

# What is Hinduism?




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## Why is the question important?

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Since the Second Vatican Council, Catholics have been encouraged to learn about the faith of other people as a way of developing mutual understanding and respect. This was the Pope's theme when he spoke in New Delhi at the start of his short visit to India in 1986. Later, he affirmed that 'the Catholic Church recognises the truths that are contained in the religious traditions of India' and that 'God is present in the cultures of India'.

About 85% of India's people are Hindus, while perhaps five hundred thousand Hindus live in Britain. There are sizeable Hindu communities in London and Leicester, for example. In the last twenty years, over one hundred temples have been set up in this country, many in converted houses or halls, a few purpose built. Here and in Hindu homes, worship is offered, festivals celebrated and values passed on which belong to the Hindu way of life.

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## What is Hinduism?

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This question tends to be asked by people outside the religion seeking to understand it or by Hindus presenting their religion to non-Hindus.

'Hinduism' itself is a Western word. It grew from the Persian name for the people who lived beyond the River Indus. Later, 'Hindu' indicated Indians who were neither Muslim nor Buddhist. In the nineteenth century, Europeans called the religion of these people 'Hinduism'. Actually, 'Hinduism' was not a single religion at all.

So, a first answer to the question 'What is Hinduism?' might be:

Hinduism is a whole family of religions rooted in the Indian sub-continent.

This should lead us to expect:

*enormous variety in what counts as Hindu belief and practice*

- there is no single founder, scripture, creed or authoritative organisation for Hinduism as a whole

*strong bonds with India*

- but India is a vast country with many major languages and other great regional variations.

At first, such diversity may seem confusing. But it should warn us not to expect all Hindus to do or believe the same and make us open to the richness of the Hindu tradition. One of the documents of the Second Vatican Council pays tribute to this richness and diversity:

"In Hinduism, people contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an inexhaustible abundance of myths and through searching philosophical inquiry.

They seek freedom from the anguish of our human condition either through ascetical practices or profound meditation or a flight to God with love and trust" (Nostra Aetate, 2).

A term which Hindus sometimes use to indicate the unity underlying this great variation of Hindu thought and practice is 'Sanatana Dharma'.

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### What is Sanatana Dharma?

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'Sanatana Dharma' is an expression with many meanings. 'Dharma' comes from a root meaning 'to make firm'. So, firstly, *dharma* is the principle of order in our universe. Humans have their place within a wider perspective. 'Dharma' also means 'righteousness'. To act in accordance with dharma is to act rightly and so to sustain order in human society and the larger world. Dharma is not just about ideals, but the many particular social and religious duties, which vary from person to person and caste to caste.

'Sanatana' means 'eternal'. This dharma is eternal because it derives from the *Vedas*, the ancient Sanskrit scriptures believed by many Hindus to be eternal. Its values, such as truthfulness, generosity and peace, are universal, valid for all time.

'Sanatana' can also refer to the One Supreme Reality (*Brahman*) which pervades this universe. So the Sanatana Dharma is also the many-sided teaching which is based on and leads to an understanding of the Supreme Reality. For Gandhi, this expressed itself in his deep commitment to seeking Truth.

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### Some other key ideas

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Most Hindus accept the ideas of *karma* and

*samsara*. *Samsara* is the cycle of death and rebirth which the *atman* (self or soul) goes through. 'Karma' means 'action'. Self-centred actions, whether meritorious or unmeritorious, perpetuate rebirth and a person's next rebirth is affected by such actions in previous lives. Following your dharma, though, is a way of gaining merit and getting rebirth in a higher caste. Dharma is one of the four aims of life. *Artha* (wealth and power) and *kama* (pleasure) are two others. The ultimate aim is *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of rebirth). *Moksha* is attained when Brahman, the Supreme Reality, sought unselfishly, is fully understood.

Being a Hindu, then, is not simply a question of a spiritual search. It affects every aspect of daily life. The rest of this leaflet will select just a few features of life and thought which are characteristic of Hinduism, though by no means universal to all Hindus.

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### Caste: a common feature of life

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Each Hindu is born into a caste (*jati*), a social group with its own duties and place in a hierarchy. By tradition, ritually pure *brahmin* (priestly) castes come at the top. Ritually impure castes, e.g. leatherworkers, are at the bottom. Today, in many parts of India and abroad, traditional caste rules and attitudes are not strictly maintained, but caste remains important. Most Hindus still marry within their caste. In Britain, caste organisations may give assistance to members in financial or other difficulty and arrange programmes for festivals or sessions for devotional singing.

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### Worship

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Worship is one of the many ways of coming

to understand Brahman. The Council document quoted above mentions rigorous asceticism, meditation and devotion. Though these are not necessarily separate paths, devotional worship does tend to personalise Brahman as 'the Lord'.

For some Hindus, the Lord is Vishnu, the preserver of all, who descends in various forms to restore *dharma*; Rama and Krishna are two of the most popular human forms of descent. For other Hindus, the Lord is Shiva, the great meditating ascetic and destroyer of ignorance. Yet others are devoted to Devi, the Goddess. Many further gods and goddesses are also worshipped. For most Hindus, these Gods are simply seen as different forms of One Reality, which is greater than all human thoughts.

Daily *puja* in the home is an important way of showing devotion to the Lord. At the shrine, offerings of food, flowers and lamps are made to the worshipper's chosen form of God, say Krishna, present in a small image or devotional picture. This image of the god is not God in essential nature but is the visible form of God's presence for the worshipper. God's blessing is received as the family members accept back the food offered to the god and symbolically take the light from the lamp into their minds and hearts.

Worship is also offered through the *puja* in the temple, devotional hymn-singing and on pilgrimage to sacred locations which mediate the divine. Often these are on mountains or rivers, Benares on the River Ganges being a famous example. Other common practices are the daily rituals and life-cycle rites, whose detail varies from caste to caste.

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## Festivals

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The annual cycle of festivals again shows unity and diversity. While some festivals are celebrated throughout India, others are regional or local. In Britain, pan-Indian festivals, like Divali, are now celebrated with colour and excitement. Gujarati Hindus celebrate Navratri's nine nights of dancing, while the North Indian festival of Holi has become a time for visiting neighbours. For some Hindus, far from family or friends, festivals will simply be marked by a special *puja* at home and a fast from grains and meat.

Fasts are of many kinds. Like pilgrimages, they may be linked with a vow. They are a form of devotion, a way of purifying oneself and of heightening awareness of God and of other people.

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## Values

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The interiority propounded in the scriptures is distinctive of Hinduism. Many Hindus continue to aspire to such inner understanding, particularly in old age. The values of *dharma* are handed on in families through example, worship and by the telling of myths and other stories. Children may hear of Rama, the ideal husband who always fights for truth; or of Sita, his virtuous wife, whose purity and faithfulness they may emulate. They see their parents showing respect to their elders and giving generous hospitality to guests. Such values are shared by Hindus of widely differing practices and beliefs and can invite us to acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods of those Hindus who are our neighbours (cf. *Nostra Aetate*, 2).

## Questions for discussion

1. Hindus emphasise in many ways the importance of realising God's presence, of understanding the truth within. What resources in the Christian tradition are available to deepen our inner lives?
2. How might an understanding and experience of hospitality in one another's traditions encourage 'fruitful collaboration' between Christians and Hindus? (Pope John Paul II. New Delhi, 1986).

### Suggested Reading:

David Kinsley **Hinduism: a cultural perspective**, Prentice-Hall 1982. Jacqueline Hirst with Geeta Pandey **Growing Up in Hinduism**, Longman, 1990. Klaus Klostermaier **A Survey of Hinduism** SUNY, reprint 1996.

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*The Committee is grateful to Dr J S Hirst for this contribution.*

+ **Charles Henderson, Chairman**

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