

# The Cultural Core of Hinduism

— Timothy Paul

*Thinking of “religion” in terms of theology and ideas leads one astray when dealing with Hindus. Culture or civilization is the more fundamental issue.*

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From a distance, Hinduism seems to resemble a vast and intricate complex of deities, customs, philosophies, languages and holy books. Many people find it confusing, so they try to classify it in terms that they can understand. The most common is to refer to Hinduism as a religion with its own doctrine and world-view philosophy. While there are concepts and traditions that seem to extend to almost every sect of Hinduism, there is also an endless panoply of detail that makes either a straightforward religious or philosophical explanation impossible. What can be done to unravel the complexity and enable people to begin to understand it?

A good starting place, perhaps, is to ask Hindu people to tell the world who they are and what they believe on their own terms. What Hindu people emphasize is that Hinduism is not a religion or a philosophy. It is a culture or a way of life that evolved over time in India. Furthermore, it is a uniquely Hindu culture, defining itself according to Hindu cultural dynamics; it is culture as Hindus define culture. It may not be incorrect to say that Hinduism is actually nothing more or less than the expression of how the idea of social and spiritual culture emerged in India over the cloistered centuries of Indian history. It is actually a unique civilization, indigenous to India.

Hindu civilization, as it exists in the modern era, grew through a process of interchange and assimilation with numerous other cultures. There have been many of these social upheavals over India's five thousand year history, but the most influential was the ancient Aryan migrations into India from Europe and Iran. The merging of Aryan culture with the indigenous people of very ancient India and the social and philosophical dynamics that emerged from it laid the cultural foundations for modern Hinduism.

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*Timothy Paul developed his understanding of Hinduism and ministry among Hindus during 15 years of hands-on ministry in the metropolitan New York area, where he continues to live.*

