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The Essence of Hindu Doctrine and its Influence on Christianity in America and Europe

Abstract

This paper addresses the topic of the identity of Hindu religion and its impact on Christianity in the West (i.e. in Europe and USA), which is to be seen, especially through Neo-Hindu movements (that occurred mainly during 1950s–1980s). Thus, features and key terms such as: authority of the Veda, Dharma, moksha, samsāra and karma, the paths to liberation, concept of God, Brahman-ātman, avidyā and māyā and AUM are sketchily presented in the first part of the paper. There are obvious differences between both Hindu schools and Christian faith which regards 1. Ultimate concern: For the Hindu, it is escape from the human condition, whereas for the Christian it

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is freedom from guilt, sin, and the devil; 2. Human nature: For the Christian it is creaturely and sinful; for the Hindu it is divine; 3. Human problem: It is moral sin for the Christian and intellectual ignorance for the Hindu; 4. Resolution: For the Christian it is a divine act at infinite cost to God; for the Hindu it is human effort, sometimes mixed with grace, without cost to the god. In the second part it is presented the debated problem of Gurus and their movements and Neo-Hindu movements sprung at the second half of 20th century, such as Satya Sai Baba, International Society for Krishna Consciousness and meditation for "transcendental consciousness" (TM). In any case, the Indian offspring demonstrate that we have come to an important moment in the history of religions, one in which new religious landscapes continually emerge like the images of a kaleidoscope and where people will have to learn whether it is possible to share the same planet.

Keywords

Hinduism, Christianity, God, Dharma, samsāra, human nature, moksha, atman

1 Introduction

One of the most fastidious tasks in the field of Comparative Religion is to unravel the religious and philosophical structure of what constitute "the ism of Indian People", as the celebrated British scholar Robert Zaehner inspiringly expressed the meaning of this ancient religion.[1] On the other hand, comparatively with Greek philosophy, in India philosophy is essentially spiritual. It is, as Sarvepalli Radhakrisnan put it, "the

[1] Robert C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 1.

intense spirituality of India, and not any great political structure or social organization that it has developed that has enabled it to resist the ravages of time."[2]

The problem of Hinduism starts with its enormous collection of sacred texts, which were conceived many thousands of years ago in the Sanskrit language – the root of most modern Indian languages. These were not actually written down until relatively modern times but were passed down by learned *rishis* or sages who realized these teachings. There was no single author of these teachings and they were also compiled by various different *rishis*. These Hindu scriptures contain systematic explanations on various subjects including science, religion, metaphysics (first principles), philosophy and spiritual knowledge. [3]

There is so much diversity among people who think of themselves as Hindu and such a variety of ways that they have preferred to live their lives that it is impossible to present a 'typical Hindu' who would make it really simple to learn about Hinduism. Instead it is important to take into account many kinds of Hindus and many images. Imagine high castes, low castes, outcastes; beggars, kings, and renunciants; 325 languages expressed in more than 2,000 dialects and 25 scripts. Such diversity and all of it can have something to do with living as a Hindu. These images may help us to see why definitions of Hindus and Hinduism can seem so baffling. Hinduism is a

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2 Sarvepalli Radhakrisnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 1, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 24-25.

3 They are not limited to a few books because Hinduism is not confined to a single set of ideas and so the scriptures have become a home for many different schools of thought. They are the product of relentless investigations into the facts and truths of life carried out by the ancient sages of India. They are divided into two main categories: Shruti ('that which is heard') and Smriti ('that which is remembered'). Rameshchandra Majithia, *Hinduism*, in: Martin Palmer (General Editor), *World Religions*, (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), pp. 144-145.

complex set of interrelationships among many sorts of people, belief systems, and practices rather than a single uniformly structured, bureaucratically organized, and centrally codified religion.[4]

No Hindu word corresponds exactly to the term 'religion,' and whoever or whatever should be considered responsible for 'inventing Hinduism' (which is how some contemporary or 'postmodern' Western scholars refer to the question of its origin) is a matter of on-going debate. Nevertheless, most scholars continue to use the word 'Hinduism' as a general term to denote a constellation of South Asian religious thought and activity that includes an incredible variety of expression and may range from simple beliefs of uneducated folk through elaborate rituals of a priestly intelligentsia to the transcendent meditations of an accomplished mystic.[5]

Therefore what we call 'Hinduism' is an interpretation of the currently available record of the multifaceted ways in which hundreds of millions of human beings in the subcontinent of India, from ancient times to the present, have shaped their lives. *Hinduism* like *Americanism* is a term that has been made to carry a variety of different meanings that range from the loftiest ideals to the lowliest forms of behaviour. Like

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4 A student who is an outsider to Hinduism is likely to think about it on the basis of a Christian or Muslim model of religion. Outsiders seem to have given Hinduism its name, too. But naming by outsiders has been typical of most major religions, including Christianity.

5 *Religions of South Asia. An introduction,* Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby, eds., (New York: Routledge, 270 Madison Avenue, NY 10016, 2006), pp. 15-16. Although many contrasting (in some instances competing, at times even conflicting) forms of belief and practice can be included within the category of Hinduism, in general Hindus suppose that what is essential for one human being in a specific situation and at a particular stage in their development need **not** be appropriate for another. As a result, the extent of Hindu diversity, complexity, and variety makes a complete and closed capsule definition, including all the features that could be found within the range of things usually considered Hindu, impossible to formulate.

Americanism, Hinduism is also linked with a particular geographical place.[6]

Thus, "What is Hinduism?" is a complex question the response to which ranges from claiming that Hinduism in a unified, coherent field of doctrine and practice to claiming that it is a fiction, a colonial construction based on the miscategorization of indigenous cultural forms.[7] Defining the parameters of the term is not simply an exercise for scholars but is closely related to the questions, as Brian Smith observes, of "who speaks for Hinduism?" and "who defines Hinduism?"[8] This debate goes way beyond academic formulations and arguments in the academy into the politics of cultural identity and questions about power.

Hinduism is not unique, but it is unusual among the world's major religions in having neither an identified founder nor a single defining creed, neither a central authority nor a fixed pantheon, neither a universally accepted scripture nor a seamless system of beliefs. Since neither the Muslim nor Christian model of religion fits it, modern scholars repeatedly comment on the difference of Hinduism.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith has done so in a way that has been particularly influential: 'Many Christians and many Muslims have come to believe that there is one true Christianity and one true Islam. Hindus, on the other hand, have gloried in diversity. One of their basic and persistent affirmations has been that

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6 From ancient times, Hindus made their home in South Asia on the subcontinent of India, and even today Hindus who live elsewhere in the world tend to look to India for models of religious life and for the sources of their spiritual traditions. *Ibid*., p. 16.

7 Gavin Flood, "Introduction: Establishing the Boundaries", in: *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, Gavin Flood ed., (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), p. 2.

8 B. Smith, "Who Does, Can, and Should Speak for Hinduism?", in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68 (4) 2000, pp. 741–742.

there are as many aspects of the truth as there are persons to perceive it'.[9]

More recently, Heinrich von Stietencron contributed to this line of commentary on what makes Hinduism a different and difficult category to grasp: What we call 'Hinduism' is a geographically defined group of distinct but related religions, that originated in the same region, developed under similar socioeconomic and political conditions, incorporated largely the same traditions, influenced each other continuously, and jointly contributed to the Hindu culture. Therefore it is only by distinguishing the various Hindu religions from 'Hinduism' that comparability with other historical religions can be ensured.[10]

Organizationally, if not theologically, Hinduism is more similar to Judaism than to either Islam or Christianity. Russell T. McCutcheon has remarked that 'all we seem to have is a host of differing Judaisms all talking with each other'[11]. Academic research has shown again and again, however, that the popular impression that there is a unified, uniform, and unanimous Christian or Muslim religion is mistaken when viewed in light of the evidence of history, the complex variations among the actual lives of Christians or Muslims, and the contemporary discussions about how to interpret the sources of those religions that currently involve their own scholars, spiritual leaders, and scriptural commentaries.

So Hinduism is multifaceted as well as characterized by diversity. It is a category that encompasses religion, philosophy, and interrelated ways of life that form a complete civilization.

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9 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), p. 66.

10 Heinrich von Stietencron, "Hinduism: On the Proper Use of a Deceptive Term", in: Gunther D. Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke, eds., *Hinduism Reconsidered*, 11–27, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1989) p. 20.

11 Russell T. McCutcheon, *Religion and the Domestication of Dissent: Or, How to Live in a Less than Perfect Nation*, (London: Equinox. 2005), p. 27.

Leaders in the 'Hindu Renaissance' of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries proposed that Hinduism could serve the world as an example of a universal framework for religious and spiritual pluralism. Yet no concise substantive definition of Hinduism has proven to be wholly satisfactory, in part because the various students of Hinduism, including Hindus themselves, tend to place their emphasis on different aspects of the whole.[12]

2 The Essence of Hindu Doctrine

Scholars generally agree that Hinduism[13] (incorporating its various subtraditions) has grown from two ancient cultural complexes, the Indus Valley civilization (c. 2500–1500 BCE)

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12 Despite its daunting variety, ever since the nineteenth century, influential Hindus have asserted the identity and unity of Hinduism in a successful effort to establish it as a major world religion with the same status as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The question that must inevitably be asked is whether any key features in the comprehensive phenomenon known as Hinduism can be identified; and, if so, whether they would be evident only to Hindu 'insiders' or whether non-Hindu 'outsiders' would recognize them, too. Cf. Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby, eds., *Religions of South Asia. An Introduction,* p. 17.

13 As for the origin of the term, the earliest use of 'Hindu' according to the best evidence currently available was in about 500 BCE as the Persian equivalent for the Sanskrit word 'Sindhu.' Sindhu was the ancient Vedic name for a major river but also came to denote the people who lived on or beyond the Sindhu River as well as the region itself. In the fourth century BCE, with the arrival of the army of Alexander (356–323 BCE), the word 'Sindhu' entered Greek as 'Indikoi' and Latin as 'Indus.' The names of India and the Indus River are derived from these words. In the late 1700s British writers began to use the terms 'Hindu' to refer to people in North India and 'Hinduism' to denote the religious beliefs, rituals, cultural values, and social institutions given shape by the high-caste Brahman. s. More recently the term 'Hinduism' has been appropriated by the majority of people in India itself, first as part of an attempt to establish an independent national identity in opposition to the British colonial empire and currently as an expression of religious and cultural self-understanding. Cf. *Ibid*.

and the Aryan culture (c. 1800–1500 BCE). There continues to this day to be a heated controversy concerning the relationship between these two ancient cultures. The received theory, which is still supported by many scholars, maintains that as the ancient, indigenous Indus Valley civilization declined, it was superseded by the Aryan culture that was brought into India by migrating Indo-European people who had originated in or passed through the Caucasus region of Central Asia.[14]

The issue of Hinduism's origins has far-reaching consequences not only for Indologists but also for archaeologists, linguists, politicians, and modern Hindus; and it is thus fraught with tension. It is no wonder that modern scholars are so interested in, and so passionately divided over, the origins of Hinduism. However, whether the Aryans came from outside India, most scholars agree that Hindu tradition(s) developed from a fusion of ancient elements that incorporated various beliefs and practices of the peoples who resided in India as they interacted and eventually formed what is now called *Hinduism*.

2.1 Authority of the Veda

Perhaps the most generally accepted criterion of Hinduism is the recognition of a large body of ancient literature, originally oral in character (thus known as *shruti*, 'that which is heard'), composed in Sanskrit and known as the Veda (Vedas). In a more general sense, however, the term *Veda* does not denote only these four books, or any single book, but a whole literary complex, including the Samhitas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, the Upanishads, the Sutras, and the Vedangas.[15]

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[14] The main alternative theory is that the Aryan culture is evidenced in Indus Valley civilization itself and was not introduced into India by migrants from outside the subcontinent.

[15] The many texts, varied in form and content, that make up the Veda were composed over several centuries, in different localities, and by

The Veda is regarded as sacred text, as revelation, as an absolute authority that reveals unassailable truth. It is venerated from a distance and serves as what may be termed "an authoritative source of Hindu self-understanding." Anyone who rejects the Veda's authority is called Nastika (and this includes the Carvakas or the Materialist school followers, Buddhists, and Jainas) and is regarded as unfaithful to the root tradition and thereby *heterodox*. It is a conspicuous feature of Hinduism that its orthodoxy or heterodoxy depends upon the acceptance or rejection of Veda's revealed and authoritative character.

But from philosophical point of view, one should notice that Vedic texts are nothing but pale interpretations of gods, man and universe. Consequently, hints only of the main outlooks to come are recorded especially in Rig-Veda (the oldest and most important out of the four Vedas). Thus, a god like Indra in some way prefigures (the later) Vishnu's incarnation as Krishna and Rudra already has many characteristics of the later Shiva. The concept of *rta* (cosmic order), too, looks forward to the later and more complex *dharma*, but that is all. There is no trace of a mother-godess, later to become so prominent, nor do we hear anything of the key-concepts of brahman, moksha, samsāra and karma. The Rig Veda still looks back to its Indo-Iranian past: the key concepts of Hinduism have yet to make their appearance.[16]

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many generations of poets, priests, and philosophers. Tradition, however, will not admit the use of the word *compose* in this context, for the Veda is believed to be *apauruseya,* "not produced by human agency." Hence, it is eternal. R.N. Dandekar, "Vedas", in: Mircea Eliade, editor in chief, *Encyclopedia of Religions*: vol. 14, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987). See also *Encyclopedia of Religions*, 2nd edition: Lindsay Jones, ed., vol. 14: Transcendental Meditation • Zwingli, Huldrych, (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005), p. 9549.

16 Robert C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, p. 35. Further reading: Faddegon Barend, *Studies in the Samaveda* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1951); S. N. Dasgupta, *History of Indian Philosophy.* Vol. 1 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975); Jan Gonda, *Vedic Literature (Samhitas and*

2.2 Dharma

Dharma is a pivotal concept around which a Hindu's self-understanding revolves. Its meanings and usage exemplify not only what Hinduism is, but also explain the tradition's tensions, changes, reinterpretations, and diversity. Further, there is an elastic coherence in the term that reflects the elusive yet undeniable coherence of Hinduism itself. There is not one privileged understanding of dharma but a complex network of interactions and tensions between different employments. Each use of the term is indebted to, oriented around, and reflects traditional orthodox Brahmanical usage. This brings us back to the necessity of the Veda, for dharma is that which can be learned only from the Veda and justified through the Veda.

Dharma is a complex and multifaceted term in Hindu tradition. It can be translated as "religious law," "right conduct," "duty," and "social order." Its root, *dhri,* means "to hold up." The social concept of dharma emerges from the Vedic notion of *rita* or "cosmic order". In this worldview, dharma (the social order) is maintained by dharma (right conduct and the fulfillment of duty and religious law); In this way, following dharma meant doing what was required.

Traditionally, dharma (which can be rendered loosely as 'religion') is what the Veda reveals. The meaning of the term includes such ideas as 'truth,' 'ethics,' 'duty,' 'law,' 'cosmic order,' and 'righteousness.'[17] This idea contains the implication

Brahmanas): A History of Indian Literature, Vol. 1, no. 1 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz,1975); Thomas Hopkins, *The Hindu Religious Tradition* (Encino, Calif.: Dickenson, 1971); J. C. Heesterman, *The Broken World of Sacrifice: An Essay on Ancient Indian Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

17 Literally, dharma is 'what holds together,' and thus it is the basis of all order, whether natural, cosmic, social, or moral. It is the power that

that what a Hindu does is more important than what a Hindu believes. Thus, by means of ritual or dharmic actions, Vedic culture sought to create, nourish, and maintain cosmic order. Eventually, with the development of classical Hinduism, not just specific rituals but every human action was said to contribute to the maintenance of cosmic and social order. For Hindus, *dharma* is so central that Hindu Dharma is actually a more fitting label for this great tradition than Hinduism.[18]

Better to do one's own duty (dharma) though void of merit than to do another's duty, however well performed. Doing the works (karma) that inhere in one's own condition one remains unsullied. Because one should not lay aside the works that are inborn in each of us, even though they involve demerit, for all enterprises are associated with demerit as is fire with smoke.[19]

2.3 Moksha and its four roads

In a literal sense, *moksha*[20] is the desire to be released from birth and rebirth, but the term has come to mean the release

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makes things what they are. John Grimes, Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby, "Hindu Dharma", in: *Religions of South Asia*, pp. 18 sq.

18 Asked (in Hindi) about his own religion: "*Aap ka dharma kya hai*?" (i.e. *What's your religion?*), a traditional Indian Hindu will reply: "Mera Dharma Sanatana!" (My *religion* is Sanatana, i.e. Eternal Order of things). Cf. Michel Hulin & Lakshmi Kapani, "Hinduism" in: Jean Delumeau, *The World Religions* (*Le fait religieux*, Paris, Fayard, 1993), p. 350.

19 Cf. *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 18. 47-48, in: *Hindu Scriptures*, R.C. Zaehner, trans. & ed., 1938, (rpt. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1978; rpt. Everyman's Library, David Campbell Publishers LTD, 1992), p. 405. Further reading: Wendy Doniger with Brian K. Smith, *The Laws of Manu* (London: Penguin Books, 1991); P.V. Kane, *History of the Dharmasastra (Ancient and Medieval Religious and Civil Law in India),* 5 vols. (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1968); Patrick Olivelle, *The Dharmasutras* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

20 The term *moksha*, a Sanskrit masculine substantive, and its feminine synonym *mukti*, are derived from the linguistic etymon *muc*, meaning

itself. It is used interchangeably with *mukti. Moksha* is the highest spiritual goal in the Hindu tradition (the term is used in Jainism and Sikhism as well). Traditional Hinduism recognizes four primary ends of life and *moksha* is the last in the list. While every Hindu tradition sees *moksha* as the ideal, there are different understandings of its nature. Some traditions believe that one can be liberated while still alive – *jivanmukta.* Some see liberation as a merging into a characterless *Brahman,* while others see liberation as simply becoming one with God, or being liberated near God.[21]

In Indian philosophy moksha is one of the four *purusharthas*, or aims of life; the others are *artha* (wealth, power, and prosperity), *kama* (desire), and *dharma* (righteousness). The quest for liberation involves questioning and ultimately detaching oneself from pursuits of purusharthas are legitimate and sanctioned, liberation is usually seen as the ultimate goal, the last goal to be pursued after fulfilling the pleasures and pains stemming from the other three. Moksha is also unchanging, bringing one complete and absolute freedom, whereas the other three are ultimately transient, for they are pursued within the ever-changing world of desires.[22]

As opposed to Christian understanding of salvation, *liberation* or moksha is not something new that one acquires; it is nothing but the very nature of one's true Self. What we call "becoming liberated" is the removal of ignorance, of *avidyā,* which hides

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"release." Both terms have always been employed in an exclusively religious sense, denoting release from the tedious and painful cycle of transmigration (*samsāra*). Such a notion first appears in Indian thought with the oldest Upanishad, as well as in early Buddhism. A.M. Esnoul, "Moksha", in: *Encyclopedia of Religions*, 2nd edition, vol. 9: Mary Ndembu Religion, p. 6115.

21 Encyclopedia of World Religions: *Encyclopedia of Hinduism,* Constance A. Jones and James D. Ryan, J. Gordon Melton, series editor, (New York: Facts On File Library of Religion and Mythology, 2007), p. 292.

22 *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, James G. Lochtefeld, Ph.D., vol. II: N-Z, (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc., 2002), pp. 444.

our nature from us. The question therefore arises: what is it that constitutes the immediate cause of the removal of *avidyā*? The action (s) whose result constitutes liberation must be such as to remove *avidyā.* But no *action* can remove ignorance; the only thing that can remove *avidyā* is knowledge, and knowing is not an act.[23]

There are four main avenues to *moksha* in Hindu religions: the way of *knowledge* (*jñāna*), the best-known of which is Advaita Vedanta), the way of *devotion* (*bhakti*), the way of *works* (*karma*), and the way of *meditation* (*yoga*). We are going to look at two of these, because they are the best known and the most widely practiced – the way of knowledge and the way of devotion. The first, the way of knowledge or Advaita Vedanta, is the best known and most prestigious intellectual tradition in Hinduism; the second, the way of devotion (*bhakti*), is far and away the most popular form of Hindu religion today. If one can get a basic idea of how these two Hindu systems work, one will be able to comprehend the basic ways the vast majority of Hindus in the world think.[24]

Indian writings with a political tendency often mention the three traditionally recognized objects (*vargas*) of earthly life: *dharma* (moral duty or law), *kama* (enjoyment), and *artha* (material wealth). In a combined philosophical and religious

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23 We can see infra further details about the link between ignorance and liberation. Cf. *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*, Karl H. Potter, ed., vol. III: Advaita Vedānta up to Śankara and his pupils, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1998), pp. 39 sq.

24 Further reading: M. C. Bharatiya, trans. and ed., *Moksha the Ultimate Goal of Indian Philosophy* (Ghaziabad: Indo-Vision, 1984); Balbir Singh, *Ātman and Moksha: Self and Self-Realization* (Atlantic Highlands, N. J.: Humanities Press, 1981); *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty,ed., (Berkeley, 1980); Andrew O. Fort, *Jivanmukti in Transformation: Embodied Liberation in Advaita and Neo*-Vedānta, (New York: Albany, 1998); *Living Liberation in Hindu Thought*, Andrew O. Fort and Patricia Y. Mumme, eds., (New York: Albany, 1996).

context, a fourth object, *moksha*, is added. Philosophically, it is recognized as the most important, for it expresses the human being's supreme object, his return to the primary cause, the Ultimate.[25]

A. The Way of Knowledge: Advaita Vedānta

If one attempts to take off the Western eyeglasses and be ready to imagine a way of looking at reality that is very different his own, he can conceive a world as it is seen by more than a billion people on this planet (because some features of this philosophy are shared by Daoists and Buddhists). This path to *moksha* is called *the way of knowledge* because it promises that one can escape samsāra if one comes to see reality in the right way. It takes a lot of work to come to this knowledge or spiritual vision, but the result will be the end to rebirths (reincarnation). The most famous teacher of this way was Śankara (AD 788-820), a Brahmin, priest and philosopher from South India. Śankara's system, which has become the most respected school of philosophy for Hindus, is called Advaita Vedanta: the nonduality of *Ātman* and *Brahman* or the Absolute. It gives a unifying interpretation of the whole body of Upanishads, providing scriptural authority for the postulation of the nonduality of *Ātman* and *Brahman*. *Advaita* (*not-two* in Sanskrit) refers to the recognition that the true Self, *Ātman*, is the same as the highest Reality, *Brahman*. Brahman is the unchangeable reality, eternal, unborn and immutable. Ātman, which is the innermost self of man is also eternal, unborn, uncreated. He should not be confused with empirical ego, which is subject to permanent change. But Brahman and Ātman are

25 A. M. Esnoul, "Moksha", in: *Encyclopedia of Religions*, p. 6116.

identical, i.e., they are nothing but different names for the same and ultimate reality.[26]
Followers seek liberation by acquiring vidyā (knowledge) of the identity of Ātman and Brahman. Attaining this liberation takes a long preparation and training under the guidance of a guru.[27]

B. The Way of devotion: Bhakti

This path is a way to liberation from samsāra by means of love and surrender (devotion) to a personal god. Notice I use the adjective "personal". This is because the previous path, Advaita, says that the gods are not real at the highest level of reality. So there is no personal god at all. Brahman is not a person (having mind, will, and emotions) and not a god as we tend to think – a Someone who created the world and controls it and will finally put an end to it. No, Brahman is impersonal, something of an it that is behind and in the world, and in fact is the only thing that is unchanging and fully real. [28]
But bhaktas (devotees of bhakti) believe there are gods, and they are at every level of reality, if there are levels at all. Some of the gods are very powerful and can actually save us from samsāra. They do this by forgiving our sins and getting rid of our bad karma, so that we can live with them forever in one of their heavens. And rather than going through many lives, trying to build up good karma and getting rid of bad karma, they will do this for us after this life if we turn to them in sincere faith. It

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[26] Alexandru-Corneliu Arion, *Panteismul hinduist și învățătura creștină despre Dumnezeu* (*Hindu pantheism and Christian teaching on God*), (Bucharest: Enciclopedică Publishing House, 2010), p. 453.

[27] The key source texts for all schools of Vedānta are the Prasthanatrayi, the canonical texts consisting of the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and the Brahma Sutras, of which they give a philosophical interpretation and elucidation. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advaita_Vedanta

[28] Gerald R. McDermott, *World Religions. An Indispensable Introduction*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2011), p. 19.

is no wonder that *bhakti* is far more popular than Advaita or any other way. It is easier and much quicker.[29]

For the beginner, however, and the religious amateur, the divine superego commonly called "God" is properly and advisedly the center of pious devotional exercises of self-surrender *(bhakti).* By bringing this "God" to focus and making "Him" the center of consciousness, one is enabled to get rid of one's individual ego. This makes it possible to rise above the status of the individual who sees many trees but not the forest and fancies himself to be a tree. One recognizes the all-embracing aspect of the forest, that is to say, the collective identity of all beings in "God". This is a step toward the conquest of the dualism of "I" and "Thou" – the strife with fellow creatures. All are experienced as one, subsumed in the one divine personality. All creatures, everywhere and at all times, are "His" continuously changing manifestations.[30]

Bhaktas say the world is real and change is real, without different levels of reality. But this world is not a place of hope or fulfillment. Hindus are pessimistic about their ability to have deep or lasting happiness here on earth. For bhakti, the basic human problem is being stuck in samsāra. What keeps us stuck is the combination of our karma and our ignorance of a personal god. The resolution to the problem is to get rid of karma by practicing love and surrender to a personal god (bhakti) and getting *grace* (prasada) from that god.

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[29] For example Krishna, who is the most popular of all the Hindu saviors, and the main character in the most beloved Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, is said to be an incarnation (avatār) of Vishnu, who came to earth to right wrongs and restore righteousness. If one of his devotees serves him with love and praise, he will be released from samsāra and not be reborn but enter one of Krishna's lovely heavens.

[30] Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, edited by Joseph Campbell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd Broadway House, 1953), p. 426. The practice of bhakti, devotion to the personal aspect of the Divine Being as the all-pervading ruler of the world and the "witness" who dwells within every creature, the inner controller of every action, to whom the fruits *(phala)* of all activities must be resigned. *Ibid.*, p. 435.

C. Concept of Avatār

The idea of an *avatāra*, a form taken by a deity, is central in Hindu mythology, religion, and philosophy. Avatar is a modern Hindi word from the Sanskrit word *avatāra,* which means "one who has descended to the earthly realm". The word in both its Sanskrit and its Hindi forms is used in vaishnavism to refer to the incarnations of Vishnu, which usually number 10. Technically, Shiva never becomes an avatar.[31]

Hindu bhakti contains the idea of *incarnation – avatar* (a god coming to earth, literally "in the flesh"). Its chief god (different from its most popular god, who is Krishna) is Vishnu[32], the god of order and righteousness, who comes down from the heavens whenever evil is especially bad on earth, so that he can set things aright. Bhaktas believe Vishnu has come to earth in various incarnations nine times, and will come again at the end of time in a tenth incarnation (*avatāra*). His previous

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31 In recent times, the word *avatār* has come to be used for any enlightened teacher. It is, in effect, an honorific bestowed upon the teacher by his or her disciples or the larger community. Further reading: Antonio T. de Nicolas, *Avatār, the Humanization of Philosophy through the Bhagavad Gita* (New York: N. Hays, 1976); P. George Kalladanthiyil, „The concept of Avatār (incarnation) according to Hindu Tradition", in: *The Reality of Incarnation according to Hinduistic and Christian* Tradition, (Regensburg: Interfaith Symposium, 1998), pp. 58-75; Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatār and Incarnation*, (London: Faber and Faber), 1970.

32 The *avatāra* idea also came to be applied to other Hindu deities. Siva and Durga, for example, are said in some later scriptures to assume appropriate forms in order to preserve the world or to bless their devotees. Especially in devotional contexts, *avatāras* no longer function primarily to restore cosmic order. Rather, their *raison d'etre* is to bless devotees with the presence of the divine, to rescue devotees from peril, or to reward them for heroic devotion or service. Cf. David Kinsley, "Avatāra", in: *Encyclopedia of Religions*, Lindsay Jones, ed., vol. 2: Attributes of God • Butler, Joseph (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005), p. 708.

incarnations have been as a fish, tortoise, boar, man-lion, dwarf, high-caste hero, Rama (another god), Krishna, and Buddha.
While those following Advaita do not believe in the final reality of personal gods and are therefore essentially atheistic, *bhaktas* are theists. Another difference is that bhaktas believe the human self is real and will retain its individuality even after release from samsāra. There's no dissolution of the drop of water into the ocean for bhaktas, but they believe that the human self is divine, in fact, a "finite mode" of God.[33]
In the Bhagavad-Gītā, Krishna explains the reasons for God's descent: "Whenever dharma has become weak and adharma has waxed strong I am descending to destroy the wicked and to relieve the good." Avatāras have 'apparent bodies', not real bodies; they are not really born and do not really die. Many schools of Hinduism rule out the possibility of avatāras. It is, however, not infrequent even today, for Hindus to regard a living guru as an avatāra of the godhead.[34]
Many Christians have thought that their faith is the only one that teaches salvation by grace. But now one can see this is not exactly the case, though bhakti flourished – it is commonly ascertained – after Hindus came into contact with Christianity.[35]

2.4 Samsāra and Karma

The tension between dharma and moksha is played out against a background of two important concepts: *karma* and *samsāra*. *Karma* literally means 'actions,' and involves the idea that all

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[33] Gerald R. McDermott, *World Religions. An Indispensable Introduction*, p. 21.

[34] Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), p. 33.

[35] For further details: P.N. Srinivasachari, *The Philosophy of Viśishtādvaita*, (Madras, Adyar: The Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1978).

actions have predictable effects. In a general sense, the idea of karma teaches that each person is ultimately responsible for every action he or she performs.

The exaggerated importance allotted to sacrifices by the priestly ancient texts (Brahmanas) had as corollary the belief that any action, by the mere fact that it was gaining a result, integrates in an unlimited series of causes and effects.

Another aspect related to transmigration (samsāra), which appears in the old Upanishads, is that Samsāra cycle is triggered by human's desire: "As is his desire, so will his will be; as is his will, so will he act (karma); as he acts so will he attain."[36] Of course, the initial desire is to experience the physical world and, consequently, the *illusion* and "the act he will attain" is the fruit picked out in a life to come, through the way of karmic retribution.[37]

Every action produces its necessary result, and every cause produces an effect. '*As one sows so one reaps*.' Thus the idea entails that the present condition, character, and peculiar circumstances of a person are the result of his or her past deeds. There are no accidents or coincidences, but karma is not a doctrine of fatality or despair. Each action when performed creates a residue, a trace, as well as a dispositional tendency.[38]

Samsāra is the idea that one's present life is only the most recent in a long chain of lives extending far into the past.

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[36] Brihadāranyaka Upanishad (IV,iv,5), in: *Hindu Scriptures*, R.C. Zaehner (ed., trans.), p. 89.

[37] Alexandru-Corneliu Arion, „«Interpretatio Christiana» a unei mari provocări spirituale a lumii de azi: reincarnarea" ("*Interpretatio Christiana" of a great spiritual challenge of today's world: reincarnation*), in: *Studii Teologice* (*Theological Studies*), (Third Series, year X, no. 2, April-June, 2014).

[38] There is a perfect conservation of the energy of the cosmos. Hence, each action one performs contributes to forming one's character, and even as one is responsible for the person one is, so can one create the person one would like to become. John Grimes, Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby, in: *Religions of South Asia*, p. 19.

Samsāra is "the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth" and implies that each individual has lived countless lives, none in his or her current identity or form, all of which have some bearing on the present life. According to this theory, each individual incarnation is but a brief existence in a seemingly endless drama spanning thousands if not millions of lives, both human and nonhuman.

Virtually all Hindu schools have developed their own *karma* theories. Some elements are fairly commonly agreed upon, such as the derivation of the word karma from the root *kri* - to act, and the incompatibility of karma and liberation (moksha). The notion first occurs in the Upanishads where karma is seen as responsible for enmeshing a living being in the cycle of birth and rebirth. Attainment of vidyā, or jñāna (knowledge) is considered the only means to gain liberation from samsāra. In addition to the karma one accumulates from one's own actions in the present life, there is *prārabdha karma* with which a person is born and which has to run its course.[39]

The theories of karma and samsāra provide Hindus with a reason for human differences. If people are of differing social classes or physical and mental abilities it must be a result of their deeds in this life or a past life. Karma and samsāra also encourage Hindus to act ethically, because if they do not they will suffer for their poor actions in the future.[40]

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[39] The Bhagavad-Gita teaches that actions performed without selfish desire do not yield karma. In the Purānas the intervention of God absolves devotees from having to suffer from their karma and God's grace nullifies karma. On a popular level many Hindus are inclined to attribute everything that happens to them, fortune as well as misfortune, to their karma. Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, p. 95.

[40] See, inter alia, Alexandru-Corneliu Arion, „Rolul faptelor în textele importante upanișadice și în Bhagavad-Gītā" (*The Role of deeds in the principal Upanishads and in Bhagavad-Gītā*), in: *Teologie, Istorie și Viață bisericească* (*Theology, History and Ecclesiastical Life*), Rev. Prof. PhD Dumitru Abrudan, ed., Oradea: Editura Universității, 1998), pp. 177-200.

The samsāra cycles are an ever-changing universe of requirements, consequences, and conditions. This universe contrasts with the unconditioned and eternal world of the gods. The goal of practicing Hindus is to liberate themselves from constantly changing samsāra – to find release from the cycles of rebirths and redeaths and gain existence in the realm of the gods.[41]

While the concepts of karma[42] and samsāra[43] seem to provide an attractive explanation for the otherwise undeserved sufferings and unmerited blessings of life, when viewed from the perspective of moksha, they are regarded as negative or at least insufficient. That is because they bind the individual to an ever-repeating and never-ending cycle of births and deaths, pleasures and pains, and it is only complete transcendence, freedom, or liberation (moksha) that is a totally sufficient resolution of all the suffering of temporal life.

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41 *World religions: Hinduism*, fourth edition, by Madhu Bazaz Wangu, Series Editors: Joanne O'Brien and Martin Palmer, (New York: Chelsea House), pp. 113-114.

42 Further reading: C.F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel, *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, ed., *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Haridas Bhattacharyya, "The Brahmanical Concept of Karma", in: *A. R. Wadia*; *Essays in Philosophy Presented in His Honor*, edited by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan et al., (Madras, 1954), pp. 29–49; Kalidas Bhattacharyya, "The Status of the Individual in Indian Metaphysics", in: *The Status of the Individual East and West*, edited by Charles A. Moore (Honolulu, 1968), pp. 29–49; Charles F. Keyes and Daniel E. Valentine, eds., *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry*, (Berkeley, 1983).

43 Further reading: Rajeshwari Vijay Pandharipande, *The Eternal Self and the Cycle of Samsāra: Introduction to Asian Mythology and Religion,* 3rd ed. (Needham Heights, Mass.: Simon & Schuster Custom, 1996); Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974); Muni Narayana Prasad, *Karma and Reincarnation: The Vedantic Perspective*, (New Delhi, 1994); Alex Wayman, *The Vedic Gandharva and Rebirth Theory*, (Pune, 1997).

2.5 Paths to liberation

Counterbalancing an individual's temporal social obligations (*dharma*) is his or her eternal destiny or *liberation* (*moksha*). According to a Hindu worldview, the universe, society, and all things within it are temporal and one day or another will pass away. Thus to seek eternality in the finite is doomed to failure from the start. It is a given in most subtraditions within Hinduism that every individual is, in some sense or other, a part of the divine. That is one's birthright, and all individuals will, by the end of some lifetime sometime, come to experience it. Although exclusive dedication to the search for *moksha* has never been the goal of more than a small minority of Hindus, liberation has been a religious ideal that affects all lives.[44]

With the acceptance of the notions of samsāra and rebirth, the major preoccupation of Hindus became liberation from the cycle of birth and death. The Upanishads call the Vedas 'unsafe boats' because they are unable to carry one to 'the other shore'. The Vedānta and most other systems are primarily concerned with teaching paths to liberation from rebirth. They agree on the necessity to neutralize karma and to detach oneself from desire. They differ in the roles ascribed respectively to ritual (*karma*), devotion (*bhakti*) and insight (*jñāna*). They also disagree on the possibility of reaching liberation while still in a body (jïvanmukta) and on the condition of the liberated (mukta).[45]

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[44] *Moksha* determines not only the hierarchical values of Hindu social institutions and religious teachings and practices but also the function of what one must do to find true fulfillment and what one has to realize by direct experience in order to escape from *samsāra* and reach spiritual freedom. Worldly life is not finally a cause for regret or resignation. If dharmically lived, it is a preparation for liberation. Cf. J. Grimes, S. Mittal & G. Thursby, "Hindu Dharma", p. 20.

[45] While Śankara teaches complete loss of individuality in the merging of the liberated with Brahman, Rāmānuja and other theistic Vedāntins speak about an eternal individual existence in the company of the

Hindus differ in their preferences concerning a suitable way or path to *moksha*. Traditionally three paths (*trimarga*) to liberation have been presented as paradigmatical. These are: *karma-marga* (path of duties); *jnana-marga* (path of knowledge) and *bhakti-marga* (path of devotion).

Karma-marga or karma-yoga uses everyday life and everyday activities as the basis for spiritual exercises. For those who cannot spend long hours focusing the mind through meditation, it offers work as a means of focusing one's mind. In addition to the work involved in one's profession or occupation, it includes the performance of rituals and good deeds. This yoga cultivates the ability to perform actions wholeheartedly and because they are intrinsically good, not for reward (reward is for the ego). One does one's work in the world without reference to punishment or reward. Only in such a manner can actions be purified from ego attachment. In fact, this is the main message of the Bhagavad-Gita ("Gospel of Hinduism", Louis Renou): "to give up the fruits of your deeds" (phalatrshnavairāgya).[46]

Jñāna-marga. Monistic religion finds its practical application in the Way of Knowledge. It is a form of mysticism. A mystic is someone who has had a direct experience of Ultimate Reality. Having a mystical experience typically convinces a person that true reality is something completely other than what he or she thought it was, and likewise completely other than what most people continue to think it is. For the Vedantin, the root cause of human misery is ignorance, and the final solution to our problem is knowledge (*jñāna*) of a special kind. Jñāna is not

highest God. Cf. Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, p. 104.

46 For details see, inter alia: Mircea Eliade, *Istoria ideilor şi credinţelor religioase* (History of ideas and religious beliefs), vol. II: *De la Gautama Buddha până la triumful creştinismului* (From Gautama Buddha up to Christianity triumph), Cezar Baltag, trad., (Bucharest: Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, 1986), pp. 231-237; Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrisnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1, pp. 565-574.

mere information. It is a deep, penetrating, direct insight into the nature of reality. We might call it a mystical experience.[47]
Bhakti-marga. Devotional Hinduism encourages people to relate to God in much the same way as persons relate to each other. Whereas the Way of Knowledge leads to a recognition of the non-duality between one's True Self and Infinite Spirit, the Way of Devotion leads to increasing depths of love for a personal God.[48] When passionate attachment to the Lord is stressed, *bhakti* is a striking contrast to yoga and other ascetic paths to salvation that stress detachment and the overcoming of all passions, positive as well as negative. Yet many forms of *bhakti* also stress the detachment from all worldly beings that must accompany attachment to the Lord, or, like the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which speaks of *bhaktiyoga*, they use the language of ascetic philosophy to extol the path of *bhakti*. Anyway, *bhakti* has both appealed to and puzzled Western students because

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47 While mystical experiences can happen spontaneously, training in certain mental disciplines can help bring them about. Jñāna Yoga is one of these disciplines. It emphasizes meditation and the cultivation of insight. One focuses the mind and turns one's attention inward. As the practitioner enters deeper states of awareness, he or she may directly experience the Ātman, and thereby achieve union ("yoga") with Ultimate Reality. Cf. James B. Robinson, *Religions of the world: Hinduism*, Series Consulting Editor Ann Marie B. Bahr, *Foreword* by Martin E. Marty, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers), pp. 63-64.

48 Devotees *first* concentrate on loving God as they love a superior person, e.g., someone who is their lord, master, father, or mother. *In the next stage* of love, they relate to God as they would to a close friend. *The third type* of devotional love is the inverse of the first type. Whereas one began by imagining God as one's mother or father, God is now thought of as the child and the devotee becomes the parent. Like any vulnerable, helpless child, the image of the deity is wakened, fed, bathed, and put to sleep. In *the final stage* of love, one relates to God as one would relate to one's beloved or spouse. In this last type of love, which is the most intense form of devotion, God and soul are separate but are capable of being joined just as the souls of human lovers are knit together. *Ibid*., p. 67.

they see in its central features Western monotheism combined with other elements that seem different or even totally alien.[49]

2.6 Concept of gods. Brahman-Ātman

Hindus know innumerable visible and invisible deities. In early Vedic hymns as well as in the classical Hindu pantheon, one meets with the names of countless gods. However we may try to account for this situation – whether we suppose that these gods were originally personifications of natural phenomena, or part of an ancient unphilosophical polytheism, or a sophisticated mystical expression of the One Absolute (and there are many adherents to all these theories) – Hinduism does not insist that everyone must acknowledge any one form of God exclusively. The basic idea, according to some ancient teachings and many contemporary Hindus, is that there is a Supreme Being that may be worshipped in various forms.[50]

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[49] Many features of Hindu *bhakti* are also found in the more popular aspects of Jainism and Buddhism, and Pure Land Buddhism has incorporated much of *bhakti* at its very core. The Indian expressions of both Islam and Christianity, moreover, have developed their own *bhakti* poets and saints. Cf. John B. Carman, "Bahkti", in: *Encyclopedia of Religions*, Lindsay Jones, ed., vol. 2, pp. 856-860. **Further reading**: Stephen P. Huyler, *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999); Donald S. Lopez, *Religions of India in Practice* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995); Donald N. Lorenzen, ed., *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community, Identity and Political Action* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod, ed., *Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987); Karel Werner, *Love Divine: Studies in Bhakti and Devotional Mysticism* (Richmond, England: Curzon Press, 1993).

[50] Early sources for this are in the Rig Veda, 'The one Being the sages contemplate in many ways' (10.114.5) and 'The one Being the wise call by many names.' (1.164.46). That idea seems to be based upon the recognition of the diversity of the human mind as well as the potential

The word *god* or *deity* is one with various possible meanings in different contexts. On one hand, it can refer to the gods (*devas*). These are beings who live in one of the heavenly realms, by virtue of their past good *karma* (actions), but who are still subject to the law of karma and who therefore must someday be reborn in a lower state. This word can also refer to the Supreme Reality, which can best be designated as "God," although the Hindu imagination has given it various names: *Brahman*, the *Goddess, Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesh*, and a host of other deities in the pantheon.[51]

Many Hindu homes are lavishly decorated with color prints of a great many Hindu gods and goddesses, often joined by the gods and goddesses of other religions and the pictures of contemporary heroes. Thus side by side with Śiva and Viṣṇu and Devī one can see Jesus and Zoroaster, Gautama Buddha and Jīna Mahāvīra, Mahātmā Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, and many others. But if questioned about the many gods, even illiterate villagers answered: *bhagavān ek hai* (i.e. *the Lord is One)*. They may not be able to figure out in theological terms how the many gods and the one god hang together and they may not be sure about the hierarchy obtaining among the many manifestations, but they know that ultimately there is only One and that the many figures somehow merge into the One.[52]

But the concept of God in a particular form (Isvara, deva) is a pervasive feature of Hinduism. The ancient Upanishads revealed a different concept of God as Brahman or the Absolute. Brahman can be evoked only indirectly by metaphors and

for different levels of spiritual development and understanding in each individual. Cf. J. Grimes, S. Mittal & G. Thursby, "Hindu Dharma", p. 21.

51 *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, James G. Lochtefeld, vol. I: A-M, (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc., 2002), pp. 181.

52 Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, third edition, (New York: State University of New York Press, Albany, 2007), pp. 116-117.

analogies and yet is no different from the inmost self (ātman) within each human being and all that lives.[53]

Incidentally we can affirm that the totality of philosophical-religious reflection in Hindu area comprised, essentially speaking, the possession of the existential way with a more precise destination: touching the Ultimate Reality, the Absolute, so that, we may say, Descartes' classical aphorism *cogito ergo sum* becomes, within the Hindu thought, *sum ergo cogito*. And it is precisely this Ultimate Reality concept, in form of Brahman that dominates the entire Hindu philosophy and religion.

Brahman is one of the most important terms in the Vedic tradition, with a rich variety of meanings. It derives from the root *brih,* which means to "swell" or "grow," and evidently first referred to the swelling or growing power of the sacrifice and its *mantras* that expand out and create efficacy. The most common early meaning of *brahman* was simply "prayer." It is from this term that the word *brahmin,* "one who prays," or "priest," is derived.[54]

Eventually, the term *brahman* was developed in the Upanishads to mean "the All" or "Ultimate Reality." An understanding developed that the individual self, or Ātman , was identical to the *brahman.* These understandings developed in later Vedānta into both theistic views, in which the *brahman* was tantamount to a god or goddess, and nontheistic views, in which the *brahman* was seen as an uncharacterized reality that constituted or underlay everything.[55]

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[53] This idea has profoundly influenced literature and philosophy worldwide, but if one were to ask most Hindus who or what Brahman is, they would have no clue. Their understanding of God is focused on a particular name and form.

[54] Certain Vedic text collections are called Brahmanas; they are said to contain the secret of prayer.

[55] Often *brahman* is spelled as *brahma,* in part depending on grammatical context. Both forms are commonly used in transliterating Sanskrit. In the latter spelling the word must be carefully distinguished from Brahma, the creator god, whose name is pronounced with a long final

At the same time, the *brahman* kept up its intimate connection with *speech*, which gave rise to the later speculations on the primordial utterance as the cosmic principle (*sabda-brahman*) and to philosophy of language, as well as to grammatical description. On the other hand, identification made it possible to concentrate the whole of the spoken and acted proceedings of the ritual in the person of the single sacrificer, who in this way internalizes the whole of the ritual, that is, the transcendent cosmic order, and so becomes identical with *brahman*. This was already prefigured in the *brahman* who identifies himself with "the highest heaven of speech". Here the development leads over to the Upanshadic doctrine of the unity of *ātman*, the principle of individuation or the individual "soul", and *brahman*, which gave rise to the monistic philosophy of the Vedānta.[56]

The whole world was seen as the divine activity welling up from the mysterious being of Brahman, which was the inner meaning of all existence. The Upanishads encouraged people to cultivate a sense of Brahman in all things. It was a process of revelation in the literal meaning of the word: it was an unveiling of the hidden ground of all being. Everything that happens became a manifestation of Brahman: true insight lay in the perception of the unity behind the different phenomena.[57]

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a. Cf. *Encyclopedia of Hinduism,* Constance A. Jones and James D. Ryan, p. 91. Further reading: Louis Renou (with the collaboration of Liliane Silburn) in "Sur la notion de brahman," *Journal asiatique* 237 (1949): 7-46, reprinted in his *L'Inde fondamentale* (Paris, 1978); Jan Gonda, *Notes on Brahman* (Utrecht: J. L. Beyers, 1950); Stephen H. Phillips, *Aurobindo's Philosophy of Brahman* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986.) G. Sundara Ramaiah, *Brahman: A Comparative Study of the Philosophies of Śankara and Ramanuja* (Waltair: Andhra University 1974). R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, pp. 36-56; Michael W. Myers, *Brahman: A Comparative Theology* (Richmond, 2001).

56 Jan C. Heesterman, "Brahman", in *Encyclopedia of Religions*, Lindsay Jones, ed., vol. 2, p. 1026.

57 Everything had started from the Vedic times, when people had experienced a holy power in the sacrificial ritual. They had called this

Some of the Upanishads saw Brahman as a personal power but most of them saw it as strictly *impersonal*. Brahman cannot be addressed as "thou"; it is a neutral term, so is neither he nor she; nor is it experienced as the will of a sovereign deity. Brahman does not speak to mankind. It cannot meet men and women; it transcends all such human activities. Nor does it respond to us in a personal way: sin does not 'offend' it and it cannot be said to 'love' us or be 'angry'. Thanking or praising it for creating the world would be entirely inappropriate.

2.7 Avidyā and māyā

The central idea prevailing almost like an obsession in the whole Hindu philosophic literature is that lack of proper knowledge, designated with the term *avidyā*, associated with ignorance, could endanger the human soul's condition towards the future life's perspective, by subjecting it to a long cycle of several reincarnations. Avidyā represents the basis and object of the spiritual illusion, the human condition in itself.[58]
Transcending this obstacle has always been a special concern of the Brahmins, as the good knowledge of the Vedas constituted the very essence of their role in the universe's revivification and perpetuation by performing and supervising the rites,

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sacred power *Brahman*. The priestly caste (known as Brahmanas) were also believed to possess this power. Since the ritual sacrifice was seen as the microcosm of the whole universe, Brahman gradually came to mean a power which sustains everything. Cf. Karen Armstrong, A *History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 1993), p. 24.

58 In earlier literature *shruti*, *avidyā* used to mean a mere absence of knowledge, which could have distracted man from fulfilling his religious and moral obligations prescribed so rigorously by authority and tradition. Cf. Răzvan Tatu, "Knowledge and ignorance in Indian Thought", in: *An. Inst. de Ist.* "*G. Barițiu*", Series Humanistica, tom. VI, (Cluj-Napoca, 2008), p. 416.

important for their lives too. The necessity of an adequate knowledge in carrying out the rites is expressed in this way: "*If, without knowing this, one offers an Agnihotra, it would be as if a man were to remove the live coals and pour his libation on dead ashes*".[59]

The Upanishads teach that ignorance (*avidyā*) is the root cause of suffering and bondage. Each individual 'incarnation of immortality' tends to confuse that which, essentially, he or she is with that which he or she is not and is thus ignorant of true spiritual condition and ultimate destiny. In a sense, it is similar to the Christian concept of 'original sin.' *Māyā* (illusion or principle of appearance) is the concept employed to explain how this mistaken identification of the immortal self with the physical body and mind takes place and also to explain the creation of the universe and everything in it. The Upanishads contain two main views regarding māyā: *first*, it is the mysterious, wondrous, bedazzling, deceptive power of God (in which case, the world and its phenomena are considered real), and, *second*, it is the principle of appearance, the force that brings about the illusory manifestation of the universe.[60]

The Upanishadic thinkers' great discovery seems to have been, according to the majority of researchers, that soul was immortal and its true being remained outside of space and time, that its link to the material, empirical world of *samsāra*, should be transient and someway illusory.[61] Certain Upanishadic passages suggest that *avidyā* does not mean just a simple lack of necessary knowledge, but mostly an ontological state, which

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59 *Chāndogya-Upanishad*, V, 24,1, in: *Cele mai vechi Upanisade*, trans., introductory study, notes and commentaries by Radu Bercea, (Bucharest: Ştiinţifică Publishing House, 1993); parallel text in: *The Upanishads*, trans. by Max Müller, Part 1, in *The Sacred Books of the East*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), vol. 1, p. 91.

60 As such, it (as well as all its effects) is considered to be neither real nor nonreal.

61 R. C. Zaehner, *At Sundry Times*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), p. 61.

darkens the human mind, depriving it of liberation.[62] Caught in avidyā, being unaware of their own ignorance, these people become like dreamers who, simply, imagine their goals already fulfilled, when actually each act which denotes ignorance fastens them more and more in *samsāra*.

The main advocate of māyā theory of the world was the great Śankara, the renowned maestro of Vedānta. But Śankara's intention was to prove the self's existence and sustain the Upanishadic argument for an inner entity within the human being related to Brahman. The human self, *atmān*, is independent of the physical body and any mental or psychic aspect of man. From the error of those who identified the self with the body or psyche there results the source of all the human problems, *avidyā* and from this, rebirth and future death. Samsāra and the world's grieve become, therefore, the consequence of the lack of knowledge. Without self-conscience, man would be deprived of liberation. Nevertheless, paradoxically, reintegration in Brahman doesn't mean anything else but dissolution of the individual self into the infinite ocean of the Supreme Conscience, in a continuous process of depersonalization.[63] And that is the end of the individual existence.

One can notice a positive meaning of māyā's world view (weltanschauung) thanks to man's ability to become aware of the fact that mere empirical knowledge could stop or shade the

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62 Of certain persons, the sage says: "*Dwelling in the darkness of their ignorance, fools, imagining themselves as wise and learned, go round and round, like blind men led by the blind*". *Katha-Upanishad*, I, 2, 5, trans. and notes by Swami Lokeswarananda, (Bucharest: Ritam, 1998); see parallel text in M. Müller, *The Upanishads*, Part 2, in *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 15, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884), p. 8.

63 "*As the flowing rivers disappear in the ocean, losing their name to Purusha [the divine Person], the greater (para) than the great, the divine (divya) one*". *Mundaka-Upanishad*, III, 2, 8, in: *Upanishad*, O.C. Nedu, trans.; parallel text in M. Müller, *The Upanishads*, Part 2, *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 15, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884), p. 41.

discovery of Brahman. From this point of view, there are conceptual similarities between Śankara and Plato, Parmenides or Immanuel Kant. Summarily, the sensual world is pure illusion (*māyā*), only a phenomenon, but not the *noumen* in itself, or *das Ding-an-Sich*, as Kant would say.[64]

2.8 AUM (OM)

Om is the most important mantra in Hinduism. Chandogya Upanishad discusses the significance of OM. There it is given the highest value, equivalent to the Rig Veda and Sama Veda combined; it is said to be speech and breath combined. AUM is a Sanskrit word and symbol which is sacred in Dharmic religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sanatana Dharma and Jainism.[65]

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64 And the true knowledge, not being the intellectual or experiential one, it implies a deep transformation, of the individual. Cf. Răzvan Tatu, "Knowledge and ignorance in Indian Thought", p. 421. Further reading: Aditi De, *The Development of the Concept of Maya and Avidya with Special Reference to the Concept of Vivarta: An Interpretation of Śankara Philosophy* (Patna: De, 1982); John Grimes, *The Seven Great Untenables* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990); Chandranarayan Mishra, *The Problem of Nescience in Indian Philosophy* (Darbhanga: Kashinath Mishra, 1977); Swami Muktananda, *From the Finite to the Infinite,* 2nd ed. (South Fallsburg, N.Y.: SYDA Foundation, 1994); Bashistha Narain Tripath, *Indian View of Spiritual Bondage* (Varanasi: Aradhana Prakashan, 1987); Paul David Devandan, *The Concept of Maya* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1950); Margaret Dev and Neena Dev, *Maya: The Divine Power* (Piercy, Calif.: Chinmaya, 1999).

65 OM is often used to initiate or empower longer chants and mantras such as the Sanskrit chant, "Om Namah Shivaya" or the Sanskrit chant often associated with Buddhism, "Om Mani Padme Hum". ("Behold! The jewel in the lotus!" or "Praise to the jewel in the lotus!"). The 14th Dalai Lama writes, "The six syllables, 'om mani padme hum', mean that in dependence on the practice of a path which is an indivisible union of method and wisdom, you can transform your impure body, speech, and mind into the pure exalted body, speech, and mind of a Buddha...". Ray J. Rousseau, *OM, The Symbol for Primordial Sound*. http://institutespiritualsciences.org/blog_mantras/om.php

Just as an acorn seed has the potential of a huge oak tree, so does this symbol hide the potential to give us meaning and direction in life. The scriptures say 'In the beginning was the word'. This word is Aum. This sound is the music of the spheres in the galaxy. This short word is the primal sound and it is said to emanate from the right side of the brain, and pervade down the spine and through the whole body. The seeker tries to chant 'Aum' to perfection for full purification of the mind and subsequent realization. Yogis hear this sound when they are sitting in meditation totally at peace. The Katha Upanishad says "The Goal which all the Vedas declare, which all the austerities aim at and which men desire when they lead a life of continence I will tell you briefly: It is Aum."[66] Nearly all chants or mantras have Aum in front of them. All seekers of truth try to tune in with the cosmic sound of Aum because it is the voice of God.

The Mandukya Upanishad outlines the esoteric aspects of *om*. It is said to be all that is –past, present, and future – and to transcend time. Om is said to be the Self (ātman). Esoterically, it is said to encompass the four states of consciousness: the waking, dreaming, deep-sleep, and transcendent states. For this purpose, using Sanskrit grammar, the letter "*o*" in the word om is understood to constitute an *a* and a *u. A* is the waking state, *u* the dreaming state, *m* the deep-sleep state; the fourth state has no external marker and is the non-dual reality.[67]

The word AUM, when written properly, contains three letters, signifying the threefold nature of cosmic vibration. In English, this word is often written OM, because the vowel "O" is pronounced as a diphthong. Hence, the "A" in AUM represents the cosmic creative vibration, and should be pronounced short, rather than long as in "arm". "U" (pronounced "oo" as in

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66 *Kathopanishad. A dialogue with death*, *Commentary by Swami Chinmayananda*, (Mumbai: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 2000), p. 168.

67 Ananda Wood, „The Fourth state of Changeless Reality", in: *Times of India*, *Speaking Tree*, (New Delhi: 8th December, 2000), p. 6.

"moon") is the cosmic vibration of preservation. It maintains all creation in a state of equilibrium. "M" represents the vibration of cosmic dissolution, which draws all creation back into the Absolute at the end of a universal cycle. The time allotted to cosmic manifestation is known as a Day of Brahma, and spans a period of billions of years.[68]

For a *yogi*, to focus on the mantra *om* is to focus on the ultimate reality. If the yogi pronounces om, it reaches the crown chakra; if the yogi becomes absorbed meditationally in om, he becomes eternal. Om, too, is understood as the essence of the word *brahman* and is therefore, via its transcendent sound, the source of all manifest reality, where reality is known to be nothing but the congealing of sound.[69]

The syllable AUM or "OM" is first described as all-encompassing mystical entity in the Upanishads. Today, in all Hindu art and all over Nepal and India, 'OM' can be seen virtually everywhere, a common sign for Hinduism and its philosophy and theology. Hindus believe that as creation began, the divine, all-encompassing consciousness took the form of the first and original vibration manifesting as sound "OM". Before creation began it was "Shunyākāsha", the emptiness or the void. Shunyākāsha, meaning literally "no sky", is more than nothingness, because everything then existed in a latent state of potentiality. The vibration of "OM" symbolizes the manifestation of God in form (*sāguna brahman*). "OM" is the reflection of the absolute reality, it is said to be "Adi Anadi", without beginning or end and embracing all that exists. The mantra "OM" is the name of God, the vibration of the Supreme.

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68 J. Donald Walters (Swami Kriyananda), *The Hindu Way of Awakening: Its Revelation, Its symbols* (Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House, 1999), pp. 157-158.

69 No mantra begins without *om* and most Vedic mantras end with *om* as well. Om is often referred to as *Omkara* (the *kara,* a meaningless marker), added to make it easier to distinguish visually in Sanskrit script. It is also called *pranava,* which literally means, "That which resounds."

When taken literally, A-U-M represents the divine energy (Shakti) united in its three elementary aspects: Bhrahma-Shakti (creation), Vishnu-Shakti (preservation) and Shiva-Shakti (liberation, and/or destruction).[70]

3 Influence of Hinduism on Christianity in the West

What can we say as Christians about these Hindu religions? The first thing we can say is that there are obvious similarities. *Avatāras* are similar to the Christian incarnation of Jesus Christ. Both Hindus and Christians say that God has come to earth to help and save.

There is also the idea of *grace*, which technically means God does for human beings what they cannot do for themselves. But there are profound differences between Christianity and Hinduism. The *avatāras*, as even Hindu scholars concede, are based less on historical reality than theological story. Many Hindus take the stories literally, but the stories about Krishna (stealing butter and having amorous affairs with cowgirls), for example, seem to have been a conflation of accounts of several Krishnas in real history, with supernatural elements added later. Second, there are ten incarnations in Hinduism, unlike the one incarnation of Jesus, which did all that was needed to save human beings for all time. [71]

Thirdly, these Hindu saviours are less than morally perfect, while Jesus was sinless. Christian grace is also different from bhakti grace. In the latter, grace is in the context of an

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70 Gerald R. McDermott, *World Religions. An Indispensable Introduction*, p. 21. Further reading: Cornelia Dimitt and J. A. van Buitenen, eds. and trans., *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Puranas* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978); S. Ranganath, *Aum-Pranava in Indian Tradition* (Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 2001).

71 For details: Alexandru-Corneliu Arion, *Hindu pantheism and Christian teaching on God*, pp. 382-409.

impersonal law of the universe (karma), which even the gods cannot change. In Christian faith, on the other hand, Jesus Christ is the author of the law, and he has cancelled the power of that law over us.[72]

But more important, a self-indulgent Krishna forgives sins at no cost to himself. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, was sinless and gives us grace only by an infinitely painful atonement. Grace cost him everything.

There are other differences as well, between both Hindu schools and Christian faith[73]:

1. *Ultimate concern:* For the Hindu, it is escape from the human condition; for the Christian it is freedom from guilt, sin, and the devil.
2. *Human nature:* For the Christian it is creaturely and sinful; for the Hindu it is divine.
3. *Human problem:* It is moral sin for the Christian and intellectual ignorance for the Hindu.
4. *Resolution:* For the Christian it is a divine act at infinite cost to God; for the Hindu it is human effort, sometimes mixed with grace, without cost to the god.

3.1 Gurus and their movements

A practice that goes back at least to the days of the Upanishads is that of seekers associating themselves with particular teachers or gurus. It is a practice one finds in contemporary India as well as in the Indian diaspora. As people seek to rediscover the essence of their faith, and, in the process, their own identities, they attach themselves to the exponent of a particular school of thought or practice, whether from a

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72 Cf. Ernest Valea, *Creștinismul și spiritualitatea indiană* (Christianity and Indian spirituality), (Timișoara: Ariel Publishing, 1996).

73 Gerald R. McDermott, *World Religions. An Indispensable Introduction*, p. 23.

distance through the guru's books, or in ashrams (or mathas) to meditate in the presence of the teacher. Such teachers are selected for any number of reasons: a friend recommends someone with whom he or she has been in contact; one is impressed, by word of mouth, with a guru's style or "miracles"; the guru speaks one's own vernacular.[74]

"Gurus" are abundant in the Indian landscape; there is little quality control save as devotees become impressed with the charisma or "wisdom" of the teacher. At times each guru starts movements distinctive to his or her own particular perceptions of the "truth."

During the British colonial period the British substantially influenced Indian society, but India also influenced the western world. An early champion of Indian-inspired thought in the West was Arthur Schopenhauer who in the 1850's advocated ethics based on an "Aryan-Vedic theme of spiritual self-conquest", as opposed to the ignorant drive toward earthly utopianism of the superficially this-worldly "Jewish" spirit. Helena *Blavatsky* moved to India in 1879, and her Theosophical Society, founded in New York in 1875, evolved into a peculiar mixture of Western occultism and Hindu mysticism over the last years of her life.

The first sustained contact that Americans had with Hinduism came through the International Parliament of the Religions, held in Chicago in 1893. The sojourn of Swami *Vivekananda* to this World Parliament had a lasting effect. Vivekananda founded in New York the *Ramakrishna Mission* or *The Vedanta Society*, a Hindu missionary organization still active today.[75]

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[74] Or, if one is an Anglicized urbanite, one may be impressed by the guru who is also Anglicized and a globe-trotter. So, if one is a Tamil smarta brahman, for example, living in Mumbai, away from one's home, one may look to the Śankaracarya for guidance.

[75] He identified that oneness of religion with the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta. Vivekananda was bringing Vedānta to the United States much

Based on the monistic philosophy of one of Hinduism's philosophical schools and on its interpretation as given in the teachings and mystical experiences of Vivekananda's teacher, Ramakrishna (1836–'86), the Vedanta Society attracted the attention of many prominent members of the artistic community: the French actress Sarah Bernhardt, the American author and publisher Paul Carus, the English novelist Aldous Huxley, and the Anglo-American novelist and playwright Christopher Isherwood, among others. With centers in India and throughout the world, the *Vedanta Society* continues to promote a highly eclectic and tolerant form of religious unity, claiming that all world religions teach fundamentally the same truth, but nevertheless maintaining that Vedanta is uniquely capable of articulating this unified doctrine.

Hinduism-inspired elements in *Theosophy* were also inherited by the spin-off movements of Ariosophy and *Anthroposophy* and ultimately contributed to the renewed New Age boom of the 1960s to 1980s, the term New Age itself deriving from Blavatsky's 1888 *The Secret Doctrine.*[76]

In the early 20-th century, Western occultists influenced by Hinduism include Maximiani Portaz – an advocate of "Aryan Paganism" – who styled herself Savitri Devi and Jakob Wilhelm Hauer, founder of the German Faith Movement. It was in this period, and until the 1920s, that the *swastika* became a ubiquitous symbol of good luck in the West before its association with the Nazi Party became dominant in the 1930s.

In unrelated developments, during the same time Jiddu *Krishnamurti*, a South Indian Brahmin, was promoted as the

as Western missionaries had brought Christianity to India. Cf. James B. Robinson, *Religions of the world: Hinduism*, pp. 148-149.

[76] For more details: Sylvia Cranston, *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena* Blavatsky (New York: Tarcher, 1995).

"vehicle" of the messianic entity Maitreya, the so-called World Teacher, by the Theosophical Society.[77]

3.2 Neo-Hindu movements 1950s–1980s

During the 1960s to 1970s counter-culture, Sathya Sai Baba (Sathya Sai Organization), A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (ISKCON or "Hare Krishna"), Guru Maharaj Ji (Divine Light Mission) and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (Transcendental Meditation movement) attracted a notable western following, founding religious or quasi-religious movements that remain active into the present time. This group of movements founded by charismatic persons with a corpus of esoteric writings, predominantly in English, is classed as founding, proselytizing religions, or "guru-ism".[78]

Hatha Yoga was also popularized from the 1960s (by B.K.S. Iyengar, K. Pattabhi Jois and others). However, western practice of Yoga has mostly become detached from its religious or mystic context and is predominantly practiced as *exercise or alternative medicine*.

A relevant exemplification for "guru-isms" is *Satya Sai Baba* movement that has gained great popularity in India's current milieu. While he has his detractors who speak of him as a charlatan and an exponent of "easy" religion, not a few middle and upper-class urbanites, many of whom have lost touch or confidence in more "traditional" forms of religion, find him to be a charismatic and attractive figure. "Satya Sai Baba" was born in 1926 in a village now in Andhra Pradesh. His boyhood

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77 Another early Hindu teacher received in the west was *Sri Aurobindo* (d. 1950), who had considerable influence on western "integral" esotericism, traditionalism ("Perennialism") or spirituality in the tradition of René Guénon, Julius Evola, Rudolf Steiner, etc.

78 Alex Michaels, *Hinduism Past and Present*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 22.

is said to have been filled with a variety of miraculous occurrences, including a "disclosure" at the age of thirteen when he declared himself to be an incarnation of Sai Baba, the Muslim-Hindu guru who died in 1918. In a later "revelation" (in 1963) he declared himself to be the embodiment of Siva and Sakti (literally the divine totality), in the flesh. In the meanwhile, he had begun to attract considerable attention through his "miracles," his travels throughout the south, and the establishment of his ashram in Puttaparthi, the village of his birth. He predicted he would live until the age of ninety-six[79] and that the latter half of his life would be devoted to teaching, the performing of miracles, and, eventually, offering intensive teachings to selected groups.

Even though he is thought to be the incarnation of all the deities and is called *Bhagavan* ("God") by his devotees, Satya Sai Baba is especially associated with Siva and is depicted most commonly in the company of Siva's linga (an aniconic representation). In addition, he is most noted to his followers for his ability to make sacred ash (*vibhuti*, commonly used in Saiva worship) appear at will and in massive amounts.[80]

The movement which Satya Sai Baba has established has mushroomed into a major pan-Indian phenomenon.[81] Clearly the center of the movement is Satya Sai Baba himself – he is the object of worship and the *raison d'etre* of the movement. Worship of Satya Sai Baba, in other words, is primarily a form of pietism - of bhakti - whereby, it is thought, one is directing

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79 But, unluckily (!) he died in 2011, at age 84.

80 Cf. Later he expands the scope of the supernatural pretenses, claiming that he would even be the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and by 1976 to reach the peak of ludicrous, arguing that "Sai religion" would be nothing more than a "synthesis of all religions until now". Nicolae Achimescu, *Noile mișcări religioase* (New Religious Movements), (Cluj-Napoca: Limes Publishing, 2002), p.177.

81 Its funds are kept in a trust fund. The Central Shri Satya Sai Trust supports ashrams, engages in philanthropic activities, publishes a magazine, and endows at least four colleges.

one's thanksgiving and one's personal requests to God himself. It is clear that many of these *bhaktas*, sometimes referred to as "urban alienates," are economically well-placed.[82]

The period of the modern influence of Hinduism on America and Europe is that which followed the Second World War and especially since the 1960s. For one thing, things Indian had influenced American popular culture and subsequently global culture. There were several factors contributing to this phenomenon. There was, on the one hand, certain alienation by 1965 especially on the part of the young with "Western" values of consumerism and international hegemony. There was a perceived loss of respect for authority figures exacerbated by the Vietnam War and the Nixon years. There was an increased sense of mobility and depersonalization, a perceived need for community and roots. One of the results of this relative malaise was a willingness to accommodate "newer" or more eclectic forms of religion.[83]

Among these alternatives was the *International Society for Krishna Consciousness*, a movement shaped in the Vaisnava tradition founded by Chaitanya and brought to the West by

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82 Though many have never seen Satya Sai Baba in person, they have come to believe in his persona, and in his claims for himself and even attest to miracles wrought in their own lives. No profound theological claims need be affirmed; no rigorous discipline needed. One need only worship at the "altar". Little wonder millions find this attractive, while others dismiss it as "pop religion." Fred W. Clothey, *Religion in India. A Historical Introduction*, Routledge 270 Madison Avenue, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, pp. 216-217. Further reading: Erlendur Haraldsson (1987) *Miracles Are My Visiting Cards,* (London: Century Press, 1987); N. Kasturi, *Sathyam, Sivan, Sundaram: The Life Story of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba,* 3 vols, (Prasanthi Nilayam, A.P.: Sri Sathya Sai Books and Publications Trust, 1973-1975); D.A. Swallow, (1982) 'Ashes and Powers: Myth, Rite and Miracle in an Indian God-man's Cult', *Modern Asian Studies,* 16:123–58.

83 Some have estimated that perhaps as many as 1,000 "alternative" religious movements have been spawned in North America alone since the Second World War. *Ibid*., p. 235.

Swami Prabhupada. While the movement has remained relatively small in the US and Europe, many "outsiders" became familiar with the rigorous discipline of the movement, its characteristic garb, and public chanting of "Hare Rama, Hare Krisna".[84] Far less accommodating to American cultural and religious predilections, ISKCON is fundamentally a continuation of a Hindu sect, originating in India's medieval period that emphasizes ecstatic devotion to the god Krishna. Conversion to ISKCON entails not only a shift in *religious belief* and practice but an entire break with Western culture, symbolized by the adoption of Indian dress and diet and by the shaving of male followers' heads. Such radical signs of alienation from Western culture and values, together with the group's active proselytizing dimension and its internal crises and leadership struggles, engendered much controversy about the Hare Krishnas.[85]

Yet another movement was forged by *Swami Maharishi Mahesh Yogi* and his technique of meditating for "*transcendental consciousness*" ("TM"), packaged and sold as twenty minutes a day of meditation designed to focus the mind and clear it of unnecessary debris. Maharishi Mahesh (1918-2008) won much

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84 Singing, dancing, and preparing and eating vegetarian food in the name of Krishna are encouraged, as is reading Prabhupada's books, particularly his translation and commentary of the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Srimad Bhagavatam,* and the life of Chaitanya. A devotee's spiritual objective is to serve and remember Krishna at all times and in all activities, whilst the movement's goal is to follow Chaitanya's call to spread Krishna consciousness to every town and village. Cf. Kim Knott, "International Society for Krishna Consciousness", in: *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, Peter B.Clarke, ed., (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2006), pp. 308-309.

85 "New Religious Movements", in *Britannica Encyclopædia of World Religions*, Jacob E. SAFRA, *Chairman of the Board*, (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 2006), p. 802. Further reading: Kim Knott, *My Sweet Lord: The Hare Krishna Movement*, (Wellingborough, Northants: Aquarian Press, 1986); Nicolae Achimescu, *New Religious Movements*, pp. 138-145.

publicity by attracting to himself and his teachings celebrities such as the American film star Mia Farrow, the American engineer and architect Buckminster Fuller, and the English musical group the Beatles. Transcendental Meditation was also represented as a "scientific" method for obtaining both personal and social peace and harmony; it centered around the repetition of and concentration on an individualized *mantra* imparted to the initiate by the guru.[86] The practices and institutional developments associated with TM stem from the idea that changes at the micro-level – in terms of the individual's stress reduction, spiritual growth, and development of yogic powers – can be successfully multiplied to bring about transformation at the macro-level, whether that be crime reduction in the local neighbourhood, improvements to a nation's health, or world peace.[87]

Other gurus have come and gone – Rajneesh of Oregon fame is but one of hundreds who have made their way through North America and Europe. Scores of other "alternative religions" have also been engendered, some for brief periods before returning to relative oblivion. Anand Marga and Eckankar are but two such.

These impeti, especially those of the TM and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness groups, were given popular currency by the Beatles, whose songs resonated with Indian idioms and whose donations supported such movements. Not

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86 *Ibid.*, p. 801.

87 This creative multiplication effect is possible, according to the Maharishi, because of 'the Unified Field of the Natural Law'. Personal and social problems arise because this law is violated; the appropriate response to this violation is spiritual regeneration, first of the individual and then, as the number of individuals increases, of the whole planet. Kim Knott, "Transcendental Meditation", in: *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, pp. 634-635. Further reading: Roy Wallis, *The Elementary Forms of the New Religious* Life, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984); Nicolae Achimescu, *New Religious Movements*, pp. 125-137.

least important in this process of popularization has been the way yoga has been made available throughout the West – as a form of exercise, virtually stripped of its cosmological and soteriological context. Such South Asian terms as "karma" and "nirvana" have become part of the English language, obviously nuanced with their new cultural trappings.[88] While the fascination with India cooled in the 1980s and 1990s, it was piqued further as the emigration of South Asians increased.

4 Conclusion

Among the many features common to all "theo-spiritualisms" we may retain: refusal of dualism - of the natural and supernatural intervention of law and that between divine and human; a fundamental optimism sprang out from the belief that *reincarnation* allow all men to always approach in a greater degree their salvation; the idea of an essential convergence, even the identity of all religions; belief in an "original" universal primordial tradition; a tendency towards syncretism (or at least towards eclecticism) between occultism, spiritualism, theosophical society (and also other trends like Freemasonry); influence of Eastern religions, especially *Hinduism* and *Buddhism*.[89]

The story of the global dispersion of Indian ideas, culture, and people, only sketched here, suggests a number of implications. It is clear, for example, that religion is now transnational. No

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[88] Fred W. Clothey, *Religion in India. A Historical Introduction*, p. 241. Further reading: Francoise Champion, "Spirit religios difuz, eclectism și sincretisme" (*Diffuse religious spirit, eclecticism and syncretism*), Carmen Stoean, trans., in: Jean Delumeau, ed., *Religiile lumii* (World Religions), (Bucharest, Humanitas Publisher, 1996), pp. 700-721.

[89] Alexandru-Corneliu Arion, *„Influența sectelor de origine hindusă în Europa și America*" (*The influence of Hindu originating sects in Europe and America*), in: *Studii Teologice*, Bucharest, Seria a II-a, anul LV, nr. 1-2, 2003, p. 243.

longer is "east east" and: "west west." Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Buddhists have become the neighbors of Christians and Jews. Muslims, for example, are the second largest religious population in France and are as abundant in the US as are Jews. Hinduism is not confined to India and to Indians; Buddhism, with its active publishing agencies in the US and the concomitant construction of *stupas* and meditation centers is stronger in the US than it was in its first century in China, where it became the "state religion" within centuries. This leads us back to the conclusion: It is not possible to ignore these religious traditions in our study of history of religion, or of the human experience, for to do so would be to ignore something of the world's history and of the changing face of the West's religious landscape. In fact, the presence of these alternative religions and of South Asian immigrants in most countries of the world is an invitation for persons raised in any single religious tradition or in no religion at all, to rethink the ways in which fundamental human issues are answered in light of the questions raised by these transnational migrations.[90]

Each "Hindu-inspired meditation movements" (HIMM) employs a different mixture of rituals from Hindu and Western religious and secular traditions.[91] In spite of their differences, HIMMs

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90 *New Religious Movements: Challenge and response*, Bryan Wilson & Jamie Cresswell, (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 1999), pp. 91 sq.

91 For example, Siddha Yoga emphasizes Hindu rituals quite a bit, with ceremonies performed at ashrams such as the washing and feeding of statues, offering worship through waving trays containing lights burning on wicks dipped in ghee, flowers, and other sacred objects (puja), and fire ceremonies (yajnas). One of these involves rapidly rubbing the hands together and then stretching the arms upward and, along with a slow motion of the arms downward, chanting *Om* as a way of offering blessings to the world. TM employs Vedic rituals, such as yajnas, as well as puja. Lola Williamson, *Transcendent in America: Hindu-inspired meditation movements in America*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), p. 198.

also participate in some of the same rituals and share characteristic attitudes toward ritual. The main goal of ritual is not to reinforce group identity, (although it does this), nor is it to affect changes in the outer world. Followers of HIMMs believe that the purpose of outer rituals is to stimulate an inner sense of sanctity. Mircea Eliade theorizes in *The Sacred and the Profane* that one function of a religious system is to separate the sacred from "the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space."[92] This is accomplished by carving out a sacred space and delineating it in various ways from the profane space that surrounds it. And talking about the concept of God imparted by all HIMMs followers, it is clear that they shared the classical Hindu view of God, i.e. they believe that the Divine is in man. Every human being, irrespective of caste or color, can attain to the knowledge of this truth and make his whole life an expression of it. The Divinity in us is to be realized in mind and spirit and made a power in life.[93]

In many ways, Indians who have sought to revivify or reinterpret their religious orientations since the nineteenth century have been a people living "on the boundaries." They have been renegotiating identities in response to multiple cultures and religions. They have reacted, even over-reacted, to the effects of colonialism and have been tempted by the lure of nationalism, orthopraxy, and ethnicity. They have sought to maintain anchorage in the face of increased mobility, and the loss of a sense of rootedness and community. Many persons today live "on the boundaries," familiar with more than one culture or religion through travel, education, or life experience. Many persons look for authentic humans worth emulating, experiment with "rituals that work," and long for a sense of

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92 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion.* trans. by Willard R. Trask. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), p. 22.

93 S. Radhakrishnan, *Hinduism*, chapter VII in: *A Cultural History of India*, Edited by A. L. Basham, Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 73.

community. Not infrequently, people "on the boundaries" have turned to orthopraxy – the practice of a "tradition" thought to affirm certainty and heritage.[94] Others experiment with alternative ideas and construct collages of religion. In any case, the Indian experience demonstrates that we have come to an exciting and important moment in the history of religions, one in which new religious landscapes continually emerge like the images of a kaleidoscope and where people will have to learn whether it is possible to share the same planet.[95].

We can draw to the end of our paper by referring to an celebrated poem by Rudyard Kipling, which sounds like o prophecy (written in 1889), even though its first line is often quoted, sometimes as an example of Kipling's attitudes to race and to the Empire: "Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,/Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;/But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,/When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!"[96]

From the *Christian Orthodox perspective*, we can underscore that these religious forms are trying to integrate even Christianity, of course via marginal, sectarian sources that are completely outside to the Holy Church and Tradition. All of these evade the real magnitude and significance of the Resurrection of our Lord, the only one able to set holism (so much prized by all these new religious movements) in the service of God through Jesus Christ, the Savior, who by His death and resurrection opened to all creatures the path to deification by grace.[97] But it is absolutely normal that from the

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94 Fred W. Clothey, *Religion in India. A Historical Introduction*. p. 245.

95 In effect, the search for a new world order – to say nothing of more satisfying religious orientations – has just begun.

96 *The Ballad of East and West*, in: *The Collected Poems of Rudyard Kipling* (Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2001), pp. 245-248.

97 Alexandru-Corneliu Arion, "The influence of Hindu originating sects in Europe and America", p. 246.

uniqueness of our God to arise logically the uniqueness and specificity of the method as well by which He can be known and – at the same time – the (single) way through which man has access to God, as apodictically expresses our Savior Himself: "I am the way [.. .] No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14: 6).