

## What Can Christians Learn from Hindus

Ephesians 2:1-10

Imagine a Christian such as myself having a conversation with a Hindu guru, a teacher. I ask, "Is your religion monotheistic or polytheistic?" In other words, "Do you have many gods or one God?" The guru replies, "Yes." I ask, "Is your God transcendent or immanent? Is God up there or down here?" The teacher replies, "Certainly." Uncomfortable now, I push a step further. "You refer to God as Brahman, Vishnu, and Shiva. Do Hindus embrace a Trinity as Christians embrace the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?" With kindness in his eyes the guru replies, "As you like it."

Frustrated now I say, "You can't have you cake and eat it too. Just give me the facts, yes or no." Patiently the guru replies, "God has made different religions to suit different hopes and desires, different times, and countries. All religions are simply different paths to God. So it doesn't matter which way you eat your cake – frosting first, straight-up, sideways-it's still cake. Truth is one, but the wise call it by many names." "So you do believe in one God?" I ask again. He replies, "Well, maybe, or maybe not. Come let me show you the images that inhabit our temple."

People who believe that all religious paths are equally valid routes to God are attracted to Hinduism. There are about 900 million Hindus in the world, with about a million of them in the United States. In a world where religions compete and fight with each other, there is something comforting about this inner path to peace as promoted by Hinduism.

As we might guess, Hinduism is the most diverse and the most accepting religion in the world. Hinduism is in fact not truly one religion, it is the combination of many different streams of thought and ideas and with many different customs and different concepts of what we call God. Hindus believe that all gods (small "g" god) are simply different ways of visualizing the one God (capital G).

Many Christians, of course, see this approach to faith as simply the worship of many gods over and against the one true God who is known to us as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

As I look at pictures of Hindu Temples, and pictures of images of the broad range of "gods" that are portrayed in sculpture or Hindu art, I am reminded of what the Apostle Paul said when he arrived in Athens. Paul was stunned by the multiple idols he discovered on Mars Hill. These ancient people embraced all gods, and even erected an idol to an

unknown God. So when Paul got a chance to speak, this is what he said: "O people of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious. Let me tell you, if I might, about this one unknown God. This God made the world and everything that is in it. This master of sky and land doesn't live in custom made shrines or need the human race to run errands... God made the creatures; the creatures didn't make God... God doesn't play hide and seek with us. God is not remote; God is near. In God we live and move and have our being." This is the nature of the God Christians worship. We understand God as personal and relational. We understand God as a God is love.

For Hindus, spiritual growth is found in the practice of yoga. Yoga means "to unite or yoke together with God." Yoga is the process by which we can detach from the ego and discover the God within. Yoga is a way to lose ourselves in order so that we can find God. There are at least four kinds of yoga: Jnana Yoga for reflective people, Bhakta Yoga for feeling people, Karma Yoga for active people, and Raja Yoga for scientific seekers. There is also a psychophysical form of Yoga which is a popular form of exercise and not so much a path to find God.

For Christians the path to God is prayer and worship. They will know we are Christians when we can attract as many

people to a prayer meeting or worship as we can get to a sporting event. In our understanding prayer is more than conversation it is true communion (interactive communication) with God. Jesus said, "Abide in me as I abide in you." We do not lose ourselves in prayer; rather we align ourselves with the will and purposes of God. We find our peace in prayer, rather than yoga.

For Hindus accountability is found in karma. Karma is "the law of cause and effect." What goes around comes around. We all get what we deserve. Life in the world is our practice field. Karma explains the differences that exist between people. Some are healthy - others suffer from disease. Some are rich- others are starving. Some have success- others are constant losers. Galatians 6:7 says, "A person harvests whatever that person plants." Hindus see this statement as something we can all expect.

For Christians accountability is a response to God's love or to use the traditional words, God's grace. As we understand it, our actions do not predict future rewards or punishment. We see God's forgiveness as the power that allows us to overcome challenge, illness or other suffering. And so, in Ephesians 2:4-5, Paul wrote, "Because of God's great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, even

when we were dead in transgressions- it is by grace you have been saved" (Ephesians 2:4-5). To be pardoned or "saved" cancels out the law of cause and effect.

For Hindus the path to eternity is reincarnation again and again until we reach Nirvana. Shirley Maclaine once said, "Reincarnation is just like show business, you keep doing it until you get it right." Twenty percent of all Americans believe in reincarnation. Of course, the goal is to ultimately merge with God, which is the state of Nirvana. In Nirvana, our self-centeredness is gone and my spirit is returned to the heart of God's spirit.

As Christians we see eternity as life in the presence of God rather than a merger of our being with God's being. In II Corinthians 5:8 Paul says, "To be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord." I don't have to keep coming back until I get it right. God in Christ Jesus has already made it all right. Evangelist Billy Graham said not long ago, "When you hear of my death, remember this - I know who I am and I know where I'm going."

We can learn much from the example of tolerance that is such a central theme of Hinduism. We can incorporate the practices of Yoga exercise and meditation into our road to spiritual growth. And we can certainly learn from the concept

that our actions do have rewards or consequences as we claim to be Christians and to follow the teachings of Christ.

In fact, we can even find new metaphors or images in Hinduism that will enhance our spiritual journey. For instance, take this Hindu prayer. I believe this Hindu prayer can be used with integrity by anyone who claims to be a Christian:

The Hindu prayer goes like this:

Lead me from the Unreal to the Real,

Lead me from Darkness to Light,

Lead me from Death to Immortality,

In the Name of the Eternal,

Let there be peace, peace, peace, everywhere. Amen.

I do believe we can learn from our sisters and brothers who are Hindu. Do we need to buy into every idea or concept? No, I don't believe so. But we can use some of these ideas or beliefs to grow in our Christian faith. That's certainly a part of my prayer as I keep on praying "our' prayer. Join me... *God, help me see what you want me to see. Jesus, help me love myself and others as you want me to love. Holy Spirit, help me live in the power of faith, in the optimism of hope and in the joy of love. Amen.*