

Sharing Jesus with Hindu Friends

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You have started life at your new university. Despite your nerves, you make an effort to meet the other students on your corridor and discover you are next door to a Hindu. Raj is from the Midlands; his parents moved to the UK from India before he was born. Raj is easy to get along with; in many ways he seems just like any other student. But there is no getting away from the fact that there are differences too. There are images of Hindu gods on the shelf in his room, he bows to his parents when they visit, and talks with them in Gujarati.

You have always wanted to share your faith with people from other religious traditions but now that you have the opportunity you wonder where to start. How can I avoid causing offence? Can I talk about 'God' if his spiritual beliefs are different from mine? How should I present the uniqueness of Christ?

This article has been written to help you begin to answer those questions, calm your nerves, help you understand your friend, and give you some tips on how you can share your faith.

What is a Hindu?

It is estimated that there are over a billion Hindus in the world today. The vast majority live in India, with sizable populations in Nepal and Bangladesh, but Hindus have also settled in many other countries around the world.

Hinduism has no single founder and no date in which it originated. It evolved over many centuries in India as older populations interacted with later migrations, resulting in a highly complex and diverse web of beliefs and practices, including many that are mutually contradictory. Hinduism, simply put, is the traditional civilization of India.

Most Hindus will not look to a sacred book to explain their practices; they will answer in terms of tradition.

Hindus recognise a large number of books as sacred scripture (*shastras*). Most Hindus are familiar with only a few of these. The most popular is the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is a song recounting the interaction of prince Arjuna with the god Krishna; it expresses the hopes and advice which many Hindus aspire to. The great diversity in beliefs and practices among Hindus reflects a number of factors, not just the sacred books. When asked why they do a particular ritual or follow a particular practice, most Hindus will not give a reference to a sacred book. Rather, they will answer in terms of tradition: it is very important to keep the customs that have been passed down from your ancestors.

These days most people think of Hinduism as a 'world religion' like Christianity or Islam, but that has not always been the case. It was only in the nineteenth century that Hinduism came to be understood in this way, when Western scholars (called Orientalists) sought to compare the traditional way of life and beliefs of the majority of Indian people with the rest of the world.

It was easy to compare Christianity, Judaism, and Islam with each other. But what to do with the traditions of India? They are very different from the religions that are connected with Abraham and far more complex and sophisticated than tribal religions in places like Africa

(aka 'paganism'). Hindu reformers also had a hand in defining Hinduism as a religion, as they interacted with colonial masters and missionaries. Today, scholars sometimes talk about Hindu religions, rather than a single religion, and some have abandoned the term Hinduism altogether. It is certainly problematic.

For many Hindus, the project of comparing other religions with Hindu traditions is unattractive and makes little sense. The idea of 'changing religion' is likewise unappealing and even offensive, which has some serious implications, as we shall see.

The Hindu way of life

Hindu life is marked by attention to *dharma*, which, although sometimes translated as religion, can also be translated as law, custom, duty, or way of life.

Caste

The most important aspect of a Hindu's life is their relationships. Hindus tend not to be as individualistic as Westerners; it is central to a Hindu's life to belong to an extended family, and through that, to a caste. There are thousands of castes in the Hindu world. A caste is really a grouping of families who, theoretically at least, intermarry with each other. Some are huge and spread over a large area of India (and now the world). Others are small and introverted.

Traditionally, one's caste was linked to one's occupation. There are still carpenter castes and priest castes, for instance, though being in such a caste never stopped you from being a farmer and won't stop you being a taxi driver or software engineer today. The most significant thing about caste is that it gives you membership in a group. This is still important, though among those more impacted by secularisation, such as in the cities of India and among those who have settled in the UK or other places in the West, it probably doesn't have quite the same significance it once did.

The importance of caste leads people to be very careful in selecting a marriage partner. Traditionally, only another member of the same caste would be eligible, making arranged marriage the norm. Today this is less important among Hindus affected by modernisation. But even in such communities the family continue to have a strong say in whether a prospective spouse is acceptable or not.

The stages of life

Ideally a man's life should go through four stages, from that of a student, to that of a householder (after marriage), to retreat from social life for meditation, to the life of a homeless wanderer (*sannyasi*). Very few actually live this out fully. The role of the woman has not been defined in the same way but, traditionally, it is very important for a woman to marry and bear children.

Festivals

All villages have their own celebrations. Cities and regions with long traditions have many festivals, each usually centred on the worship of a god, such as Krishna, Rama, Saraswati, or Shiva. They are occasions for worship but also for feasting and fun in the family home and with friends. A few festivals are pan-Hindu, such as the spring festival of Holi, in which everybody goes out and throws coloured powder and water at each other. You can even join in such celebrations on many university campuses.

Daily worship

Devout Hindus begin and end the day with, usually, short rituals of worship (*puja*) in which flower petals, sacred water or milk, bright red powder and fruit are offered to idols in the home or temple. Some of the red powder is then received back and rubbed on the forehead as a blessing from the god. Often the women in the house are more active in these rituals than men.

Diet

Many Hindus are vegetarian, though by no means all. Many are strict about the things they can or cannot eat. This varies depending on their circumstances, so that, for instance, there are things you must not eat while you are mourning for a family member who has died, but they are perfectly fine at other times. Many Hindus have a strong taboo against the eating of beef because the cow is seen as sacred. But there are parts of India where beef curry is enjoyed along with the more widespread chicken or fish.

Fasting is a common practice by devout Hindus. There is a common conception that the eating of rich food is a hindrance to true spirituality and the appearance of gluttony or laziness would disqualify you from being a religious teacher. Indeed, attachment to material things in general may be interpreted as a lack of spirituality.

Hindu beliefs

As Hinduism is really a family of religions or a confluence of many streams, beliefs as well as practices vary widely. In general, beliefs are far less important than your behaviour. One Hindu professor doing anthropological research in a Dutch village expressed his frustration with the frequent questions he received about his beliefs as a Hindu: 'Why all these questions about my beliefs? In our religion it is not beliefs that are important. What is important is what you *do*.' With that reminder, we will look at some of the beliefs that are common among Hindu people.

In general, Hindus consider beliefs far less important than behaviour

In Hindu traditions a great emphasis is placed on living a spiritual life. Hindus want to achieve salvation (*moksha*), which is usually understood as release from the endless cycle of reincarnation. But while they agree on what they want to be saved from there is no agreement on what you are saved *to*, or *how* you can be saved. There are generally understood to be three ways to achieve salvation.

The way of knowledge (*jnana marga*)

This is not knowledge that can be gained by learning a system of doctrine or by debating the nature of God, humans, life and death, etc. It can be achieved through rigorous teaching by a qualified teacher (*guru*) and meditation on ancient texts and sacred symbols, like the sound *Om*. The aim is to become one with *Brahman*, the One Supreme Being or spirit of the universe.

This tradition has been repackaged for a Western audience in recent decades in the New Age Movement, which is popular in the West but much less so in India. Many Hindus don't even recognise this as authentic religion.

The way of works (*karma marga*)

In the past this was achieved through observing the sacrificial tradition of the ancient Vedic scriptures. This evolved to include all of one's life so that salvation is achieved by doing one's duty, and especially by serving the poor and downtrodden.

The way of devotion (*bhakti marga*)

Hindus can be polytheistic (believe in many gods), monotheistic (believe in one god), or monistic (believe that all of reality is one, as we saw above). For many Hindus, what you believe about god is not actually very important. Some orthodox Hindus are even atheistic.

For many Hindus, what you believe about god is not actually very important

It is very common for Hindus to believe that there is one god who takes many forms and is worshipped in many different ways. You will commonly see that Hindus believe in a *Trimurti*, a threefold expression of god as Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. This seems to be more common in books about Hinduism than on the ground, however.

For many Hindus the important gods are those that they worship day by day in the home and village shrine. For most Hindus today, this way of devotion is how they seek salvation. They may have an idol in the shape of one of the gods of the ancient stories, like Ganesh, the elephant-headed son of Shiva, or Krishna, an *avatar* (manifestation) of Vishnu. Or their god may be a simple cobblestone propped up in a corner of their village. Some traditions emphasise powerful goddesses such as Durga.

Sharing Christ with Hindus

Witness to Hindu people demands great sensitivity. The more that you know about your Hindu friend, the more you will be able to help them come to appreciate the significance of following Christ. And because, as we have seen, there is so much diversity of belief and practice among Hindus, it is vital you ask questions if you want to know your friend's tradition. You must be sincere in your questions: you will put your friend off if you are not really interested in them but merely want to get a hearing for your gospel presentation. Your questions should be about her family and way of life, not just about her beliefs – remember the Hindu professor!

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In the last couple of centuries large numbers of Hindus have become Christians in India. These people are almost all from the downtrodden (*Dalit*) castes. Most Hindus in the UK are from castes that have more respect in wider Indian society. Some are very wealthy, like the Mittal family who own much of the UK's steel production. Comparatively very few Hindus from this sector of society have ever put their trust in Christ. This is largely because following Christ is not seen as an attractive proposition: who wants to leave their own highly valued tradition for one that seems less sophisticated and less spiritual?

This brings us to what some see as disturbing advice: don't tell your friend you want them to convert to Christianity. Let me explain. If you have read so far, you should by now have picked up the significance to Hindus of their community. It is more important than anything else. Hindus see Christians as people who belong to *other* communities. So, if you tell them

you want them to become Christians, they will invariably hear that as an invitation to give up on their people and join yours. That is unthinkable. And neither is it the message of the Bible.

Within the Hindu tradition, as we have seen, there is a strong current of devotion. You can choose a god to devote your life to without turning your back on thousands of years of your family tradition. The good news that Christians are committed to is all about what God has done in sending his Son to take on human nature and live on this earth and die for those who are alienated from him. So, you can tell your friend you are devoted to Jesus and why that is – what he is like and what he has done. You can read the Bible with them and give them the opportunity to see the beauty of Jesus for themselves, starting with one of the Gospels. You can tell them you would love for them to become devotees or followers of Jesus too.

Some practical tips

Don't contrast their beliefs with yours

That will come across as arrogant, as if you have got all the answers neatly tied up. You haven't. Hindus appreciate it when you acknowledge there are things you don't understand. We are all on a spiritual journey. We do not have all the answers, but we have found peace and joy in Christ. And that will be attractive.

Share your testimony

The story of your own spiritual journey will be very appealing. And feel free to pray with your friend; Hindus are comfortable with public acts of devotion. But be careful how you explain the gospel: if you talk about being born again, for example, your friend might think you talking about reincarnation.

Talk about God

Your friend will no doubt not be thinking about God in biblical ways (which of us has a completely precise knowledge of him, anyway?) but as you point them to stories in the Bible, particularly stories of the Lord Jesus, their understanding will slowly grow.

Spend time with them

If your friend invites you to their home, consider that a great honour. Invite them to eat with you too but be sure to check if they have any dietary requirements.

Live out your faith

A consistent Christ-like life is vital in your witness. If you are not serious about growing as a disciple of Jesus, you will not impress your friend. Why should they listen to you when they have such great examples in their own history? If you are committed to knowing God and honouring him in your life that will be a great witness. Then you can pray and look for opportunities to share your heart's desire with your friend.

Resources

- *A Survey of Hinduism* by Klaus K. Klostermaier (3rd ed.; Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007). Free download [here](#). This updated edition is a highly regarded overview of Hinduism by a top scholar.

- *Disciple Making Among Hindus: Making Authentic Relationships Grow* by Timothy Shultz (Pasadena: William Carey, 2016). Shultz has worked among Hindus for over 30 years and has lots of wise advice to share (see [review here](#)).
- *Engaging with Hindus* by Robin Thompson (n.p.: Good Book, 2014). Another helpful contribution by a seasoned practitioner (see [review here](#)).
- *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* by C. J. Fuller (rev. & exp. ed.; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004). Another scholarly study of Hinduism by someone who is particularly familiar with south India.
- *Understanding Hinduism* by Dayanand Bharati (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2005). Bharati seeks to bring the gospel to Hindu people from within Hindu society as a devotee of Christ and *sannyasi* and help Christians reach out to Hindus in ways that are both faithful and engaging.

About the Author

Mark is a researcher and educator in intercultural studies. Before moving to Wales, he and his family made their home in Nepal, where he received a PhD for his work on the social and cultural life of the Newars of Lalitpur. Mark blogs at markpickett.blogspot.co.uk and tweets [@drmarkpickett](https://twitter.com/drmarkpickett). The origin of this article results in the presence of British spelling and geography.