



STATEMENT DH123

Witnessing to Hindus (Part Two: Specific Suggestions)

American Christians who take the Great Commission seriously cannot afford to ignore Hinduism. Not only are one million of its roughly eight million adherents living in the United States, but the beliefs and practices of Hinduism (e.g., pantheism, reincarnation, and yoga) have deeply penetrated Western culture. In Part One we provided necessary background information for understanding Hindus. Now we offer six specific suggestions that will help facilitate meaningful dialogue with them.

1. Ask and Listen. Hinduism is a vastly diverse religion in which adherents share similar beliefs but do not have a common doctrinal creed. As such, it is in some respects a tolerant religion, allowing some latitude for individual Hindus to choose their own set of beliefs.

Don't assume, therefore, that you know what your Hindu friend believes. Ask questions about his or her beliefs concerning God, man, sin, and salvation, and listen carefully to the answers. Listen closely to the way your Hindu friend describes the way to enlightenment. He or she might use words such as "achieve," "attain," "overcome," and "strive." Such expressions are significant because they reveal how enlightenment — the Hindu equivalent of salvation — is based on human effort, and not on God's grace. After your friend has used such words, you might discuss passages such as Romans 3:19-24 and Ephesians 2:8-9, which speak of the futility of attempting to earn one's salvation and of how salvation is a gift from God to be received by faith.

2. Be Aware of Differing Definitions. Be aware of biblical terminology or concepts Hindus might misunderstand. For example, Hindus understand being "born again" as referring to reincarnation, a bondage from which they are striving to be liberated. In Christian terminology, however, being "born again" means to be made new or to be regenerated by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. It is something to be desired.

3. Offer Jesus' Forgiveness. Bakht Singh, a convert from Hinduism and an Indian evangelist, once said, "I have never yet failed to get a hearing if I talk to [Hindus] about forgiveness of sins and peace and rest in your heart" (Hesselgrave, 169). Forgiveness is certainly a need for Hindus because it is not available in their karma-based belief system. The law of karma is like a law of nature — every cause has its effect and there is no place for mercy. The fact that forgiveness is not available in Hinduism troubles many Hindus, for they are aware that the actions that bind them to this illusory realm keep accumulating, and the prospect of escape is hopelessly remote.

One biblical passage that is good to use is Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." The people that Jesus had in mind when He spoke these words were those who felt burdened by the impossibility of attaining salvation through their own efforts.

4. Keep God's Personal Nature in Mind. When discussing your beliefs and those of your Hindu friend, always keep God's personal nature in mind. Here are three examples that show how this is relevant.

First, the image of a personal God will help you find ways to communicate the Christian perspective on spiritual issues. Consider, for instance, illustrating the various aspects of sin through the image of a personal God:

- What is the meaning of sin? Sin is the breaking of a moral law: ultimately it is rejecting and rebelling against a personal God. Why? Because only persons — not impersonal forces such as *Brahman* — are able to make moral distinctions. Only a God who is by nature personal is sufficient to sustain the foundation necessary for moral law to have validity.
- What are the consequences of sin? Even on the human level, we are aware that sin breaks relationships.

- How can sin be resolved? Through confession and forgiveness. Forgiveness is possible only in the context of God being personal, for only persons are capable of forgiving. Brahman, an impersonal oneness, is incapable of forgiving.

Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, where the son turned his back on his father and severed their relationship (Luke 15:11 -32), is an excellent illustration of the personal nature of God. Furthermore, this parable is certainly useful in explaining the meaning of sin and forgiveness to Hindus.

Second, the fact that God is personal has implications for the destiny of the individual after death. To "know" the impersonal *Brahman* of Hinduism is to merge into the oneness of Brahman and to lose one's identity as a distinct and separate individual. There is a drive within each of us, however, that makes us want to cling to our existence as personal beings with all our might. Is your Hindu friend really willing to stand by his or her belief that such a drive is nothing more than the ignorance of our separatistic egos? Moreover, is it not true that we are most fulfilled as persons when we are in a friendship or love relationship? Since that is where we are most fulfilled, think of how much greater our fulfillment is when we are in fellowship with a personal, holy, and loving God! Such a fulfilling relationship is precisely what the God of the Bible offers, and it's a relationship that will last for eternity (see John 14:2-3; 17:3; Rev. 21:3).

In the parable of the prodigal son, the father longed to be reunited with his son in the same way that God longs to be in a relationship with us. Ask your Hindu friend, "How does it make you feel when you know that someone – a father, a mother, a spouse – longs to be in a relationship with you?" Then ask, "Is your concept of God able to sustain such a love?"

Third, probably the most common Hindu objection to Christianity concerns the Christian belief that there is only one way to God. Hindus believe that each person can choose whatever way is best suited for him or her. Why is that? Because most Hindus see Ultimate Reality – Brahman – as being an undifferentiated oneness. If such a view of God were true, then it would follow that there are many ways to God, because God would be an underlying force, then sin is nothing more than a matter of ignorance; it carries no real consequences with respect to our relationship with God, for it would not be possible for us to sever our connection to such a source.

By way of a response, if God is by nature personal, then the issues of knowing God are different from those of "knowing" an impersonal, indifferenced force. With a personal God, the issues are similar to those of relating to a friend, a parent, or a spouse. Such relationships involve issues of morality and trust. If the morality and trust that underlie any relationship are broken, then that relationship will be broken. Sexual infidelity, for example, will break a marriage relationship. The implication of such a truth is that sin carries real consequences. It breaks our relationship with God.

If our primary problem is that we have broken our relationship with the Person of God, we can understand why there is only one way to God. Consider this question: How many ways are there to restore a relationship that you are responsible for having broken?

There is only one way, and it involves confessing your guilt and receiving forgiveness. Salvation is a matter of reconciliation, and this reconciliation was historically made: possible through the death of Christ on the cross (2 Cor. 5:18-19; Eph 2:12-16). It is the restoration of a previously broken relationship.

5. The Objection That "Jesus Christ Is Not Unique." The Hindus see their gods and *avatars* (incarnations) as manifestations of the impersonal Brahman. These manifestations come through *Vishnu*, the preserver deity. Hindus view Jesus as merely one of a number of avatars. Your Hindu friend might be willing to incorporate Jesus into his or her pantheon, but would not be willing to accept Jesus as the exclusive incarnation of God.

Is the incarnation of Jesus really the same as Vishnu's incarnations? Consider the differences:

Vishnu	Jesus
At least ten incarnations (some claim more) in both animal and human form.	The only incarnation of the Son of God in human form.
While the stories of the avatars, or incarnations, of Vishnu might have some remote historical basis, their historicity is not essential. They are primarily mythical in nature. Even if it were shown that there is absolutely no historical truth to the stories, it would have no effect on their meaning and influence.	The historicity of Jesus' life is extremely important to the veracity of Jesus' claims and to the salvation that He accomplished on our behalf (1 Cor. 15:14, 17; 1 John 1:1-3). If Christ did not actually live, die, and rise from the dead, then Christianity is built on a lie and the gospel is without foundation.

Vishnu

One of the purposes of Vishnu's incarnations was "for destruction of evil-doers" (*Bhagavad Gita* 4:8; Edgerton, 23)

The avatars pointed to a way by which we can attain enlightenment over a period of many lifetimes: "But *striving zealously, with sins cleansed, the disciplined man, perfected through many rebirths*, then [finally] goes to the highest goal" (*Bhagavad Gita* 6:45; Edgerton, 37, emphasis added).

Vishnu incarnates periodically as an avatar when the need arises, and then the avatar dies and is reabsorbed back into Brahman. Hinduism makes no claims concerning the bodily resurrection of the avatars.

Jesus

The purpose of Jesus' incarnation was "to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10). "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17; see also John 10:10).

Jesus pointed to Himself as *the way* by which to receive eternal life immediately (John 6:29, 40; 10:9-10; 14:6; 11:25-26).

Jesus' incarnation was a unique event. His sacrifice was "once for all" (Heb. 9:26); He died and rose from the dead; and His individual identity is maintained before, as well as after, the Incarnation.

If the objection to Jesus uniqueness comes up, encourage your Hindu friend to read through the Gospel of John and to judge the issue for himself or herself. Remind your friend that even Gandhi said, "I shall say to the Hindus that your lives will be incomplete unless you reverently study the teachings of Jesus" (Hingorani, 23).

6. The Inclusiveness of Jesus. While you want the Hindu to see how Jesus is unique, you will also want to share how Jesus Christ is *inclusive* toward others. Point out that:

- Christ beckons "*all* you who are weary and burdened" to come to Him (Matt. 11:28, emphasis added).
- The inclusive Christ *associated with the most unlikely of people, even the social outcast* (Luke 19:1-10) *and the sinner* (Luke 15:1-7).

The gospel of Jesus Christ is intended for the *whole* world. As John wrote: "I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, *from every nation, tribe, people, and language*, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:9, emphasis added). Such an all-embracing Christ will naturally appeal to the Hindu (Sudhakar, 3). — *Dean C. Halverson and Natun Bhattacharya*

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