

Name of Religion: Hinduism

God(s): Brahman

Number of adherents: Hinduism has over 1.08 billion adherents worldwide (15% of world's population) with about 95% living in India. Along with Christianity (31.5%), Islam (23.2%) and Buddhism (7.1%), Hinduism is one of the four major religions of the world by percentage of population.

Date of Origin: 6,000 years ago (4000 BCE or possibly earlier); regarded as the oldest known practicing religion in the world. Through archeology, believed to have originated with the Indus-River Valley Civilization. Around 1500 BCE, people from the north, known as Aryans, came through the passes in the Caucasus Mountains between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, and brought their own knowledge and religion, which fused with the indigenous people to form the roots of Hinduism.

Founder: Unlike most other religions, Hinduism has no single founder/leader, no single scripture, and no commonly agreed set of teachings. Hinduism is the least dogmatic religion - there is not *one way* of being a Hindu.

Sacred scripture: The *Vedas* ("Knowledge") are the oldest Hindu texts and are a collection of poems or hymns. Hindus regard the Vedas as having been directly revealed to or "heard" by gifted and inspired seers (rishis) who memorized them in the "most perfect human language", Sanskrit. The Vedic literature teaches Hindus the nature of the soul, God, the material universe, the nature of activities and karma, reincarnation, the process of yoga (practice to control the senses and ultimately, the mind), and the purpose of life. *Bhagavan Sri Krishna* (the complete manifestation of God) continues to emphasize the need to end human karma, to stop the cycle of birth and death in this material existence, and to ultimately reach the spiritual world, His abode, where we belong.

Background: a world religion originating on the Indian subcontinent and comprising several and varied systems of philosophy, belief, and ritual.

Main principles:

1. *Truth is eternal.* The truth is ONE. May be many different pathways to truth (some may take the pathways of truth or devotion or knowledge or duty), but all Hindus are seeking the one reality/truth that transcends Hinduism itself.
2. *There is one God.* Hindus are not really polytheistic, as many people may believe, but Hindus believe that there is "one world soul" called **Brahman**. Now, out of that one world soul, there are manifestations through other gods and goddesses.
 - a. *Brahman* is the creator.
 - b. *Vishnu* is the protector.
 - c. *Shiva* is the destroyer.
 - d. *Many other mother gods and goddesses that individual Hindus can decide to follow and pray to, but all of these are extensions of Brahman, the one world soul.*
3. *All Hindus believe the **Vedas** are sacred.* The Vedas are 4 books of *knowledge*. (Originally, the Vedas weren't written down; they were poems/hymns/prayers/rituals that were memorized and passed down through generations. Around 500 BCE, much of the information was written down. These became the foundation for the practice of Hinduism. Some Hindus follow certain

Vedas more than others; and yet, other Hindus follow other Vedas. Lots of room for different beliefs and interpretations of the Vedas.

Dharma – the basic principles of cosmic or individual existence: divine law. All Hindus believe it is their job on earth to find their dharma and do it. It's the belief that there is *a way/path* of living your life, according to your path of truth: authenticity, honesty, virtue.

Karma - the sum of a person's actions in this and previous states of existence, viewed as deciding their fate in future existences.

4. *All souls are immortal.* Hindus believe that we all have **Atman**, our connection to the universe; our soul; the god inside of us. This soul (in humans) is connected through the interconnectedness of the universe to Brahman, the one world soul. People find this connection through their dharma (their path), knowing that their karma (their good deeds and bad deeds) influence the path that they must follow. All Hindus believe in reincarnation; they believe that the Atman (which is forever) transcends the body (transmigration) when a person dies. After death, the soul transmigrates to another body. That person's karma (what they did on earth) effects which dharma the person has in the next life; karma determines who that person will be born as, who their parents are, whether they will be poor or rich...which connects to the original caste system idea – you are born into a certain caste based on your karma, and your dharma is dictated by the person you were born into. (Hierarchical caste system: priests (closest to eternal truth), warriors/kings, merchants/landowners, commoners/peasants/servants, street sweepers/latrine cleaners.) No one person is born saved or condemned, but rather earns the fruit of their actions, words, and thoughts, or *karma*, and advances spiritually by acting in accordance with *dharma*, or righteousness.
5. *Moksha – the search for eternal truth and freedom from life and death.* Following one's dharma will liberate one's soul from the constant cycle of reincarnation. If you follow your path, you can reach moksha and your soul will be free from the misery and pain of human earth.

Follow your dharma, which is dictated by your karma, so you can achieve moksha and free your soul from earth to be connected to the one eternal soul, Brahman.

Main belief(s): More strikingly than any other major religious community, Hindus accept—and indeed celebrate—the organic, multileveled, and sometimes pluralistic nature of their traditions. When Hindus speak of their religious identity as *sanatana dharma*, they emphasize its continuous, seemingly eternal (sanatana) existence and the fact that it describes a web of customs, obligations, traditions, and ideals (dharma) that far exceeds the Western tendency to think of religion primarily as a system of beliefs. *Sanatana dharma* consists of virtues such as honesty, refraining from injuring living beings, purity, goodwill, mercy, patience, forbearance, self-restraint, generosity, and asceticism (severe self-discipline and avoidance of all forms of indulgence). A common way in which English-speaking Hindus often distance themselves from that frame of mind is to insist that Hinduism is not a religion but a way of life. In the pursuit of truth, tolerance is the foremost religious virtue.

Hinduism is practiced in many different forms: family tradition, own personal path, lots of different ways to practice.

However, all believe that the rivers in the Ganges are sacred; they cleanse their souls by bathing in it, they are all supposed to make a pilgrimage to the Ganges.

There are also traditions of fire alters, burning offerings, and having a temple in your own home.

There is also a belief in sages, people born with the eternal truth, and it's their job to teach other Hindus about the eternal truth.