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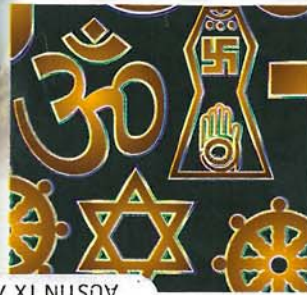
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HINDU VISHWA

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Are All Religions the Same?



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COVER STORY

Are All Religions the Same?

By Swami Nikhilanand

There is a statement many of us make which undermines efforts to preserve the authenticity of the teachings of Hinduism and pass that heritage on to future generations. We often say, "All religions are the same." Why do we say it? Sometimes it is out of caution. In other words, we don't want to offend anyone, and that is a safe fallback position. It is considered politically correct. Sometimes we say it out of ignorance. In other words, we find it difficult to grasp the intricacies of Hinduism so we fail to recognize the uniqueness and greatness of our own religion. If Hinduism were the same as all other religions then why would we care if our children convert to other religions? If Hinduism were the same as all other religions then why would we organize a conference to preserve the essential teachings of Hinduism and develop better ways of teaching it to our kids? If Hinduism were the same as all other religions then why would I, who was not raised Hindu, have chosen Hinduism over other religions? In this I am going to explain very briefly what it is that separates Hinduism from the other religions of the world.

To begin let's understand that there are religions in the world today which are considered atheistic, meaning they do not teach the existence of God. For the purpose of this write up we will leave such religions aside and focus on the theistic religions, those who accept the existence of God. First let's consider some commonalities amongst the theistic religions. One thing we can be sure of is that no matter what religion



someone belongs to, if they are worshipping God, then they are worshipping the same God. There cannot be two Gods. God is only one. There cannot be a separate Hindu God, a separate Christian God, a separate Muslim God, a separate Jewish God, etc. God is God and He is one and absolute. Our Vedas state, 'ekamevadvitiyam brahm nehanasti kinchan' एकमेवाद्वितीयम् ब्रह्म नेहान्नास्ति किंचन. In other words, "God is only one. He is singular and absolute. There can be no other." Shvetashvatar Upanishad states, 'eko devah sarvabhooteshu goodhah sarvavyapi



sarvabhootantaratma' 'एको देवः सर्वभूतेषु गूढः सर्वव्यापी सर्वभूतान्तरात्मा'. Meaning, "God is one. He resides in the heart of all the living beings. He is omnipresent. He is within your very soul." If there were more than one God, God would not be absolute or unlimited, because where one God starts, the other would have to stop. But God does not begin or end anywhere because He is unlimited, absolute and omnipresent. He is one. So whoever is worshiping God, anywhere in this universe, is worshiping the same God.

There are also certain general characteristics of God that could be agreed on by all the theistic religions. Everyone who believes in God could agree on certain basic facts. Such as, God is perfect. God is Divine. God is absolute, omnipresent, all-knowing, and all-powerful. God is Blissful. God is all-kind and perfectly Gracious. This is a good general description of God which all theistic religions accept.



This is also the maximum extent of the description which is available in other religions, but not in Hinduism. The Sanskrit scriptures of Hinduism reveal the knowledge of God on a much deeper level. This is both what makes Hinduism great and also what makes it more challenging to comprehend. Just like it is easy to learn what is taught in kindergarten, but it takes much more time, effort and commitment to learn what is taught in a post-graduate course; in the same way, the knowledge revealed in the teachings of Hinduism far exceeds this general knowledge which is the limit of other religions, thus it takes more time, effort and commitment to grasp the knowledge of Hinduism. It is also extremely important to have a qualified teacher from whom to learn such advanced knowledge. Anyone can teach finger-painting, but it takes someone with a PhD to teach



nuclear physics. Similarly, the knowledge of Hinduism is meant to be learned from someone with not only theoretical understanding, but with practical experience of God. Someone may complain that it is so easy for the members of other religions to summarize the teachings of their religion. Why is it so difficult in Hinduism? One should know that the more general and superficial the knowledge, the easier it is to summarize and communicate to others. In Hinduism, due to the depth, scope



and detail of the knowledge revealed, it takes much more skill and training to be able to understand it, distill it, and communicate it to someone else.



Let's have a glimpse of the amazing teachings of Hinduism. For example, the word 'God' is a general term we have assigned to the supreme Divine power. It is vague and non-specific, like the word 'fruit'. 'Fruit' is abstract, because fruit does not exist as such. Bananas exist; apples exist; mangoes exist. You cannot eat fruit. You can eat a banana, an apple, or a mango. If I ask you to bring me fruit, you cannot, because fruit is just an abstract term. You can bring me a banana, an apple, or a mango, because these specific fruits actually exist. If I ask you to describe what

fruit looks like, you cannot because fruit is a general term. You could describe the appearance of a specific fruit. Similarly, the description of God in other religions is non-specific and general. What does God look like? You cannot tell me, because God is just an abstract term. However, in Hinduism we have the specific description of God's form and personal names. He is Krishn, He is Ram, He is Vishnu, He is Shiv, She is Durga, etc. We know what He looks like, and we know what His Divine personality is like. We even know happenings from His appearance on our earth planet.

This is just one example of what makes Hinduism unique. There are many more, but just focus on what Hinduism says about God's form. I will take you deeper into this topic with the help of a shlok by Ved Vyas from the Bhagwatam: 'vadanti tat tattva vidastattvam yajgyanamadvayam; brahmeti parmatmeti bhagwan iti shabdyate' 'वदन्ति तत् तत्त्व विदास्तात्त्वं यज्यनामाद्वायामः ब्रह्मेति परमात्मेति भगवन् इति शब्दत्वे'. This verse explains that one absolute supreme God appears eternally in 3 main forms: brahm, parmatma, and bhagwan. The Supreme God has uncountable Divine powers. When almost all of them are dormant or inactive, then God is formless and is referred to by the term brahm. This formless aspect is inactive and does not outwardly exhibit any describable characteristics because all the powers are dormant. When more of His powers are active, God has form, and is referred to by the term parmatma. This is almighty God whose 3 main forms are Vishnu, Shiv and Durga. Because His powers are active, He has a form, which can be experienced by one who has Divine senses and mind (a God realized Saint). In this almighty form, God is actively involved in the maintenance and functioning of the universe. He Graces the souls by keeping track of their karmas and giving them the consequences, and by awarding any soul who surrenders to Him His Divine Bliss and knowledge. There are many affiliated forms, such as Lakshmi, Saraswati, Ganesh, Kartikeya, Kali, Gauri, etc., but They are all related to the Divine almighty power. There is one important power which is not manifest in almighty God. That is the power of Divine love, or prema shakti. When all of God's powers are manifested, it includes the power of Divine love. When this is the case, God appears in His loving form and is referred to by the term bhagwan. In this form, God awards an intimate relationship with Him to the

soul who surrenders to Him. The form of bhagwan is Ram and Krishn. In Ram, the Divine love power is manifested in its modest form, and in Krishn, the Divine love power is manifested in its absolute supreme form. This is evidenced by the type of leelas (Divine actions) They each performed while They were on the earth planet.

One should not think that there are different Gods or that God changes from one form to the other. One supreme God appears eternally in uncountable forms, which are all simultaneously omnipresent. This is how God appears to a surrendered soul anywhere in the world in the form that individual has worshiped, and that soul becomes a Saint and sees the whole world as the form of his worshiped form of God. Thus Krishn says in the Gita, 'ye yatha mam prapadyante tanstathaiva bhajamyaham' 'ये यथा माम प्रपद्यन्ते ताम स्थतैव भजाम्यहम्' other words, "I come to you in whatever form you worship Me." All the forms of God are Divine, whole, and absolute. That is the miracle of the Divine power that makes the impossible possible, and it is the reason that such matters are beyond human intellect until such time when a soul surrenders to God and receives a Divine intellect.

Thus we see that one single God, which is described in general in other religions, is described in much more detail in Hinduism. We understand that one single God has 6 main forms: two are loving (Ram and Krishn) and are referred to as bhagwan; three are almighty (Vishnu, Shiv and Durga), and are referred to as parmatma; and one is formless and is referred to as brahm. So we see that Hinduism not only incorporates the concepts of God of other religions but also reconciles the apparent differences in the various descriptions, all the while providing an unmatched depth and elegance in the description of God.

One other distinguishing feature of Hindu philosophy is that it says God can be experienced, and in fact, that is the ultimate goal of a soul. This was one of the most compelling factors for me in my decision to adopt Hinduism. Not only does Hinduism answer all of my intellectual questions, but it clearly states that you can meet God in person. Now who wouldn't want to do that? However, if you don't have the full description of God, then how will you find Him? It would be like someone coming from India and landing at JFK in New York and asking the people he sees, "Have you seen my friend? Where is my friend? I want to meet him." They would ask him, "What does your friend look like?"

Do you have a picture of him? What is his name? Where does he live?" The man answers that he only knows that his friend moved to America 20 years ago, but he does not remember what he looks like, nor does he have a picture of him, nor can he remember his name, nor does he know what his address is. The people he approaches will consider him insane, because he may search all over America for his whole life and never have any chance of finding his friend. Similarly, without a proper description of God, how could we hope to find Him? Hinduism provides such a detailed description of God which is like providing the photograph and the address of the man's friend. Now all the man has to do is follow the path to reach his friend. This path, known as the path of God realization, is also described in Hinduism.

There are many more such points which illustrate the greatness of Hinduism. So remember, although there are similarities between Hinduism and the other religions of the world, and as Hindus we respect all religions, nonetheless, there are features of Hinduism which are not found in other religions and which make Hinduism great. If you would like to study this topic

in greater depth, I can refer you to a resource which has transformed my understanding. It is a book by H.D. Swami Prakashanand Saraswati named *The True History and the Religion of India*, which is available at www.RadhaMadhavDham.org. ■

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the eternal knowledge of the Upanishads
(Vedas), the Gita and the Bhagwatam, etc. and
to impart the practical process of divine
upliftment called 'raganuga bhakti' or 'divine
love consciousness.'*