



Understanding
HINDUISM
basic questions answered

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UNDERSTANDING HINDUISM

BASIC QUESTIONS ANSWERED

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Note: Some of the answers presented here have been previously published by the [InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington](#) in “Strengthening Teaching About Religion.”

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Throughout this book we’ve placed keywords below each question to assist with searching for topics covered in each question. If you search for these terms using your PDF reader you will be taken through each place where these terms are mentioned.

BASICS

What is the overview of Hinduism?

BELIEFS, DEFINE, PRACTICES, SANATANA DHARMA, THEOLOGY, VISION

Hinduism offers practitioners a variety of ways to transform their minds so that they become aware of the Divine's presence everywhere, at all times, in themselves, in every other human being, and in the whole of creation. Such a person rises above sorrows, awakens an innate sense of compassion and service towards all, and spreads peace and joy.

What are the special features of Hinduism that you would like others to know about?

BELIEFS, DHARMA, GOD, TEACHINGS, PLURALISM, PRACTICES

Hinduism offers practitioners a variety of ways to transform their minds and connect with the Divine present in all beings and in the whole of creation. It is not about defining a doctrine. It is about seeking the Truth. It is the most ancient of religions whose teachings have adapted to changing times while maintaining a central coherence and embodying a deep understanding of the human mind. Its ethical foundation, known as *dharma*, is not a set of laws, but behavioral guidelines sensitive to context. The belief in rebirth and the intrinsic relationship between cause and effect gives Hindus a way to accept sorrows that are hard to explain while providing an incentive to always do one's best and create a better destiny for the future. Hindus worship one Supreme which can appear in many forms, and who is both transcendent and immanent. Hinduism embraces diversity in spiritual practices to suit diverse human temperaments and respects all religions without claiming that Hinduism is the only right path. Hinduism does not allow rejection of robust scientific findings in deference to religious dogma.

Who is a Hindu? Is one a Hindu only by birth or can one convert to Hinduism?

BELIEFS, CONVERSION, DEFINITION, PRACTICES, PROSELYTIZATION

The term 'Hindu' was originally used by Persians to indicate those who lived by the *Sindhu* (Indus) river. Nowadays a Hindu is defined as one who considers the Vedas to be sacred and practices the teachings of Hinduism – although an ancient philosophical school known as *Charvaka* denies the authority of the Vedas too. As proselytizing and conversion are not part of Hindu tradition, most Hindus are born into the tradition. However, there are many who have chosen to become Hindus and have adopted Hindu customs and rituals. Rites for formal conversion to Hinduism do exist, but are a relatively modern phenomenon.

Is there a central creed in Hinduism?

BELIEFS, DOCTRINE, THEOLOGY

There is no single set of beliefs that all Hindus must necessarily subscribe to in order to be called Hindus. In general, Hindus revere the teachings of the Vedas and share the commitment to seek and connect with the Divine Consciousness that dwells within each living being. This commitment is expressed in different ways in the numerous *darshana* and *sampradaya*, sub-groups that constitute Hinduism. A central belief is that God is One, lives in all and is eternal, all-pervasive and blissful.

What do most Hindus believe in?

BELIEFS, COMMANDMENTS, PRACTICES, SANATANA DHARMA, THEOLOGY

Most Hindus believe that their Divine essence, *atman*, is deathless and is reborn with a different body in successive births. Their daily conduct is governed by the teachings of *dharma* as the foundation for personal morality and social obligations, and the law of *karma* as defining individual responsibility and tendencies through rebirth. Hindus believe in worshipping One Supreme Being that can appear in many forms. They believe in the need for spiritual practice, as individuals and in community with others, to enjoy the world sensibly, purify their own mind, and overcome the obstacles to spiritual liberation, *moksha*. Hindus respect other religions and do not believe that Hinduism is the exclusive path to the Truth.

What is Hinduism's worldview?

BELIEFS, COMMANDMENTS, COSMOLOGY, CREATION, THEOLOGY

A core Hindu teaching is that the entire universe, without exception, is pervaded by the One Supreme. The Divine dwells in each being. Animals, trees, rivers, mountains, planets all embody the Divine. Since the Divine pervades every aspect of all that we experience, we should view every part of nature as a celebration and manifestation of the Divine. Unjust and harmful actions are the result of human ignorance and the tendency to disregard the universal presence of the Divine. Being born as a human is an opportunity to progress spiritually and eventually be liberated from the cycle of birth and death.

What are the main differences between Hindu beliefs and those in Christianity?

BELIEFS, BIBLE, COMMANDMENTS, THEOLOGY

The primary difference between Hindu and Christian beliefs is the Hindu philosophical conviction that each human being is not a sinner but intrinsically Divine and capable of directly experiencing this inner divinity through study, practice, and Divine Grace. As such, there is no ultimate Day of Judgement in Hinduism. Instead, accountability for one's actions is an ongoing process that follows the law of *karma* and each successive birth is a renewed opportunity to pursue the goal of liberation. A second major difference is that scripture for Hindus is not a single holy book but a vast corpus of teachings. Thirdly, Hindus recognize that there can be many paths to the goal of liberation and do not claim that Hinduism is the only right path. Consequently, proselytizing and evangelizing are not part of the Hindu tradition. There are numerous other differences such as the nature of God, reliance on *dharma* rather than commandments, nature of heaven, absence of an independent force of evil, rebirth and so on.

Is there a set of moral codes or commandments? What is dharma?

COMMANDMENTS, ETHICS, LAWS, MORALITY

Dharma provides the ethical foundation for all aspects of life, not only spiritual, and guides conduct by providing criteria for making good choices in all that humans do. The

root meaning of the term *dharma* is to sustain, protect or nourish. This has a vast scope of meaning in practice. *Dharma* is not simply a set of laws; it is a highly nuanced set of guidelines sensitive to context. Much of Hindu religious literature is aimed at conveying a practical understanding of *dharma* through teachings, stories, and dialogues on what constitutes appropriate actions and responses in a variety of real-life situations. (For more, see Chapter 6 of *Understanding Hinduism*)

What is the spiritual goal of Hindus?

BELIEFS, HEAVEN, LIBERATION, OBJECTIVES, PRACTICES, SALVATION, THEOLOGY

The spiritual goal of Hindus is *moksha* (to be liberated from sorrows associated with the cycle of birth and death known as *samsara*). The understanding of liberation varies. The popular understanding is that the practitioner attempts to do good deeds, gain spiritual merit, and go to heaven after death. But that sojourn in heaven ends when the merit is exhausted and the spiritual journey continues on earth by being reborn. With unswerving devotion to God and a pure mind, the seeker attains a divine realm after death, living eternally at the service of God. Another view is that liberation is possible even when alive by gaining right knowledge of the nature of existence and maintaining constant awareness of the Divine, thereby becoming compassionate, fearless and free from all sorrow. (For more, see Chapter 5 of *Understanding Hinduism*)

Do Hindus believe in pre-determination and destiny? Is the law of karma fatalistic?

BELIEFS, FATE, THEOLOGY

By the law of *karma*, every action has a consequence that appears in this or in future lives. This implies that what one experiences is the result of one's own actions in the past and what one does now determines one's own destiny in the future. To the extent that the impact of this "law" carries into successive lives, the outcomes might appear to be predetermined, but in fact, they represent full accountability for past actions. Much of what one has to undergo in this life is a destiny determined by one's previous actions, but at the same time, one has discretion concerning future destiny by choosing current actions wisely. This is not a fatalistic doctrine. It provides a strong incentive to

always do one's best and also helps one come to terms with unexplained adversities in life. (For more, see Chapter 9 of *Understanding Hinduism*)

What is yoga? Does one have to be a Hindu to practice yoga?

BELIEFS, PRACTICES, PHILOSOPHY

A practice that helps one unite with inner divinity may be called *yoga*. Hindu scriptures teach many different paths of *yoga* based on right action, devotion to God, mobilizing subtle energies, meditation, and understanding of Truth. The popular use of the term *yoga* refers to physical postures (*asana*), which is one element in one of these paths of *yoga*: the 8-fold path defined by the ancient sage Patanjali. This path provides techniques to gain mastery over the mind, the mind being the primary locus of spiritual practices to attain *moksha*. These benefits are available equally to Hindus and non-Hindus. (For more, see Chapter 11 of *Understanding Hinduism*)

What is the role of a spiritual guru?

GURU, PRACTICES, SWAMI, TEACHER

Guru means one who dispels the darkness of ignorance. A *guru* is much more than a teacher or an expert in something. He or she is a spiritually evolved person who has mastery of the scriptures and an ability to impart the subtle knowledge they contain. It is very difficult for a layperson to attain *moksha* without a *guru*. A spiritual seeker benefits from detailed guidance by the *guru* on specific practices as well as on how to approach life. In essence, the role of the *guru* is to awaken the inner awareness of the seeker that will itself guide the seeker on the spiritual path.

What is Sanatana Dharma?

BELIEFS, DEFINITIONS, HINDU, PHILOSOPHY, THEOLOGY

The phrase *Sanatana Dharma* means eternal *dharma*. Many Hindus use this phrase to refer to the Hindu religion. However, Hindus belonging to one group known as *Arya Samaj* associate the term *Sanatana Dharma* with the post-Vedic practice of worshipping *murtis* or images of the Divine, to which they are opposed. Treating *dharma* as synonymous with religion is incorrect as Hindu philosophy and practice is a

broader concept than the term *dharma* which refers mainly to the ethical foundations of Hinduism and of life itself.

Hinduism appears to be very complex and hard to understand. Why is that?

BELIEFS, OVERVIEW, PLURALISM, THEOLOGY

The fundamentals of Hinduism are quite simple: understand that the Supreme Being pervades the whole universe and make it the task as human beings to reconnect with the Divinity within them. As human resistance to this simple idea is so profound, the ancient sages provided a variety of tried and tested practices suited to persons of differing temperaments. The plethora of practices may sometimes appear to be confusing and self-contradictory. However, they make sense when viewed as techniques to make the mind clear and calm, thereby promoting spiritual growth for persons who have different temperaments and are at different levels of spiritual understanding. A further reason for complexity might well be that the human mind sometimes loves complexity and is reluctant to accept a prescription that is too simple. Guidance from a qualified *guru* can help a seeker navigate the vast array of spiritual paths in Hinduism.

Questions about Hindu philosophy or practice seem to have more than one answer. Why is that?

BELIEFS, CONTRADICTION, DIVERSITY, PLURALISM, THEOLOGY

The primary reason is that Hinduism does not espouse a single doctrine but emphasizes the search for the Truth that is beyond the mind's ability to comprehend. Since people have different likes, dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, they bring different kinds of doubts to the spiritual quest and their minds are receptive to different kinds of answers. Hindu sages lead seekers to the same goal using a variety of paths to suit people of different levels of intellectual sophistication, physical fitness, discipline in lifestyle, and emotional maturity. The definitions of concepts and the design of practices are adjusted accordingly. In all cases, the aim is the same: to move each seeker further along on his or her spiritual journey to the supreme goal.

Hindu spirituality puts a lot of emphasis on the Self. Doesn't that mean Hindus are selfish?

ATMAN, BELIEFS, GOAL, SELF-REALIZATION, SOUL

The Self in Hinduism is the inner essence of each living being, different from the body, mind, intellect, and the personality that we speak of when we describe ourselves. The aim of spiritual practice is to transcend the selfish, little individual 'self' and connect with the 'Supreme Self,' which means subjugating our ego to the will of the Divine. This is the very antithesis of selfishness.

SCRIPTURE

What are the main scriptures? Is there a single holy book?

BELIEFS, BIBLE, SCRIPTURE, WORSHIP

Scripture in Hinduism refers to a large body of literature rather than a single text. Since spiritual seekers have varying levels of understanding, scriptural messages are presented in a variety of ways to provide direct access to all seekers. Hindu scriptures are classified broadly into four categories: *Shruti*, *Smriti*, *Purana*, and *Itihasa*. The word *shruti* literally means 'heard,' and consists of truths that ancient sages realized in their advanced states of meditation and complete detachment. *Shruti* includes the Vedas and Upanishads, that were transmitted orally for many centuries. Texts and laws that are man-made are loosely classified as *Smriti* ('remembered'). Teachings in *smriti* texts are meant to be read and interpreted in the light of changing circumstances over time. The specific statements in *smriti* texts do not carry the same weight as *shruti*. Puranas contain stories that are intended to convey deep spiritual teachings. The Mahabharata and Ramayana are *itihisas* (histories) of the Indic people. The most commonly used Hindu scriptures are the Bhagavad Gita and the Ramayana. (For more on the scope of scriptures, see Chapter 3 of *Understanding Hinduism*)

How are the scriptures used?

PRACTICES, COMMANDMENTS, SCRIPTURE, STUDY, WORSHIP

Scriptures are the source of liturgy used in formal worship as well as of philosophical teachings that are studied and guide spiritual practice in daily life. Communal chanting and singing of scripture is a popular form of worship. Stories in scriptures convey lessons in ethics and morality and are often taught through different and entertaining art forms, including dance, drama, and sculpture. Subsidiary texts provide the foundations of sacred art, architecture, dancing, and music as well as other disciplines such as *yoga*, *ayurveda* and astrology.

How old are the Vedas?

AGE, BIBLE, HISTORY, SCRIPTURE

While impossible to date accurately, the Vedas are the most ancient of texts known to us. All agree that the Vedas are over three thousand years old, but there is little agreement on just how old they are. Evidence is scarce and estimates of their age vary widely, from 1200 BCE to some thousands of years earlier. Similar disagreements are found on dating other ancient scriptures, which were preserved orally for a long time before they were written.

In what language are Hindu scriptures written?

HISTORY, SCRIPTURE

The Vedas and Upanishads are composed in an ancient form of Sanskrit. Other scriptures are in classical Sanskrit, that is widely taught today. Texts composed in the last millennium are often in the various regional languages of India.

What are Hinduism's subsidiary scriptures, the Upavedas and Vedangas?

BELIEFS, PRACTICES, SCIENCE, WORSHIP

Upavedas are texts subsidiary to the Vedas that deal with technical topics: *Ayurveda* (the science of longevity based on good health), and the sciences of music, weaponry, and warfare. There are a number of auxiliary texts known collectively as *Vedanga* that

cover a range of topics: oral chanting of scripture (*shiksha*), grammar (*vyakarana*), prosody (*chhandas*), etymology (*nirukta*), astronomy (*jyotisha*), and obligatory rituals (*kalpa*).

What is the brief outline of the Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, and Mahabharata?

BELIEFS, HISTORY, PRACTICES, SCRIPTURE, WORSHIP

The **Bhagavad Gita** is a primary scripture for most Hindus in modern times. Although it is a tiny part of the Mahabharata and encapsulates rules of conduct (a *smriti*), it is traditionally accorded the rank of an Upanishad. It presents Lord Krishna's teachings to the warrior Arjuna and is a profound guide to living a spiritual life while being fully engaged in the world. Lord Krishna is an *avatar* of Lord Vishnu who appears on earth to restore *dharma*. The text describes the various paths of *yoga*, summarizes Upanishadic teachings on spiritual topics, and offers succinct practical advice on how to lead a spiritually fulfilling life.

The **Ramayana** is the most popular scripture in all of Hinduism, with versions in regional languages as well as the original Sanskrit. It has had an enormous impact on many dimensions of life in India and parts of Southeast Asia. It is traditionally classed as an *itihasa* and tells the life story of a noble prince, Lord Rama, who is an *avatar* of Lord Vishnu who appears on earth to destroy powerful demons. This epic story portrays several characters that embody ideal qualities and conduct. Among them are Rama himself as the ideal in every way: as prince, as king, as son, as husband, as brother, as friend and as enemy; Sita as the ideal emblem of strong womanhood; Hanuman as the ideal friend who serves Rama; Lakshmana and Bharata as devoted brothers. The Ramayana is recited by devoted Hindus, is consulted for guidance on life, and forms the basis for popular dances and dramatic presentations.

The **Mahabharata** is also a historical epic or *itihasa*. It is the longest text the world has known, seven times the combined length of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. Against the background of an extended conflict between two branches of the Kaurava family, the Mahabharata is a treasure trove of stories and discourses on the practice of *dharma*. As a scripture, its primary messages are the importance of always upholding *dharma*, the need for complete devotion to God, and the utter futility of war. The leading characters in this epic are highly complex and their roles in a wide variety of dramatic situations

convey rich lessons in *dharma*. The Mahabharata illustrates human nature at its best and at its worst.

In the Bhagavad Gita Krishna exhorts Arjuna to engage in war. Why?

ETHICS, JUST WAR, NON-VIOLENCE, SCRIPTURE

The Bhagavad Gita is a part of the large epic Mahabharata. One of the primary messages of the Mahabharata is the utter futility of war. The war in which the Bhagavad Gita is set is the unavoidable consequence of the collapse of *dharma*. Having exhausted all avenues for a peaceful settlement of the dispute between the two branches of the Kaurava clan, including Krishna's intervention to broker peace, it becomes Arjuna's duty as a warrior to defend *dharma*. Pacifism in the face of injustice is not a warrior's *dharma*. At a deeper spiritual level, war is an allegory for life where the positive and negative forces within us are engaged in constant battle. The Bhagavad Gita teaches that the spiritual seeker who is fully engaged in the world can attain liberation provided action is undertaken with the right attitude of selflessness and devotion.

How do Hindu scriptures explain how the world was created?

BELIEFS, COSMOLOGY, CREATION, SCRIPTURE

The fundamental message is that the world emerged from a single divine source, but scriptures present numerous versions of how that happened. Philosophical texts explain that the world is a manifestation of Pure Consciousness – whether this is merely an appearance or a transformation – with varying details on the process of creation. As per the Puranas, Brahma the father of all beings in the current epoch arose from the navel of Vishnu and was guided by Vishnu in meditation on how to create the world. Presenting another version, a Vedic hymn refers to the primordial Cosmic Person from whom all life and the physical world emerged. It is into this same Cosmic Person that the world will dissolve into as it prepares for the next cycle of creation. Another Vedic hymn refers to different theories of creation and concludes that the truth about creation may well be unknown.

What are sutra texts?

SCRIPTURE

Sutra texts summarize a body of knowledge in precisely formulated aphorisms. Each philosophical school, for instance, has a related text that is composed by its founder and contains the definitive statement of that philosophy in the form of *sutra*. An example of this is the popular text Yoga Sutras composed by the sage Patanjali. *Sutra* texts are not restricted to philosophy, but cover a wide range of topics.

Why is there emphasis on the formal chanting of the Vedas?

MANTRAS, PRACTICES, SCRIPTURE, WORSHIP

Sound is the subtlest of human sensory perceptions and has profound effects on the mind, breath, and body. Hence, music and chanting are universal spiritual practices. The Vedas were recited and transmitted orally long before they were written down. Precise rules about exactly how they are to be chanted are followed to this day and are said to have been instrumental in preserving the historical accuracy of the Vedic texts. Vedic chanting creates specific vibratory patterns with benefits that are cited in esoteric tradition.

HISTORY & GEOGRAPHY

Who founded Hinduism? What is the origin of Hinduism?

ARYAN INVASION, HISTORY

There is no founder of Hinduism as the sages to whom the original scriptures were revealed have preferred to remain anonymous. What is now known as the Hindu religion originated in India a few thousand years BCE, the precise period being open to debate. European Indologists in the 19th century decided that the Vedas dated to about 1200 BCE and that they were brought to India by a race called Aryans who

migrated there from somewhere in Europe or Central Asia. These conclusions were based on Biblical ideas on when human civilization started (about 4th or 5th millennium BCE) and on linguistic similarities between Sanskrit and European languages. However, excavations in the 20th century found remains of an advanced civilization in India dating back much earlier to 3500 BCE. Further, genealogical studies debunked the notion of Aryan being a race. The term *arya* in Sanskrit means noble or respected. This ancient civilization was called the Indus Valley Civilization because the settlements were found on the banks of what is now the Indus River. Subsequent evidence has shown that the settlements were more widespread, including on the banks of the Sarasvati River that is mentioned in the Vedas and had dried up about 2000 BCE. Several artefacts recovered from these sites show a connection with Hinduism: *swastika*, banyan tree, *namaste*, *yogi*. Knowledge about this civilization is greatly limited by the fact that the inscriptions have yet to be deciphered.

What is the origin of the term ‘Hindu’?

HISTORY

The term ‘Hindu’ is relatively recent, introduced by the Persians to indicate the people who lived by the *Sindhu* (Indus) river.

Where is Hinduism practiced outside India? How did it get there?

DEMOGRAPHICS, DIASPORA, HISTORY

With more than a billion adherents, Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world. A [Pew research report](#) estimated that as of 2010, the population of Hindus outside India are about 59 million, with the largest population outside of South Asia in East Asia (primarily 4 million in Indonesia and 1.7 million in Malaysia). Populations of Hindus elsewhere are as follows: North America (1.8 million in United States and 0.5 million in Canada); Europe (primarily 0.8 million in UK); and Africa (primarily 0.73 million in Mauritius and 0.57 million in South Africa). Aside from Bali in Indonesia, most Hindus across the world are descendants of migrants from India in recent centuries. Some of the migration to Africa and Caribbean was as bonded labor in British colonies.

Migration to Europe and North America was in the last century with most of the Hindus in U.S. migrating in the last 50-60 years.

What has been the influence of Hinduism in Southeast Asian countries?

DEMOGRAPHICS, DIASPORA, HISTORY

Religion (both Hinduism and Buddhism) was an integral part of Indian culture's journey to Southeast Asia which began almost 2000 years ago. Evidence of Hindu influence historically is still seen all over Southeast Asia. Ancient Hindu temples were built in the ancient kingdom of Champa (now a part of Vietnam), Cambodia, and Java. Hindu legal texts also had a deep impact. Stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata are well known and frequently presented in dance dramas in Indonesia and Thailand. The practice of *yoga* originated in Hinduism and is now popular all over the world.

PHILOSOPHY & SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

What is the ultimate goal of human life? How is it attained?

BELIEFS, ETHICS, PRACTICES, SELF-REALIZATION

Hinduism recognizes four goals of human life: living ethically (*dharma*), seeking material prosperity (*artha*), seeking pleasure (*kama*), and seeking liberation (*moksha*). Attaining *moksha* is seen as the ultimate goal: liberation from the sorrow that is intrinsic to the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. This is not to be confused with heaven, where one stays only as long as warranted by the stock of merit earned by good actions on earth. Most Hindus see *moksha* as being reincarnated in God's realm and reuniting with Him or living eternally in His service. Another definition of *moksha* is that those who have a clear understanding of their own eternal, universal and truly blissful nature rise above

all sorrow, and are liberated while still living. Such persons are fearless, ever-joyful and the source of comfort and joy to others.

What is the goal of spiritual practice?

BELIEFS, PRACTICES

The ultimate goal of Hindu spiritual practice is to become aware of the Divine's presence everywhere at all times, in oneself, in every other human being, and in the whole of creation. This requires radical transformation of minds that vainly seek happiness in an external world and are mired in desire, anger, greed, anxiety, and fear. Hindu scriptures prescribe ways to make the mind clear and calm, to connect with the Divinity within, and awaken love and compassion toward all.

How are the goals of Hinduism achieved? Why are there multiple spiritual paths within Hinduism?

BELIEFS, PLURALISM, PRACTICES

Ancient Hindu sages recognized that as people have varying strengths and inclinations, it is not reasonable to expect all people to traverse a single path to liberation. A variety of spiritual paths or *yogas* were defined that emphasized the right attitude to action, deep meditation, devotion to God or direct experience of the Divine based on a study of scriptures. The common factor in all of these paths is the transformation and purification of the mind as preparatory to connecting with the Divine within.

A key component of all *yoga* is to transform the mind, making it clear and calm – the techniques vary among the different paths of *yoga*. Those who like to remain very active are advised to act without attachment and dedicate their actions to God. Those who are contemplative are encouraged to meditate. The intellectually inclined are instructed to enquire more deeply into the meaning of the scriptures. Those who are more emotional by nature are asked to surrender their hearts to a form of God that is most endearing to them. These paths are mutually complementary, not exclusive. Each path contributes in its own way to the attainment of spiritual goals.

What is the role of belief, faith, and reason in Hindu spiritual practice?

BELIEFS, PLURALISM, PRACTICES, SCRIPTURE

If belief is defined as accepting a stated proposition to be true, there is no belief that is an absolute prerequisite for being a Hindu. Hinduism as such has no set doctrine or creed. Faith, defined as reverence based on understanding, has an important role both in being able to access scriptural knowledge and in devotional surrender to God. However, advanced spiritual aspirants are encouraged to corroborate scriptural prescriptions by reason and, more importantly, by their personal experience. Hindu sages recognized that spiritual commitment is strongest when scripture, reason, and experience are well-aligned.

What does it mean to say that Hinduism is a way of life? Does that mean it is not a religion?

BELIEFS, PLURALISM, PRACTICES

Hinduism has all the defining features of a religion such as scripture, temples, sacraments, moral code, metaphysics, and notions about the afterlife. It is often described as a way of life because Hindu religious practices are closely interwoven into the practitioner's daily life. Numerous sacraments mark life's milestones. The calendar is punctuated with frequent holy days that are celebrated with devotion and enthusiasm. Prayers are an integral part of daily routine activities. Spiritual growth is sought in every sphere of life, both individual and communal. Because Hinduism does not have a rigid central doctrine, the beliefs and practices in Hinduism are transmitted informally from one generation to the next, rather than through formal instruction in religious doctrine. It may be said that Hinduism is more than a religion, it is a way of life.

Hinduism is said to permeate all aspects of a Hindu's life. What does that mean?

BELIEFS, PLURALISM, PRACTICES

Hinduism may be described as being more than a religion and as a way of life. Frequent remembrance of God is built into the daily routine of a Hindu: daily prayers at an altar at home, prayers associated with daily activities such as waking up, eating, bathing, driving, switching on a light, and going to bed. There are many ways in which religious

beliefs influence daily life: daily routine, diet, avoiding beef, removing footwear at home, not letting one's foot touch books, newspapers or musical instruments, respecting parents, decorating the home with pictures and images of God. At a more philosophical level, Hinduism teaches one to bring an attitude of *karma yoga* to all one's activities in life – engage in actions that are right without being attached to the result; and to accept adversity without complaint. In this way, a Hindu's actions and attitudes are shaped to a considerable degree by Hindu philosophy. (For more on *karma yoga* see chapter 11 of *Understanding Hinduism*)

How do Hindus handle conflicts between modern science and scriptural teachings?

BELIEFS, PLURALISM, PRACTICES, SCIENCE

The essence of Hindu spirituality is not to adhere to a doctrine, but to seek a better understanding of the Absolute Truth. This Truth being infinite and beyond sensory cognition, is necessarily beyond the scope of the tools used by objective science. To the extent that Hindu scriptures contain statements concerning the physical universe – or any matter within the scope of objective sciences – there is no tendency to reject robust scientific findings in deference to religious dogma. For the most part, Hindu scriptures are remarkably congruent with modern science. Hindu scriptures never asserted that the earth was flat, or that the earth was the center of the solar system. Recent advances in cosmology, quantum physics, and neuroscience tend to confirm what Hindu scriptures and yogic traditions stated many centuries ago. While the theory of biological evolution is not specifically discussed in Hindu scriptures, the possibility is not excluded. The main focus in Hindu scriptures is on spiritual progress and transforming the mind where the approach taken is fundamentally scientific.

Does Hinduism accept the theory of evolution as explaining the origins of mankind?

BELIEFS, PLURALISM, PRACTICES, SCIENCE

Hindu scriptures contain a variety of theories of creation, the only essential principle being the presence of the Divine in all living beings and the entire creation. As such, there is no necessary conflict with modern scientific theories of evolution. Scriptures

proclaim the divine origin of *Rtam*, or Natural Law that governs all physical phenomena. The processes of evolution may be seen as special cases of the operation of *Rtam* in specific environments. Scientific theories about the physical universe are still incomplete and there is much still to be discovered. Hindus accept scientific progress as it occurs and rely on scriptures for a broader understanding that goes beyond the limits of current scientific knowledge.

What happens to an individual after death?

BELIEFS, REINCARNATION, SCIENCE

Only the physical body dies. *Atman* is eternal; it neither dies nor is born. The subtle body (the energy field and mind and distinct from the individual *atman*) of one who performs good acts is rewarded by going to heaven, but remains there only until its merit runs out and then returns to the cycle of birth and death. When the subtle body returns, it does so in another physical body and a setting best suited to exhaust the accumulated karmic consequences of its previous deeds. Through knowledge and devotion one can be liberated from this cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Is there a Final Judgement? Eternal damnation?

BELIEFS, REINCARNATION, THEOLOGY

Since Hindu philosophy allows for rebirth, death does not mean being subject to a Final Judgment. Every living being gets yet another chance to evolve spiritually until liberated from the cycle of birth and death.

Do Hindus believe in heaven and hell?

BELIEFS, REINCARNATION, THEOLOGY

Hindu scriptures do speak of heaven and hell, but these are temporary sojourns between successive lives. Based on the quality of one's actions, the subtle body enjoys Heaven or suffers Hell as long as required to exhaust the stock of merit or demerit and then returns to earth for spiritual growth. This cycle continues until *moksha* is attained.

What are the implications of the Hindu belief in rebirth?

BELIEFS, REINCARNATION

Rebirth means that when the physical body dies, the subtle body, including the mind, seeks another physical body to be born again. Death is a comma, not a period. Each birth is an opportunity to work off the burden of *karma* and recover from the misdeeds of this and previous lives, and to build a better destiny in future lives. The memories of previous births are erased so that they do not contaminate relationships in the current life. Therefore, there is no specific knowledge of how current events are related to past actions. However, since the cause/effect cycle of the law of *karma* can extend over many births, Hindus are given a clear answer to the question “why me?” and can understand “why bad things happen to good people.” There is no anxiety that the judgement at the end of this life is final. There is always another chance to progress spiritually.

Is there scientific evidence of rebirth?

BELIEFS, REINCARNATION, SCIENCE

There is no systematic verified evidence that there is rebirth. Neither is there evidence to the contrary. Belief in rebirth is common to all the Indic religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Rebirth provides a persuasive explanation of how some children have prodigious talents and why even genetically identical twins can behave differently. Isolated reports do offer some anecdotal support for the concept of rebirth where some persons are able to recount experiences of a past life that have been verified.

Can a human be reborn as an animal or plant? What are the causes and implications of that?

BELIEFS, REINCARNATION, THEOLOGY

The specific form and environment in which an individual is reborn is designed to provide that individual with the best opportunity to make progress toward liberation. The obstacle to liberation is ignorance of our intrinsic connection with the Divine. We are ignorant because our minds are burdened with our past *karma*. Each birth is an opportunity to work off the burden of *karma* and recover from the misdeeds of this and previous lives. When the karmic burden is light, a human birth is an opportunity to

engage in spiritual practice and attain liberation. However, humans who make wrong choices may accumulate bad *karma* that sets them back in the spiritual journey. Since animals and plants act on instinct alone, a portion of their past *karma* is systematically exhausted during their lifespan without creating new *karma*. Therefore, birth as an animal or plant may be the best option for spiritual progress suited to a specific karmic condition. It is a mistake to believe that birth as an animal is a “punishment” or that material prosperity is evidence of ‘good *karma*.’

Can animals become liberated?

BELIEFS, REINCARNATION, SELF-REALIZATION, THEOLOGY

Hindu scriptures do provide instances of animals being liberated by direct Divine intervention. However, there is no indication that this can be a generalized phenomenon. In principle, liberation can happen when the karmic burden is eliminated. But seeking liberation through spiritual practice requires a degree of self-awareness that animals are unlikely to have.

How is the caste system related to Hinduism?

CULTURE, HISTORY

Caste is a Portuguese word that confuses a spiritual concept with a social hierarchy that is not part of Hindu teachings. Hindu scriptures categorize people by different temperaments – known as *varna* – and prescribe special duties for those in each *varna*. Persons who are intellectuals, Brahmanas, are asked to preserve knowledge of the scriptures by studying and teaching them; those who have the talents and power to govern, Kshatriyas, are asked to use their power to protect the weak; those who have skill in commerce, Vaishyas, are asked to pay taxes and build social infrastructure; those who are inclined to be followers, Shudras, are asked to serve their employers loyally. These classifications by *varna* were not hereditary. In contrast, the social phenomenon known as *jati* meant that children generally took on the professions of their parents, making it hereditary whereas *varna* was not. The combination of *varna* and *jati*, became a rigid hierarchy that came to be known as the *caste* system. The oppressive and discriminatory practices based on *caste* were not part of the scriptural classification into *varna*, but an outgrowth of perceived hierarchies between and

amongst various *jati*. (For more on *caste*, see Chapter 17 of *Understanding Hinduism*)

How is untouchability related to Hinduism?

CULTURE, HISTORY

Certain *jati* who were traditionally engaged in scavenging, sweeping, and other menial tasks considered ritually impure were shunned by society and required to live separately and draw water from separate sources. Mahatma Gandhi worked strenuously to break this social practice by living among them and calling them *Harijan* ('children of God'). Some in this community consider *Harijan* a pejorative, and thus prefer the term 'Dalit.' Untouchability has no scriptural basis, relying on *jati* and not on *varna*, and is now an illegal practice. The nearest term used in scriptures is *mleccha* to signify anyone from foreign lands or who spoke a vulgar language.

I have heard that the Vedas support the caste system too. Is that so?

CULTURE, HISTORY, SCRIPTURE

This is incorrect. Some persons misinterpret a famous Vedic hymn known as the *Purusha Sukta*. The metaphorical reference in this hymn to the four *varnas* emerging from the Cosmic Person is misinterpreted to indicate a social hierarchy and a license for societal oppression. The purport of this hymn is different. The Cosmic Person is deemed to be the world. From His body emerges the whole of creation, including all people. Through their *guna* (tendencies) and *karma* (actions), they perform different functions in society. The *Brahmana* is the head. The *Kshatriya* is the arms of the Cosmic Person. The *Vaishya* are the thighs of the Cosmic Person and the rest are the feet that support the structure. Just as the head, hands, thighs or feet alone can never be the whole person and every part is as essential as the other, so are the four *varna* of equal importance in a healthy society. Persons of each *varna* are all part of the body of the same Cosmic Person. Scriptures clearly state that *varna* is based on temperament and not inherited by birth. (For more, see Chapter 17 of *Understanding Hinduism*)

What are the main schools of Hindu philosophy?

BELIEFS, THEOLOGY

Scholars categorize ancient Indian philosophies into six orthodox systems that accept the authority of the Vedas and three heterodox traditions that do not. (*Charvaka*, Jain, and Buddhist). The six orthodox systems were later grouped into four groups: Nyaya-Vaisesika, Sankhya-Yoga, Mimamsa, and Vedanta. Each one of these four systems expressed worldviews in terms of epistemology (doctrine of knowledge), ontology (doctrine of reality), theology (doctrine of God), cosmology (doctrine of universe), psychology (doctrine of soul), and soteriology (doctrine of salvation). Proponents of each of these philosophies vigorously debated issues for centuries. Vedanta drew on their viewpoints and is now the dominant philosophy in Hinduism.

What are the main schools of Vedanta?

BELIEFS, THEOLOGY

The basic text of *Vedanta* is the *Brahma Sutras* authored by *Vyasa Badarayana* probably around 500 BCE to 200 BCE. This text has been variously interpreted by philosophers over centuries, leading to several schools within *Vedanta*. The principal schools were established by: *Sankara* who considers the entire universe and all its inhabitants to be non-dual (i.e. non-different) from Pure Consciousness, and the perception of multiplicity to be the product of ignorance; *Ramanuja* who accepts non-duality, but with certain qualifications; and *Madhva* who considers the Supreme Being as being quite distinct from all of creation that is dependent on Him.

What is the 8-fold path of Yoga known as Raja Yoga?

PRACTICES

Raja Yoga is the systematic practice of precise techniques to become aware of one's internal energies, make the mind clear and calm and know the Self. This path consists of eight steps: 1) exercising specified disciplines in daily life; 2) cultivating and refining internal awareness; 3) physical postures to improve health and gain awareness of internal energy flows; 4) breathing exercises to mobilize internal energy, access the nervous system and bring clarity to the mind; 5) turning the mind inward, away from the distracting influence of sense organs; 6) making the mind one-pointed in

concentration; 7) focusing and uplifting the mind in meditation; and, finally, 8) achieving *samadhi*, a super-conscious state of mind that leads to intuitive wisdom and direct experience of the Self. This path requires physical fitness, a disciplined lifestyle, and a dedication to regular practice.

What is Tantra? Why is Tantra so often associated with sex?

PRACTICES

Tantra is a systematic and comprehensive spiritual path where aspirants see the Divine in and through every experience, and use every object and experience in the world as tools for spiritual growth. Declaring that each human being is a microcosm embodying the entire universe, tantric practitioners seek to master their own mind, senses, and body as a means of knowing the universe. Tantric practitioners embrace a very wide variety of practices including the use of sacred sound, sacred designs, sacred gestures, sacred objects, gems, astrology, alchemy, ritual sacrifice, fire-offerings, prayer, and meditation. Some esoteric practices in *tantra* are related to sex. But the prominence of sex in popular presentations of *tantra* reflects ignorance of its true scope or an attempt to exploit it commercially.

How do Hindu scriptures explain the concept of time?

BELIEFS, COSMOLOGY, SCIENCE

Time is the interval between two events. Pure Consciousness, which existed before anything else, is beyond the concept of time and space. The start of creation, being the first event, is beyond time, as time can be measured only with the second event. Time itself is an aspect of creation. Hindu scriptures discuss time in units that are infinitesimally small and astoundingly large, suggestive of infinity. The smallest unit is the time taken for light to traverse the smallest unit of matter, known as *Paramanu*, which is about a 16,000th fraction of the time taken to blink an eyelid. The time taken for one cycle of creation, known as *kalpa*, is 4.32 billion years.

What do scriptures say about the age of the universe and its future?

BELIEFS, COSMOLOGY, SCIENCE

Creation is cyclical and ever-repeating. A *kalpa* is 4.32 billion years and is the equivalent of one day in the life of the Creator, Brahma. At the end of each *kalpa* the whole of creation goes into a dormant state for the same duration and then reemerges. This cycle repeats 36,000 times during one lifetime of Brahma which comes to over 300 trillion years. At this point there is a major dissolution, known as *Mahapralaya* characterized by drought, fire, storms, and an all-encompassing flood, whereby the whole of creation is completely absorbed back into an unmanifest primordial state. Then the whole cycle begins again with a new Creator who emerges from eternal Consciousness. However, for one who gains Self-realization, the universe is finally and completely dissolved instantly. (For details see *Srimad Bhagavatam* Chapters 3.11 and 12.4.) Each *kalpa* consists of 1000 mini-cycles known as *Mahayuga* and each *Mahayuga* has four parts each known as a *yuga*. According to Hindu scriptures, the world is currently in the second half of the life of the current Creator and in the final *yuga* of this mini-cycle. It is known as *Kali yuga* and lasts for 432,000 years.

Is it true that one must be born a Brahmin to gain liberation?

BELIEFS, SELF-REALIZATION

No. As was stated previously, above, the path to liberation involves transforming the mind using a variety of spiritual practices. Any person can engage in these practices regardless of birth and achieve liberation. Indeed, those who are more oriented toward service, such as the *Shudras*, are more likely to progress spiritually. Historically, scriptures and history provide numerous examples of great sages and religious leaders born in all echelons of society who were liberated beings.

How does Hinduism explain the presence of evil? Is there a Satan?

BELIEFS, THEOLOGY

There is no Satan or evil force separate from God. Hinduism sees the Divine as truly all pervasive, encompassing all forces in the universe; and sees all as intrinsically divine.

However, those who forget their intrinsic divinity fall prey to their baser instincts and fail to see the harmony in the universe. They are motivated by greed, anger, jealousy, and uncontrolled desire. They can then do wicked things that bring harm to others and even to themselves. Thus evil is a manifestation of ignorance.

What is the source of suffering?

BELIEFS

Suffering arises when expectations and desires are not fulfilled. Suffering is made worse by the actions of those who seek to prosper at the expense of others or impose their will on others. The root cause of unfulfilled desire is ignorance of our intrinsic divinity, and an insufficient trust in God. By connecting with the Divine within, all beings can access infinite bliss and end suffering.

How does a religion with emphasis on ‘your duty’ allow for change and upward mobility?

BELIEFS, CULTURE

Hinduism’s emphasis on duty is aimed at addressing one of the main obstacles to spiritual progress: the animal appetite for sense pleasures and being driven by one’s desires rather than one’s obligations and sense of purpose. Upward mobility can be spiritual or material and the two are not necessarily correlated – those who are rich are not necessarily happy. There is room in Hinduism for material ambition and following one’s dream, provided it is consistent with the teachings of *dharma* (i.e. not hurting others) and being true to one’s own essential nature.

How does Hinduism view atheism?

BELIEFS, THEOLOGY

The fundamental philosophical goal in Hinduism is to deeply examine the nature of existence – of ourselves, of the world, and of Divinity – and their inter-relationships. One school of Indian philosophy posits belief only in that which can be directly perceived by our senses. Rejecting all speculations about afterlife, followers of the *Charvaka* philosophy are atheists. Other Hindu philosophical schools refute this view.

MORALITY, ETHICS & SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

What are the moral and ethical principles that guide behavior?

ETHICS, NON-VIOLENCE

The moral and ethical foundations of Hinduism are known as *dharma*, a word that defies translation. Dharmic injunctions guide all aspects of life, not only spiritual. *Dharma* is not simply a set of laws; it is a highly nuanced set of guidelines whose application requires individual discretion based on one's particular role and the context of a specific situation. Much of Hindu religious literature is aimed at conveying a nuanced understanding of *dharma* through teachings, stories, and dialogues on what constitutes appropriate actions and responses in a variety of real-life situations. Because the scope of *dharma* is so wide, it is impossible to summarize. However, it is generally agreed that there are three guiding principles that are most important in guiding our actions on the path of *dharma*:

Ahimsa (non-injury): avoiding harmful actions, harsh words, and malicious thoughts.

Satya (truthfulness): being truthful to oneself and to others in thought, word, and deed.

Brahmacharya (non-indulgence): abstaining from sensory excess that dissipates vital energy and causes harm to others.

How does a Hindu determine what is dharma in practice?

ETHICS

As *dharma* is contextual, an individual's *dharma* varies with each situation and it is up to the individual to discern the right course of action. Scriptures provide extensive guidance on the relation of *dharma* to stage of life (*ashrama*) and personal temperament (*varna*). (For more, see Chapter 6 of *Understanding Hinduism*)

A relatively simple approach to *dharma* is to consider the need to discharge our debts. Hindu scriptures identify four categories of debt owed by all humans and fulfilling these obligations can be seen as a basic requirement of a *dharmic* life:

Debt to God: respecting God and ensuring that one acts in harmony with cosmic forces in sustaining creation

Debt to the sages: Study and practice of the scriptures

Debt to parents: Respecting one's parents and bringing up our children well

Debt to society: Caring for all living beings with whom the world is shared

What are the moral qualities Hindus are asked to cultivate?

ETHICS

Many scriptures contain injunctions on moral and ethical issues which are presented as norms to strive for rather than mandatory commandments. One example is the list of restraints (*yamas*) and observances (*niyamas*) presented in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. The five *yamas* are: non-injury; truthfulness; non-stealing; non-indulgence; non-possessiveness. The five *niyamas* are: purity; contentment; spiritual fervor; spiritual study; surrender to God. In addition, all are expected to honor their parents, teachers and guests; and study and practice the scriptures.

What are a Hindu's spiritual obligations?

BELIEFS, PRACTICES

The highest spiritual goal of a Hindu is to see God in all things (the One in the many) and all things in God (the many in the One). Among all living beings, humans are uniquely equipped to be self-aware and seek spiritual growth. Hindu scriptures declare that the moral duty of each human being is to cultivate the qualities necessary for

spiritual evolution. For this, the scriptures enjoin worship, selfless activity for the good of society, charity and spiritual discipline. In essence, spiritual obligations involve purifying the mind, deepening understanding and cultivating intense devotion to God rather than adherence to doctrine. In practical terms, scriptures prescribe a vast array of practices that can be helpful to a spiritual seeker. (For more, see Chapter 10 of *Understanding Hinduism*)

Explain the law of Karma. How does it differ from predetermination?

BELIEFS

A central idea in Hindu philosophy is that one who does something intentionally must necessarily reap the consequences of that action. The time interval between the action and its consequence may be very short, even immediate, or very long, stretching over many lives. Thus, one's experiences in this life may be the result of their actions performed in past lives; and the fruit of one's present actions may be experienced by them in future lives. It is a mistake to equate the law of *karma* with 'fatalism' or 'predetermination.' First, one's experiences today are merely the consequences of their own actions in the past, not predetermined by some external force. This is a theory of full accountability rather than predeterminism. Second, while what an individual experiences is a consequence of their past actions, how they conduct themselves in the midst of these experiences determines their own destiny in the future. This again is individual responsibility and exercise of free will rather than fatalism. The law of *karma* helps one accept unavoidable sorrows while simultaneously providing an incentive to do one's best in every circumstance.

Is there free will? What are the limits to free will?

BELIEFS

Yes. Free will is part of Hinduism. Although the external situation and events one faces are determined by the Law of *Karma*, they are free to choose how they act in response to those situations. The choices they make reflect their personal character and spiritual understanding and these choices determine their own destiny for the future. To the extent one's actions are influenced by one's desires and habits inherited from the past, their responses are constrained by their own past choices. However, one can work to

modify them for the better and create a better destiny for the future. It is a misconception that Hindu philosophy is fatalistic.

How are Hindus called upon to respond to suffering?

BELIEFS

The person who is suffering is advised to accept that the suffering is a manifestation of one's own *karma* and, therefore to be accepted in a spirit of surrender to God. But when observing another person's suffering, one is advised to be compassionate and alleviate the suffering of others to the extent possible. Failure to be compassionate is itself an action that brings bad *karma* for the future. So Hindus are called upon to accept their own suffering without complaint while being compassionate toward the suffering of others.

How is sin defined in Hinduism?

BELIEFS

Like evil, sins are actions undertaken in ignorance of our intrinsic Divinity. The core definition of sin is that which causes agitation in our minds at a deep level and makes it harder for us to connect with the Divine Consciousness within us. Therefore, any action that causes harm to oneself or others, or expresses disrespect to God falls in the category of sin. Scriptures that elaborate on *dharma* discuss the specifics of actions that are classed as sins.

What is the purpose of life?

BELIEFS

Each life is an opportunity to progress toward the goal of liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Progress comes from cultivating noble qualities, deepening understanding, and devotion to God. This progress in turn determines how one responds to life's challenges while being fully engaged in the world. In brief, the purpose of life is to learn to know one's self, how they relate to the world, and connect with the Divinity within. It is worth noting that spiritual progress or the consequences

of good *karma* are not necessarily reflected in material prosperity, as the ultimate goal is spiritual, not material.

How does Hinduism define obligations toward nature and the environment?

BELIEFS, ECOLOGY, ENVIRONMENTALISM

The highest spiritual goal of a Hindu is to see God in all things (the One in the many) and all things in God (the many in the One). Nature is but a part of the perceived Universe. A core Hindu teaching is that the entire universe, without exception, is pervaded by the One Supreme Being. Since the Divine envelops and permeates every aspect of all that we experience, we should view every part of nature as a celebration and manifestation of the Divine. As humans, it is our obligation to play our part in the grand cosmic theatre. Nature serves human life and prosperity; and equally, humans are servants of nature, not its masters or stewards. Through nature, the Divine Mother expresses Her love and compassion for all living beings. In return, humans are asked to enjoy the bounties of nature in a responsible way. When greed and self-indulgence disturb the ecological balance, the clear teachings of Hindu scriptures are violated. Humans and the natural environment are bound to each other in a mutual relationship where humans are required to nurture the forces of nature even while enjoying its bounty.

How do Hindus view war?

BELIEFS, NON-VIOLENCE

War entails violence and the principles of *dharma* urge Hindus to avoid violence to the extent possible. However, there is no prohibition against engaging in war when there is no other way of upholding *dharma* in society. When one's legitimate rights are under violent attack and all attempts to resolve the conflict peacefully have failed, war is justified – a circumstance portrayed in the Bhagavad Gita. Even within the context of war, Hindu epics describe rules that must be followed by combatants to minimize unnecessary violence and ensure the safety of non-combatants.

GOD

How is the Supreme Being defined in Hinduism?

BELIEFS, THEOLOGY

Hindus believe in One Supreme Being who can appear in many forms. Hindu scriptures contain a variety of conceptions of the Supreme Being to suit seekers who approach Divinity in different ways. At a philosophical level, the Supreme Being is known as *Brahman*, having no form and no attributes. *Brahman* is the all-pervading Pure Consciousness, and there is really nothing in the universe separate from *Brahman*. This makes *Brahman* beyond the grasp of human senses and mind. Meditators use a less abstract concept of the Supreme Being known as *Ishwara*, who is all-knowing and all-powerful, but is still formless. Those on the path of spiritual devotion wish to cultivate a close personal relationship with the Divine and need a more tangible concept than *Brahman* or *Ishwara*. They worship the Supreme Being as a Personal Godhead who can take many forms and has revealed Himself as a human being on earth too. Of all global faiths, Hinduism alone allows worshipping the Divine as Feminine. A core belief in Hinduism is that the Supreme Being is present in the heart of all living beings.

Is God one or many? Is Hinduism monotheistic or polytheistic?

BELIEFS, PLURALISM, THEOLOGY

It is wrong to characterize Hinduism as polytheistic. Hindus believe in One Supreme Being who can appear in many forms. Hindus may choose to worship a favorite form of God to cultivate a close personal relationship. However, they respect other forms of the Divine and do not regard the different forms as competing Divinities. Each of the forms is a manifestation of the same One Supreme Reality. The Upanishads declare: "In

the beginning there was Existence alone...One alone, without a second.” (For more, see Chapter 12 of *Understanding Hinduism*)

What are the attributes of God?

BELIEFS, THEOLOGY

At an abstract philosophical level, *Brahman* is infinite and beyond all attributes. *Ishwara* is described as being all-knowing and all-powerful, all-pervasive, and the Source of the whole universe who dwells in each living being. At the level of a personal form of God, there is no limit to the list of Divine attributes. The scriptures list six in particular: Knowledge, Detachment, Sovereignty, Righteousness, Renown, and Glory. Others that are emphasized in scripture include Beauty, Love, Compassion, and Radiance.

What does ‘deva’ mean?

BELIEFS, THEOLOGY

Devas and devatas are divine beings that are manifestations of the One Supreme Being in all aspects of creation. They are extraordinary beings who have accrued significant merit in past lives and are therefore custodians of natural phenomena. *Deva* literally means ‘shining being’ and is seen as the divine force presiding over each field of activity, whose blessings we invoke for success in what we do in that field. Each *deva* is merely one aspect of the Supreme Being who, being transcendent and immanent is to be seen in all forms. Devas exist as cosmic forces as well as forces within every being – demonstrating humanity’s deep connection with nature and the Divine. Translating *deva* and *devata* as ‘Gods’ has led to the incorrect inference that Hinduism is polytheistic.

Along with devas there are several other classes of beings in creation. Danavas and asuras are forces of nature aligned against the *devas*. Gandharvas are heavenly beings who are skilled in the arts. Yakshas are a broad class of nature-spirits, usually benevolent, who are caretakers of the natural treasures hidden in the earth. Manavas are humans.

Has God manifested on earth? In what forms and for what purpose? What does 'avatar' mean?

BELIEFS, THEOLOGY

The word '*avatar*' literally means descent. When God takes a special manifestation to restore *dharma* on earth, it is known as an *avatar*. Lord Vishnu declares that He would manifest when needed to protect the good, destroy the wicked and restore *dharma*. Scriptures contain many accounts of such avatars. For example: as a fish at the time of the great flood, as a boar to rescue the earth from the depths of the ocean, as a tortoise when the oceans were churned to yield nectar, as a man-lion to protect a devotee, and in human form as Rama and Krishna to destroy demons and cleanse the world. Goddess Durga manifested on earth to destroy powerful demons. Buddha is also regarded as an *avatar* because of his role as a teacher who relieved suffering of humanity.

What is the symbolic meaning of how God is depicted?

BELIEFS, THEOLOGY

Multiple hands	all-powerful
Multiple faces	all-seeing
Long arms	infinite strength and reach
Gentle smile	compassionate welcome
Blue color	indicative of infinity (e.g. blue sky indicates infinite space)
Yellow	earth; infinite consciousness is clothed in matter
Third eye	the eye of wisdom, beyond normal cognition by human mind
Vehicles	Mouse is the vehicle of Ganesha; it can reach the most inaccessible places; can access all our secrets;
	Garuda [eagle] is the vehicle of Vishnu; king of birds;
	Nandi [bull] is the vehicle of Shiva; denotes power

Peacock is the vehicle of Kartikeya; denotes beauty

Swan is the vehicle of Brahma and of Sarasvati; denotes sharp intellect; can separate water from milk

Owl is the vehicle of Lakshmi; a warning not to be blinded by desire for wealth

Lion/tiger is the vehicle of Durga; denotes power

Weapons

Gods and Goddesses are depicted as holding various weapons in their multiple hands. This is symbolic of their power that they use to destroy evil and restore dharma in the world. Such weapons include sword, axe, bow and arrow, discus, mace, trident, noose.

What are the forms in which God is worshipped? Explain their symbolic meaning.

BELIEFS, THEOLOGY

A consecrated image of God, known as *murti* is used in worship to help concentrate the mind and focus on aspects of divinity symbolized by the particular form of the murti.

Ganesha: Lord of all functioning forces in the universe. He symbolizes wisdom and is worshipped at the start of any new enterprise to overcome all obstacles to success. He is shown with the head and trunk of an elephant that signifies wisdom, intelligence, and strength; and a large belly that contains the whole universe.

Vishnu: the “Preserver”, who manifests as an *avatar* when needed to destroy evil forces that overwhelm *dharma* and restore righteousness and justice in the world. Vishnu is known by numerous names and is depicted in a variety of forms: reclining on the divine serpent Shesha in an ocean of milk, with the Goddess Lakshmi at his feet; as Krishna, the blue-hued boy of Vrindavan wearing a peacock feather on his crown; as Rama, the prince who killed the demon Ravana; as Venkateshwara with four arms carrying a discus, a mace, a conch shell and a lotus; as Narasimha, with the head and

claws of a lion; and many more. His blue color represents infinity and He is dressed in yellow, the color of the earth.

Shiva: the “Destroyer” or “Transformer,” whose unique dance sets the whole universe ablaze and brings to an end a cycle of creation. As Nataraja, he is shown as dancing and trampling on ego; as Prajapati he is worshipped as the *lingam*, a formless stone that depicts infinity and the source of life; and as Shiva clad in tiger-skin, with matted locks, and with skulls and serpents draped on his body. The serpents indicate sensory temptations which Shiva wears casually as a decoration without being distracted. When ignorance and desire are destroyed and eliminated from the human heart, what remains is only pure goodness, which is Shiva. He is depicted in deep meditation on Mount Kailash, the very embodiment of peace, compassion, and all things auspicious.

Brahma: the “Creator.” Generally depicted with a beard, holding the Vedas and riding a swan. Brahma is rarely worshipped. Most Hindus see Brahma as being subsidiary to Vishnu, being born out of Vishnu’s navel and needing Vishnu’s guidance on how to proceed with creating the world. Note the difference between Brahma, the Creator, and Brahman which signifies Pure Consciousness.

Devi/Shakti: the feminine forms of Divinity that represent creative energy as a necessary complement to the pure Consciousness that is the basis for the created universe. Depicted in a wide variety of names and forms: Parvati, the *shakti* of Shiva also appears as Durga and Kali; Lakshmi, the *shakti* of Vishnu; Sarasvati, the *shakti* of Brahma; Sita the *shakti* of Rama; Radha, the *shakti* of Krishna. Parvati, Durga and Kali are worshipped for their power and compassion; Lakshmi for wealth; and Sarasvati for learning.

Nataraja: Shiva, appearing as the Lord of dance. He is surrounded by fire signifying the end of a cycle of creation and stands on a human figure signifying the demonic ego. His upper hands hold a *damaru* (drum), signifying creation, and fire, signifying creative destruction. His lower hands give the blessing of fearlessness and the importance of submitting to God.

Shesha: The snake on whom Vishnu reclines represents the mind that is turned toward the Lord. The worlds are depicted as supported by his multiple heads.

Male and female Gods are said to be married. What does that signify?

BELIEFS, THEOLOGY

Being 'married' is simply a popular way to express the esoteric relationship between the male and female aspects of the universe. This union produces life and is therefore to be celebrated. Scriptures describe the marriage of Shiva and Parvati. The marriage of Rama and Sita is celebrated regularly in temples with great enthusiasm. At a deeper level, depicting divinity as both male and female recognizes the intimate relationship between Pure Consciousness and Creative Energy as they manifest in the universe and in each living being. This is also shown in one form of Shiva, *Ardhanari-nateshwara*, where the right half of the image is male and the left half is female in appearance.

Why is God sometimes depicted as an animal?

BELIEFS, THEOLOGY

The Divine is represented in a large variety of forms, including animals, birds or reptiles, planets, mountains, rivers, plants. This has two important messages: first, persons of every temperament can find a form of God that appeals to their heart and to whom they can offer deep devotion; and second, seeing Divinity in so many different forms creates in Hindus a reverence for the whole of creation and for the Creator who has brought forth this wonderfully diverse universe.

What is the role of grace?

BELIEFS, THEOLOGY

Hindu philosophers explain that Divine Grace is available to all, like sunshine. God has no favorites and is ready to shower His Grace on all. However, the human mind needs to be ready to receive this Grace. When the windows are closed and the blinds drawn, sunshine does not enter. When the mind is turned toward worldly pleasures and driven by lower impulses, it is incapable of connecting with the Divinity within. Spiritual progress requires both personal effort to purify the mind and a willingness to take refuge in a Higher Being.

WORSHIP

Why do Hindus use images in worship?

BELIEFS, PRACTICES, WORSHIP

A *murti* is a representation of a particular form of God. It is traditionally made of clay, wood, stone, or metals. The specific attributes of each *murti* have been described in scripture and have symbolic significance. Before a *murti* is installed in a temple, there is an elaborate ritual to imbue the inert image with life by invoking the sacred presence of the particular form of God. This ritual is known as *prana pratishtha*. Worship of a *murti* offers Hindus a way to make the mind single-pointed during worship. Contemplation on the worshipful qualities of God depicted in the *murti* helps cultivate love and devotion to the transcendent Divine Consciousness. Worship is offered to a *murti* not as a physical object, but to the Divinity it represents. In some cases, the image may even be ritually disposed of at the end of the worship ceremony.

Why is it wrong to use the word 'Idol' when we refer to Hindu *Murtis*?

BELIEFS, PRACTICES, WORSHIP

Murti puja is not to be confused with 'idol worship' that is condemned in the Abrahamic traditions. The use of *murtis* in Hindu practice is NOT the same as the worship of idols mentioned in Hebrew texts. Nonetheless, when Jewish, Christian or Islamic listeners hear Hindus referring to *murtis* as "idols" they will inevitably remember the very strong condemnation of idols in their scriptures, making it that much harder for them to respect Hindu practice. Texts mentioned below are considered sacred by Christians. And similar condemnations are to be found in the Koran as well. By frequent repetition and strong imagery, these passages create a visceral disgust of idols among Jewish, Christian and Islamic believers.

Condemnation of idols in the Hebrew Bible: The following excerpts, taken from Zondervan New International Version Study Bible, 2008, show the repeated condemnation of idols in the Hebrew Bible.

Exodus 23.24: “Do not bow down before their gods or worship them or follow their practices. You must demolish them and break their sacred stones to pieces.

Exodus 20.4 {The Ten Commandments}: “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath it or in the waters below. 5. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God...”

Jeremiah 10.2-5: This is what the LORD says: Do not learn the ways of the nations or be terrified by signs in the sky though the nations are terrified by them. For the customs of the people are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest. And a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good....8. they are all senseless and foolish; they are taught by worthless wooden idols. Hammered silver is brought from Tarshish and gold from Uphaz. What the craftsman and goldsmith have made is then dressed in blue and purple – all made by skilled workers. But the LORD is the true God;...”

Deuteronomy 32.16: “They made him jealous with their foreign gods and angered him with their detestable idols. They sacrificed to demons which are not God – gods they had not known, gods that had recently appeared, gods your fathers did not fear....21. They made me {LORD} jealous by what is no god and angered me with their worthless idols....23. I will heap calamities upon them and spend my arrows against them.”

Isaiah 40.18: “To whom then will you compare God? What image will you compare him to? As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple. Do you not know? Have you not heard?...25. To whom will you compare me?”

Isaiah 44.6: This is what the LORD says – ... I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God. ...9. All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame. Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit him nothing? He and his kind

will be put to shame; craftsmen are nothing but men,...[describes making of idols]...17. From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, Save me; you are my god. They know nothing, they understand nothing; ...19. ...Shall I bow down to a block of wood? He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, is not this thing in my right hand a lie?

Jeremiah 17 “Every man is senseless and without knowledge; every goldsmith is shamed by his idols. His images are a fraud; they have no breath in them. They are worthless, the objects of mockery; when their judgement comes, they will perish. He who is the Portion of Jacob is not like theses, for he is the Maker of all things.”

Habakkuk 18: “Of what value is an idol since a man has carved it? or an image that teaches lies? For he who makes it trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak. Woe to him who says to wood, Come to life! Or to lifeless stone, Wake up! Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in it. But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.”

Condemnation of idols in the Psalms: Following are cited in Sara Grant’s “Toward an Alternative Theology” page 65.

“all of the gods of the nations are devils”.

“having eyes they see not – having ears they hear not. May those who worship them become like them” [psalm 115:4-8; Ps 135:15-18]

How is God worshipped? What is puja?

BELIEFS, PRACTICES, WORSHIP

The Hindu worship ceremony is known as *puja*. There are many different versions of the *puja* ritual, some simple, and some very complex and lengthy. In all cases, the ritual is designed to engage all the senses so that the worshipper’s mind is made one-pointed and not easily distracted from contemplation on God. In essence, the *puja* is like welcoming a revered guest to our home: first offer water to wash hands and feet, a seat to sit on, some refreshments, entertainment, praise, and celebration. In the end, we wish the guest goodbye. The mantras and activities in the *puja* are just that.

The practices in the *puja* engage all the five senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting. In a typical *puja*, the *murti* is beautifully decorated, bells are rung, and *mantra* are chanted as worshippers make several offerings to the Deity such as fragrant

flowers, special leaves [*tulsi* and *bilva*], rice, water, fruit and sweets. Finally a lighted lamp is waved as an *arati*. At the end of the *puja* the worshipper reverentially accepts the offerings made to God as representing God's grace and blessing. This is known as *prasad*. Applying this attitude to life as a whole, all actions are a form of worship and one should accept everything as an expression of God's grace and compassion towards creation.

Prana Pratishtha: When a *murti* is installed in a temple, a special ritual is undertaken to inhere in this *murti* the energy of the transcendent Pure Consciousness before engaging in worship. Once the *murti* is so consecrated, the *murti* in the temple is treated as an embodiment of Divine presence, a living being, and is cared for as such. As part of daily worship, the *murti* is bathed, decorated, offered food, and rest. In worship, the devotee offers the best of everything to the Divine.

Some articles and practices of *puja* and their symbolism:

Coconut	broken and offered in worship as sign of surrendering ego
Flowers	used to decorate <i>murti</i> ; only fragrant flowers used
Fruit	sweet fruit offered in worship, such as bananas, apples, or raisins
Incense	offering fragrance in worship
Sandalwood	applied to body of <i>murti</i> as perfume
Water	offered in worship to bathe <i>murti</i>
Food	milk, yogurt, ghee, honey and cooked food are offered in worship and returned as sign of divine grace
Bathing	in addition to bathing in water, the <i>murti</i> may be ceremonially bathed in milk, yogurt, and honey as part of ritual worship
Parikrama	Worshippers may walk around the <i>murti</i> or the shrine, keeping it always to one's right as a mark of respect.
Joining palms	<i>namaste</i> to offer respect and pray to divinity
Prostration	to show humility and surrender by touching forehead to ground

Prasad

as part of the *puja*, fruit or food is offered to the Deity. These offerings are returned at the end of the *puja* and distributed to worshippers as a token of Divine grace, or *prasad*. Token amounts are eaten immediately and sometimes taken away for distribution to devotees who were not present at the *puja*. Most often, the *prasad* consists of sweet fruit such as bananas or raisins.

Bindi/Tilak

Many Hindus wear a colored dot on their forehead, known as tilak or bindi. Originally part of the daily ritual worship, it is also used as an ornament by Hindu women. The spot between the eyebrows has special significance in yoga as an energy center and as the 'third eye'. Worshippers of Shiva apply ash to the forehead and body as a reminder of how Divine power destroys evil and as a symbol of renunciation of desire.

Why do Hindus walk around the images of deities in temples?

BELIEFS, PRACTICES

Worshippers show respect to the deity in the shrine by walking around the shrine, always keeping the shrine to the right. They might also turn around three times in place to show respect to the Divinity within.

Is worship mainly communal or private?

BELIEFS, PRACTICES, WORSHIP

Daily worship at an altar at home is typically private, either individually or as a family. Worship at the temple can be either individual or communal. Special ceremonies such as fire offerings (*homa*, *havan*) and groups singing devotional songs or *kirtan* are communal. Holy days and other celebrations are occasions when the extended family and friends meet together for communal worship ceremonies. Some festivals, such as *Diwali*, *Holi*, and *Ganesha Chaturthi* bring together whole communities or neighborhoods.

What is the role of temples in Hindu worship? How often are Hindus required to visit temples?

BELIEFS, PRACTICES, WORSHIP

Temples create an especially sacred space for Hindu worship because they house consecrated *murti* of God that have been ritually installed and are worshipped daily following strict rituals. When the freshly sculpted image is first brought to the temple, there is an elaborate ritual that invokes the life-force of that form of Divinity to reside in this image. This ritual is known as *prana-pratishtha*. Once this is done, the image becomes and is treated like a living being. The priest in the temple is then required to care for this living being on a daily basis in every way – that is why temples are open all days in the year. And every image is bathed, clothed, fed, and worshipped on a strict routine every single day, even when no other worshippers are present. Hindus consider it very auspicious to witness these rituals and visit the temples for *darshan* at times designated for the main *puja*. Temples are believed to further enhance their spiritual energy from the fact that numerous devotees have engaged in intensive worship for a long time. However, visiting temples is not mandatory. A Hindu may visit a temple occasionally, regularly, frequently, or never. The primary obligation of a Hindu is to worship God daily at home, perhaps at a simple altar.

What goes on in temples?

PRACTICES, WORSHIP

The primary function of a temple is to conduct daily worship of the deities in the temple and assist devotees in the worship rituals they wish to perform. In addition, temple priests conduct special rituals, including fire ceremonies, *homa*, to commemorate holy days, sacraments, and other special occasions (For more on sacraments, see chapter 15 of *Understanding Hinduism*). To varying degrees, temples also serve as community centers by hosting cultural events and classes on Hindu philosophy and mobilizing their members to serve the broader community. Many temples also conduct classes to introduce children to Hindu philosophy and culture.

Describe a typical visit to a Hindu temple

PRACTICES, WORSHIP

Temples are typically open to visitors for several hours each day in the morning and evening. Anyone is permitted to visit a temple and participate in worship, regardless of their own religion (though a few famous temples in India do restrict entry to Hindus only). The temple may house one or more shrines dedicated to particular deities. The visitor may walk around the temple freely, to observe, or participate in any *puja*. At the end of the *puja*, the priest might offer some tokens symbolizing God's grace such as the lamp used in *arati*, holy water, or fruit that the visitor is encouraged to accept.

Visitors are advised to dress modestly, especially if they intend to sit on the ground. Each temple posts certain rules that apply to visitors. Common prohibitions are footwear, non-vegetarian food, alcohol, or arms. Head covering is not necessary. It is improper to smell or taste any offering before it is offered to God.

How often must Hindus pray?

PRACTICES

Orthodox requirement is to pray at home thrice daily, at dawn, noon, and dusk. Commonly, Hindus pray once or twice a day at home and visit temples at varying frequency. In addition, short prayers are recited mentally to accompany daily activities such as waking up, getting out of bed, having a bath, eating, travelling, turning on a light, or before going to bed. Special *puja* may be performed before embarking on large projects such as moving to a new home, large construction projects, start of a child's education etc. *Puja* are part of the celebration of sacraments related to the life-cycle. (For more on sacraments, see chapter 15 of *Understanding Hinduism*)

Do Hindus pray to more than one God?

PRACTICES

Hindus worship One Supreme Being which can appear in many forms. Since there are prayers and worship practices addressed to the various forms of God, it may appear as if Hindus pray to many Gods. Both temples and typical home altars house many *murti* and photographs of different forms of God. These are not competing divinities, but make it easier for each devotee to develop an intimate personal relationship with a

form of God that is most appealing. In addition, Hindus traditionally pray to *Ganesha* at the start of any major undertaking.

What are the forms of communal worship?

PRACTICES, WORSHIP

The most common form of communal worship is devotees meeting regularly to sing *kirtan* or *bhajan* in praise of God. This may happen at temples or at homes. Families arrange special *puja* for holy days and other special days, inviting friends to join in worship and food. Temples organize large ceremonies, including fire-offerings, on holy days and special occasions in which large numbers of devotees participate. Some large festivals involve *puja* that are performed jointly by the whole community coming together in celebration. On particular holy days, community members may participate in traditional dances, story-telling, and recitations of scripture.

Explain the role of sacred fire in Hindu ritual. Explain the main elements of homa/havan.

PRACTICES

The sacred fire, *Agni*, plays a central role in Hindu worship. The very first set of mantras of the Rig Veda is the *Agni Sukta*, the hymn in praise of *Agni*. The word *agni* itself means ‘the one who leads us forward.’ The hymn praises *Agni* as the One who illuminates one’s path and guides them to their true welfare; and appeals to *Agni* to be as a father unto all, saving all from harm. The transformative power of fire is well known. In the Vedic tradition, prayerful offerings are made into the sacred fire, known as *homa* or *havan*. The subtle essence of these offerings is delivered by *Agni* to the particular Divinity that is the intended recipient. Hence, all Vedic rites require the invoking of the sacred fire, *Agni*, who is like a witness to the prayers and vows uttered in His presence. Every aspect of such ceremonies is strictly regulated: the shape and dimensions of the fire-pit, the selection of firewood, the preparation of sacred offerings such as ghee or specified herbs, the mantras to be used, and how the ceremony is to be concluded. Details vary according to the purpose of the ceremony, which can be either the fulfillment of a personal desire or a universal goal such as peace and good health.

Explain the meaning of the main religious symbols: Om, swastika, lotus, six-pointed star

BELIEFS, THEOLOGY

Om (or Aum): The deepest spiritual truth in the Vedas is the omnipresence of divine consciousness. Absolutely nothing in the universe exists without the divine. This supreme truth is represented in the Vedas by the Sanskrit symbol *Om*. *Om* is a most sacred symbol. It is recited before all Vedic mantras, written at the start of any document, and even used as a greeting. The sound *Om* is composed of three sounds that span the whole vocal apparatus: the sound 'A' from the base of the stomach; the sound 'U' in the mouth; and the sound 'M' at the lips. The Upanishads explain how these three components of *Om* represent the sum totality of all human experience. Serving as a reminder of the omnipresence of the Divine, the chanting of *Om* can bring one's minds to a profound meditative state. When chanted, its vibratory quality is purificatory and supports meditation.

Swastika: The word 'swastika' in Sanskrit means "that which brings good luck and well-being." It appears in one of the most frequently used mantras of the Rig Veda. The swastika is considered extremely sacred and holy by Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Zoroastrians, amongst others, and remains very widely used from ancient times to the present day. It has been interpreted in a variety of ways. The symbol is engraved on sacred objects of worship as well as on doorways of temples and homes. It forms part of all kinds of religious ceremonies and is often used to decorate objects in daily life. (For more, see Chapter 14 of *Understanding Hinduism*)

Lotus: Gods and Goddesses are frequently depicted holding a lotus or sitting on one. The centers of energy in the human body, known as *chakra*, are also symbolized by lotuses. The lotus is admired because it retains its freshness and beauty although it grows in ponds that are frequently murky, serving as a reminder for the seeker to remain untouched by negativity that may surround them.

Six-pointed Star: the six pointed star can be seen as the combination of two triangles. The upward facing triangle symbolizes human effort to progress spiritually; and the downward facing triangle symbolizes God's grace that pulls the seeker upwards towards God.

What are the main pilgrimage sites for Hindus? Are all Hindus required to go to them?

PRACTICES

India is dotted with innumerable sacred sites and most Hindus will go on a pilgrimage at some point in their lives. Visiting a pilgrimage site is not mandated, but is strongly encouraged as a spiritual practice. Visiting Varanasi is traditionally seen as the most important pilgrimage. Hardwar in the north, Gaya in the east, and Rameshwaram in the south are designated sites for rites associated with funerals. Some sites, like Mount Kailash in Tibet are hard to reach. Others, such as Varanasi, are well connected and visited by very large numbers of Hindus from all parts of the country, including many who are quite poor. Some sacred sites have annual *mela* or gatherings that attract large numbers, such as the up to 100 million people who attend the *Kumbha Mela* in Prayag (Allahabad).

How is worship integrated into daily life?

PRACTICES, WORSHIP

In addition to daily worship at a home altar and visits to temples, there are numerous ways in which Hindus are constantly reminded of God's presence. Short prayers are recited mentally to accompany daily activities such as waking up, getting out of bed, having a bath, eating, travelling, turning on a light and so on. Doing the right thing without focus on personal gain and as an offering to God is itself seen as a form of worship. This includes helping others who are in need. Respect for parents and hospitality towards guests are also considered as worship of God. A vegetarian diet reduces injury to other living beings, in all of whom God lives. Similarly, Hindus respect books and musical instruments by not letting their feet touch them. Fundamentally, a core Hindu teaching is that the entire universe is pervaded by the One Supreme Being and that it is our obligation to recognize the mutuality in the relationship between Nature and humans.

What is the role of fasting in Hinduism?

PRACTICES

In common with many religions, Hinduism recommends fasting as a form of spiritually purificatory practice. Traditional Hindus fast during the eleventh day of the lunar fortnight and are expected to devote their time to prayer and contemplation on God. Many Hindus fast once a week on days dedicated to their *Ishta Deva*, or favorite deity. Certain festivals, such as Mahashivaratri, are preceded by a day of fasting. While recognizing that fasting builds spiritual discipline, scriptures also warn against excessive fasting and torturing the body.

What is a mantra?

PRACTICES

Mantra are sacred sounds that have been revealed to sages since ancient times and have great potency. In the spiritual realm, the repetition of mantras is a powerful practice that purifies the mind and connects the spiritual seeker with the Divine force embodied in the *mantra*.

What is a yantra?

PRACTICES

Yantra are esoteric physical objects corresponding to mantras that are sounds. Generally two-dimensional diagrams with geometric patterns, they can also be three dimensional. They are ritually worshipped to invoke the forces they represent. They constitute an important feature of the practice of *tantra*.

How are beads used in prayer?

PRACTICES

Hindus use a string of beads, known as a *mala* to aid their practice of mantras. The *mala* is made up of 108 beads with one bead set apart with a tassel. 108 is considered a sacred number, the digit sum being 9. The *mala* is held in the right hand, using the thumb and middle finger to advance one bead with each repetition of the *mantra*. This physical practice helps keep the mind alert for long periods. Using the *mala* also

enables one to keep count of the number of repetitions when engaged in a formal practice requiring a set number of repetitions such as 100,000 or one million.

What is the role of meditation?

PRACTICES

Meditation is a central practice in Hindu spirituality as a means of calming the mind and connecting with the Divine. It is practiced in a variety of ways. Most meditative practices involve focusing the mind on an object of meditation that may be a physical object such as a *murti*, image of God, or a subtle object such as a *mantra*. More advanced meditative practices involve stopping the flow of thoughts and becoming aware of Pure Consciousness that is the substratum of the mind. In Hinduism, 'meditation' is distinct from the practice of 'contemplation,' which involves dwelling on a stream of thoughts about God, and from the practice of 'enquiry' which involves probing for answers to a deep spiritual question.

Why is the word 'shanti' recited three times at the end of a prayer?

PRACTICES

Shanti means 'peace.' It is repeated three times because threats to peace come from three sources: natural disasters, actions of others, and agitations in our own mind.

Hinduism still permits animal sacrifice in worship. How is that consistent with the principle of non-injury (ahimsa)?

ETHICS, NON-VIOLENCE, PRACTICES

The principle of *ahimsa* requires one to minimize all forms of injury and that would seem to preclude the sacrifice of animals. However, for those who themselves eat meat, it is not unnatural to offer to God what is the best of what the worshipper himself consumes. Hindu scriptures do discourage offering animals in worship, but scriptures also acknowledge that there are different kinds of worshippers with different levels of understanding. For some, offering animal sacrifice is natural and is not prohibited.

What is the significance of Navagraha Puja?

PRACTICES

Navagraha Puja is a ritual to propitiate nine celestial planets in the belief that they have a significant influence of what happens in the world. Seven of the nine planets are deities who preside over the days of the week: Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn. The remaining two, Rahu and Ketu, are not strictly planets, and represent the ascending and descending nodes of the moon. A story in the Puranas relates how they used subterfuge to consume some of the nectar reserved for the Gods and thus became immortal. In the Puranas they are said to cause the solar and lunar eclipses. Hindu temples have a special space dedicated to images of deities representing these nine planets and visitors to the temple pay their respects to them as they enter the temple.

Are women restricted from participating in religious rituals during the menstrual cycle?

CULTURE, PRACTICES

There is no scriptural basis for such a restriction. By social convention, women were expected to rest during this period and were excused from heavy housework such as cooking meals for the household. But this convention has morphed into an injunction against visiting temples or participating in religious ritual. This rule is strictly observed by orthodox Hindus but is not enforceable on others.

Why are there erotic sculptures on temples?

CULTURE, PRACTICES

Carvings on temple walls show life in all its aspects. Erotic sculptures show Manavas, Yakshas and Gandharvas who are beings within the realm of sensory pleasure and do not depict deities. The purpose of depicting secular scenes is to remind the viewer of the importance of remembering the Divine at all times, even as one engages in mundane activities.

CULTURE, ARTS & SCIENCE

Describe a common Hindu greeting.

CULTURE

Hindus greet each other by bringing their palms together in front of the heart and saying “Namaste” which means “I bow to the Divinity in you.”

What is the meaning of the marks worn on the forehead by Hindus?

CULTURE, PRACTICES

Hindus wear a variety of marks on their foreheads as part of the daily worship. The most common is a colored dot, known as *tilak* or *bindi*. It is placed on the spot between the eyebrows that has special significance in yoga as an energy center and as the ‘third eye’ of wisdom. Some Hindus wear ash on the forehead as a reminder of the impermanence of the world and of the power of the Divine to transform our lower tendencies. Different markings, such as three horizontal stripes across the forehead or a U-shape between the brows may also indicate a seeker’s deity tradition.

What are the main Hindu Holy Days? How are they observed?

CULTURE, PRACTICES

The most popular Hindu festivals are Navaratri, Dussehra and Diwali that occur in October/November (holy days are set by the lunar calendar). Diwali is known as the “Festival of Light.” It celebrates the victory of good over evil, and in some regions of India, marks the New Year. Navaratri, a nine day long festival, involves worship of the Goddesses of Power (Durga), Wealth (Lakshmi), and Knowledge (Saraswati). Other major holy days are the birthdays of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna, Maha-Shivaratri (in honor of Lord Shiva), and Ganesha Chaturthi (in honor of Lord Ganesha) and many more.

When is the Hindu New Year?

CULTURE, PRACTICES

Hindus celebrate the New Year at different times based on regional calendars. Hindu holidays are based on the lunisolar calendar which causes the solar dates to change slightly each year. Most regions celebrate the New Year at the time of the spring harvest, which normally falls in April. A major exception is the Gujarat region that observes the start of the New Year at Diwali, which is normally in October/November.

Explain the Hindu calendar

CULTURE, PRACTICES

Hindus traditionally follow a lunisolar calendar with the addition of an extra month as needed to coordinate with the solar calendar. There are many regional variations. The lunar calendar has twelve months, with each month having two lunar phases. Festival dates are thus specified by day, lunar phase, and month.

What is the role of women in ancient and contemporary Hindu society?

CULTURE

Of all major global religions practiced today, Hinduism alone promotes worshipping the Divine as Feminine. *Shakti*, the energetic feminine aspect of Divinity has a prominent presence in the Hindu pantheon and is symbolic of both compassion and strength in dealing with powerful demons. Worship of the feminine forms of Divinity is very popular among both men and women. Scriptures contain numerous accounts of women who commanded the highest respect as founders of new spiritual disciplines (e.g. Lopamudra), as learned sages (e.g. Gargi and Hemalekha), as powerful heroines in popular epics (e.g. Draupadi, Savitri, and Damayanti). Among contemporary Hindu religious leaders, women are very prominent (e.g. Anandamayi Ma, Sarada Ma, Ammachi, Karunamayi Ma). At the level of ritual too, women have a key role: the *yajamana*, or protagonist in a religious ceremony is traditionally a married couple with both spouses directly involved in the ceremony.

Who/What is Sati?

CULTURE, PRACTICES

Sati was the consort of Shiva who burnt herself to protest against His being insulted in a celestial ceremony. In the scriptures we have instances of wives entering the funeral pyre of their husbands as a mark of devotion to their deceased husbands. This was a voluntary practice that came to be known as Sati. During the Mughal period in Indian history, there were instances of Hindu wives committing suicide by burning themselves en masse when their husbands were defeated and killed in battle against the Mughals. This was done to escape the dishonor of becoming the property of the victor. In 1829, the practice of *sati* was made illegal in India, however isolated and rare cases are still reported, probably the result of widows being forced to burn themselves. These are criminal acts, against the spirit of *dharma*, and with no sanction in Hindu scriptures.

Explain the practice of dowry

CULTURE

Dowry is the practice of payment to the bridegroom's family by the bride's family along with the giving away of the bride during the marriage ceremony. The practice originated as a means of helping with marriage expenses and became a form of insurance against mistreatment by a bride's in-laws. This practice has no foundation in Hindu scriptures. Dowry was outlawed in 1961, but remains a social evil that is practiced across several communities throughout South Asia. (For more see www.HAFsite.org)

Are Hindus required to be vegetarian?

CULTURE, ECOLOGY, ENVIRONMENTALISM, NON-VIOLENCE

One of the cardinal principles of *dharma* is non-injury, *ahimsa* i.e. to minimize the injury to others caused by us in our daily lives. Hence Hindus are advised to eat a diet that minimizes injury to other living beings. Even harvesting plants and fruit causes some injury. But that is considered much less than the injury caused by killing animals or birds in order to feed ourselves. To allow for circumstances when there is no alternative to eating meat, a vegetarian diet is advised, but not mandated for Hindus. Many Hindus

are strict vegetarians in keeping with this *dharma*. The strongest dietary prohibitions are against eating beef because cows are regarded as sacred.

How is consuming dairy consistent with vegetarianism?

ECOLOGY, ENVIRONMENTALISM, NON-VIOLENCE

This question arises from a misconception that vegetarianism means not consuming anything that emanates from animals. That is not so. The principle underlying vegetarianism is the avoidance of injury to living beings. Milking a cow does not injure the cow and is therefore consistent with being a vegetarian.

Why are cows regarded as sacred? Are they worshipped?

BELIEFS, CULTURE, PRACTICES

From Vedic times, Hindus have seen cows as a gift from God to humankind, for cows are gentle creatures that give great abundance to humans. Everything about them was seen as beneficial, especially in agrarian societies: they work on the fields, draw carts, provide valuable dairy products, and even their dung and urine is used. Because of these qualities, cows are considered divine gifts and therefore sacred, not to be abused. In keeping with the philosophy that God is all-pervasive and the Divine manifests in many forms, there are certain celebrations when the family cow is worshipped.

Why is the river Ganga considered sacred?

BELIEFS, CULTURE

Hindus believe that the river Ganga descended from heaven and purifies everything it touches. Many pilgrims visit cities on the banks of the Ganga, such as Varanasi, to pray in the temples and bathe in the holy river. One festival called the *Maha Kumbha Mela* occurs every 12 years in Allahabad where the Ganga and Yamuna rivers meet. About 100 million pilgrims joined the Mela in 2013, making it the largest ever sacred gathering in the world.

Are there dress codes for Hindus?

CULTURE

There are generally no rigid dress requirements although traditional dress is preferred on special occasions. Modest dress is appropriate for visiting a temple.

Does Hindu scripture promote arranged marriages?

CULTURE

There are many stories in Hindu scriptures about princesses choosing their mate from among many suitors and no indication that arranged marriages are recommended. However, arranged marriage is a common social practice in India. Traditionally, Hindu parents see it as their obligation to ensure that their sons and daughters find suitable spouses.

LIFE CYCLE

What are the life cycle events celebrated in Hinduism?

CULTURE, PRACTICES

Hindu tradition prescribes a number of sacraments, known as *samskara*, which aim to purify an individual's inner being during the journey through life. Tradition defines as many as forty *samskaras* that span the entire gamut of milestones in a person's life, from the womb to the funeral pyre. Many Hindus do not observe them all due to the pressures of modern life. The landmarks in childhood include birth, naming the child, first solid food, first outing, first haircut, and piercing of the ears. At a young age, the child undergoes a religious initiation (*upanayana*) by the guru and embarks on formal

education and regular religious practice. Wedding vows are exchanged in the presence of the sacred fire using Vedic mantras culminating in the prayer “may our minds always be in harmony.” At death, almost all Hindus cremate the body. Cremation purifies the body and returns it to the five physical elements of which it is composed: earth, water, fire, air and space. (For more, see Chapter 15 of *Understanding Hinduism*)

Describe the Hindu funeral ceremony

CULTURE, PRACTICES

On death, the body is traditionally cremated by male family members in an austere ceremony where only white clothes are worn, followed by several days of prescribed ritual, prayer, and scriptural readings. The rituals signify the provision of food and peace and comfort to the departed soul in its journey to the next world. After about two weeks of mourning, there is a feast celebrating the soul at rest.

What happens to an individual after death?

BELIEF, PRACTICES

Only the physical body dies. The subtle body (i.e. the energy field and mind; distinct from the individual soul or *atman*) of one who performs good acts is rewarded by going to heaven but remains there only until its merit runs out and then returns to earth. When the subtle body returns to earth, it is in another physical body best suited to exhaust the accumulated karmic consequences of its previous deeds.

What is the relationship to one’s ancestors?

BELIEF, CULTURE, PRACTICES

Respect for elders and deceased ancestors is a strong value. On the anniversaries of their parents’ death, Hindus perform a special ceremony honoring their ancestors. The blessings of ancestors are invoked on special occasions such as marriage and at designated periods each year.

How does Hinduism describe the stages of human life?

BELIEF, CULTURE, PRACTICES

Recognizing the contextual nature of *dharma*, scriptures discuss *dharma* that is appropriate at different stages of one's life. A typical lifespan may be viewed in four stages following childhood. The first stage of being a student is known as *brahmacharya*; the appropriate *dharma* for a student is to serve the teacher and excel at acquiring knowledge. The second stage is being a householder, *grihastha*, when an adult goes to work and raises a family; the appropriate *dharma* at this stage is to care for the family and meet obligations to society. The third stage is *vanaprastha* which means 'forest dweller' and may be viewed as equivalent of a retired person; the appropriate *dharma* at this stage of life is to allow the next generation to take charge of mundane affairs, reflect on the deeper issues of life and engage in spiritual practice. The final stage, which does not apply to all persons, might be *sannyasa* which means complete renunciation of worldly attachments; such a person is wholly devoted to spiritual practice. (For more, see Chapter 6 of *Understanding Hinduism*)

Hinduism seems to deny the world and extol escaping from the world. Why is that?

BELIEFS

Hinduism addresses a wide range of goals in human lives: establishing a strong ethical foundation for all our actions (*dharma*), ensuring material security and seeking prosperity for one's family (*artha*), fulfilling one's desires and enjoying sensory pleasure (*kama*), and seeking liberation from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth (*moksha*). Scriptures do place extra emphasis on the last goal because that is a uniquely human endeavor where most people need guidance and encouragement. *Dharma, artha and kama* come naturally even to animals. Only human beings have the degree of self-awareness necessary to pursue spiritual goals. It is not necessary to deny the world to find liberation – freedom from bondage can be achieved while being fully active in the world. (For more, see Chapter 4 of *Understanding Hinduism*)

STRUCTURE, ORGANIZATION & GOVERNANCE

What are the main divisions in Hinduism? How do they differ in their religious beliefs and practices? Is intermarriage among these groups permitted?

BELIEFS, CULTURE, PRACTICES

The philosophy and practices of Hinduism span an extremely broad spectrum of spirituality. Followers of specific beliefs or practices may consider themselves as separate communities within Hinduism. Distinctions may arise due to philosophy (such as the monist tradition of Shankaracharya, the qualified dualism of Ramanujacharya, and dualism of Madhvacharya) or the choice of a favorite form in which God is worshipped (e.g. worshippers of Vishnu, Shiva or the Divine Mother). Another distinction is variety in the modes of worship prescribed by revered teachers such as Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Vallabhacharya, Basavanna, or Dayananda Saraswati. As India is a large and diverse country, regional and language differences can also be quite significant. There is no religious barrier to intermarriage, although marriage within linguistic and other sub-groups is sometimes preferred for cultural reasons.

Who are considered religious leaders? How are they chosen? Is there a structured hierarchy?

BELIEFS, CULTURE, PRACTICES

There is no person or organization that exercises any authority over Hinduism as a whole. Each subgroup has its own leadership structure and their selection processes vary. The influence of each leader depends on how many followers they have.

What is the role of clergy? How are they trained? Are they celibate? Are women eligible?

BELIEFS, CULTURE, PRACTICES

Priests are trained to perform rituals, mainly in temples, and are also used in homes for special occasions. They generally do not have a role in teaching, preaching or pastoral counseling. Monks and scholars are active in guiding and teaching spiritual seekers. Priests are not celibate and have generally been trained from a very young age in mastering mantras and ritual practices. It is rare, but not unknown, to have women priests.

Who is permitted to interpret scripture?

BELIEFS, PRACTICES, SCRIPTURE, THEOLOGY

All spiritual seekers are encouraged to study and reflect on the scriptures directly to the best of their ability. Doctrinal issues are generally left to the individual to decide in line with his/her own understanding of *dharma* and personal conscience. Their understanding is aided by the guidance of commentators and teachers, but there is no stricture against individuals reaching their own interpretations of scripture. Vigorous questioning and independent enquiry are strongly recommended, with the ultimate goal of directly experiencing the Truths stated in the scriptures. The scriptures themselves state that direct experience of the Divine has more authority than the scriptures.

What does 'swami' mean? What is their role in Hinduism?

GUIDE, GURU, PRACTICES, SWAMI

The term *swami* as a prefix denotes a renunciate who has renounced all personal possessions and taken a new identity to pursue the spiritual path exclusively. Some are part of organizations and live in ashrams. Others, also known as *sadhus*, are unaffiliated, have no fixed home, and subsist on the charity of individuals. The main role of swamis is to teach and guide spiritual seekers, either formally in classroom settings or informally as they mingle with families in their wanderings.

Are there saints in Hinduism?

BELIEFS

There is no formal process of granting sainthood, but the traditional term *sant* is commonly used to venerate religious leaders from ancient times who have made a big impact on the lives of people historically.

What role do religious leaders play on social issues?

CULTURE

Religious leaders speak out on social issues and can be quite influential, but it is recognized that many choices are matters of judgement where individual circumstances must be taken into account rather than religious doctrine. Personal decisions are ultimately left to individual conscience.

What is the legal status of religious injunctions? What are the punishments for transgressions?

BELIEFS, PRACTICES

As there is no central authority in Hinduism and no formal system of religious law, there are no enforceable religious injunctions of broad applicability. Various local groups might have rules of their own and their own standards for disciplining transgressions within the scope of secular law.

What guidance or rules emerge from Hindu scriptures on social issues pertaining to gender and medical interventions?

BELIEFS, CULTURE, PRACTICES

There is no formal religious law or central authority that promulgates doctrine in Hinduism. The pluralist tradition in Hinduism embraces diversity and encourages individuals to make their own decisions. Decisions on social issues are a matter of individual conscience, with the individual taking the karmic consequences of that decision. Each individual makes a decision based on *dharma* using such guidance as may be available in scripture and from learned religious leaders. Such guidance may be specific or embedded in stories in the *Smriti* texts. It is important to remember that

Smriti texts are subject to reinterpretation to reflect changes in time and place. As such, there also appear to have been many interpolations in these texts, so it is hard to decipher what the original text is.

Contemporary Indian attitudes are often much more rigid than those seen in the Hindu scriptures. That is probably because of the hundreds of years during which Muslims and Christians ruled India, imposing their own ideas of morality and social norms. These attitudes were sometimes written into laws, some of which are yet to be repealed. It is therefore necessary to make a distinction between traditional Hindu norms as depicted in the scriptures and current social practice in India. An example of this is the *Upanayana* ceremony. Although generally practiced only for boys, this gender restriction is being contested by reformers as being contrary to the older scriptures. There is a growing willingness to perform this ceremony for girls as well.

The following section provides a general idea of how Hindus might view social issues based on scriptural guidance:

LGBT: Ancient Hindu texts offer no prohibition or condemnation of same sex desire or activity. They also reference a possible 'third sex' as being part of nature. Scriptures contain examples of persons changing gender presentation (eg. Arjuna and Ela). There is no scriptural basis for discrimination against homosexuality or transgender persons. Nor is sexual orientation an obstacle to spiritual progress in Hinduism. (See policy brief at www.HAFsite.org)

Divorce: Scriptures praise lifelong devotion between the spouses, but divorce is not prohibited.

Polygamy: Polygamy discouraged in the scriptures, but permitted in Hinduism. It is now illegal in India for Hindus.

Remarriage: There is no religious prohibition on remarriage, but social barriers to widow remarriage are high.

Interfaith marriage: There is no religious barrier to interfaith marriage, although marriage within the same faith is sometimes preferred for cultural reasons.

Same-sex marriage: Scriptural tradition states that marriage is for purpose of procreation, but marriage rites are mostly gender neutral.

Abortion: Scriptures consider life of a fetus to begin at conception. Abortion creates karmic consequences but it is left to the individual to decide.

Contraception: Contraception is permitted.

Suicide: Taking one's own life interrupts the completion of the karmic plan for this life and creates additional karmic consequences for future lives.

Euthanasia: Considered the same as suicide.

Adultery and premarital sex: Amounts to sensual gratification contrary to *dharma*.

Organ donation: Organ donation is noted to have occurred in the Puranas and is praiseworthy.

Human cloning and in vitro fertilization: Both are noted to have occurred in the Puranas.

End of life care: Patient may choose to forego life support and refuse food.

How does one become a Hindu? Is there a formal process for conversion to Hinduism?

BELIEFS, CULTURE, PRACTICES

Most Hindus are so by birth, but many have chosen to become Hindus. Those who are born Hindus do not undergo any subsequent formality such as Confirmation or Bar or Bat Mitzvah. For others who choose to become Hindus it is enough if they profess faith in the Vedas and begin to practice as Hindus. More recently, some organizations have developed formal rites for conversion.

ATTITUDE TOWARD THE “OTHER”

How are other religions viewed in scripture or tradition?

BELIEFS, PLURALISM, THEOLOGY

Respect for other religions is part of the Hindu fabric. The primary source of this intrinsic respect for other religions is in the core philosophy of Hindu scriptures: that the Supreme Divine Truth is beyond human comprehension. Hindus naturally accept the validity of the spiritual paths defined by other religions and have no hesitation in participating in worship with followers of other religions. Hindus do not engage in proselytizing and have no hesitancy in acknowledging other religions as legitimate ways to God. This pluralistic attitude is fostered by the scriptural emphasis on experience rather than doctrine; an ancient tradition of free debate among all philosophical schools, including atheism; and a long history of offering sanctuary to followers of religions that were being persecuted elsewhere, including Jews, Christians, Muslims, Zoroastrians, and Baha’i. Hindus have close philosophical and social affinity to the three other major religions that were born in India – Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism.

Can followers of other religions attain moksha?

BELIEFS, PLURALISM, THEOLOGY

Hindus do not claim that Hinduism is the exclusive path to liberation. The Hindu goal of *moksha* is attained by right knowledge and devotion – a path that can be traversed by followers of other religions as permitted by their own faith traditions.

How important is it to try to convert others to Hinduism?

BELIEFS, CONVERSION, PLURALISM, PRACTICES, PROSELYTIZATION, THEOLOGY

Attempting to convert followers of other religions is not part of Hindu tradition. A growing number of Hindus oppose proselytization by others, particularly missionary activities that are seen as subtly coercive, using material incentives to target those

suffering poverty and lack of education. Further, there is strong suspicion at claims of exclusivity or uniqueness by any religious group.

What is the attitude toward Hindus who choose to change to another religion?

BELIEFS, CULTURE, PLURALISM

There is no social ostracism of Hindus who convert to other religions.

What is Hinduism's relationship with the Jain religion?

CULTURE, PLURALISM, PRACTICES

The two religions have coexisted in India for many centuries, with families often practicing both at the same time. The cultures are so intertwined that it is hard to identify boundaries. Some of the main differences between Hinduism and Jainism are in the areas of theology and cosmology. Jains do not believe in God and regard the universe as eternal and beginningless, without a creator. Jains do not believe in the sacredness of the primary Hindu scriptures, the Vedas, and follow the teachings of a series of *Tirthankar*, or teachers, the first of whom has a prominent place in Hindu scriptural texts as well. Philosophy and practices relating to *moksha*, *karma*, and worship practices are very similar. Both revere the same religious symbols such as Om and the swastika, although interpretations may vary. Neither tradition attempts to convert others to their faith. This philosophy of live and let live is enshrined in the Jain concept of *anekantavada* and the Hindu Vedic teaching that "Truth is one and wise persons speak of it in many ways."

What is Hinduism's relationship with the Buddhist religion?

CULTURE, PLURALISM, PRACTICES

Buddhism originated in India in the 5th century BCE and rapidly gained in popularity in place of ritualism. Buddhism remained a dominant religion in India for about a thousand years (500 BCE to 500 CE) and spread through most of Asia. Buddhism faded away from India almost completely after two philosophical systems (*Nyaya-Vaisesika* and *Mimamsa*) revived Hinduism. Although spiritual concepts differ greatly, Hinduism and

Buddhism share much of their philosophy, ethics, and spiritual practices, especially in the field of *tantra*. The Buddha's teachings aimed at relieving suffering were highly practical and closely aligned with Hindu *dharma* and the teachings of *yoga*. Hinduism adopted from Buddhism the concept of monastic orders to promote scriptural study and practice. Hindus regard Buddha as one of the major incarnations of Lord Vishnu, though Buddhists do not acknowledge this. Followers of the Dalai Lama (who is the head of the *Vajrayana* branch of Buddhism) and other Tibetan Buddhist leaders have had shelter and support in India since 1959.

What is Hinduism's relationship with Sikhism?

CULTURE, PLURALISM, PRACTICES

The Sikh religion was founded in India in the 15-16th century at a time when Hinduism was being swept by a strong wave of religious and social reform promoted by saints who emphasized the primacy of devotion to God, criticized religious ritual, and the practice of caste discrimination. From a Hindu perspective, Sikhism is very close to Hinduism, sharing similar concepts of God, belief in *karma*, rebirth and liberation, and an emphasis on knowledge and devotion with a strong foundation in ethics. However, Sikhism rejects the worship of personal forms of God, numerous rituals common among Hindus, and the praise of renunciation and non-violence. Sikh Gurus were even more emphatic than Hindu social reformers in condemning the caste system. Cultural bonds have been very close between Sikhs and Hindus, with traditional Hindu families in Punjab, India encouraging one of their sons to embrace Sikhism in gratitude for the Sikh defense of Hindus against oppression by Muslim rulers in the 17th century.

Cite historical periods when there was exceptional amity or conflict between Hinduism and other religions. To what extent do these conflicts linger today?

CULTURE, HISTORY, PLURALISM

Hindu society has traditionally been a haven for followers of religions persecuted elsewhere. For a thousand years until 1947, India was governed by non-Hindus who sometimes actively discriminated against followers of Hinduism. In 1947, India was partitioned on a religious basis with the creation of territories that are now Pakistan

and Bangladesh. Despite the bitter memories of the awful violence that accompanied that upheaval, religions have mostly lived amicably in India. The sporadic bursts of local conflict are usually politically motivated: the poor, uneducated, and unemployed are easily manipulated to provoke unrest and riots. The Indian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion to all. A constitutional amendment in 1977 proclaimed India as a secular State. 'Secular' in the Indian context is not defined as separation of the State from religion, but as the obligation of the State to treat all religions equally.

What are the ways in which Hinduism interacts with other religions in the US today?

CULTURE, HISTORY, PLURALISM

While Hindus have been in America since the late 19th century, the Hindu community as a whole is still young, with the overwhelming majority of Hindus arriving in the United States after 1965. The vital effort to build temples matured in the 1990s and 2000s. Hindus integrated easily into the American workplace, and a growing number of Americans gained some familiarity about Hinduism through travel or the study of *yoga* and *ayurveda*. But most Americans know very little about Hindu philosophy or religious practice, and Hinduism is often badly distorted in American schools' curricula. Contact between the religions had been primarily in interfaith organizations in large cities in America, but now most American-born Hindus grow up with youth of other faith groups, sharing much of the same culture. Despite instances of hate crimes against the Hindu community or places of worship, relations between Hindus and members of other religions have been mostly cordial.