

## Religious Tolerance in Hinduism

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### Abstract

Among all religions of the world, Hindu religion is considered as an ancient religion that is recognized as foundation of civilization. Hindu Dharma is a righteous way of life based on accumulated wisdom of great sages, Vedas, Upanishads and Agamas. Various basic concepts like Dharma, Karma, Ahimsa, Rebirth, Moksha (Nirvana) are inherited by various dharmic traditions like Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism from Hinduism.

Hinduism is the world's oldest religious tradition; it goes back to the very dawn of history. The hymns composed some 5,000 years ago are still recited today. Hinduism is the third largest of the world's religions, after Christianity and Islam. Nearly 800 million people or one-seventh of humanity call Hinduism their spiritual home. Millions more in South and Southeast Asia and in the Far East trace their spiritual roots to Hinduism. Introduction :

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Hinduism is also the world's largest pluralistic tradition. A multiplicity of spiritual paths and ways are recognized as valid in Hinduism. Hinduism is not based on the teachings of a single Prophet or a single Book. The teachings of many different sages and saints find home within Hinduism. God may be worshiped both in male and female forms. Hinduism has much in common with the earth based religious traditions of the world.

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), the great Indian seer of the first half of the twentieth century declared that Hinduism (also known as *Sanatan Dharma* or the eternal tradition) was rising not for India alone but for the world. Arnold Toynbee in his *A Study of History* was of the view that Hinduism will gain the status of a world religion in the new century. What lies behind such tall claims for Hinduism?

## HINDU THEOLOGY:

Hindus believe that Reality is OneB *Ekam Sat*. This Reality is everywhere, in everything, in every being. It is One and Many at the same time and it also transcends them both. At the popular level, the One Reality is worshipped as the Trinity: Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the dissolver. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are not different gods, but they represent different faces of the One Supreme. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva have their respective female consorts: Saraswati, Lakshmi and Durga. Even though God is One, Hindus worship God in a number of both male and female forms.

## THE AVATAR :

The Avatar is God in human form. When God takes birth in Human body, He is known as the Avatar. The Hindu scripture Bhagavad Gita States that God descends when religion is on the decline and immorality is on the rise. The Avatar comes down to earth from age to age.

*“ Yada yada he dharmasya*

*glanir bhavati Bharata abhyuthanam adharmasya tad atmanam srijami aham paritranaaya  
sadhunam vinashaya cha dushkritam dharam sansthapan arthaya sambhavami yuge yuge ”*

“Whenever there is decline in religious values and increase in unrighteousness, at that time I take birth. For the establishment of the good, for the destruction of the evil-doers, for the enthronement of the Right, I am born from age to age.”-- *Bhagavad Gita*, 4:7-8

**The Avatar helps mankind move to a higher level of consciousness.**

- 1.Rama and Krishna are popular Hindu Avatars.
- 2.Buddha is accepted as an Avatar, even though he was a dissenter and a critic of the ritualism and caste distinctions of the Hindu system of his day.
- 3.Many Hindu teachers accept also Jesus Christ as an Avatar. This is typical of the inclusiveness of the Hindu teachers.

## FOUR PATHS:

Hinduism prescribes four ways of spiritual salvation, depending on the personality of the seeker.

- 1.For the active person, there is Karma yoga, the path of selfless works.
- 2.For the contemplative and intellectual person, there is Jnana Yoga, the path of Knowledge.
- 3.For the emotional person, there is Bhakti yoga, the path of love and surrender. Bhakti yoga is said to

be similar to the Christian path of love.

4.Finally, Raja yoga is the path of meditative exercises including concentration and one- pointedness.

This path focusing on meditation has become popular in the West.

### **Pluralism and tolerance of diversity are built into Hindu theology.**

India's long history is a testimony to its tolerance of religious diversity. Christianity came to India with St. Thomas in the first century A.D., long before it became popular in the West. Judaism came to India after the Jewish temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. and the Jews were expelled from their homeland.

Zoroastrians from Persia (present day Iran) entered India in the 7<sup>th</sup> century to flee Islamic

conquest. They are known as Parsees in India. The Parsees are an affluent community in the city of Bombay without a sense of having been persecuted through the centuries. Among the richest business families in India are the Parsees; for example, the Tata family controls a huge industrial empire in various parts of the country. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the powerful Prime Minister of India (1966-77; 1980-84), was married to Feroz Gandhi, a Parsee (no relation to Mahatma Gandhi).

**The four legitimate wants allowed in Hinduism include: Artha, Kama, Dharma and Moksha.**

**1.Artha** is material prosperity

**2.Kama** is pleasure

**3.Dharma** is righteous conduct

• **4.Moksha** is spiritual liberation Dharma and Moksha come after Artha and Kama.

Indian poverty cannot be blamed on Hinduism. Nor is Hinduism opposed to science and rational thinking. Ancient India contributed handsomely to mathematics, astronomy, the physical and the medical sciences.

Poverty is a recent phenomenon in the long stretches of Indian history. It dates to the period of colonization.

India fell to colonial exploitation first by certain Muslim dynasties originating in

Central Asia and then by the British in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The invaders and plunderers were drawn

to India's wealth. When Muslim adventurers ransacked India in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was the richest country in the world. When the British left India in 1947, it was the poorest.

**Mahatma Gandhi's favorite hymn, chanted regularly at his evening prayer meetings, says:**

*“ Raghu Pati Raghav Raja Ram Patit Pavan Sita Ram*

*Ishwar Allah tere Naam*

*Sabko Sanmati De Bhagwaan ”*

“The Lord God is One, people call Him by different names. Some call him Ishwar; others call him Allah. O Beneficent Lord, bestow on humanity the peace of Thy Harmony.”

The globe has shrunk and is now a much smaller place. Thanks to the Internet and the mass media, people in distant lands are now our neighbors. We cannot have peace in this shrunk globe so long as we insist that we are in possession of the truth and all others are groping in the darkness. Every method of spiritual growth and worship is worthy of respect. Hinduism has much to contribute to build a pluralistic global system that is peaceful and compassionate. I will conclude with the words of Radhakrishnan, the philosopher President of India (1962- 67): “ What counts is not creed but conduct. By their fruits ye shall know them and not by their beliefs. Religion is not correct belief but righteous living. The Hindu view that every method of spiritual growth, every path to the Truth is worthy of reverence has much to commend itself.” - - *The Hindu View of Life*, 1962.

### Conclusion :

Hindus consider a person belonging to another religion as people who worship the same Isvara in a different way. It is the people of the other religion that protest this and claim that they worship a “different” “God”. To a Hindu, there is only one Isvara, who can be worshiped in different ways. It is the followers of the so-called “monotheistic” religions that say “our God is different from your God”. A typical Hindu, who equates “Isvara” to “God”, finds it very difficult to understand how there can be several “Gods” who are completely different from each other, and can never accept this concept. This makes the Hindu tolerant and in fact “accepting” and “respecting” of people, beliefs and practices of all religions. Problems arise only when the acceptance and respect is not fully reciprocated.

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