

# ESSENTIALS OF HINDUISM

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*Transcription*

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# Lesson 5: Christianity and Hinduism

I want to take time in the concluding moments that we have and talk about Christianity and Hinduism. I think it is actually quite important and significant as Christians to reflect on what all of this means and how we can have a better impact on India.

## SEVEN CONTRASTS BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND HINDUISM

I want to begin by being very clear about what I believe to be the seven major contrasts between Christianity and Hinduism and then talk about ways in which people have tried to model Christian witness in the Indian context. I want to end these lectures by focusing quite a bit on the Christian response to Hinduism. I will begin with noting the seven major differences between Christianity and Hinduism.

### KNOWABILITY OF GOD

The first is the relational nature and knowability of God. The hallmark of the Christian faith is that God is relational and that he is knowable. This is rooted in the doctrine of the Trinity because the Trinity tells us that even before the creation of the world, God was a relational being. God had relationship even among Himself in the Holy Trinity. Not only does God know, but God desires to be known. Therefore, God by nature is a relational God. We believe that He has revealed Himself in Scripture. That means He is knowable. He has revealed truths about Himself. Indeed, He has revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. This is not something that you have dominant in the Hindu context. The Bible says, "Whoever has seen me has seen The Father." Paul talks about, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection." This is not possible in Hinduism, where God is not known and no-one can make positive affirmations about God.

### INCARNATION

The second big difference that I want to point out between Hinduism and Christianity is the relationship between the Hindu and Christian conceptions of incarnation. We did not discuss this a lot in these summary lectures. But if you know Hinduism and you were attentive in our discussions about Vishnu and Shiva, especially Vishnu, there is great emphasis on how Vishnu has incarnated himself multiple times in multiple places. The Hindu term for this is "avatar." It means "divine descent." Many people have used this as a bridge to talk about the incarnation of Jesus Christ. However, I find this to be extremely difficult. I am a big believer in building bridges with Hindus. I do believe we need to do all we can to make the Gospel intelligible to Hindu ears. So, by default I am very sympathetic to fresh, new ideas about trying to communicate the Gospel to Hindus. My own doctoral work is in the area of "How the Gospel is communicated to Hindus." But I do not believe that this comparison between Hindu avatar and the Christian incarnation can really take us where we want to go. There are

so many major differences between avatar and incarnation, that I have found it is best to keep the two terms completely separate. For example, incarnation is once in the history of the world. It is one historic incarnation. In the avatar world, there are many incarnations, both human and non-human. There were many in the past and many more to come in the future. So, that is the problem I have with that.

I also do not like the fact that the incarnation does not allow for any mixing or blending of the divine human. It is two distinct natures united in one person. The natures are never confused; but yet they are united harmoniously in the one nature. Yet in the avatar there is a mixing or blending of the divine and human, so that you don't really have a true human being. I think there are problems philosophically with it and theologically with it. According to the Bible, Jesus was sent as a free act of God's grace. According to the doctrine of avatar, it is compelled by the necessity that occurs when a certain amount of accumulative karma builds up. I have difficulty with the doctrine of avatar as an easy comparison to the incarnation.

## KARMA

My third point of contrast between Hinduism and Christianity is in the doctrine of karma. According to the classic definition of karma, I think the bhakti movement shows why they find this to be so difficult to accept. In classic Hinduism, karma cannot be paid by another. There is no way that anyone can do something for you redemptively. There is no vicarious suffering. Every Hindu is responsible for working off his own karmic debt. Whereas, in the Bible Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world, Jesus paid the debt which we could never pay. That is the good news of the Gospel. Karma does not allow for that. There is a great gulf between the karma of Hinduism and the redemption found through our Lord Jesus Christ.

## UNIQUENESS OF THE GOSPEL

The fourth major difference between Christianity and Hinduism is of course found in the uniqueness of the Gospel and the multiple paths of Hinduism. As we have seen in these lectures, Hinduism accepts many paths to God. It rejects the exclusivity. It does not ever reject the deity of Christ or any of the kind of classic doctrines of Christianity such as incarnation or the resurrection. Hindus have no problem with all of that. What they have difficulty with is Christ's unique claim, which is found in John 10:1 and 7, John 14:6 or Acts 4:12 where Peter says, "There is salvation in no one else. There is no other name under all of heaven by which we must be saved." Hinduism wants to reduce Christianity to a subjective experience. Christianity proclaims historic objective facts. Christ died on the cross for your sins. That is a fact to which we must respond. There are not multiple ways of salvation. Christ is the unique answer to the human dilemma. This is a major difference between Christianity and Hinduism.

## CREATION

The fifth big difference is that creation in Hinduism is not good. It lacks design, has no real purpose. In the Bible, we find that creation is the result of God's great design. God called the heavens and the earth into being through his own spoken word. Each level, each part of creation has dignity. A bird has dignity because it is doing exactly what God created it to do. Not so in Hinduism. All of creation lives in this kind of iffy state of, "We're not certain whether it is good or not and we're not certain whether or not it is to be trusted." Transmigration of souls, the atman, puts the entire creation – if you want to use the word "creation," actually emanation, but the entire visible world – on a ranking ladder of increasing evil, from a man, all the way down to a woman. According to Hinduism, a woman is more evil than a tiger; a tiger more evil than a man; a Dalit is more evil than a Sudra; a Sudra more evil than a Brahmin, etc. A female more evil than a male, etc.

This is a terrible travesty because in the Bible, creation is not based on a ranking ladder. A worm has just as much dignity as a tiger, because a worm is doing exactly what God created it to do in God's good order, as is the tiger, as is the man, etc. The idea of taking away God's creative design, taking away God's active principle of creating every facet of creation with dignity, is wrought by the Hindu worldview. Therefore, I find it incompatible.

## TRANSMIGRATION

The sixth of our seven contrasting points between Hinduism and Christianity is that transmigration, or reincarnation as it is sometimes called in the West, does not actually solve the problem of evil. According to the Hindus, transmigration is the great way that the problem of evil is solved. Let me explain. If we see a young child suffering, that is a problem for us because we see that the poor child, like a baby born with leukemia or with AIDS, didn't do anything to deserve that; it represents an innocent sufferer. I realize that the child in Christian theology may be born in sin, etc. But in terms of this child's volitional acts, the child in that sense cannot be blamed for his or her AIDS or whatever. Crack babies, you see all the time in the news.

This is not a problem in Hindu theology because according to Hinduism, anyone who is suffering is simply paying for the karma of a previous lifetime. Therefore, if you see even this child suffering, it is because they deserve it, from a previous lifetime. In that sense, they say transmigration solves the problem of evil. But I find that indeed, it does not.

First of all, transmigration is not a form of just punishment because no one remembers their past lives. So, is it right to punish people for deeds about which they have no knowledge? It is totally unjust to punish a child without first explaining to the child what they did wrong. It is the same with any court of law, that you are not sent to prison because of a crime that you are pronounced guilty of, and that is articulated clearly to the defendant. Transmigration assumes, as we saw earlier with the view of creation itself, that the entire world is here in a chain of evil. A worm is suffering a greater karmic death than a bird. Again, this is against Scripture because the Scripture

does not accept the world as a chain of increasing evil or increasing good. Transmigration does not solve the problem of evil because it is based on the impersonal law of karma. It shuts the door on divine grace. Yet our lives are constantly enriched by acts of mercy, forgiveness and grace which we bestow on one another. Where would the world be without those things? There are just many problems with the doctrine of transmigration.

## SALVATION

Finally, my seventh big difference is that salvation in Hinduism is not final. The schools of Hinduism reject any personal consciousness identified with the atman, so your personal knowledge is lost. That consciousness is again re-admitted in the next creation. Schools of Hinduism believe that the atman will eventually be manifested into the world system again, making the accumulation of karmic debt possible, and thus the need to be released from the wheel of samsara all over again. This makes salvation not definitive in Hinduism; whereas in Christianity we are told that we will dwell and reign with Him forever and ever (Revelation 22:5).

## WITNESSING TO A HINDU

There are big differences between Christianity and Hinduism; and we need to recognize the importance of sharing this Gospel to the ends of the earth. In the full lectures, I also give a summary of five different models of how Christians witness in modern-day contemporary India. I will briefly summarize them here; but if you want the whole exposition of each of these, then you should definitely key into the full lectures of "Introduction to Hinduism."

It is true to say that Christians have a witness to Jesus Christ in a wide variety of ways. One model I think is out there very prominently is what I call the "Pentecostal power encounter model." This essentially pits the Gospel; it is like recreating the Mount Carmel analogy of the paradigm where you focus on Jesus' healing and deliverance ministry. This is done very widely throughout India to promote the power of Christ over false idols.

Others present Christ as the perfect embodiment of "dharma." Dharma is the word for teaching and so you have an emphasis on the life of Christ and his ethical teachings, because Indians are often very favorable to the teachings of Christ. Then of course at some point you have to make that transition to preach the Gospel of repentance and faith in the complete work of Christ on the cross.

Another well-known example is what I call "Jesus Christ, the liberator from oppressive structures." There is a big movement to demonstrate how Christianity will help to liberate those that are disenfranchised by Hinduism. Even though Hinduism supposedly is 86 percent of India, if you think that only 8 percent are Brahmin, then most Hindus have actually been disenfranchised by the very religion they belong to.

This model tends to emphasize how the Gospel truly liberates from oppressive structures. For example, in our community we have done a number of schools throughout India and these schools are helping to liberate people from ignorance, which Hinduism never would teach these people. Therefore, Jesus Christ is the liberator from oppressive structures.

Fourth, you find Jesus Christ the western savior. This is what I often jokingly refer to as “Jesus Christ in a three-piece suit.” You find a number of people who preach the Gospel in India using western forms, western cultural kind of presuppositions. The discourse is largely in English. As western church “techniques” are perceived in India, one has to ask, “Will this kind of foreign Jesus be effective in really communicating the Gospel to Hindus?”

Fifth and finally, Jesus Christ the unique logos made “sannyasin.” Sannyasin is a word for those who renounce the world. You often will find Jesus presented as a great Brahmin priest who has renounced the world, renounced everything and comes down as the bearer of the true philosophy. Of course, that may be very amenable to a Brahmin who wants to believe in Jesus, understand his tradition; but might be very, very difficult to be successful in communicating this to the average Indian.

These are some examples. I think it is all out there. India is the recipient of a lot of Krishna activity; therefore, we need to keep that in mind when we go into India. India has been exposed to a wide range of views regarding Christianity; and how we respond to them is largely tied to many, many great centuries of tradition that perhaps precede us and inform them in ways that we cannot imagine.

It is important to always be prayerful as we think and pray about India. It is one of the most diverse countries in the world with one of the greatest needs imaginable to bring the Christian Gospel to the people of India. I challenge you to prayerfully keep India before you in prayer and ask God to bless you and to help you to make a difference in bringing the glorious Gospel of Christ to the people of India.

Thank you very much.