

# Hinduism



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Hinduism generally is regarded as the oldest formal religion in the world.

The origins of Hinduism go back to the pastoral Aryan tribes, spilling over the Hindu Kush from Inner Asia, and mixing with the urban civilization of the Indus Valley and with the tribal cultures of hunting and gathering peoples in the area. Unlike other world religions, Hinduism had no single founder and has never been missionary in orientation. It is believed that about 1200 B. C., or even earlier by some accounts, the Vedas, a body of hymns originating in northern India were produced; these texts form the theological and philosophical precepts of Hinduism.

Hindus believe that the absolute (the totality of existence, including God, man, and universe) is too vast to be contained within a single set of beliefs. A highly diverse and complex religion, Hinduism embraces six philosophical doctrines (darshanas). From these doctrines, individuals select one that is congenial, or conduct their worship simply on a convenient level of morality and observance. Religious practices differ from group to group. The average Hindu does not need any systematic formal

creed in order to practice his or her religion. Hindus only to comply with the customs of their family and social groups.

One basic concept in Hinduism is that of dharma, natural law and the social and religious obligations it imposes. It holds that individuals should play their proper role in society as determined or prescribed by their dharma.

The caste system, although not essential to philosophical Hinduism, has become an integral part of its social or dharmic expression. Under this

system, each person is born into a particular caste, whose traditional occupation-- although members do not necessarily practice it--is graded according to the degree of purity and impurity inherent in it.

Other fundamental ideas common to all Hindus concern the nature and destiny

of the soul, and the basic forces of the universe. The souls of human beings are seen as separated portions of an all-embracing world soul (brahma); man's ultimate goal is reunion with this absolute.

Karma (universal justice) is the belief that the consequence of every good or bad action must be fully realized. Another basic concept is that of samsara, the transmigration of souls; rebirth is required by karma in order that the consequences of action be fulfilled. The role an individual must play throughout his or her life is fixed by his or her good and evil actions in previous existences. It is only when the individual soul sees beyond the veil of maya (illusion or earthly desires)--the forces leading to belief in the appearances of things--that it is able to realize its identity with the impersonal, transcendental reality (world soul) and to escape from the otherwise endless cycle of rebirth to be absorbed into the world soul. This release is known as moksha.

Veneration for the cow has come to be intimately associated with all orthodox Hindu sects. Because the cow is regarded as the symbol of motherhood and fruitfulness, the killing of a cow, even accidentally, is regarded as one of the most serious of religious transgressions.

Hinduism is polytheistic. It incorporates many gods and goddesses with different functions and powers; but in the most important and widely held doctrine, the Vedanta (end of the Vedas), gods and goddesses are considered

merely different manifestations or aspects of a single underlying divinity.

This single divinity is expressed as a Hindu triad comprising the religion's three major gods: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, personifying creation, preservation, and destruction, respectively. Vishnu and Shiva, or some of their numerous avatars (incarnations), are most widely followed.

Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, is regarded as the ninth avatar of Vishnu.

Some Hindus identify Christ as the tenth avatar; others regard Kalki as the final avatar who is yet to come. These avatars are believed to descend upon earth to restore peace, order, and justice, or to save humanity from injustice. The Mahabharata (compiled by the sage Vyasa, probably before A. D. 400), describes the great civil war between the Pandavas (the good) and the Kauravas (the bad)--two factions of the same clan. It is believed that the war was created by Krishna. Perhaps the flashiest and craftiest avatar of Vishnu, Krishna, as a part of his lila (sport or act), is believed motivated to restore justice--the good over the bad.