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## What is Hinduism?

By Colleen Messina

Hinduism is quite different from other world religions. For example, if you were a Muslim, you would read the Koran. If you were a Christian, you would read the Bible. However, if you were a Hindu, you would read a variety of ancient texts. While other major religions have a founding father or prophet, Hinduism has no original teacher. Hinduism is a unique religion in many ways.

Hinduism is over three thousand years old. The word "hindu" comes from Hind, which is a Persian word for India. Indians call their religion the *Sanatan Dharma*, which means "Universal Religion." In the broadest sense, Hinduism is the religion of the many peoples of India.

The country of India has many different regions, and Hinduism is not the same in each region. However, all Hindus love their sacred scriptures. The Rig-Veda is the oldest of the Hindu scriptures. In one part of this legend, a dragon named Vritra steals all of the water on earth. A god named Indra heroically fights the dragon to get the water back, and when he does, life is restored to the land. This story was first told orally. Later, Indians wrote them down in Sanskrit around 1500 B.C. Other Hindu scriptures include the Ramayana, the Upanishads, and the Mahabharata. These texts contain the core beliefs of Hinduism.

One central belief in Hinduism is a belief in Brahman, the universal spirit behind everything. He is the force behind all other deities. Brahman shows himself through many gods and goddesses. Every Hindu has his or her favorite god or goddess, and many temples dot the landscapes of India. There are also stunning statues of the Hindu deities in every home. This idea of a host of deities representing different aspects of Brahman is quite different from the Jewish, Christian, or Muslim idea of one god.



Some of the most dramatic statues represent the Hindu trinity. Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are the three parts of the *Trimurti*, or holy trinity. Brahma's job was to create the universe. He is different than Brahman, the universal spirit. Representations of Brahma sometimes show three heads so that he can keep an eye (or six of them) on his creation! After he made the world, he was done with his job.

However, the other two parts of the Hindu trinity have ongoing work like the rest of us. Shiva's job is to destroy one cycle of life so that a new cycle can begin. One common statue of Shiva shows him dancing with a circle of flames surrounding his head. He is balancing on his right foot, while lifting up his left foot. His right foot rests on top of the Black Dwarf, a demon of ignorance. Shiva has four arms and wild, whirling hair! Flowers, snakes, and even a skull are held in his wavy locks. The symbols in this statue come from an ancient legend where Shiva conquered 10,000 non-believers by stomping on the demon of ignorance. Many Hindus love Shiva's fierceness!

Another part of the Hindu trinity is Vishnu. He has the 24/7 job of keeping order in the universe, which is probably a bit harder than keeping your room clean! Some of the liveliest stories in the Hindu tradition are about the avatars of Vishnu who came down to earth. An avatar is an incarnation of a god. Each of the ten avatars of Vishnu came to rescue earth from trouble. The first avatar came as a fish to rescue the world from a flood. Another avatar was a warrior named Parashurama. He wiped out a bad king. One of the liveliest avatars of Vishnu was Krishna. He was avatar number eight. He had the blue skin and was a butter-loving, flute-playing cowherd. Krishna has unofficially won the most popular avatar award in Hinduism!

One of the reasons that Indians love Krishna is because he is the central character in an enormous poem called the Mahabharata. One important part of this poem is called the Bhagavad-Gita, which tells the story of a war between relatives. One family represents good, while the other family represents evil. Arjuna is the leader of the good side, and Krishna is his charioteer. Together they wage an exciting war against darkness!

However, this great story has a twist to it. Since Krishna is really a god, he gives Arjuna lots of divine advice and help. Krishna tells Arjuna to lead his people into battle and tells him that even if people die, their souls will live forever. Hindus believe that a person has many lives. Krishna tells Arjuna that a soul can escape the cycles of

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rebirth in three ways. The soul can be free by doing good works and making good karma, by meditation, or by devotion to God. Hindu children enjoy the ancient Krishna stories in the same way that many Christian children like Bible stories.

Not all Hindu stories are thousands, or even hundreds, of years old. Sri Ramakrishna was a Hindu teacher who lived in the 19th century. He used stories all the time to teach his students different spiritual truths. You might even recognize some of his stories, like the story about four blind men and an elephant.

One day, four blind men were led to an elephant to "see" it. Each of them felt a different part of the great beast, but being blind, each had different idea about the nature of the animal. The first man felt the elephant's leg and said that an elephant is like a pillar. The second man felt the elephant's tummy and said that an elephant is like a large jar. The third man had a different idea after he felt the elephant's trunk. He said the elephant is like a thick club. The last man disagreed with all of his friends. He felt the elephant's huge ears and was sure that the elephant was like a fan.

Soon the four friends were all arguing about the true nature of the beast. A passerby asked them what they were fighting about, and they told him. The man explained to them that the elephant had different parts, and that each of them had only experienced one part. Sri Ramakrishna used this elephant story to explain why it is ridiculous for men to argue about which religion is best because anyone who fights about God has only seen a part of him!

One common theme in many Hindu stories is their belief in reincarnation, or the idea that we are born many times. In Hinduism, the soul does not stay in one body. The soul first enters the body of something simple, not human. You might be a bug in your first life! As your soul evolves, it enters more and more complex life forms (here kitty, kitty). Eventually, the soul enters a human body. Then the law of karma kicks in. This means that good choices in one lifetime lead to good things in the next lifetime. Unkind acts may mean hardships in the next life. Hindus believe that we create our own future circumstances. A belief in karma is a good reason to be nice to people!

Another important idea in Hinduism is dharma. Dharma means fulfilling our purpose in life. Everyone has a special dharma. Your dharma right now is to be a student. Later, you might be a parent, an employee, a businessperson, or something else. The idea of fulfilling one's purpose is important to every Hindu, and each person's ultimate goal is to reunite with Brahman.

Like many religions, Hinduism has many festivals throughout the year. One of the most important is Divali, the Festival of Lights, which celebrates the New Year. Divali means "row of lamps." Hindus light clay lamps filled with oil and place them in windows, on roofs, and around courtyards. Divali celebrates the triumph of light over darkness. Holi is the rowdy, spring harvest festival. Everyone throws colored powder at each other! Janmashtami is Krishna's birthday. During Janmashtami, the streets and homes are decorated with mango leaves and banana trees. Temples to Krishna are decorated with flowers and lights to honor the blue avatar.

With its many gods, colorful festivals, and rich stories, Hinduism is unique. Every Hindu can find a special god or goddess to worship. Hinduism affects all elements of life for those who follow it. Hindus don't simply practice their religion. They live it!

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## Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. How did Hindus originally transmit the Rig-Veda?
- A. on scrolls
  - B. through stone tablets
  - C. on cave paintings
  - D. by word of mouth
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. What is the language of the Rig-Veda?
- A. Persian
  - B. Chinese
  - C. Sanskrit
  - D. English



