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Hinduism: a Universal Religion Example

The dictionary defines Hinduism as, a major religious and cultural tradition of South Asia, developed from the Vedic region. However, Hinduism as a whole cannot be boiled down to a simple sentence. While it is a religion that over millions of people follow, it also can be considered a lifestyle. Even the roots of Hinduism are different than other well-known religions, as it has no original leader, no single scripture, or even a regularly fixed set of teachings. So what is Hinduism? It is often addressed as the eternal faith or the Santana Dharma because it is based on collective wisdom of several various teachers (Singh, 1990). Like most ancient faiths, there are religious texts and scriptures for believers to follow. For Hinduism, it is the Vedas and the Upanishads. These Scriptures teach its followers the best way to live their life, offering guidance and spiritual confirmation. Another major difference between Hinduism and other renowned religions is the fact that it can be considered a universal religion or belief system. A universal religion is a religion that transcends normal human pettiness, fake theology, and a one-way system. It's a religion that does not belong to one specific race or gender or country and does not maintain a sense of superiority. It is a religion of freedom of thought and rationality and goodness. It is a religion that recognizes the value of all lives and all of humanity. These are all the different aspects that Hinduism encompasses and what makes it a renowned universal religion.

A common misconception regarding the religion of Hinduism is that Hinduism is a polytheistic religion. By definition, polytheism refers to worshipping many gods of equal stature. This is not the case in Hinduism as they recognize one unitary, supreme God, who is the absolute. While the Hindu religion does have a plethora of gods, they are more or less considered great beings rather than the one true Divine (Scotton, Hiatt, 1996). Because reality is based on inner experience rather than outer experience, so the gods are seen as an inner experience. As such, they are just as susceptible to change as the human mind (Scotton, Hiatt, 1996).

The concept of time to Hindus is different than how most Western cultures view it. While Westerners see time as linearly, Hinduism embraces an approach that interprets the notion of time as cyclical (Scotton, Hiatt, 1996). Not only is it because each soul lives on through reincarnation, but the world is created and destroyed only for the creation process to begin again. Ultimately, the world and time is eternal.

The Vedas offer guidance on how to achieve the necessary liberation from the world. It manages this by stating the four goals of life: dharma, artha, kama, and moksa. Dharma is not as basic as its definition of religion would state. Dharma is what shapes a person's worldview and their sense of justice. It is doing what they believe to be right, regardless of the circumstances. Artha and kama are the second and third goals of life. Artha is wealth while kama is sensual enjoyment and pleasure. Both of these relate to the physical and worldly desires that people face. The Hindu religion encourages seeking after both of these all in moderation, as it is unrealistic to believe that these won't be found appealing to normal people. Moksa is the release from suffering, old age, and ultimately death wherein one attain peace in spiritual poise (Singh, 1990).

The word Dharma constitutes the core of the message of India to humanity (Suda, 1970). It is shown to be of importance time and time again in both of the two great epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana and in the various religious Scriptures. In fact, the Bhagavad-Gita actually centers on the concept of dharma, as Lord Krishna encourages Arjuna to fight in the war because it is his duty as a warrior and prince. Dharma is derived from the root of the Sanskrit word, dhr, which means, to hold, have or maintain (Suda, 1970). Dharma is the philosophy of thought that keeps the whole universe in order and everything in its proper place (Suda, 1970). The

idea is that an individual only realizes his or her dharma when they get rid of all their impurities (Suda, 1970). Dharma is accordingly paired with the concept of Truth, known as Rita, which signifies divine or cosmic order (Suda, 1970). One's dharma, however, is not fixed or static. It is susceptible to change and subject to growth just as people are (Suda, 1970).

The Bhagavad-Gita is one of many Scriptures of the Hindu religion. It follows the story of Arjuna, a warrior prince, with his mentor, Lord Krishna, and his dilemma of whether or not to participate in the war while on a battlefield. It is thought to influence a whole galaxy of leaders from the [Indian] freedom movement (Singh, 1990). There are four main reasons, why the Gita is both significant and relevant, even in today's modern society. The first reason being that the Gita is written amidst a situation of conflict. The epic pans out in the middle of the great Kuruksetra War and is about a warrior for the divine call (Singh, 1990). This appeals to readers, both in the old and modern day, as every individual wants to feel that their life has a higher meaning. Furthermore, the Bhagavad-Gita shows a divine personality of the teacher (Singh, 1990). Lord Krishna is disguised in human form and it essentially personifies the Para-Brahman. The relationship between Krishna and Arjuna is one that resonates with readers as well. In the Hindu tradition, the connection between a guru and a sisya (protegee) is a very intimate one. These relationships are related to father and son, best friends, and even lovers. It is a bond based off of faith, devotion, and trust (Singh, 1990). Even though Krishna is the mentor and a god, he is never seen threatening Arjuna, but rather urging him to follow his dharma.

The Mahabharata and the Ramayana are the two great Indian epics. Not only are they interesting stories to read, but they also offer guidance on how Hindus, or people in general, should live their lives. Like the Bhagavad-Gita, the Mahabharata's inner message, also maintains one must always do their duty (Krishnananda, 1990). Additionally, the Mahabharata preaches on trusting in the Lord. When one clings to God, He will see that all abundance is poured upon [you] (Krishnananda, 1990). Like the Mahabharata, the Ramayana has numerous lessons to follow as well. In both of these epics, they start off with an initial depiction of the glory of human life, only to be contaminated by the vision of a poisonous sting that also is a part of human existence (Krishnananda, 1990). Life is not always going to be smooth sailing. It has ups and downs and it's about adapting to the curve

balls it throws. Furthermore, the Ramayana teaches about abandoning one's worldly desires, such as lust and greed and pride and to choose the path of righteousness.

Hinduism also follows a timeline in which the people split the stages of their life. These stages are known as Brahmacharya, Garhasthya, Vanaprastha, and Sannyasa (Singh, 1990). The stages are split into twenty-five year periods and are separated into student life, householder, semi-retirement, and the final stage of complete withdrawal. During one's student life, the primary focus is receiving an education. The next stage is the householder stage, which is concentrated on starting a family and that seeds into the next stage of semi-retirement. This stage is mostly a filler of gradual attachment in order to prep for the final stage of complete readiness to withdraw entirely from a social life.

Individuals are divided into four categories based on their inherent qualities (Singh, 1990). This is commonly known as a caste (or varna) system, and it is still used to this day in India. The four varnas break down into the Brahmanas, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras. The Brahmanas are ranked the highest and appear on the top of a vertical ladder. They are the people who provide spiritual guidance and intellectual sustenance to society (Singh, 1990). Next comes the Ksatriyas, or the warriors. In America they would be considered soldiers or people of power in the government; people's who duty or dharma revolves around ruling the nation and defending it against aggression (Singh, 1990). The vaisyas are the traders, those who are involved in agricultural and commercial operation (Singh, 1990). Lastly, there are the Sudras or the labourers. However, contrary to popular belief, the ladder can be shifted to look at horizontally rather than vertically. People are not desperate to switch castes, even if they appear on the lower rung. They are proud of their caste and everyone is considered an integral part of society.

The Vedanta, also known as the Upanishad, come at the end of the Vedas and hold what is considered to be key tenets of Hinduism. It follows five main principles that are the core of Hindu belief. The first one is the all-pervasive Brahman. This is an ideology that is shown in countless other religions. There is one divine entity that has a driving force and power for everything that anyone does. There is no manifestation without the divinity

behind it (Singh, 1990). This concept of the Brahman is what makes Hinduism a monotheistic religion, contrary to the common misconception of it being a polytheistic one. The next principle leapfrogs off of the first one as the Brahman resides within each person's consciousness, in the Atman (Singh, 1990). The Atman is fundamentally a soul residing in an individual. The Atman is neither separate nor apart of the Brahman as the Lord resides within the heart of each person. The relationship between the Atman and the Brahman is the crucial point upon which the entire Vedantic teaching revolves (Singh, 1990). The last three principles are what establish Hinduism as a universal religion rather than a limited one.

The four yogas (Jnana, Bhakti, Karma, and Raja) are concentrated on bringing a union between the Atman and the Brahman (Singh, 1990). The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit word, yuj, which is translated to join or yoke. That is why the idea of the four yogas or paths to the divine involves the joining of the individual soul with the universal divine being (Singh, 1990). Jnana yoga encompasses intellectual discrimination and knowledge (Singh, 1990). Intellectual discrimination is discerning between real and fiction (Gabriel, 2018). The goal is to reach Enlightenment through the process of reasoning (Gabriel, 2018). This yoga is done via studying. Bhakti yoga is the path of devotion to a personal form of God (Singh, 1990). It is considered the easiest yoga to practice, as one does not have to have supreme physical or mental attributes. In the Vedanta, there is said to be a fine thread of pure love which connects [one's] heart to the divine (Gabriel, 2018). That thread is reflected to be the crux of Bhakti. It is the ultimate surrender to the divine. Karma yoga, not to be confused as just karma, is known as, the way of action (Singh, 1990). It is performing an action, regardless of the benefits. Essentially, it is acting selflessly. The final yoga is raja yoga and it is considered the king of all yogas. This yoga involves the various spiritual practices, including physical and psychic exercises (Singh, 1990). Raja yoga means the royal path (Singleton, 2010). It is about maintaining control over one's mind. This is done through the practices of mantras, various techniques, and meditation. Every mind is filled with conflicts, which causes the obscuration of the Divine. Through the practices mentioned above, the Divine will be able to peacefully join with oneself. Many Westerners appreciate Raja yoga as it is not necessarily linked with the Hindu religion, and can be practiced regardless of one's belief system (Singleton, 2010).

The concept of karma is not lost on Western culture and this Hindu idea is one of the more recognized one. Etymologically karma means work, but it is more often noted for the after effects of any action (Kalghatgi, 1965). The principle of karma revolves around the idea of eternal metempsychosis (Kalghatgi, 1965). This word, developed from the Greek language, envelops the idea of the soul after death, transitioning to a new body, regardless of species. It is a subcategory of the idea of reincarnation. The basic idea of karma is that through ones actions, a unique and particular life is created (Scotton, Hiatt, 1996). Regardless of the nature of any action action, actions of a particular type produce experiences that match that type of said action (Scotton, Hiatt, 1996). The actions continuously persist, until a human makes an effort to change their ways and stop performing actions that harm either themselves or others. This is where the idea of metempsychosis comes in. Accumulated karma is carried over from one lifetime to the next (Scotton, Hiatt, 1996). A specific soul will be forced to continually reincarnate until the lessons from the previous life are learned and no more karma is generated, regardless if it is good or bad (Scotton, Hiatt, 1996).

All human beings, because of their shared spirituality, are members of a single, extended family (Singh, 1990). This is a principle found in the Vedanta that displays Hinduism as a universal religion. It is the belief that individuals are amrtasya putrah: children of immortality. Humans carry within their consciousness the light and power of the Brahman (Singh, 1990). Furthermore, the Vedanta talks about the essential unity of all religions and of all spiritual paths (Singh, 1990). There is no explicit way to the divine but rather there is a multiplicity of paths.

Hinduism has approximately around nine hundred million followers. There is a multiplicity of paths on the way to the divine, and that is due to the fact that everyone comes from a different background. Even in the Bhagavad-Gita, there is a sense of universal applicability. Hinduism does not confine itself to any particular creed, and has no desire to make converts (Singh, 1990). This is due to the fact that the divine Brahman and Atman reside in all beings (Singh, 1990). What works for one person, may not work for another. There is no central book or authority, which is different from many religions as Christianity focuses on the Bible and Islam, has the Quran.

While Hinduism is a religion, it can also be seen as a way of life. There are no strict rules or guidelines one must

follow in order to be in accordance with their way of living. While many Hindus are vegetarian because they believe in the well being of all beings, there are others who are not. There is no specificity. Furthermore, it is extremely tolerant. In all the religious Scriptures and texts such as the Upanishads and the Vedas, Hindus put an emphasis on the many different ways to reach God or the Brahman. This belief comes from the fact that God exists in everything and everyone. Furthermore, Hinduism doesn't believe in conversions. Missionaries were never a priority because if the Brahman resides in all beings, people will realize it themselves. While Hindus do have rituals, which they follow, they are by no means necessary in order to gain access to the Divine. The only requisite to become a Hindu, is sincerity and the actual desire to become one with the Brahman. There is a prayer in Hinduism that translates to, well-being of the whole world. Hinduism is not an exclusive religion, but one that is open to all (Beckerlegge, 2004).

Like most belief systems, Hinduism has many different tenants and principles condensed into one religion. Whether it is the idea of reincarnation, where a soul is reborn into another body after death, or the concept of karma, Hinduism has managed to become a forefront on the religious playing field. It is currently the third highest followed religion in the world, with over millions of faithful followers. While it started as a religion based on geography (the Indu River), it has made its way all throughout India and even into the Western hemisphere. But how has a religion that doesn't force conversions or even believe in missionaries become so big? Hinduism prides itself on being a tolerant religion. Unlike Christianity and Islam, Hindus are open-minded towards other faiths because they believe that they are all pathways to the Brahman. It is difficult to categorize Hinduism into a specific sect of theology, as Hindu theology contains many different elements of almost every theological system. There are five ideologies, however, that help condense the Hindu religion. These five elements have given shape to the Hindu religious tradition: doctrine, practice, society, story, and devotion (Narayanan, et al., 2018). While Hinduism has many different messages relayed to its followers, the very essence of Hinduism is found in the opening line of the Upanishads, This entire cosmos, what is still or moving is pervaded by the Divine (Singh, 1990).