

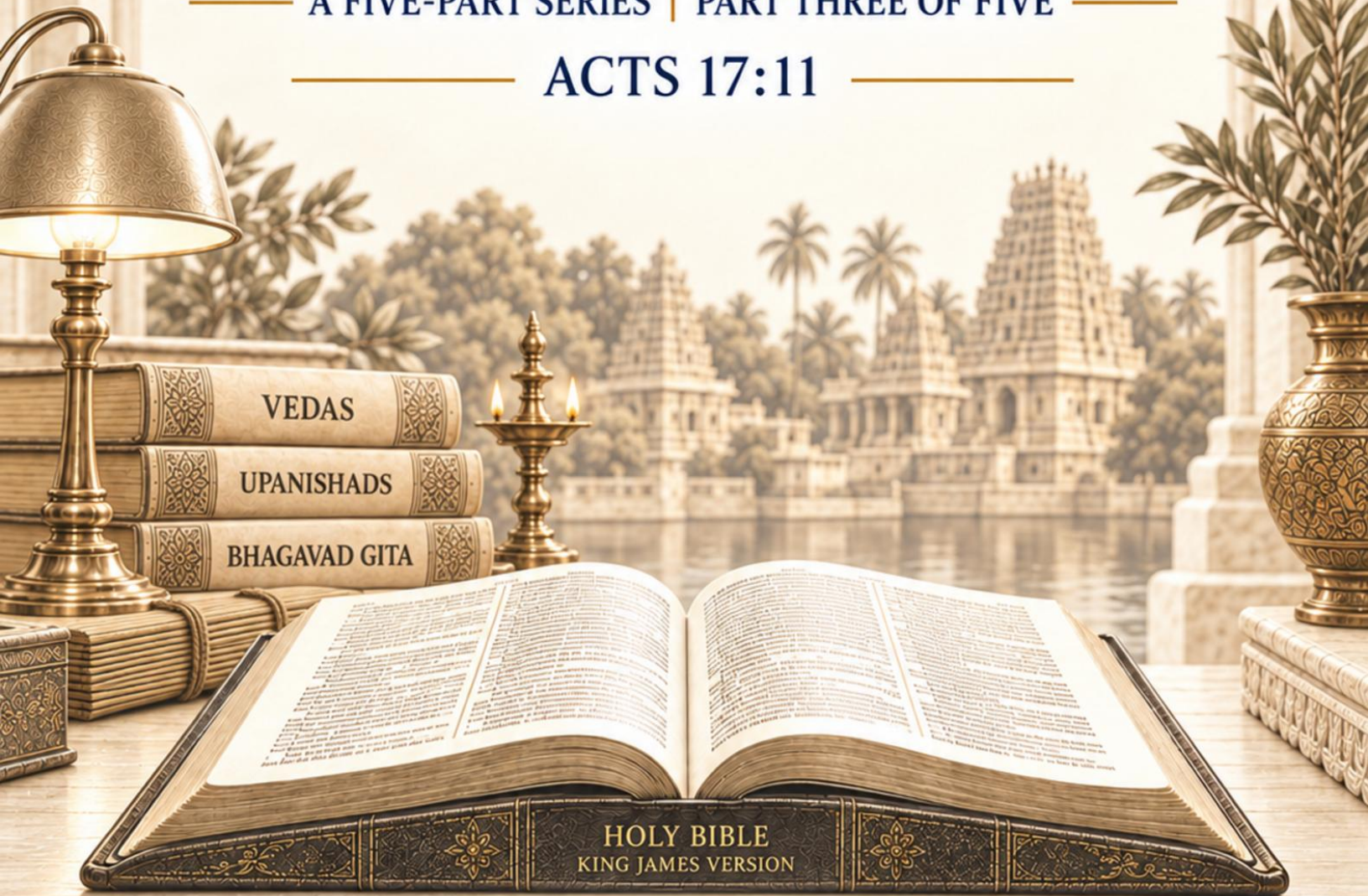
REASON TOGETHER CHURCH



HOW DOES HINDUISM DIFFER FROM THE BIBLE?

A FIVE-PART SERIES | PART THREE OF FIVE

ACTS 17:11



SERMON & PASTOR'S COMMENTARY

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How Does Hinduism Differ from the Bible?

Full Sermon Manuscript

Reason Together Church

Bring your questions. Open your Bible. Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Aloha.

Welcome to Reason Together Church.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let us Reason Together the Word of God.

Today we continue our series asking how the teachings of major religions differ from the Bible. Our question today is, How Does Hinduism Differ from the Bible?

Before we open in prayer, I want to make something very clear. Hindu people are not our enemies. They are our neighbors, coworkers, classmates, relatives and friends. They are people created in the image of God. We will not mock their names, their clothing, their food, their images or their customs. We will not repeat slogans that we have never taken time to examine.

But respect does not require silence. Love does not require us to pretend that contradictory beliefs are all saying the same thing. If we care about people, we should listen carefully, represent them honestly and then speak the truth of God with humility and courage.

Let us pray.

Our Father, we come before You asking for wisdom. Protect us from pride. Keep us from careless words and unfair judgments. Help us understand what our Hindu neighbors actually believe. More importantly, help us understand Your Word. Make Jesus Christ clear. Open the heart of every person who does not yet know Him. Give us truth without cruelty, confidence without arrogance and compassion without compromise. We ask all of this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Please open your Bible to Acts chapter 17. We will begin with verse 22.

“Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars’ hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.

“God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men’s hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;

“And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:

“For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.

“Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man’s device.

“And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:

“Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.”

Paul did not begin by insulting the people of Athens. He noticed their devotion. He understood that they were religious people. He even quoted their own poets. But Paul did not stop with a polite compliment. He declared the Creator. He corrected their misunderstanding. He called them to repentance. He warned them of judgment. He proclaimed the resurrection.

That is our model today.

Before we continue, let me mention a few things about our church. Reason Together Church does not pass a plate. If you are our guest, we do not expect you to give. If you are a member of another church, please continue supporting your home church. If the Lord leads you to help this ministry, there is a giving box in the back.

If this is your first time with us, we invite you to complete a guest card with just your first name and email address. We will not pressure you. We simply want to thank you for coming and help you remain connected.

After the service, please join us at the Reason Together Café. COFFEE means Christ Offers Forgiveness For Everyone Everywhere. We offer free refills on coffee and free refills on conversations. If today’s subject raises questions, I will also be available in the Pastor’s Study on the second floor.

Now, how does Hinduism differ from the Bible?

The first thing we must understand is that Hinduism is not one uniform religion. It has no single historical founder. It has no universally binding creed. It has no worldwide governing institution. It has no single book interpreted the same way by every Hindu.

Many Hindus use the expression Sanatana Dharma, meaning the eternal way, eternal order or eternal dharma. They do not believe their spiritual tradition began with one person at one moment in history. They understand it as a collection of ancient truths, duties, paths and practices.

There are several major Hindu traditions. Vaishnavism centers devotion upon Vishnu and forms such as Krishna and Rama. Shaivism centers devotion upon Shiva. Shaktism centers devotion upon the Goddess or divine power. Smartism commonly permits devotion through several principal forms of the divine.

There are also different philosophical schools. Three are especially important for our discussion.

Advaita teaches nonduality. At the deepest level, the true self and ultimate reality are one.

Vishishtadvaita is often called qualified nonduality. It teaches a personal supreme Lord while preserving the reality of souls and the world as completely dependent upon Him. Dvaita teaches a lasting distinction between God and individual souls.

That means we must be careful. If I quote one Hindu teacher and then say, “This is what every Hindu believes,” I may be answering something millions of Hindus do not believe.

Yet diversity does not mean that nothing can be examined. Hindu traditions still answer the greatest questions of life. Who is God? Who are we? What is wrong with us? How can we be saved?

Let us begin with the first question. Who is God?

One important Hindu word is Brahman. Brahman refers to ultimate reality. Brahman is not the same as Brahma, the name of a particular deity associated with creation in some Hindu traditions.

Some Hindu schools speak of Brahman as beyond attributes and beyond ordinary personality. Other schools identify Brahman with a personal supreme Lord. Some people worship Vishnu as supreme. Others worship Shiva. Others worship the Goddess. Some regard several divine forms as ways through which one ultimate reality may be approached.

This is why the statement “Hindus worship many gods” is too simple. Some Hindus worship one supreme deity. Some recognize many divine beings but place one above the rest. Some understand different deities as manifestations of one ultimate reality. Others follow a philosophy in which the distinction between the worshiper and the worshiped is not ultimately final.

Someone may ask, “Could Brahman simply be another name for the God of the Bible?”

The answer is no. The issue is not merely the name. The issue is the nature of the One being described.

Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”

God existed before creation. God created everything that exists. God did not form the universe out of His own divine essence. The universe is not a piece of God. God made the world, but God is not the world.

In Exodus 3:14 God said unto Moses, “I AM THAT I AM.”

He is self-existent. He depends upon no one. Everyone and everything else depends upon Him.

Deuteronomy 6:4 says, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD.”

The God of the Bible speaks. He knows. He wills. He loves. He commands. He judges. He saves. His personality is not a lower level of truth that disappears when someone reaches a higher spiritual understanding.

Paul declared in Acts 17 that God made the world and all things therein. He is Lord of heaven and earth. He gives to all life, breath and all things.

This gives us the first controlling difference between the Bible and much Hindu philosophy: the Creator-creature distinction.

God is present everywhere, but everything is not God. Creation depends upon God, but creation is not part of God’s essence. We may see God’s power and wisdom through creation, but we must not worship creation as God.

Romans 1:25 describes people “who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator.”

The Bible does not present the true God as one form among many. It does not present Him as one personal expression of a higher impersonal reality. He alone is God. He alone is the Creator.

Once we ask who God is, we must ask who we are.

Another important Hindu term is atman. Atman refers to the self, particularly the deepest spiritual identity.

In Advaita, atman is ultimately identical with Brahman. The famous Upanishadic expressions “That thou art” and “I am Brahman” are understood as pointing toward this nondual reality. The ordinary sense that I am one independent individual and you are another belongs to ignorance at the deepest level.

But that is not the only Hindu interpretation. Vishishtadvaita teaches that individual souls are real while remaining completely dependent upon the personal supreme Lord. Dvaita teaches that God and the soul remain permanently distinct.

Therefore, we should not carelessly say, “Every Hindu believes he is God.” That is not accurate.

We can still ask what the Bible teaches.

Genesis 1:26 says, “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” Verse 27 continues, “So God created man in his own image.”

Human beings possess extraordinary dignity. We can reason, love, create, communicate and exercise moral responsibility. We were made to know God and represent His rule within creation.

But being made in God’s image does not mean we possess God’s essence.

A reflection in a mirror is not the person standing before the mirror. A portrait may represent a king, but the portrait is not the king. Humanity reflects something of God’s character and authority, but humanity is not God.

Isaiah 43:10 records God saying, “Before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me.”

The Bible never tells us to discover that we are God. It tells us to recognize that we need God.

Some may compare the Hindu idea of divinity within every person to the Christian teaching that the Holy Ghost lives within believers. But these are not the same teaching.

Romans 8:16 says, “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.”

Notice the distinction. There is God’s Spirit and there is our spirit. The Holy Ghost lives within the believer, but the believer does not become the Holy Ghost. God dwells with us and within us without turning us into God.

If we are not God and if our greatest problem is not simply that we have forgotten our hidden divinity, what is wrong with us?

Different Hindu traditions speak of ignorance, attachment, selfish desire, karma and bondage to the cycle of rebirth. Ignorance can mean far more than lacking information. It can mean failing to recognize the true nature of the self and ultimate reality.

The Bible certainly teaches that ignorance and deception are serious. We need truth. We need our minds renewed. But the Bible goes further.

Romans 3:23 says, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”

Romans 6:23 says, “For the wages of sin is death.”

Our deepest problem is not merely that we do not understand ourselves. Our deepest problem is that we have sinned against our Creator.

We have failed to love God with all our heart. We have broken His commands. We have worshiped created things. We have lied, lusted, hated, envied and placed ourselves at the center of life.

If my problem is ignorance, I need a teacher.

If my problem is guilt, I need forgiveness.

Jesus is a teacher, but He did not come merely to provide better information. Matthew 1:21 says, “thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.”

This does not mean that every Hindu is outwardly cruel or immoral. Many Hindu people are loving parents, faithful spouses, generous neighbors and responsible citizens. The Biblical doctrine of sin does not mean every person behaves as wickedly as possible. It means every person has failed to love, honor and obey the true God perfectly.

That includes people who grew up in church. That includes pastors. That includes me. Apart from the grace of God, we stand under the same condemnation.

Hindu teaching frequently places the human problem within karma and samsara.

Karma means action and the moral consequences of action. It is not merely bad luck. It is not simply the saying, “What goes around comes around.” Within the cycle of samsara, the consequences of actions may extend into future births.

This idea can appear to explain why people are born into radically different circumstances. It offers a moral order rather than a universe of meaningless accidents.

But it also raises difficult questions.

If a person suffers because of conduct in a previous life, why does that person normally have no memory of the conduct being corrected?

How can punishment for forgotten wrongdoing produce informed repentance?

What caused the first wrongdoing within the cycle?

Can an impersonal moral law forgive?

Can karma remove guilt, or does it only continue consequences?

In John chapter 9, the disciples saw a man who had been blind from birth. They asked Jesus, “Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Jesus answered, “Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.”

Jesus did not teach that every present suffering could be explained by a particular personal sin.

We should also be careful not to accuse Hindu people of having no compassion because they believe in karma. Many Hindu people serve the poor, care for the suffering and show remarkable generosity. We are comparing explanations of suffering. We are not denying the compassion of individual people.

The Bible teaches that creation is fallen. Sin and death have entered the world. We cannot explain every tragedy. But God sees the sufferer. God hears the cry of the oppressed. Most importantly, God did not remain distant from our suffering.

Jesus Christ entered it.

He experienced hunger, grief, rejection, injustice, pain and death. Hebrews 4:15 says that we have a high priest who is “touched with the feeling of our infirmities.”

Karma leads naturally to samsara, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

Bhagavad Gita 2:22 uses the picture of someone setting aside worn clothing and putting on new clothing. In the same way, the embodied self is said to leave an old body and receive another.

The Hindu goal is not endless reincarnation. Rebirth is the problem from which moksha brings liberation.

The Bible gives a completely different account.

Hebrews 9:27 says, “And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.”

One earthly life.

One death.

Then judgment.

The Bible does not offer another earthly birth in which we may continue trying to repair ourselves.

But the Biblical message is not merely a warning about judgment. It is also the promise of resurrection.

Jesus said in John 5:28 and 29, “the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth.”

Resurrection is not a soul moving into another body. Resurrection means God raises the dead.

The person who died will stand before God. Personal identity is not an illusion. The body is not a meaningless prison to be discarded forever. God will redeem the whole person.

First Corinthians 15 calls Christ “the firstfruits of them that slept.” Because He rose bodily, those who belong to Him will also be raised.

Reincarnation says you must return because the problem continues.

Resurrection says Christ has conquered death.

The Christian hope is not that you will receive another life in which to keep trying. The Christian hope is that Jesus Christ can save you completely in this life and raise you to eternal life.

This difference becomes even clearer when we compare the Hindu avatar with the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The word avatar means a descent. It is most prominently associated with manifestations or descents of Vishnu, including Rama and Krishna.

Bhagavad Gita 4:7 and 8 describes the divine manifesting when dharma declines and unrighteousness rises, protecting the righteous, confronting evil and restoring dharma.

We should not say that every Hindu understands an avatar as a mere disguise. Some devotional traditions understand the avatar as a genuine divine descent.

But even the strongest understanding of an avatar differs from the incarnation of Jesus.

John 1:1 says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

John 1:3 says, “All things were made by him.”

Then John 1:14 says, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.”

The Creator entered His creation.

The eternal Word truly became man without ceasing to be God.

An avatar appears within recurring cycles. Jesus entered history once.

An avatar restores dharma. Jesus came to save sinners.

An avatar may destroy evildoers. Jesus gave Himself for His enemies.

An avatar does not necessarily provide an atoning sacrifice. First Peter 2:24 says that Jesus “bare our sins in his own body on the tree.”

Hebrews 9 says that Christ appeared once to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. He was once offered to bear the sins of many.

Once.

Not one manifestation in an endless cycle.

Not one divine teacher among many.

Not one possible path for one kind of person.

Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son who accomplished a once-for-all salvation.

A Hindu neighbor may call Jesus an avatar as a sign of respect. That person may sincerely believe the title honors Him. But if Jesus is placed beside other avatars, His own identity is denied.

Jesus did not come merely to restore moral balance. He came to bear our sins, defeat death and reconcile us to God.

We must now compare moksha with Biblical salvation.

Moksha means liberation from samsara and karmic bondage. Different Hindu traditions describe it differently. It may be realization of nonduality, freedom from ignorance, nearness to the supreme Lord, eternal devotional service or release from rebirth.

Hindu traditions also describe different disciplines or paths. Karma yoga emphasizes disciplined action. Jnana yoga emphasizes spiritual knowledge. Bhakti yoga emphasizes devotion. Other practices emphasize meditation and control of the mind and senses.

We should not falsely claim that every Hindu system teaches salvation through unaided human works. Some Vaishnava traditions speak strongly about surrender, divine mercy and grace.

But similar words do not necessarily describe the same salvation.

We must ask: Who grants grace? What problem does that grace solve? Is guilt forgiven? Has someone borne judgment? Is the saving work finished? Does the person continue through future births?

The grace of the Bible is grounded in the blood of Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:8 and 9 says, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Hebrews 10:14 says, “For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.”

Jesus does not improve our karma.

He forgives our sin.

He does not give us another opportunity to earn liberation.

He gives eternal life.

He does not show us how to discover that we were never truly separated from God.

He reconciles people who really were alienated from God because of sin.

Now we come to one of the most attractive claims in modern religious discussion. Perhaps all of these religions are simply different paths to the same destination.

Some Hindu interpretations say that different religions and divine forms are appropriate for different cultures, personalities and stages of spiritual development. Rig Veda 1.164.46 is frequently summarized with the idea that truth is one though sages speak of it in different ways. Bhagavad Gita 4:11 is also used to describe different approaches to the divine.

But not every Hindu tradition treats every religion as equally complete. Some devotional traditions strongly proclaim the supremacy of their chosen Lord. Bhagavad Gita 18:66 calls for surrender to Krishna alone.

Therefore, we should not pretend that every Hindu is a simple religious relativist.

But we must still test the larger claim.

Christianity and Hindu traditions disagree about whether ultimate reality is personal.

They disagree about whether God created the world as something distinct from Himself.

They disagree about whether the deepest human self is divine.

They disagree about whether our central problem is guilt or ignorance.

They disagree about whether people live once or repeatedly.

They disagree about whether salvation is resurrection or liberation from rebirth.

They disagree about whether Jesus is the only Savior or one manifestation among others.

These are not simply different descriptions of the same teaching. They are competing truth claims.

People sometimes say that all religions are different roads leading up the same mountain.

But different roads reach the same destination only if they actually lead there. A road does not arrive at the correct destination merely because the traveler is sincere.

The disagreement is even deeper than the road. The religions disagree about what the destination is.

One describes realizing identity with nondual reality. Another describes eternal personal service to a supreme deity. The Bible describes forgiven and resurrected people dwelling with their Creator in a renewed creation.

They cannot all be identical destinations.

Jesus said in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."

Acts 4:12 says, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”

First Timothy 2:5 says, “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

The exclusivity of Christ is not a declaration that Christians are better than Hindus.

Christians need the same Savior.

We are not saved because we were born into the right family, nation or culture. We are not saved because we attend church. We are not saved because we understand comparative religion.

We are saved by the mercy of God through Jesus Christ.

How, then, should a Christian speak with a Hindu neighbor?

Ask what that person actually believes.

Listen before answering.

Do not mock unfamiliar names.

Do not repeat claims that you have never verified.

Do not confuse Indian culture with Hindu doctrine.

Do not make winning an argument more important than loving a person.

But do not hide Jesus.

Explain who God is. Explain what sin is. Explain why death is followed by judgment. Explain what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Explain the resurrection.

Invite your neighbor to read the Gospel of John with you.

Truth does not require contempt. Love does not require compromise.

Perhaps you are listening today and you were raised Hindu.

Perhaps you were raised Christian.

Perhaps you have no religion at all.

Your background cannot save you.

You were created by God.

You are not God.

You have sinned against God.

You will live this earthly life once.

After death comes judgment.

Good works cannot erase guilt.

Religious devotion cannot pay for sin.

Jesus Christ is God manifested in the flesh.

He lived without sin.

He died in the place of sinners.

He was buried.

He rose bodily from the dead.

He offers forgiveness and eternal life.

Romans 10:9 says, "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."

Verse 13 says, "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Jesus is not asking you to become culturally American.

He is not asking you to deny that your family matters.

He is calling you to turn from every false god, every false hope and every effort to save yourself.

He is calling you to receive Him as Lord and Savior.

You may call upon Him now.

Tell Him that you know you are a sinner.

Tell Him that you cannot save yourself.

Tell Him that you believe Jesus died for your sins and rose from the dead.

Ask Him to forgive you and save you.

The prayer does not save you. Jesus saves you. Place your faith in Him.

If you have trusted Christ today or if you still have questions, please speak with me after the service. Come to the Pastor's Study. We will open the Bible together. We will help you understand salvation, baptism and what it means to follow Jesus.

Let us pray.

Father, thank You for speaking through Your Word. Thank You that You did not leave us searching through endless lives for a salvation we could never earn. Thank You for sending Your Son. Thank You that Jesus bore our sins, died in our place and rose from the grave. Draw every unsaved person to repentance and faith. Give us love for our Hindu neighbors. Forgive us for careless words and pride. Make us courageous enough to speak truth and gentle enough to listen. Help us proclaim that there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Before we leave, remember what this study requires from us.

Do not mock what you have not taken time to understand.

Do not confuse kindness with silence.

Do not confuse confidence with arrogance.

Learn to ask your Hindu neighbor what he or she actually believes. Listen carefully. Open your Bible. Then speak clearly about the personal Creator, the reality of sin, the certainty of judgment and the Savior who died and rose again.

Your Hindu neighbor is not your enemy. Your Hindu neighbor is a person made in the image of God and someone to whom Christ's invitation must be lovingly proclaimed.

We do not offer one more path, one more philosophy or one more technique for escaping suffering.

We proclaim Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

Please join us at the Reason Together Café. If you have questions, I will meet you in the Pastor's Study on the second floor.

Aloha Nui Loa.

How Does Hinduism Differ from the Bible?

A Biblical Commentary and Study Companion

Reason Together Church

Bring your questions. Open your Bible. Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Primary passages: Acts 17:22-31; John 1:1-18; Hebrews 9:24-28; John 14:6; Acts 4:12

Introduction: Truth Without Contempt

A Christian examination of Hinduism must begin with two commitments. We must tell the truth about Hindu teachings, and we must treat Hindu people with dignity. Misrepresentation is not faithfulness. Mockery is not courage. At the same time, respect does not require Christians to describe incompatible teachings as equally true.

Acts 17:22-31 supplies the proper model. Paul observed the Athenians' religious life, used language they understood and then proclaimed the Creator, repentance, judgment and resurrection. He neither ridiculed his hearers nor concealed the points at which their worship conflicted with God's revelation.

Hinduism as a Family of Traditions

Hinduism is an umbrella term covering numerous religious traditions, philosophies and devotional communities. Many Hindus prefer Sanatana Dharma, commonly rendered eternal dharma, eternal order or eternal way. Unlike Christianity, Hinduism has no single founder, universally binding creed or central institution that determines doctrine for everyone.

This diversity does not mean that individual Hindu traditions lack definite beliefs. A Vaishnava devoted to Krishna, a Shaiva devoted to Shiva and an Advaita philosopher may all identify as Hindu while giving different answers concerning God, the self and liberation.

Tradition	Common emphasis	Important qualification
Vaishnavism	Vishnu, Krishna or Rama	Contains several schools with different God-soul-world relationships.
Shaivism	Shiva as supreme	Includes devotional, dualist and nondualist forms.
Shaktism	The Goddess or divine power	The Goddess may be understood personally, cosmically or metaphysically.
Smartism	Several principal divine forms	Often associated with Advaita but not reducible to one practice.

Sacred Authority: Shruti and Smriti

Shruti means that which is heard and traditionally carries the highest authority. It includes the Vedas and their associated Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads. Smriti means that which is remembered and includes the Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Puranas and religious law literature.

The Bhagavad Gita is part of the Mahabharata and is technically Smriti, yet it possesses enormous devotional and philosophical authority. Its verses are interpreted through different schools. Christians should not assume that one translation or commentary represents every Hindu reading.

Who Is God?

Brahman is the principal Vedanta term for ultimate reality. It must not be confused with Brahma, a particular deity. Advaita gives final priority to attributeless nondual Brahman. Vishishtadvaita presents Brahman as the personal supreme Lord with perfect attributes. Dvaita identifies Vishnu as supreme and permanently distinct from souls and matter.

The Bible reveals the self-existent personal Creator. Genesis 1:1 distinguishes God from the world He creates. Exodus 3:14 reveals the One who simply is. Deuteronomy 6:4 declares one LORD. Acts 17:24-25 declares that God made the world and gives life to all.

The difference is not solved by translating Brahman as God. A concept of ultimate reality beyond personality and moral distinctions is not equivalent to the speaking, willing, holy and judging God of Scripture.

One God, Many Deities or Many Forms?

Hindu traditions cannot be classified by one simple label. Some are strongly theistic and devote themselves to one supreme Lord. Some recognize many devas while placing one above the rest. Some understand several divine forms as manifestations of one reality. Smartism commonly permits worship through several principal forms.

The Biblical issue is worship. Isaiah 43:10-11 denies any God before or after the LORD. Romans 1:25 condemns exchanging the Creator for creation. First Corinthians 8:4-6 distinguishes the many beings called gods from the one God, the Father, and one Lord Jesus Christ.

Who Are We? Atman and the Image of God

Atman refers to the self or deepest spiritual identity. Chandogya Upanishad 6.8.7 contains tat tvam asi, commonly rendered That thou art. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1.4.10 contains I am Brahman. Advaita interprets these statements as revealing the ultimate identity of atman and Brahman. Other schools preserve real distinction and dependence.

Genesis 1:26-27 teaches that humanity is made in God's image. Image does not mean identity of essence. Human beings possess dignity, moral responsibility and capacity for relationship with God while remaining creatures.

The indwelling Holy Ghost does not make believers divine. Romans 8:16 distinguishes God's Spirit from our spirit. Christian union with Christ is covenantal, relational and transformative, not an assertion that the human self is numerically identical with God.

School	Self and ultimate reality	Liberation
Advaita	Atman is ultimately identical with Brahman.	Knowledge removes ignorance and reveals nonduality.
Vishishtadvaita	Souls are real, distinct and dependent modes of the personal Brahman.	Devotion and grace lead to continuing communion and service.
Dvaita	God, souls and matter are permanently distinct.	The soul is liberated by devotion and grace but never becomes God.
KJV	Humans bear God's image but remain creatures.	God forgives, reconciles and raises believers through Christ.

What Is Wrong With Us?

Hindu traditions describe the human predicament through categories such as ignorance, attachment, desire, karma and samsara. In Advaita, ignorance includes mistaking limited individuality and plurality for ultimate reality. In devotional traditions, forgetfulness of or alienation from the supreme Lord may be emphasized.

The Bible recognizes ignorance and deception but identifies sin as the central problem. Romans 3:23 says that all have sinned. Sin is not simply lack of awareness. It is rebellion, false worship and violation of God's commands. Because the problem includes guilt, humanity needs more than instruction. Humanity needs atonement and forgiveness.

Karma and Suffering

Karma literally means action and commonly refers to the moral consequences of action. Within samsara, these consequences may shape future embodiments. This provides a moral explanation for unequal circumstances, but it raises questions about remembered responsibility, the origin of the cycle and the possibility of forgiveness.

Galatians 6:7 teaches sowing and reaping, but this is not reincarnation. Biblical accountability occurs before the personal God who knows every heart. God may forgive because Christ has satisfied justice.

John 9:1-3 prevents automatic blame. Jesus rejected the proposed explanation that a man's congenital blindness resulted from his sin or his parents' sin. Christians should neither attribute suffering to imagined previous lives nor assume every affliction reveals a particular personal offense.

Reincarnation and Resurrection

Bhagavad Gita 2:22 compares the embodied self's movement into another body with a person changing worn garments. The goal of Hindu spiritual life is generally not endless rebirth but liberation from this cycle.

Hebrews 9:27 teaches one death followed by judgment. John 5:28-29 teaches that the dead will hear Christ's voice and come forth. First Corinthians 15 connects the believer's future resurrection to Christ's bodily resurrection.

Resurrection preserves personal identity and affirms God's purpose for embodied creation. The body is not merely discarded through countless lives. God raises the person, defeats death and brings His people into a renewed creation.

Reincarnation	Biblical resurrection
Repeated embodiment within samsara	One earthly life followed by judgment
Karma shapes future births	God judges each person with perfect knowledge
Liberation ends the cycle	Christ raises and redeems the whole person
Another embodiment follows death	Death is defeated in resurrection and new creation

Moksha and Biblical Salvation

Moksha is liberation from samsara and karmic bondage. In Advaita it centers on knowledge of nondual reality. In personal devotional traditions it may involve eternal nearness, service or loving communion with the supreme deity. It must not be universally defined as absorption or annihilation of personality.

Biblical salvation addresses guilt and estrangement. It includes forgiveness, justification, reconciliation, adoption, sanctification, resurrection and eternal life. Ephesians 2:8-9 presents salvation as God's gift received through faith. Hebrews 10:14 anchors it in Christ's one offering.

Human Effort, Devotion and Grace

The Bhagavad Gita discusses disciplines of action, knowledge, devotion and meditation. Some Vaishnava schools emphasize surrender and divine grace. It is inaccurate to say that every Hindu believes liberation is achieved entirely by unaided works.

The necessary questions are what grace means, who gives it and what it accomplishes. Biblical grace does not merely reduce karmic consequences or assist spiritual realization. God justifies the ungodly through Christ's atoning blood. The believer receives salvation rather than completing it through future births.

Avatar and Incarnation

Avatar means descent and is especially associated with manifestations of Vishnu. Bhagavad Gita 4:7-8 describes manifestation when dharma declines. Some Vaishnava traditions understand the avatar as a genuine divine descent and should not be caricatured as teaching a mere costume or illusion.

John 1:1-14 identifies Jesus as the eternal Word through whom all things were made and who became flesh. Hebrews 9:26-28 emphasizes that He appeared once to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.

Jesus did not enter the world as one recurring intervention within an eternal cycle. He entered history once, bore sin once and rose bodily. Calling Him one avatar among others may sound honoring, but it denies His unique identity and finished work.

Avatar	Jesus Christ
A divine descent or manifestation	The eternal Word truly became flesh
Multiple appearances within recurring cycles	One unique incarnation in history
Often restores dharma	Saves sinners through atoning death
No necessary once-for-all sacrifice	Offered Himself once and rose bodily
One manifestation among others	Only begotten Son and only Savior

Many Paths and One Mediator

Rig Veda 1.164.46 and Bhagavad Gita 4:11 are often invoked in modern pluralistic explanations. Yet Hindu traditions themselves may rank paths and objects of worship. Bhagavad Gita 7:20-23, 9:23-25 and 18:66 do not present every devotion as identical in result.

Religious pluralism often claims that different traditions are culturally conditioned responses to one transcendent reality. This claim is not neutral. It revises the religions by placing them beneath a new theory that declares their contradictions secondary.

John 14:6, Acts 4:12 and 1 Timothy 2:5 identify one way, one saving name and one Mediator. This does not mean Christians are culturally superior. It means salvation is located in the person and work of Christ rather than human achievement or ancestry.

Yoga and Meditation

Yoga may refer to physical exercise, but classical Hindu yoga is a spiritual discipline directed toward control of the senses, mind and consciousness and ultimately toward liberation. The religious content of a modern class should be evaluated rather than assumed.

Christians should ask whether mantras, deities, spiritual energies or claims of union with ultimate reality are involved. A physical stretch is not automatically worship. A practice designed to invoke a deity or awaken divine self-realization is not religiously neutral.

Biblical meditation fills the mind with God's revealed Word. Joshua 1:8, Psalm 1 and Psalm 119 describe sustained attention to God's instruction.

Speaking With Hindu Neighbors

Begin with questions. Ask which deity, tradition, teacher or text influences the person. Do not assume philosophical sophistication or reduce someone to folk practice. Listen for the person's own understanding of God, karma, rebirth and Jesus.

Explain the gospel positively. The central message is not that Western culture is superior. The message is that the Creator has acted in Jesus Christ to forgive sin and conquer death. Conversion to Christ does not require becoming culturally American, though it does require turning from every object of worship that competes with the Lord Jesus.

Recognize that following Christ may carry family and community costs. Christian witness should include patient friendship, practical support, prayer and a welcoming church family.

Difficult Questions

Is Brahman another name for God? Not when the nature of ultimate reality is defined in ways that contradict Scripture. Names alone do not erase differences in personhood, creation, holiness and revelation.

Do Christians believe God is inside them? Believers are indwelt by the Holy Ghost, but the human person does not become God. Creator and creature remain distinct.

Does karma resemble sowing and reaping? Both affirm moral consequence, but Scripture does not connect reaping to previous earthly lives. Accountability belongs to the personal Judge and forgiveness rests upon atonement.

Can a Christian practice yoga? Physical movements are not automatically worship, but explicitly devotional, mantra-based or metaphysically Hindu practices should not be treated as neutral. Christians must examine what the practice means and does.

Why would one short life determine eternity? Judgment is not based on incomplete divine knowledge. God knows every thought and act. More time would not remove the sinful heart. Salvation is offered now through Christ's sufficient work.

Can a Hindu believe in Jesus? A person can admire Jesus while retaining a Hindu framework, but saving faith receives Him as He reveals Himself: Lord, Son of God, crucified Savior and risen King.

Reflection Questions

1. Why is the Creator-creature distinction essential to the gospel?
2. How does being made in God's image differ from being divine?
3. Why does guilt require more than enlightenment?
4. What makes resurrection better news than another earthly life?
5. How does the once-for-all work of Christ distinguish incarnation from avatar?
6. How can Christians reject pluralism without treating other people contemptuously?
7. What question would you ask a Hindu neighbor before explaining the gospel?

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