

Hinduism free essay

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Hinduism is one of the world's main religions, with about 900-million followers. 'Hindu' was originally used by outsiders to refer to people living in India (Harlan, 2005, p. 139).

It represents a diverse group of beliefs, practices, and texts that have developed over thousands of years (Ramey, 2011). Hinduism has many different beliefs about deities (gods and goddesses), life after death, and personal behavior. There are many groups within the religion that have developed their own texts, philosophies, and forms of practice. (Ramey, 2011) Hinduism has many sacred writings that have contributed to its beliefs and practices. It was developed by people of ancient India based on certain Aryan practices. Aryan priests would chant hymns in praise of their gods.

Later, those hymns and other Aryan beliefs were written down in a book and were called the Vedas. The 'Vedas' in English is 'Books of Knowledge.' They contain hymns, writings on prayers, philosophy, and religious rituals.

(Bednarz, Miyares, Schug, & White, 2005, p. 388) Hindus believe in the ideas of Karma and Reincarnation.

Both are a very important part of Hinduism. Karma is the idea that a living person's actions determine what will happen to him/her after his/her death. Reincarnation is the idea that after death, the person's soul is reborn into a different body. Hindus believe that the Karma and Reincarnation cycle occurs many times. Each person's status in life is determined by his or her behavior in previous lives.

A person who leads a virtuous life may be reborn as a wealthy or wise person. A person who lives an immoral life may be reborn as a poor or sick

person. (Bednarz, Miyares, Schug, & White, 2005, p. 388) One important feature of Hinduism is the six Darchanas. The Darchanas are a philosophical set of rules that lead to release from stress and from the earth.

The six Darchanas are Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Sankhya, Yoga, Mimamsa, and Vedanta. The Nyaya is a school of logic and epistemology (a branch of philosophy that investigates the origin, nature, methods, and limits of human knowledge). The Vaisheshika teaches that nature consists of eternal atoms distinct from the soul, by knowledge of which the soul can achieve relief of freedom. The Sankhya opposes matter to the soul. It is the doctrine of the three gunas (constant characteristics), sattava (causing goodness), rajas (passion), and tamas (laziness).

It is very influential in many sections of Indian thought. The Yoga is an exalted and remote deity forever beyond the bonds of matter. The Mimamsa is a school of Vedic exegesis, a perception of Brahmanical sacrificialism. The Vedanta, the most important of the six Darchanas, consists of the central Hindu philosophical tradition. The Darchanas greatest expositor was Shankara, a south Indian philosopher.

(Parrinder, 1983, p. 199) Another main characteristic of Hinduism is the caste system. Each person inherits a particular cast when he or she is born. That person can't change his or her caste because he has it for a lifetime. Whatever caste a person is in determines his or her job, marriage partner, and friends.

The Hindu caste system was strongly influenced by the Aryan tribal social system, which was organized around the belief that people are not equal

(Bednarz, Miyares, Schug, & White, 2005, p. 388). The four major classes in the Hindu caste system are priests, warriors and princes, merchants and farmers, and laborers. Another group, known as the ‘untouchables’, has been considered inferior to the other four major castes. ‘Untouchables’ had jobs that no one else wanted to do and weren’t allowed to have anything to do with the other castes. (Bednarz, Miyares, Schug, & White, 2005, p.

388) Today, the Hindu caste system has thousands of castes and subcastes. But the four major castes are still the most important. Now, the government and some other groups are trying to reduce the caste system’s influence on society. (Bednarz, Miyares, Schug, & White, 2005, p. 388) Hindus consider temples as buildings dedicated to divinities. Most Hindu temples have many shrines, each devoted to a divinity.

Each temple has one principle shrine that is devoted to one single important god or goddess. Hindus show the divinities as sculptured images and they treat the images as living human beings. Followers worship as individuals, not as congregations. Many Hindus worship on their own and not in a huge group. (White, 2008, p. 387-388) Many temples hold annual festivals in memory of the lives of the divinities.

Huge crowds come to worship, pray for assistance, and to enjoy the decoration. (White, 2008, p. 387-388) One very popular festival is the Dewali. Dewali means the Feast of Lights. It begins at dusk on the night of the new moon of Karttika (October and November). When it begins to get dark, there are many lights lit to frighten away demons.

But, the Dewali lights might be put up for personal meanings, too. Every young girl makes her own Dewali light. If a girl lives near a river, she sets her Dewali light on a small raft in the water. If it stays alight as long as the girl can see it, she will have good luck in the coming year. (LIFE Staff, 1969, p.

33-34) Another festival is the Hindu New Year. This is a time for being happy and for serious prayer. If people can afford it, they celebrate with new clothes, special feasts, fancy cakes, and lights. People also balance their religious and business accounts. Hindus believe that a good person ends all quarrels and forgives all their enemies when the New Year begins. (LIFE Staff, 1969, p.

33-34) The Durga Puja festival honors the divine mother goddess. The Durga Puja is one of the largest and most elaborate festivals of Hindu religion. The festival is held in autumn. The divine mother goddess is known by many names- Durga, Shakti, Kali, Parvati, and many others. She is also worshipped in many ways. (LIFE Staff, 1969, p.

33-34) Most of the homes in India have a shrine devoted to a divinity chosen by the family. The husband or wife usually conducts the daily family worship. A lot of important ceremonies are performed at home. Some religious ceremonies include marriage ceremonies, rituals connected with pregnancy, and childbirth. (White, 2008, p.

236-237) Hindus also worship the living and dead as saints. Some saints are yogis (men who practice yoga) and some are gurus (spiritual teachers). Hinduism has many local and regional saints. Many Hindu monks and nuns

have joined together in religious orders under the leadership of a saint.

(White, 2008, p.

236-237) Hindus believe that God evolved the universe from his own being. For Hindus, whatever god a man worships, his prayer reaches the same divinity. There are three groups based on the divinity of family tradition that they look on as the most important part of the ' Universal Spirit.' The three groups are the Shaivas, the Vaishnavas, and the Shaktas. The Shaivas believe that Shiva is the chief god and that all others are lower ranks of him. They believe that he created the world, maintains it through his divine asceticism, and will destroy all of it at the end of this age.

The Vaishnavas believe that the world appears when the god Vishnu awakes at the end of the cosmic night. They also believe that creation is the work of Brahma. Vaishnavas believe that Vishnu preserves the universe throughout the cosmic day and occasionally incarnating himself as an avatar so he can save it from demon attacks. At nightfall, Vishnu will sleep and the universe will be destroyed and formed into his being until he wakes up at the next cosmic dawn. The Shaktas believe that Shakti is the chief goddess (wife of Shiva).

Shakti personifies Mother Nature: she produces the world, sustains it with loving care for the faithful and dismay for the sinner, and will eventually destroy it. The Shaktas believe that Shakti is the personified power and is of the Supreme divinity. (Zehavi, 1973, p. 162) Shiva is often worshipped in the form of an upright post with a rounded top, the linga, a phallic symbol showing his original character as a fertility god (Zehavi, 1973, p. 162).

Shiva often appears as the divine dancer, which is one of the most beautiful images of Hindu religious art. The worship of Shiva is very popular in south India. (Zehavi, 1973, p. 162) The god Vishnu isn't worshipped often in his supreme form. He is worshipped more often in one of his incarnations, especially Rama and Krishna.

As one of his incarnations, he often appears as a handsome young man playing a flute. He symbolizes the call of God to a human's soul to come near and rejoice in his presence. (Zehavi, 1973, p. 162) As Parvati or Uma, the Mother Goddess is portrayed as a beautiful young woman. In a fiercer mood, she appears as Kali, a terrible ogress or Durga, a beautiful, stern-faced girl riding a lion. Ganesha is the son of Shiva and Parvati.

He has the head of an elephant and is the patron of all practical enterprises. Skanda (Karttikeya) is a son of Shiva and is popular in south India. Skanda is known for having six faces and twelve hands. He is also the captain of the army of gods and leads them in battle against demons. Hanuman is the monkey helper of Rama. He is the seventh incarnation of Vishnu.

Hanuman symbolizes the active and constant power of God in the world and that he is always ready to help his worshippers if they are in trouble. (Zehavi, 1973, p. 162) Rivers are a central point of worship. If there is no running water available, a person will say his pre-dawn prayers in a pond, water tank, or at the edge of the ocean. But, they usually prefer running water and rivers and they are worshipped as sacred.

The sacredness of rivers has never been fully understood or explained. They have always been sacred and people have migrated to them to take

advantage of their known holiness. Many Hindus worship at dawn because dawn is the most sacred time of the day. (Rice, 1973, p. 5-39) The Ganges River is the most sacred out of all the rivers.

Hindus call it ' Ma Ganga' (Mother Ganges) because she is a life giving power. ' Ma Ganga' is only one of its 108 sacred names. One legend says that the Ganges River drops from heaven and her fall is cushioned by Shiva's long locks. The river flows into a cave in the Himalayas and then down thirteen thousand feet through the mountains to Hardwar (one of the seven sacred cities). At Hardwar, the Ganges River is joined by four other rivers that are coming from the interior of the earth. (Rice, 1973, p.

5-39) One form of worship performed on the river is jalsain. It involves meditating on a bamboo platform over the water during the coldest part of the winter. The worshipper sits all day and night while he or she prays and meditates, despite the cold and hunger. (Rice, 1973, p. 5-39) Marriage is another important tradition of Hindu culture. The wedding ceremony symbolizes this conception of marriage as gift, sacrament, and initiation (Parrinder, 1983, p.

199). A man must not marry a random woman. She must be unrelated to the groom on his father's or mother's side of the family, of equal birth, and must be in the same caste as the groom. (Parrinder, 1983, p. 199) It is also a tradition for women to have their hands decorated at the time of their marriage. It is done in wax and will last for several days until it wears away.

(Rice, 1973, p. 5-39) At the beginning of a wedding, the bridegroom and his party travel in procession to the bride's house. They are received hospitably
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by the bride's father. The couple is then seated in a temporary pavilion on either side of a small curtain that is removed when the officiating priest murmurs sacred verses. Then, the bride's father formally gives his daughter to the groom and the couple clasps hands and offer grain in the sacred fire. The couple walks seven steps around the fire with the ends of their garment knotted together and are sprinkled with holy water.

More rites take place after the couple's recession to the groom's home and the marriage is fulfilled. (Parrinder, 1983, p. 199) Hinduism has become an international religion because of migrations to Europe, North America, the Caribbean, Africa, and the Persian Gulf states. Despite the complexity and diversity of Hinduism, it has remained mostly unchanged for over a thousand years. But, the pressure of the modern world is starting to influence religious practices, causing some changes in Hindu traditions and values.

One of the greatest challenges for migrated Hindus and their children will be maintaining Hindu traditions and values in the midst of a modern society. (Harlan, 2005, p. 142) References Bednarz, Sarah Witham, Miyares, Ines M., Schug, Mark C., White, Charles S. (2005).

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