything as a manifestation or reflection of spirit. Worship here does not involve sitting in front of an image, but by carrying out service or seva for the good of all. They treat both pleasure and pain as forms of bondage from which all of us need to break free.

The vast majority of Hindus like to think of God as a personality, and collectively express their religious inclinations and feelings through various rites and rituals. They practise values such as respect and reverence for all life, and promote family values and care for the community.

The way in which these spiritual feelings link with questions of value is through reverence for life, and culminates in a disciplined and focused life. Treating the whole world as a manifestation of spirit, charges it with great potency; reverence for life arises naturally from such a dynamic teaching. It is believed that in order to cope with the difficulties in our lives, it is important to pay a great deal of importance to character building. It is the only thing that comes with us after we die, and determines the nature of our future life. The belief in reincarnation therefore ensures that Hindus try to establish a stable character.

## Religious Experience

Religious experiences are the only true proof of God for Hindus. There are hundreds of cases of people finding God throughout history, and all indicate the possibility of a higher reality. However, it is only when people are able to experience God for themselves that they become certain of the existence of God. Faith is not the conclusion but the starting point in spiritual progress. Spiritual progress according to Hinduism can be likened to science: you start with a hypothesis, and then try the experiment and try to prove the existence of God for yourselves.

Spiritual experience is the culmination of religious practices and behaviour. Depending on the individual's particular approach to God, these religious practices differ. For a person who believes in God with form, religious practice constitutes carrying out worship and adoration of a chosen deity. It involves being a good human being and treating others with reverence, since God has given people the responsibility to look after all around them.

A person who believes in God as a principle rather than a personality views the whole of creation as a manifestation of God. Their religious practice constitutes service to humanity, called *seva*. This also requires the individual to revere and respect everyone and everything around them, not because it is a responsibility, but because it is only natural.

## Answers to Ultimate Questions

Dharma, the equivalent to the term for 'religion' in Hinduism, is defined as enquiring into the essential nature of the universe and ourselves. The fundamental questions of life revolve around the discovery of what is the essential nature of the universe; what is essential human nature and people are linked. Hindu theologies explore different ways of linking man, God and the universe.

The Ultimate, by its definition, will resist all attempts at articulation. If it were possible to get our linguistic or intellectual faculties around the concept of the ultimate, the very process would compromise the potency of the ultimate. Since ancient times it was recognised that all such attempts are doomed to failure, not because spirituality is a woolly thing, but because it is far too potent to be captured through any articulation. Hence the Kathopanishad declared 'This ultimate cannot be captured by any linguistic articulation, nor by intellectual gymnastics.'

What is me? Like the ancient Greeks, the Hindus declare know thyself first before attempting to make sense of God or the universe. It is important to check on the validity and the capacity of the subject before attempting to answer deeper questions about the nature of reality. This inner search of the Hindus revealed a jackpot. Human's essential nature is not the body nor the mind that they inhabit, but the spirit that percolates through the mind and body complex. This idea is encapsulated in the term *Atman* or spirit as a person's essential nature. Because *Atman* is essentially the spirit, it has the power to validate God in the most personal and intense experiential level. Because humans are a chip off the old block they possess the capacity of validating or experiencing God. When people view God using human goggles they inevitably perceive God as a super-personality. This is what monotheistic religions do.

The ideas of transcendence and immanence are not only visible in religions but in all disciplined fields of human endeavour. These ideas are visible in arts, music, dance, drama, poetry, literature and more recently at the heat of physical sciences. The old philosophic problem of 'distinguishing between being and becoming' resurfaces in the guise of transcendence and immanence in many fields. 'Being' remains crucially invisible and cannot be captured through its manifestation or within the process of becoming. The Ultimate Reality is therefore transcendent as well as immanent, encompassing the macrocosm as well as the microcosm. On the issue of transcendence the Kathopanishad declares: Spirit sits at the heart of the infinitesimal as well as the infinite.

The response to suffering: A major religion sprang out of Hinduism just to address the issue of suffering – this religion is Buddhism. It did not seek the resolution through the concept of a personal God nor through eschatology. It offered a resolution to the issue of suffering here and now without reference to a God. Esoteric Hinduism offers a similar response to the issue of suffering. We are essentially a spiritual being, the process of expressing ourselves through the body and mind comes at a price and the price is both physical and mental suffering. As Ramakrishna, a recent prophet of Hinduism exemplified, physical suffering is the tax we pay for having a body. Physical suffering is just the self-defence mechanism kicking in to make sure people continue to live in a body. In the same way mental suffering arises because people are looking for fulfilment in a non-spiritual plane. Hindus reconcile the idea of God with suffering by adopting two approaches: we have to live with both pleasure and pain as the leela or play of God. The second approach says that pleasure cannot exist without pain; they are both relative concepts defined by each other. The resolution to the human condition lies in transcending both pleasure and pain, both are forms of bondage. This bondage is called maya. The aim of human life should be to break free from the misconception that people are the body and mind and re-identify themselves with the spirit.

Hinduism recognises that these approaches do not remove suffering. At best they allow people to live with suffering and treat it as a prod forcing them to make spiritual progress.

## Religion and Science

In Hinduism, spirituality is the underpinning to everything, including the universe we experience. The theories of Evolution or the Big Bang sit well with Hindu theology which is in broad agreement with these scientific discoveries. What people discover at the heart of physical science as the quantum phenomenon, talks of a non-material underpinning to the universe. Neuroscience struggles with the concept of consciousness, the resolution may lie in equating it with the spirit rather than a brain function.

Hinduism recognises that social and psychological aspects will colour the way people view or approach ideas of spirituality. It is inevitable that our mental make-up and social background will colour the way we relate to abstract concepts of spirituality. Nevertheless Hinduism insists that religions are not social or psychological inventions or ploys but discoveries that reflect the nature of reality.

Scientists such as Paul Dirac or Einstein or Neils Bohr knew that what we call the scientific enterprise has a long way to progress. The ability humans possess to make sense of the world was seen by them as the most mysterious phenomenon. Science that does not take into account the contribution of humans' inherent powers of comprehension in their world view can never succeed in producing a coherent theory of everything. Scientists who are humbled by their discoveries, quite often feel comfortable with the broader ideas of spirituality.

Religious teachings infringing on the integrity of scientific discoveries risk losing their credibility. When religious teachings challenge theories of evolution or Big Bang in favour of creation theories, they risk being viewed as irrational and irrelevant. An ability to interpret some religious narratives as allegorical is necessary to ensure that all other religious teachings do not get automatically rejected.

Wittgenstein recognised the contextual nature of language (including religious language) and allowed for a variety of different world-views to coexist, all existing in their own self-contained worlds. This was unfortunate because it allowed religious teachings to claim immunity from rational inquiry. This has resulted in a schizophrenic world. When one thinks of religions one has to switch off one's scientific world view and vice versa. This state of affairs can no longer be put aside under the guise of 'variation of linguistic interpretation.'

Both science and religion attempt to discover the underlying nature of reality but have different starting points, one empirical, the other spiritual. However, because both disciplines are working towards the same discovery, it is only natural that the two should eventually coalesce. Hence people find the discovery in modern physics that the world is essentially not made of matter but of something which is non-material. This ties in with the teachings about Brahman in Hinduism. People find the difficulty the biological sciences have in pinning down the nature of consciousness, and find it is defined as Atman in ancient Hindu teachings.

# Values and Commitments

Understanding how moral values and a sense of obligation can come from beliefs and experience;

Evaluating their own and others' values in order to make informed, rational and imaginative choices.

## Rules and Ethical Guidelines

One of the core values of the Hindu tradition focuses on the sanctity of life. It is called ahimsa, meaning 'not to hurt, harm or kill through word, thought or deed'. This forms the basis of moral behaviour. It is still a statement of negation – the positive projection of the theory is reverence for life. This guides the behaviour of Hindus towards everyone and everything. Living for others through self-sacrifice becomes the core teaching. Living in a family unit for example requires provides the means to put this teaching into practice. The practice should be broadened to take into account the needs of those who are less fortunate. The theory requires Hindus to play an active role in helping to alleviate the suffering of others.

The source of both these fundamental values comes from esoteric Hindu philosophy which states that all living things are essentially the manifestation of spirit defined as Brahman. Spirit does not come in plural hence by implication all living things are the expression of the same phenomenon. Ecology, or caring for the environment, also becomes a natural outcome of the philosophy. It says that essentially everyone and everything including the universe, is the expression of the spirit, hence divine, and should be cared for.

Spiritual humanism as promoted by Swami Vivekananda in the last century, suggests that we must not search for God in some invisible place because he is very visible here. He manifests himself through millions of living beings. The highest worship of God is not tinkling bells in front of images but serving humanity. Pramukh Swami of the Swaminarayan movement affirms 'In the joy of others lies our own, and in the good of others abides our own.'

Right and wrong are recognised as useful religious injunctions. However the contextual aspect should not be ignored. Hinduism does not promote relativism. There is a clear injunction in Hinduism that any activity that draws us towards God (or our spiritual dimension is right and any activity that leads us away from our spiritual underpinning is wrong. However, the way this can work in practice has to take into account the context. What may appear as right in one situation may be seen as wrong in a different situation. What may be right in the short term may turn out to be wrong in the long term. What may be right for one person may be wrong for another person. Hinduism recognises the contextual nature of religious injunctions hence the law books of Hinduism come with a sell-by date.

## Principles for Ethical Decision-making

Varnasharamdharma means how to translate religious teachings into practice. It means that the age and aptitude of the individual must be taken into account to decide what role he or she can play in society. Children and youngsters have different roles to play; adults and the elderly have their own roles. They all make different contributions towards family life and society in general.

Hinduism does not claim monopoly in dealing with global issues like human rights, fairness, social justice and environment. It appreciates other religious as well as non-religious world-views on these issues. What it offers is an interesting insight on why these ideas are important. The esoteric terms Brahman and Atman promote the idea that the underpinning to the universe is essentially the same Spirit. This spirit manifests as the universe and becomes more visible as living things and becomes most transparent as men and women. The underpinning to everything and everyone is the same Spirit. This gives greater impetus to the idea of why it is necessary to be fair to others or to seek justice or human rights for others. The Hindu response claims that it is because it is the same spirit that underpins everything and everyone, equality arises very naturally – it is just reinforcing this underlying deeper spiritual unity.

Theistic Hinduism will offer the same reasons for why we have to be fair to others or seek justice or look after the environment. It will bring God into the equation and say that because everything and everyone has been created by the same God, we are obliged to look after his creation. In contrast the non-theistic Hinduism offers a more direct reason for why we should insist on

justice and fairness. It is because at a deeper level we are linked to everything and everyone. Hinduism would insist that this linkage is not at the material level (as the materialistic Humanist suggests) but at the deeper spiritual level.

A question has not been properly answered: all human beings are clearly quite different from each other at the physical as well as mental levels, so why insist on equality? The satisfactory answer cannot simply be: because we are all human — because we are so different from each other. The satisfactory answer comes with the declaration that even though we look different, we are the manifestation of the same spirit, hence we insist on equality. This approach promotes spiritual humanism in contrast to materialistic humanism.

## **Moral Issues: Examples**

The theory of reincarnation in Hinduism views death as a comma rather than a full-stop. Though Hinduism places great emphasis on the sacredness of life, it would view issues like abortion or voluntary euthanasia in a slightly different way.

**Abortion and Voluntary Euthanasia:** in the case of the abortion of a seriously malformed foetus – if the foetus is destined to suffer and certain to die due to its malformation, the Hindu teachings can be interpreted to suggest that by not terminating pregnancy the parents are incurring bad karma. That individual may be reborn in a better foetus so it may be best to let it progress to its next life rather than let it undergo suffering for no apparent reason. There are no strict religious injunctions to fall back on hence the individual family will be left to take the final decision. Similar views could be expressed in dealing with the issue of voluntary euthanasia. The individual has a right to terminate his or her own life and continue his or her journey to the next life after being freed from suffering.

**Contraception:** it is acceptable because it does not take life, though using it as a means for a promiscuous life style goes against the Hindu ideal of overcoming bodily infatuation.

**Just War:** despite appearances, Hinduism is not a pacifist religion. It recognises that there are situations where it may be necessary to take up arms. The scripture of authority for Hindus – the Bhagavad Gita – was preached on a battlefield.

Hinduism promotes spiritual humanism wholeheartedly. However this is not the same as the materialistic humanism that is in vogue. The basis for human rights, social justice and citizenship are given firm footing through esoteric Hindu teachings. These teachings suggest that men and women are not material beings aspiring to spirituality to improve their material status, but spiritual beings on a material journey.

It is essentially the same spirit that manifests in everyone. This gives a firm footing to the ideals of human rights, social justice and good citizenship. Mahatma Gandhi successfully combined the religious teachings of satya (insisting on truth) and ahimsa (non-violence) to forge a potent political tool that has been used again and again as a humane resolution to issues of gaining Human rights

From ancient times it has been recognised that earning money righteously to support the needs of family and society are very important. The creation and accumulation of wealth are entirely acceptable, yet the ultimate aim should be selfless rather than selfish; the wealth should be redistributed for the good of others. Sri Ramakrishna, a recent prophet of Hinduism states that householders should not act as hoarders of wealth, but become stewards of wealth. He tells the wealthy that it is necessary to 'act in the world as a servant, look after everyone and act as if everything belongs to you, but know in your heart that nothing is yours; you are only the guardian, the servant of God'. This is dharma or truly religious living. Looking after those around us is not simply a matter of practical concern but also a matter of spiritual concern, since the dignity of all is a central doctrine of Hindu philosophy. Selfless action is called karma yoga and is one of the prescribed ways of making spiritual progress.

**Physical and Mental Health:** Hindu philosophy contends that we possess three layers to our being: physical, mental and spiritual. Good physical and mental health are pre-requisites to allow the spiritual element to become visible. Developing nations require more help with physical health issues and developed nations need more help to foster better mental health.

**War:** Gandhi's use of Ahimsa or non-violence as a religious tool has successfully resolved many political issues in a non-violent method. This idea has been successfully used by many groups to resolve serious issues without waging war.

## The Environment

Care for the people around us should be extended to care for the animal kingdom and the environment, since all are essentially divine. Hinduism agrees with the theory of evolution which states that we are the continuation of the animal kingdom. Hence reverence for life cannot be restricted to the human kingdom; it must be extended into the animal kingdom. Poor treatment of animals bred for human consumption, or hunting down animals to the point of extinction because of greed and commercialism, go against Hindu teachings.

The Isa Upanishad in its first verse states: View all this that you view as the manifestation of the lord. Seeing the universe as the manifestation of the divine or the spirit is at the heart of Hindu teachings. Desecrating the environment is viewed as compromising the dignity of the spirit that underpins everything.

Contextual limitations on the principle of reverence for all living things and the environment: Hindus believe there is a hierarchy in creation, as some things are considered more sacred than others. Human life is seen as more valuable than animal or plant life. Divinity has become most clearly manifest in human form through the evolutionary process. This is why it is considered legitimate for humans to live off other living things or to take medicine to destroy bacteria and viruses that may be detrimental to their well-being. Sometimes this 'violence' is unavoidable.

It is also valid to defend and protect yourself from other human beings who may want to harm you. In the story of the Mahabharata, Krishna urged Arjuna to fight the wrongdoers as it was his duty to protect the righteous. Hindus have never gone out of India to conquer other people or impose their authority on others as that goes against the grain of Hindu teachings.

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