



STATEMENT DH-122

EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM

Witnessing to Hindus (Part One: Background)

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Of the 760-800 million Hindus in the world, approximately one million reside in the United States. In Part Two of this article, we will offer specific pointers on witnessing to Hindus. But first it is important for readers to have some understanding of the historical and philosophical background of Hinduism, and that is what this installment will provide.

The origins of Hinduism can be traced back to the polytheistic and ritualistic religions that began around 1500 B.C. in India's Indus Valley. At first, the rituals were so simple that fathers could perform them. As the centuries passed, however, they became increasingly complex. This made it necessary to create a class of priests specially trained to perform the intricate rituals correctly, because the consequences for incorrectly performing a ritual were considered costly. During this time, the Hindu scriptures known as the Vedas were written to instruct the priests in how to conduct the rituals.

Because of how exclusive the priests became in appeasing the gods, they gained a power over the people that became unbearable. Around 600 B.C., the people revolted, and the form of Hinduism that emerged was more mystically oriented, focusing on the individual rather than the priest.

Between 800 and 300 B.C. the Upanishads were written. They expound on the idea that behind the many gods stands one Reality, called Brahman — an impersonal, monistic (“all is one”) force. The highest form of Brahman is *nirguna* (“without attributes or qualities”).

The Hindu concept of God continued to develop even after the Upanishads were written. Nirguna Brahman became *saguna* Brahman, which is Brahman “with attributes,” and is called *Ishvara*.

According to Hindu tradition, *Ishvara* became known to humanity through the *Trimurti* (“three manifestations”) of Brahman. Those manifestations include *Brahma* (the Creator), *Vishnu* (the Preserver), and *Shiva* (the Destroyer). *Ishvara* became personified even further through the ten mythical incarnations, or *avatars*, of Vishnu in the forms of both animals and persons. Beyond the principal deities of the Trimurti, it is estimated that there are 330 million other gods in Hinduism (Halverson, 87-89).

Hinduism is amazing in its diversity and in its ability to absorb such a diversity into one belief system. Such diversity can cause interesting situations, such as when that religion is transported to another country like the United States. For example, it was reported in *Hinduism Today*, “In Nashville, Hindus building a temple sent out a ballot to decide which would be the central Deity, since there [were] worshipers of Kali, Krishna and Shiva in their area. It was democratically voted to choose Lord Ganesha” (Melwani).

One of the ways in which Hinduism is divided is according to their varied views on how the universe is related to ultimate reality (Brahman). The nondualists (*advaita*) see Brahman alone as being real and the world as illusory (*maya*). The qualified nondualists (*vishishtadvaita*) affirm the reality of both Brahman and the universe in that the universe is extended from the Being of Brahman. And the dualists (*dvaita*) see Brahman and the universe as being two distinct realities.

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While Hinduism is certainly diverse, most Hindus hold to the following beliefs:

1. **The Impersonal Nature of Brahman.** Hindus see ultimate reality, Brahman, as being an impersonal oneness that is beyond all distinctions, including personal and moral distinctions.
2. **The Brahman-Atman Unity.** Hindus believe they are, in their true selves (*atman*), extended from, and one with, Brahman. Just as the air inside an open jar is identical to the air surrounding that jar, so our essence is identical to that of the essence of Brahman.
3. **The Problem Is Ignorance.** Humanity's primary problem is that we are ignorant of our divine nature. We have forgotten that we are extended from Brahman, and we have mistakenly attached ourselves to the desires of our separate selves, or egos, and thereby to the consequences of their resultant actions as determined by the law of *karma* (cause and effect).
4. **Samsara (Reincarnation).** *Samsara* refers to the ever-revolving wheel of life, death, and rebirth. Through the law of karma we are reaping in this lifetime the consequences of the actions we committed in previous lifetimes. A person's karma determines the kind of body — ranging from human to insect — into which he or she will be reincarnated in the next lifetime.
5. **Moksha (Liberation).** The solution to the problem of attachment and karma is moksha — to be liberated from the wheel of life, death, and rebirth. This can only occur when we truly realize that our separate self is actually an illusion and that only the undifferentiated oneness of Brahman is real. We must therefore strive to detach ourselves from the desires and actions of our ego in order to attain true enlightenment.

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