

## **“Many Ways to God: A Sermon on Hinduism”**

Reverend Sharon K. Dittmar  
First Unitarian Church  
536 Linton Street  
Cincinnati, Ohio 45219  
513.281.1564  
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In a sermon last September I quoted religion professor, Stephen Prothero, who noted that in order to be productive, discerning citizens, we Americans need to know more religion. In an increasingly connected and volatile world, we need to understand religion, the source of so much global and local identity, meaning, interpretation, and conflict. More importantly, as Unitarian Universalists we have covenanted to affirm and promote seven principles, the third principle is the “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations” and the fourth principle is “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” In addition, the sources we draw from as Unitarian Universalists include “Wisdom from the world’s religions.” This led to our worship theme for the year, world religions and views, and our first sermon on a major world religion, Hinduism.

Hinduism is the oldest, continuous major world religion in existence. Elements of Hinduism began developing five thousand years ago, and another major world religion, Buddhism, was created out of a dialogue with Hinduism. Today Hinduism is the third most populous world religion after Christianity and Islam. There are over 900 million Hindus in the world, most of who live in India. However, there are also Hindus in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, and approximately 1.5 million Hindus in the United States.

The internet site, Wikipedia, has this quote on Hinduism

Hinduism is a diverse system of thought with beliefs spanning monotheism (one God), polytheism (many gods), panentheism (God within and without), pantheism (God in all things), monism (God substance of all things) and atheism (no God). It is sometimes referred to as henotheistic (devotion to a single “god” while accepting the existence of other gods), but any such term is an oversimplification of the complexities and variations of belief.

This is an excellent theological synopsis of Hinduism. Hinduism is extremely confusing to Westerners who are used to the order and monotheism of the Judeo-Christian tradition. I predict that Hinduism will be the major world religion we cover this year that will be the hardest for us to understand. Hinduism takes much of what we assume and affirm in the culturally Christian west and turns it upside down and right side up, and then adds a counterpoint or sexual imagery, something to really stir the pot. Many Westerners are horrified when they visit India. Hinduism is overwhelming different from what we know and experience in America. Hence Hinduism and India are often misunderstood in the West.

For example, within Hinduism time is cyclical, not linear in a line (like it is here in the West), but cyclical in a circle. Hindus believe in *samsara*, the continuing cycle of

birth, life, death, and rebirth that we know as reincarnation. Within Hindu thought there is *karma*, the moral law of cause and effect experienced in action, word, or deed that leads individuals to their station and *dharma* (or duty) in this life. So past and present word, deed, and action lead to one's place in the next life. Fulfilling one's duty, or *dharma*, leads to a better place closer to liberation in the next life, and this is the goal. The individual him or herself does not return (ex: Sharon is not coming back). The *atman* (self, soul, spirit that can be joined with the eternal source) with a new *dharma* or duty based on *karma* returns.

Westerners tend to bristle at the idea of *karma* and *dharma*, finding them too limiting with not enough choice. But Hindus experience them as connecting both free will and destiny. Within this life an individual can make free will choices (clearly spelled out in the *varnasrama dharma* system) that will lead to a different rebirth in the ongoing cycle of life. Ultimately the hope is to reach *moksa*, liberation from reincarnation, the end of reincarnation. *Moksa* can only be attained when one realizes the union between the divine self (*atman*) and the eternal Source of Brahman (a Godhead source in the universe). When an individual recognizes his or her *atman*, he/she is freed from passing desires, greed, from ignorance and ultimately duty and can pass on to the permanent liberation and peace of *moksa*, reunion with the Godhead. Hindu scriptures often describe *atman* as a drop of water, a beautiful metaphor. When this drop of water returns to the ocean of the Godhead there is either rebirth (reincarnation) or release, liberation, *moksa*.

The Judeo-Christian tradition is very concerned with death because it insists that there is only one life. You either go to heaven or hell or nothing – this is a Judeo-Christian idea. Within Hinduism there is the potential for the soul to have many lives so it is more important to live and die in duty and do this well so that the next life of *atman*, the soul, is better, closer to *moksa* and liberation. Hindus spend a lot of time on death rites, having positive thoughts as they face death, entering the Ganges River which is thought to lead to *moksa* (which is one of the reasons Calcutta is so crowded – people, often very sick and elderly go there to die well), and performing all death rites in the appropriate order at the appropriate time.

Within Hinduism there is also a caste system including four traditional groups; priests, warriors, merchants, and commoners. Among the commoners there is a branch known as “Untouchable” due to both their caste and the work they perform. The Great Mahatma Gandhi protested the existence of Untouchables and the modern Indian constitution outlaws the existence of Untouchables. However, the caste system is still followed, particularly in rural areas and I do wonder if then there are some rural areas where people still believe there are “untouchables.”

The caste system is one of the oldest systems in India and it developed alongside Hinduism. Many people argue that caste is inseparable from Hinduism, and I think this is true. Caste is deeply woven into family, community, religion, and work within India. Although some Indians dislike caste and choose not to follow it, most Indians see its maintenance as necessary.

In 1921 two ancient cities, Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa were discovered in the Indus Valley region of northwestern India. These cities, dating back over five thousand years (more developed than what has been found in the Tigris and Euphrates region of modern day Iraq), contained forty foot flood walls, covered sewers and bathrooms, and

methodically mapped city streets. The cities had political rules and specific forms of worship that focused on order and purity. By 1,500 B.C.E. most of these cities were empty and no one is sure why.

However, the demise of the cities happened at about the same time the Aryans from the Northwest crossed the Khyber Pass and entered India. The Aryans were nomadic, fair, patriarchal, warriors with a defined class system of priests, warriors, and commoners. They brought a religious tradition of sacred hymns of praise that were chanted in specific order and would one day become the *Vedas*, the oldest Hindu scripture. Some of these Vedic hymns mention the Aryan conquest of the short, dark people, which has led many to assume the Aryans conquered the remaining residents of the Indus Valley civilizations.

The indigenous residents of the Indus Valley, with their emphasis on order and purity (also water) and the Aryans with their emphasis on three classes and a conquered people probably created the basis of the caste system in modern India. And it is a system that has survived for four thousand years.

The earliest religion of India relied on the *Vedas* and exalted the priests, or *Brahmans*, who properly maintained Vedic ritual through proper speech and action. Even the name of the priests, *Brahmans*, indicates how powerful they were and the importance of the chanted rituals they performed. Today the word *Brahman* can mean “power of the Vedic hymns, power of the sacrifice, power of sound, creative power and truth of ritual words, Supreme deity, class of priests and caste of people.”

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. the power of the *Brahmans* and the *Vedas* was challenged by Jainism and Buddhism. As a response the *Brahmans* developed the *varnasrama dharma* system I mentioned earlier. *Varna* means “class,” *asrama* means “station in life,” and *dharma* means “duty.” The *varnasrama dharma* system offers everyone the opportunity for *moksa* by remaining within ones class, following a proscribed station in life (student, married, forest dweller or renounced) and fulfilling the duties of ones class and station. This is an amazingly powerful, self-sustaining social system. If you are a commoner who is married, be the best married commoner you can be. If you are a Brahman student, be the best Brahmanic student you can be. This is your duty. Follow it well in this life and your soul will move closer to *moksa* in the next life.

Unlike the West which focuses on individual rights and choices, Hinduism emphasizes a life of family and community obligation. So marriages are arranged between members of the same class. Love marriages are discouraged. Duty, *dharma*, is all. Women, representative of female power and fertility have complex relationships in India. They are distrusted, feared, and sometimes physically harmed if unmarried, widowed, or outside family structures. Yet they are revered as mothers, mighty as mother-in-laws, and the majority of Hindu women in India don't want equality with men, they want more autonomy for themselves.

A Hindu classic on duty and devotion is the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a devotional text to Lord Krishna (remember Hinduism has many gods male or female) written in the first or second century C.E. In this text the warrior Arjuna is dejected because he needs to fight his family on a battlefield, and he is heartbroken. Krishna appears as Arjuna's charioteer and counsels him

The self embodied in the body of every being is indestructible;

You have no cause to grieve for all these creatures, Arjuna!  
Look to your own duty; do not tremble before it;  
Nothing is better for a warrior than a battle of sacred duty . . .  
If you are killed, you win heaven; if you triumph, you enjoy the earth;  
Therefore, Arjuna, stand up and resolve to fight the battle!  
Impartial to joy and suffering, gain and loss, victory and defeat,  
Arm yourself for the battle, lest you fall into evil.  
Understanding is defined in terms of philosophy;  
Now hear it in spiritual discipline.<sup>1</sup>

In just this passage I quoted there is *dharma, karma, and moksa*. Do your duty to attain your salvation. One must act in duty, unattached to the fruits of action. This is the way to *moksa*. I encourage you to pick up some Hindu scripture and read them. Whether *Vedas, Upanishads* or other (and they are all so different) they are all this metaphysical, hard to understand, and beautifully, movingly poetic.

I think there are two reasons I love Hinduism so much; 1) its contradictions, and 2) its honesty about sexuality and the use of sexual imagery with divinity. These are two more reasons that Westerners are horrified by Hinduism. Almost every rule in India has a contradiction. The *Vedas* are so ancient that although still revered, some passages are considered unfathomable – no one, not priests, scholars, or followers can understand them. India is a very patriarchal society, so during the holiday of Holi men dress in skirts and women beat them down the streets with brooms. The goddess Uma is the picture of peaceful, selfless motherhood and a wonderful wife, so once a year she “returns” in Bengal as Durga the unmarried, buffalo slayer goddess. All of these gods and images rest side by side in a kaleidoscope of meaning. One of the purposes of all these contradictions is to remind followers that everything is finite, passing. They intend to shock to remind followers of the eternal, infinite meaning of life below the surface.

Finally, Hinduism is one of the few religions I can think of that is direct and honest about sexuality and its power. As much as good Hindus are not to engage in premarital sex or adultery, the gods do. Some of the oldest images from Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa are phalluses, known as lingam. Often the lingam is depicted in statue and relief joined to the yoni, the female sexual organ. The yoni-lingam represents the regenerative power of the universe, and it is a perfect symbol for this concept. I feel like the Hindus get it. No fig leaves in this society. There are outdoor public altars all over India with this imagery (can you imagine a public altar in Washington D.C. with a lingam?).

At the class on Hinduism I taught this past week, one participant told us about visiting India and seeing a nuclear power plant in the shape of a yoni-lingam. This I believe. Gods and goddess are shown naked, engaged in intercourse, sexually aroused, they often have different god partners, or consorts, depending on which story is being told. And truthfully, I find this symbolism honest and refreshing. Sexuality is about life, power, creation, and Hinduism has tapped into this. You can bet the Christian missionaries were appalled when they arrived.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*, translated by Barbara Stoler Miller (1986), 33-35.

So how can this information on Hinduism help us to live in our world? First, it shocks us out of our Judeo-Christian complacency, and whether we are Christian or not we live in a Christian culture. We are introduced through Hinduism to new ideas of time, life, death, salvation, family, community, order, duty, beauty, divinity, and sexuality. Our way is not always the best way just because we know it. Nor is it always the right way just because we are familiar with it. Hinduism itself is virtually a pluralistic religion, with different ways to God and salvation (*moksa*). There is order, flexibility, and chaos. I have a fondness for Hinduism because as much as order is expected it accepts the notion that things fall apart, and maybe they should. Finally, in our shrinking, volatile world, we need to understand tensions between Hinduism and other faiths.

When I look at the list of countries that include Hindu minorities today, many of them are predominantly Muslim countries (Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Indonesia for example). Hinduism and Islam have a mixed history. Between 1200 C.E. and 1700 C.E. Muslim rulers conquered first northwestern India and then moved gradually farther south into the southern plains of India (so essentially India spent five hundred years under Muslim rule). Muslim rulers both united the India we know today and introduced new law, art, and religion to India. Yet most Hindus either converted or ignored Islam, since Islam is monotheistic (one God) and requires submission to Allah and Hinduism favors polytheism (many gods) rather than just one. When the British arrived in India three hundred years ago, they intentionally pitted Hindus and Muslims against one another which has led to a more volatile relationship between the two faiths in the last few centuries.

In part this led to the traumatic events of 1947, the forced relocation of Muslims to Pakistan (and the creation of Pakistan as a country northeast and west of India), and Hindus into India. An estimated 20 million people relocated or became refugees, and half a million died in riots, massacres, and disease caused by the forced separation. It was a traumatic event in recent Indian history. In 1971 Bangladesh (northeast of India) separated from Pakistan while remaining Muslim.

I hope that in the coming year you will watch and read your world news more closely and witness the continued suspicious and sometimes violent interaction between Hindus and Muslims in Southeast Asia (seen through continued temple and mosque burnings and arguments over sacred space within India). India has nuclear weapons, and Pakistan seeks to acquire them, and both countries struggle with fundamentalism. In our current political climate it would be foolish for the United States to send any ambassador to Southeast Asia who was not well versed in the history and religion of both traditions. We must be religiously literate in order to be more productive, educated citizens.

