Introduction to Hinduism
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Introduction to Hinduism

Our publisher offers a basic summary that you can proudly present to gatherings in your community

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Hindus in the West are sometimes invited to give a talk explaining their religion at a local college, schoolroom, interfaith group or even a Christian church. Some have confided to me that they do not feel qualified to give such a presentation. There is clearly a need for an authentic, non-academic introduction to Hinduism that can be presented with confidence on such occasions. I prepared this Publisher's Desk (drawn from our book What Is Hinduism?) as a broad summary of our faith that can be drawn upon to properly educate others in the basics of Hinduism, minus all the

misconceptions and myths. You can get the text here:
www.himalayanacademy.com/intro

If you ask google "what is hinduism?" you will get some 39,000 results. Many are from outsiders offering their best take; many are from antagonists taking their best shot. Too few are knowledgeable; fewer still are authentic. Rare is the answer that goes beyond parochial sectarian understandings; scarcely any encompasses the huge gamut implied in the question. For these reasons alone, this introduction to Hinduism was inevitable.

Hinduism Today magazine founder, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927 - 2001), well understood the challenges that all religions face in today's world, whether from outside or within. He wrote that every religion consists of the spiritual precepts, practices and customs of a people or society - transmitted from generation to generation - that maintain the connection with higher realms of consciousness, thus connecting man to God and keeping alive the highest ideals of culture and tradition. Gurudeva, as he was affectionately known, observed that if this transmission misses even one generation, a religion can be lost for all time, left to decay in the dusty libraries of history, anthropology and archeology. He strove to protect the religion he loved so dearly. He would ask rhetorically, "Where are the once prominent religions of the Babylonians, Egyptians, Aztecs, Mayans, American Indians or Hawaiians?" Little remains of them. Not long ago it was feared by some and hoped by many that Hinduism - the religion of a billion people, one sixth of the human race living mostly in India - would meet the same fate. That it survived a history of religious conquest and extermination that wiped out virtually every other ancient religion is exceptional.

Ironically, this noble faith, having withstood the ravages of invasion, plunder and brutal domination by foreign invaders for over a thousand years, stumbled into the 20th century to meet the subtler forces of secularism and the temptations of materialism. Christian propaganda, fabricated by 16th-century Jesuit missionaries, empowered by the 19th-century British Raj and carried forth today by the Western and Indian media, had dealt heavy blows over the centuries to the subjugated, prideless Hindu identity. A typical Christian tactic was to demean the indigenous faith, impeaching it as rife with superstition, idolÂ-atry, antiquated values, archaic customs and umpteen false Gods. India's Communist/secular media stressed caste abuse and wretched social ills, branding as radical, communal and fundamentalist all efforts to stand strong for anything Hindu.

But an unexpected Hindu resurgence has burst forth across the globe in the last twenty years, driven in part by the Hindu diaspora and in part by India's newfound pride and influence. Hinduism entered the 21st century with fervent force as recent generations discovered its treasures and its relevance to their times. Hinduism is going digital, working on its faults and bolstering its strengths. Leaders are stepping forth, parents are striving for ways to convey to their children the best of their faith to help them do better in school and live a fruitful life. Temples are coming up across the Earth by the thousands. Communities are celebrating Hindu festivals, parading their Deities in the streets of Paris, Berlin, Toronto and Sydney in grand style without worrying that people might think them odd or "pagan." Yoga is being universally practiced, in all faith communities. Eloquent spokesmen are now representing Hinduism's billion followers at international peace conferences, interfaith gatherings and discussions about Hindu rights. Hindu students in high schools and universities are going back to their traditions, turning to the Gods in the temples, not because their parents say they should, but to satisfy their own inner need, to improve their daily life, to fulfill their souls' call. When it comes time to explain our religion in any of these settings, we offer the following:

Many faiths under one name

A major reason why those new to Hinduism find it difficult to understand is its diversity. Hinduism is not a monolithic tradition. There isn't a one Hindu opinion on things. And there is no single spiritual authority to define matters for the faith. There are several different denominations, the four largest being Vaishnavism, Saivism, Shaktism and Smartism. Further, there are numberless schools of thought, or sampradayas, expressed in tens of thousands of guru lineages, or paramparas. Each is typically independent and self-contained in its authority. In a very real sense, this grand tradition can be defined and understood as ten thousand faiths gathered in harmony under a single umbrella called Hinduism, or Sanatana Dharma. The tendency to overlook this diversity is the common first step to a faulty perception of the religion. Most spiritual traditions are simpler, more unified and unambiguous.

All too often, despite its antiquity, its profound systems of thought, the beauty of its art and architecture and the grace of its people, Hinduism remains a mystery. Twisted stereotypes abound that would relegate this richly complex, sophisticated and spiritually rewarding tradition to little more than crude caricatures of snake-charmers, cow-worshipers and yogis lying on beds of nails.

Fortunately, there is an easier, more natural way to Â-approach the vastness of Hinduism. From the countless living gurus, teachers and pandits who offer clear guidance, most seekers choose a preceptor, study his teachings, embrace the

sampradaya he propounds and adopt the precepts and disciplines of his tradition. That is how the faith is followed in actual practice. Holy men and women, counted in the hundreds of thousands, are the ministers, the defenders of the faith and the inspirers of the faithful.

four Basic principles

One way to gain a simple (though admittedly simplistic) overview is to understand the four essential beliefs shared by the vast majority of Hindus: karma, reincarnation, all-pervasive Divinity and dharma. We could say that living by these four principles is what makes a person a Hindu.

Karma: Karma literally means "deed" or "act" and more broadÂ-ly names the universal principle of cause and effect, action and reaction which governs all life. Karma is a natural law of the mind, just as gravity is a law of matter. Karma is not fate, for man acts with free will, creating his own destiny. The Vedas tell us, if we sow goodness, we will reap goodness; if we sow evil, we will reap evil. Karma refers to the totality of our actions and their concomitant reactions in this and previous lives, all of which determines our future. It is the interplay between our experience and how we respond to it that makes karma devastating or helpfully invigorating. The conquest of karma lies in intelligent action and dispassionate reaction. Not all karmas rebound immediately. Some accumulate and return unexpectedly in this or other births. The Vedas explain, "According as one acts, so does he become. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action" (Yajur Veda, Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.4.5).

Reincarnation: Reincarnation, punarjanma, is the natural process of birth, death and rebirth. At death we drop off the physical body and continue evolving in the inner worlds in our subtle bodies, until we again enter into birth. Through the ages, reincarnation has been the great consoling element within Hinduism, eliminating the fear of death. We are not the body in which we live but the immortal soul which inhabits many bodies in its evolutionary journey through samsara. After death, we continue to exist in unseen worlds, enjoying or suffering the harvest of earthly deeds until it comes time for yet another physical birth. The actions set in motion in previous lives form the tendencies and conditions of the next. Reincarnation ceases when karma is resolved, God is realized and moksha, liberation, is attained. The Vedas state, "After death, the soul goes to the next world, bearing in mind the subtle impressions of its deeds, and after reaping their harvest returns again to this world of action. Thus, he who has desires continues subject to rebirth" (Yajur Veda, Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.4.6).

All-Pervasive Divinity: As a family of faiths, Hinduism upholds a wide array of perspectives on the Divine, yet all worship the one, all-pervasive Supreme Being hailed in the Upanishads. As Absolute Reality, God is unmanifest, unchanging and transcendent, the Self God, timeless, formless and spaceless. As Pure Consciousness, God is the manifest primal substance, pure love and light flowing through all form, existing everywhere in time and space as infinite intelligence and power. As Primal Soul, God is our personal Lord, source of all three worlds, our Father-Mother God who protects, nurtures and guides us. We beseech God's grace in our lives while also knowing that He/She is the essence of our soul, the life of our life. Each denomination also venerates its own pantheon of Divinities, Mahadevas, or "great angels," known as Gods, who were created by the Supreme Lord and who serve and adore Him. The Vedas proclaim, "He is the God of forms infinite in whose glory all things are - smaller than the smallest atom, and yet the Creator of all, ever living in the mystery of His creation. In the vision of this God of love there is everlasting peace. He is the Lord of all who, hidden in the heart of things, watches over the world of time" (Krishna Yajur Veda, Shvetashvatara Upanishad 4.14-15).

Dharma: When God created the universe, He endowed it with order, with the laws to govern creation. Dharma is God's diÂ-vine law prevailing on every level of existence, from the sustaining cosmic order to religious and moral laws which bind us in harmony with that order. In relation to the soul, dharma is the mode of conduct most conducive to spiritual advancement, the right and righteous path. It is piety and ethiÂ-Â-cal practice, duty and obÂ-ligation. When we follow dharma, we are in conformity with the Truth that inheres and instructs the universe, and we naturally abide in closeness to God. Adharma is opposition to divine law. Dharma is to the individual what its normal development is to a seed - the orderly fulfillment of an inherent nature and destiny. The Tirukural (verses 31 - 32) reminds us, "Dharma yields Heaven's honor and Earth's wealth. What is there then that is more fruitful for a man? There is nothing more rewarding than dharma, nor anything more ruinous than its neglect."

Hinduism's Unique Value Today

There are good reasons for Hindus and non-Hindus alike to study and understand the nature of Hinduism. The vast geographical and cultural expanses that separate continents, peoples and religions are becoming increasingly bridged as our world grows closer together. Revolutions in communications, the Internet, business, travel and global migration are making formerly distant peoples neighbors, sometimes reluctantly.

It is crucial, if we are to get along in an increasingly pluralistic world, that Earth's peoples learn about and appreciate the religions, cultures, viewpoints and concerns

of their planetary neighbors. The Sanatana Dharma, with its sublime tolerance and belief in the all-pervasiveness of Divinity, has much to contribute in this regard. Nowhere on Earth have religions lived and thrived in such close and harmonious proximity as in India. For thousands of years India has been a home to followers of virtually every major world religion, the exemplar of tolerance toward all paths. It has offered a refuge to Jews, Zoroastrians, Sufis, Buddhists, Christians and nonbelievers. Today over one hundred million Indians are Muslim, for the most part magnanimously accepted by their majority Hindu neighbors. Such religious amity has occurred out of an abiding respect for all genuine religious pursuits. The oft-quoted axiom that conveys this attitude is "Ekam sat anekah panthah," "Truth is one, paths are many." What can be learned from the Hindu land that has given birth to Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism and has been a generous protector of all other religions? India's original faith offers a rare look at a peaceful, rational and practical path for making sense of our world, for gaining personal spiritual insight, and as a potential blueprint for grounding our society in a more spiritually rewarding worldview.

Hinduism boasts teachings and practices reaching back 8,000 years and more, its history dwarfing most other religions. In fact, there is no specific time in history when it began. It is said to have started with time itself. To emphasize the relative ages of the major religions, and the antiquity of Hinduism, Raimon Panikkar, author of The Vedic Experience, cleverly reduced them to proportionate human years, with each 100 years of history representing one year of human life. Viewed this way, Sikhism, the youngest faith, is five years old. Islam, the only teenager, is fourteen. Christianity just turned twenty. Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism and Confucianism are twenty-five. Zoroastrianism is twenty-six. Shintoism is in its late twenties. Judaism is a mature thirty-seven. Hinduism, whose birthday remains unknown, is at least eighty years old - the white-bearded grandfather of living spirituality on this planet.

The followers of this extraordinary tradition often refer to it as Sanatana Dharma, the "Eternal Faith" or "Eternal Way of Conduct." Rejoicing in adding on to itself the contributions of every one of its millions of adherents down through the ages, it brings to the world an extraordinarily rich cultural heritage that embraces religion, society, economy, literature, art and architecture. Unsurprisingly, it is seen by its followers as not merely another religious tradition, but as a way of life and the quintessential foundation of human culture and spirituality. It is, to Hindus, the most accurate possible description of the way things are - eternal truths, natural principles, inherent in the universe that form the basis of culture and prosperity. Understanding this venerable religion allows all people to fathom the source and essence of human religiosity - to marvel at the oldest example of the Eternal Path that is reflected in all faiths.

While 860 million Hindus live in India, forming 85 percent of the population, tens of millions reside across the globe and include followers from nearly every nationality, race and ethnic group in the world. The US alone is home to 2.4 million Hindus, roughly two-thirds of South Asian descent and one-third of other backgrounds.

Hindu Scriptures

All major religions are based upon a specific set of teachings encoded in sacred scripture. Christianity has the Bible, for example, and Islam has the Koran. Hinduism proudly embraces an incredibly rich collection of scripture; in fact, the largest body of sacred texts known to man. The holiest and most revered are the Vedas and Agamas, two massive compendia of shruti (that which is "heard"), revealed by God to illumined sages centuries and millennia ago. It is said the Vedas are general and the Agamas specific, as the Agamas speak directly to the details of worship, the yogas, mantra, tantra, temple building and such. The most widely known part of the Vedas are the Upanishads, which form the more general philosophical foundations of the faith.

The array of secondary scripture, known as smriti (that which is "remembered"), is equally vast, the most prominent and widely celebrated of which are the Itihasas (epic dramas and history - specifically the Ramayana and Mahabharata) and the Puranas (sacred history and mythology). The ever-popular Bhagavad Gita is a small portion of the Mahabharata. The Vedic arts and sciences, including ayurveda, astrology, music, dance, architecture, statecraft, domestic duty and law, are reflected in an assembly of texts known as Vedangas and Upavedas. Moreover, through the ages God-Realized souls, sharing their experience, have poured forth volume upon volume that reveal the wonders of yoga and offer passionate hymns of devotion and illumination. The creation of Hindu scripture continues to this day, as contemporary masters reiterate the timeless truths to guide souls on the path to Divinity.

A clear sign that a person is a Hindu is that he embraces Hindu scripture as his guide and solace through life. While the Vedas are accepted by all denominations, each lineage defines which other scriptures are regarded as central and authoritative for its followers. Further, each devotee freely chooses and follows one or more favorite scriptures within his tradition, be it a selection of Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Tirumantiram or the writings of his own guru. This free-flowing, diversified approach to scripture is unique to the Hindu faith. Scripture here, however, does not have the same place as it does in many other faiths. For genuine spiritual progress to take place, its wisdom must not be merely studied and

preached, but lived and experienced as one's own.

The Nature of God

Some descriptions of Hinduism wrongly state that Hindus do not believe in a one Supreme Being but worship a multiplicity of supreme Gods. A common way that this misconception shows up is in the idea that Hindus worship a trinity of Gods: Brahma, the Creator, Vishnu, the Preserver, and Siva, the Destroyer. To the Hindu, these three are aspects of the one Supreme Being. Indeed, with its vast array of Divinities, Hinduism may, to an outsider, appear polytheistic - a term avidly employed as a criticism of choice, as if the idea of many Gods were primitive and false. But ask any Hindu, and he will tell you that he worships the One Supreme Being, just as do Christians, Jews, Muslims and those of nearly all major faiths. If he is a Saivite, he calls that God Siva. If a Shakta Hindu, he will adore Devi, the Goddess, as the ultimate Divinity. If he is a Smarta Hindu, he will worship as supreme one Deity chosen from a specific pantheon of Gods. If a Vaishnava Hindu, he will revere Vishnu or one of His earthly incarnations, called avatars, especially Krishna or Rama.

Thus, it is impossible to say all Hindus believe this or that. Some Hindus give credence only to the formless Absolute Reality as God; others accept God as personal Lord and Creator. Some venerate God as male, others as female, while still others hold that God is not limited by gender, which is an aspect of physical bodies. This freedom, we could say, makes for the richest understanding and perception of God. Hindus accept all genuine spiritual paths - from pure monism, which concludes that "God alone exists," to theistic dualism, which asks, "When shall I know His Grace?" Each soul is free to find his own way, whether by devotion, austerity, meditation, yoga or selfless service.

God is unimaginably transcendent yet ubiquitously immanent in all things. He is creator and He is the creation. He is not a remote God who rules from above, but an intimate Lord who abides within all as the essence of everything. There is no corner of creation in which God is not present. He is farther away than the farthest star and closer than our breath. If His presence were to be removed from any one thing, that thing would cease to exist.

A crucial point, often overlooked, is that having one Supreme God does not repudiate the existence of lesser Divinities. Just as Christianity acknowledges great spiritual beings who dwell near God, such as the cherubim and seraphim (possessing both human and animal features), so Hindus revere Mahadevas, or

"great angels," who were created by the Supreme Lord and who serve and adore Him. Each denomination worships the Supreme God and its own pantheon of divine beings. The elephant-faced Lord Ganesha is among the most popular, and is perhaps the only Deity worshiped by Hindus of all denominations. There are Gods and Goddesses of strength, yoga, learning, art, music, wealth and culture. There are also minor divinities, village Gods and Goddesses, who are invoked for protection, health and such earthy matters as a fruitful harvest.

The Nature of the soul

What does Hinduism say about the soul? The driving imperative to know oneself - to answer the questions "Who am I?" "Where did I come from?" and "Where am I going?" - has been the core of all great religions and schools of philosophy throughout history. Hindu teachings on the nature of self are as philosophically profound as they are pragmatic. We are more than our physical body, our mind, emotions and intellect, with which we so intimately identify every moment of our life, but which are temporary, imperfect and limiting. Our true self is our immortal soul, the eternal, perfect and unlimited inner essence, a pure being of scintillating light unseen by the human eye, undetectable by any of the human senses, which are its tools for living in this physical world.

Our soul is the source of all our higher functions, including knowledge, will and love. It is neither male nor female. The essence of our soul, which was never created, is immanent love and transcendent reality and is identical and eternally one with God. The Vedas explain, "The soul is born and unfolds in a body, with dreams and desires and the food of life. And then it is reborn in new bodies, in accordance with its former works. The quality of the soul determines its future body; earthly or airy, heavy or light."

The Vedas teach that the Divine resides in all beings. Our true, spiritual essence is, like God, eternal, blissful, good, wise and beautiful by nature. The joining of God and the soul is known as yoga. We spend so much of our time pursuing beauty, knowledge and bliss in the world, not knowing that these objects of our desire are already within us as attributes of our own soul. If we turn our focus within through worship and meditation, identifying with our true spiritual self, we can discover an infinite inner treasure that easily rivals the greatest wealth of this world.

Hinduism is a mystical religion, leading the devotee to personally experience the Truth within, finally reaching the pinnacle of consciousness where the realization is attained that man and God are one. As divine souls, we are evolving into union with

God through the process of reincarnation. We are immortal souls living and growing in the great school of earthly experience in which we have lived many lives. Knowing this gives followers a great security, eliminating the fear and dread of death. The Hindu does not take death to be the end of existence, as does the atheist. Nor does he look upon life as a singular opportunity, to be followed by eternal heavenly existence for those souls who do well, and by unending hell for those who do not. Death for the Hindu is the most exalted of experiences, a profound transition from this world to the next, simultaneously an end and a new beginning.

Despite the heartening glory of our true nature spoken of in scripture, most souls are unaware of their spiritual self. This ignorance or "veiling grace" is seen in Hinduism as God's purposeful limiting of awareness, which allows us to evolve. It is this narrowing of our awareness, coupled with a sense of individualized ego, that allows us to look upon the world and our part in it from a practical, human point of view. The ultimate goal of life, in the Hindu view, is called moksha, liberation from rebirth. This comes when earthly karma has been resolved, dharma has been well performed and God is fully realized. All souls, without exception, are destined to achieve the highest states of enlightenment, perfect spiritual maturity and liberation, but not necessarily in this life. Hindus understand this and do not delude themselves that this life is the last. While seeking and attaining profound realizations, they know there is much to be done in fulfilling life's other three goals: righteousness, wealth and pleasure.

In some Hindu traditions, the destiny of the soul after liberation is perceived as eternal and blissful enjoyment of God's presence in the heavenly realms, a form of salvation given by God through grace, similar to most Abrahamic faiths. In others, the soul's destiny is perfect union in God or in the Infinite All, a state of oneness.

The Nature of the world

From the Hindu perspective, the world is the place where our destiny is shaped, our desires fulfilled and our soul matured. Without the world, known as maya, the soul could not evolve through experience. In the world, we grow from ignorance into wisdom, from darkness into light and from a consciousness of death to immortality. The whole world is an ashram in which all are evolving spiritually. We must love the world, which is God's creation. Those who despise, hate and fear the world do not understand the intrinsic goodness of all. The world is a glorious place, not to be feared. The Vedas advise, "Behold the universe in the glory of God, and all that lives and moves on Earth. Leaving the transient, find joy in the Eternal."

There is a false concept, commonly found in academic texts, that Hinduism is world-negating. This depiction was foisted upon the world by 19th-century Western missionary Orientalists traveling in India for the first time and reporting back about its starkest and strangest aspects, not unlike what Western journalists tend to do today. The wild-looking, world-renouncing yogis, taking refuge in caves, denying the senses and thus the world, were of sensational interest, and their world-abandonment became, through the scholars' eyes, characteristic of the entire religion. Hinduism's essential, time-tested monastic tradition makes it no more world-negating than Christianity or Buddhism, which likewise have traditions of renunciate men and women living apart from the world in spiritual pursuits.

While Sanatana Dharma proudly upholds such severe ways of life for the few, it is very much a family-oriented faith that supports acquisition of wealth, the pursuit of life's pleasures and a full engagement in society's spiritual, intellectual and emotional joys. The vast majority of followers are engaged in family life, firmly grounded in responsibilities in the world. Young Hindu adults are encouraged to marry; marriages are encouraged to yield an abundance of children; children are guided to live in virtue, fulfill duty and contribute to the community. The emphasis is not on self-fulfillment and freedom but on duty and the welfare of the community, as expressed in the phrase, "Bahujan hitaya, bahujan sukhaya," meaning "the welfare of the many and the happiness of the many."

Hindu scriptures speak of three worlds of existence: the physical, subtle and causal. The physical plane is the world of gross or material substance in which phenomena are perceived by the five senses. It is the most limited of worlds, the least permanent and the most subject to change. The subtle plane is the mental-emotional sphere that we function in through thought and feeling and reside in fully during sleep and after death. It is the astral world that exists within the physical plane. The causal plane pulsates at the core of being, deep within the subtle plane. It is the superconscious world where the Gods and highly evolved souls live and can be accessed through yoga and temple worship.

Hindus believe that God created the world and all things in it. He creates and sustains from moment to moment every atom of the seen physical and unseen spiritual universe. Everything is within Him. He is within everything. God created us. He created time and gravity, the vast spaces and the uncounted stars. Creation is not the making of a separate thing, but an emanation of Himself. God creates, constantly sustains the form of His creations and absorbs them back into Himself. According to Hinduism, the creation, preservation and dissolution of the universe is an endless cycle. The creation and preservation portion of each cycle is a period of

approximately 309 trillion years, at which point Mahapralaya, the Great Dissolution, occurs. MahaÂ-pralaya is the absorption of all existence - including time, space and individual consciousness, all the worlds and their inhabitants - in God, a return of all things to the source, sometimes likened to the water of a river returning to the sea. Then God alone exists until He again issues forth creation.

Hinduism in Practice

Hinduism has three sustaining pillars: temple worship, scripture and the guru-disciple tradition. Around these all spiritual disciplines revolve, including prayer, meditation and ritual worship in the home and temple, study of scripture, recitation of mantras, pilgrimage to holy places, austerity, selfless service, generous giving, good conduct and the various yogas. Festivals and singing of holy hymns are dynamic activities.

Temples hold a central place of importance in Hindu life. Whether they be small village sanctuaries or towering citadels, they are esteemed as God's consecrated abode. In the temple Hindus draw close to the Divine and find a refuge from the world. God's grace, permeating everywhere, is most easily known within these holy precincts. It is in this purified milieu, where the three worlds (physical, astral and causal) commune most perfectly, that devotees can establish harmony with God, the Gods and their angelic helpers, called devas. Traditional temples are specially sanctified, possessing a ray of spiritual energy connecting them to the celestial worlds.

Temple rituals, performed by Hindu priests, take the form of puja, a ceremony in which the ringing of bells, passing of flames, presenting of offerings and intoning of chants invoke the devas and Gods, who then come to bless and help the devotees. Personal worship during puja may be an expression of festive celebration of important events in life, of adoration and thanksgiving, penance and confession, prayerful supplication and requests, or contemplation at the deepest levels of superconsciousness. The stone or metal Deity images enshrined in the temple are not mere symbols of God and the Gods; they are not mere inert idols but the forms through which divine love, power and blessings flood forth from the inner world of the Gods into this physical world. Devout Hindus adore the image as the Deity's physical body, knowing that the God or Goddess is actually present and conscious in it during puja, aware of devotees' thoughts and feelings and even sensing the priest's gentle touch on the metal or stone.

Priests, known as pujaris, hold a central place of honor and importance. Each

temple has its own staff of priests. Some temples appoint only one, while others have a large extended family of priests to take care of the many shrines and elaborate festivals. Most are well trained from early childhood in the intricate liturgy. These men of God must be fully knowledgeable of the metaphysical and ontological tenets of the religion and learn hundreds of mantras and chants required in the ritual worship. Generally, pujaris do not attend to the personal problems of devotees. They are God's servants, tending His temple home and its related duties, never standing between the devotee and God. Officiating priests are almost always married men, while their assistants may be unmarried young men or widowers.

Hindus consider it most important to live near a temple, as it is the center of spiritual life. It is here, in God's home, that the devotee nurtures his relationship with the Divine. Not wanting to stay away too long, he visits weekly and strives to attend each major festival, and to pilgrimage to a far-off temple annually for special blessings and a break from his daily concerns.

For the Hindu, the underlying emphasis of life is on making spiritual progress, while also pursuing one's family and professional duties and goals. He is conscious that life is a precious, fleeting opportunity to advance, to bring about inner transformation, and he strives to remain ever conscious of this fact. For him work is worship, and his faith relates to every department of life.

Hinduism's spiritual core is its holy men and women - millions of sadhus, yogis, swamis, vairagis, saints and satgurus who have dedicated their lives to full-time service, devotion and God Realization, and to proclaiming the eternal truths of Sanatana Dharma. In day-to-day life, perhaps no facet of dharma is as crucial as the spiritual teacher, or satguru. These holy men and women are a living spiritual force for the faithful. They are the inspirers and interpreters, the personal guides who, knowing God themselves, can bring devotees into God consciousness. Hindus believe that the blessing - whether a look, a touch or even a thought - coming from such a great soul helps them in their evolution, changes patterns in their life by cleaning up areas of their subconscious mind that they could not possibly have done for themselves. They further believe that if his shakti is strong enough, and if they are in tune with him enough, they will be empowered to really begin to meditate.

In all Hindu communities there are gurus who personally look after the spiritual

practices and progress of devotees. Such preceptors are equally revered whether they are men or women. In few other religions are women allowed such access to the highest seats of reverence and respect.

Within the Hindu way is a deeply rooted desire to lead a productive, ethical life, following dharma. Among the many virtues instilled in followers are truthfulness, fidelity, contentment and avoidance of greed, lust and anger. A cornerstone of dharma is ahimsa, noninjury toward all beings. Vedic rishis who revealed dharma proclaimed ahimsa as the way to achieve harmony with our environment, peace between people and compassion within ourselves. Devout followers tend to be vegetarian and seek to protect the environment. Many individuals of all faiths are concerned about our environment and properly preserving it for future generations. Hindus share this concern and honor and revere the world around them as God's creation. Their traditions have always valued nature and cared for it. They find it natural to work for the protection of the Earth's diversity and resources to achieve the goal of a secure, sustainable and lasting environment.

Selfless service to God and humanity, known as seva, is widely pursued as a way of softening the ego and drawing close to the Divine. Charity, dana, is expressed though myriad philanthropic activities, especially feeding others.

Hindus wear sectarian marks, called tilaka, on their foreheads as sacred symbols, distinctive insignia of their heritage. Rather than burial, they prefer cremation of the body upon death, which quickly releases the soul from its earthly frame, allowing it to continue its evolutionary journey.

Perhaps one of Hinduism's most refreshing characteristics is that it encourages free and open thought. Scriptures and gurus encourage followers to inquire and investigate into the nature of Truth, to explore worshipful, inner and meditative regimens to directly experience the Divine. This openness is at the root of Hinduism's famed tolerance of other cultures, religions and points of view, capsulated in the adage, "Ekam sat viprah bahuÂ-da vadanti," meaning "Truth is one, the wise describe it in different ways." The Hindu is free to choose his path, his way of approaching the Divine, and he can change it in the course of his lifetime. There is no heresy or apostasy in Hinduism. This, coupled with Hinduism's natural inclusiveness, gives little room for fanaticism, fundamentalism or closed-mindedness anywhere within the framework of Hinduism. It has been aptly called a threshold, not an enclosure.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, renowned philosopher and president of India from 1962 to 1967, summarizes in The Hindu View of Life: "The Hindu recognizes one Supreme Spirit, though different names are given to it. God is in the world, though not as the world. He does not merely intervene to create life or consciousness, but is working continuously. There is no dualism of the natural and the supernatural. Evil, error and ugliness are not ultimate. No view is so utterly erroneous, no man is so absolutely evil as to deserve complete castigation. There is no Hell, for that means there is a place where God is not, and there are sins which exceed His love. The law of karma tells us that the individual life is not a term, but a series. Heaven and Hell are higher and lower stages in one continuous movement. Every type has its own nature which should be followed. We should do our duty in that state of life to which we happen to be called. Hinduism affirms that the theological expressions of religious experience are bound to be varied, accepts all forms of belief, and guides each along his path to the common goal. These are some of the central principles of Hinduism. If Hinduism lives today, it is due to them."

Nine Beliefs of Hinduism

These nine beliefs summarizing the essential Hindu theology are drawn from chapter fourteen of our book What Is Hinduism? That chapter also presents nine corresponding beliefs of Christianity, which can be referenced if your talk is being given to a Christian group. Seeing the two side-by-side is quite revealing for those understanding Hinduism for the first time.

Nine Beliefs of Hinduism 1 Reverence for Our Revealed Scriptures

Hindus believe in the divinity of the Vedas, the world's most ancient scripture, and venerate the Agamas as equally revealed. These primordial hymns are God's word and the bedrock of Sanatana Dharma. Dharma, the eternal religion which has neither beginning nor end.

2 All-Pervasive Divinity

Hindus believe in a one, all-pervasive Supreme Being who is both immanent and transcendent, both Creator and Unmanifest Reality.

3 Three Worlds and Cycles of Creation

Hindus believe there are three worlds of existence - physical, astral and causal - and that the universe undergoes endless cycles of creation, preservation and dissolution.

4 The Laws of Karma and Dharma

Hindus believe in karma - the law of cause and effect by which each individual creates his own destiny by his thoughts, words and deeds - and in dharma, righteous living.

5 Reincarnation and Liberation

Hindus believe that the soul reincarnates, evolving through many births until all karmas have been resolved, and moksha - spiritual knowledge and liberation from the cycle of rebirth - is attained. Not a single soul will be eternally deprived of this destiny.

6 Temples and the Inner Worlds

Hindus believe that divine beings exist in unseen worlds and that temple worship, rituals, sacraments as well as personal devotionals create a communion with these devas and Gods.

7 Yoga Guided by a Satguru

Hindus believe that a spiritually awakened master, or satguru, is essential to know the Transcendent Absolute, as are personal discipline, good conduct, purification, pilgrimage, self-inquiry and meditation.

8 Compassion and Noninjury

Hindus believe that all life is sacred, to be loved and revered, and therefore practice ahimsa, "noninjury."

9 Genuine Respect for Other Faiths

Hindus believe that no particular religion teaches the only way to salvation above all others, but that all genuine religious paths are facets of God's Pure Love and Light, deserving tolerance and understanding.