

# Question & Answer Session on Hinduism and Hindu Beliefs

## [Saint John's Episcopal Church](#), Tallahassee, FL 32301 | Father Lee Graham's Class on World Religions and

Private Church Interfaith Gathering Scheduled for Sat, Nov 1, 2009

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Questions from the Group and answers from Thayumanasamy Somasundaram

### ***Introduction***

I would like to take this opportunity first to thank Father Lee Graham for asking me to come and talk with you. I have enjoyed speaking and discussing with him during the last few weeks since I have known him. Secondly, I want to thank all of you for being open and welcoming me to be with you to discuss my faith. Opportunities like these can allow all of us to understand each other better and make us good neighbors.

I came to the US almost two decades ago and to Tallahassee almost 15 years ago. Now my family and I call Tallahassee our home. We visit India once in 18 months since all our extended families still live in India. We want to keep our connections to India active so that we keep both perspectives of these two great cultures.

At the outset I want to clarify few points:

- I am neither a priest, preacher, yogi, nor claiming to be one
- I have not read or know many of the sacred texts of Hinduism
- I am an ordinary practitioner of the Hindu faith
- There are almost 900 million Hindus and hence there many perspectives of the faith
- What I am going to say is based mostly on my own family's tradition and my own reading and interpretation of limited literature
- The errors I make or my own and does not reflect views held by others

With that said I will start with few general points about Hinduism:

- It does not have single founder or founders
- There are no organized Sunday schools or sermons at temples, except for festival or special speeches by scholars and yogis

- There is no corporate worship except during religious festivals
- Worship is done individually or as a family but nothing larger than this unit
- There is no one accepted authority of Hinduism
- Due to the enormous diversity of people, cultures, and customs that is dictated by the geography, history, and literacy of India there are literally multitudes of practices and views

## Belief

- **How does one become a Hindu? Any personal decision or ritual acts are involved?**

Hindus do not believe in proselytizing but there are no rules against one becoming a Hindu. It has been happening for a long time but unnoticeable due to the small numbers. A Hindu is one who lives a life prescribed by certain teachings and principle that include:

1. Belief in God
2. The body and soul are two separate entities
3. *Karma* and reincarnation
4. Belief in liberation or *moksha*
5. Belief in worshipping at home or in temples
6. Belief in non-violence (*ahimsa*)
7. Belief in purity of body and mind
8. Belief that one day they will attain the highest level of knowledge and become one with god.

However, in certain parts of India, non-Hindus may not be welcome in places of worship even though they are tolerated.

**Any personal decision or ritual acts are involved?** In some classes, for example priests, merchants, and princes, there is thread ceremony when boys are initiated and is done between 5 and 18 years.

- **Is there a set of rituals, commandments or expectations for Hindus?**

Hinduism was fraught with several rituals and ceremonies that didn't reflect original intent of great sages and so during the last several hundred years religious scholars like Swami Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Ram Mohan Roy, and Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan have fought against the rituals and currently there are far less than it used to be. However, the following rituals are followed

1. Birth
2. Naming
3. Head shaving (mostly for boys)
4. Ear piercing
5. Going to school
6. Coming of age (primarily for girls)
7. Marriage
8. Death

- **Are there Holy Writings in Hinduism?**

There are several Hindu sacred texts. The important ones are *Vedas (Rig, Yajur, Sama, and Adarvana)*, *Gita*, and *Tevaram* (12 sacred books of *Shivites*) and *Divya Prabhandam (Vaishnavites)*.

- **How does belief in reincarnation affect your living?**

Hindus strongly believe in reincarnation. It is one of the main guiding principles in their lives. This gives them a perspective about the great saying "reap what you sow" Bible Galatians

6:7. This belief reinforces the point that when you live follow a good way of life so that you will be rewarded by being born into a higher level during the next generation.

- **What is *Karma*? And what is *Atman*?**

*Karma* literally means action but here it refers to cause and effect. For every action we undertake there is a reaction if not immediately but eventually. People sometimes confuse it with fate, but karma is based on one's own action and not something that is imposed on by God or other supernatural being. This answer is tied to the one we just addressed.

*Atman* is the soul. **And what is *Atman*?** Hindus believe that human body and soul are two distinct entities. Body is only place holder for the soul (*atman*) and therefore less important and what resides inside is the *atman* and that is the important thing.

- **Why was man created? What is he expected to do?**

Man, according to *Vedas* was created by God by sacrificing a primordial *purusha* in **fire** and created with  $\frac{1}{4}$  of existence in the Earth and  $\frac{3}{4}$  in the heavens. When this man was divided up they became Moon, Sun, Fire and wind. God then present in the Man as *Shiva* divided the body and into two with one becoming the man and the other becoming woman.

Arthanareerswarar.

- **What is the relationship between Brahman, Shiva, Vishnu or Krishna?**

They are intertwined and several manifestations of one Supreme Being. God in the manifestation of *Brahma* acts as the creator; and in his manifestation of *Vishnu* acts as the Preserver, and *Shiva* acts as the Destroyer. *Brahman* is the ultimate being with no beginning and no end. Once again this view is tied to the circular view of the world, time, and birth and rebirth.

- **Are there fasting periods in Hinduism? Are there religious festivals in Hinduism?**

There are times when men and women fast. Usually women adhere to these more often than men. Sometimes men do it on special occasions. Men are required to stay virtuous by not eating meat, bathe and worship every day at dawn and dusk, stay away from alcohol, tobacco, and women.

**Are there religious festivals in Hinduism?** Yes, there are many. The famous ones are *Pongal* (Jan), *Holi* (Mar), *Shiva Rathri* (*Neela Kandhan*), *Nava Rathri* (*Durga*, *Lakshmi* and *Saraswathi*; Sep|Oct), *Ganesh Chathurthi* (Aug), *Gokulashtami* (Birth of *Krishna*; Aug|Sep), *Raksha Bandhan* (Jul), and *Diwali* (Oct|Nov).

- **Was *Vishnu*, *Krishna* or *Shiva* a historical person?**

There is no concrete evidence so far to indicate that such a person or persons ever existed.

- **Are there any civic responsibilities in Hinduism?**

Hindu *dharma* prescribes certain responsibilities.

1. Restraints: Non-violence, Truthfulness, non-stealing, virtuous conduct, patience, hard work, compassion, honesty, proper eating, and purity
2. Do: Remorse, contentment, giving, faith, prayer, learning, knowledge, follow through promises, recitation, and austerity
3. Hindus are expected to worship God
4. Celebrate Hindu festivals and at home and preferably at the temple

5. Pilgrimage to Holy places
6. Performing of rites: birth, naming, feeding, ear-piercing, head shaving, and learning, coming of age, marriage and death.

- **Why are cows sacred? How does it get expressed outside India?**

Cows are respected and treated well. It is a humble animal that eats grass, drinks water but provides plenty to everyone. It is considered to be life and sustenance of life. It is considered very bad to eat beef or that matter any meat. We will cover that separately.

- **What is the connection between Hindu faith with**

1. **The caste system**

The caste system has two components one is called *varna* (workers, merchants, rulers and priests) and second is *jati* (classification of what one does). Hindus are NOT proud of the vestige from olden time. Spiritual leaders like Vivekananda and leaders like Gandhi preached against the caste system and discrimination against non-touchable. Now wealth equalization is slowly replacing the caste system but it will take a **long** time before the caste system is completely eliminated.

2. **Government**

The Government role has been both positive and negative. They have passed laws in banning discrimination based on caste system. While at the same time gave broad protections and quotas for lower class people in education, scholarship, and jobs. Unfortunately the laws that were passed specifically to protect the lower class ended up keeping the class separate. Politicians are after all people who want to get reelected and first needed the upper class for money and help but now realize the strength in masses. So it has been see-saw change.

3. **Other religions**

As we know that practices of Christians in Africa, Asia and Latin America are not exactly the same the other religious groups have indirectly kept the caste system intact.

4. **Social life**

As we discussed separately the social life is generally not affected by the caste system. It is very common to see that people of different caste work together, eat together, play together, and worship together without any problems. The main segregation comes at home and marriage.

## *The Temple*

- **Statues: Are they Gods, symbols, or idols?**

The idols, Gods, Goddess come to signify a way for us to focus ourselves to the almighty. Another way to look at it that Hindus see God in everything including animals such cows, monkeys, and peacocks. Another way to think about is the idols are instrument through which Hindus communicate with God.

- **Are singing, chanting, and music part of worship?**

Yes. Listening to music, playing of hymns, and chanting of mantras are very common and are part and parcel of worship. But as noted before it is usually done individually and only rarely done in groups as you see here gospel singing.

- **When does worship in the temple take place?**

Hindus consider early morning and late evening as the best time worship God. Many temples will completely be closed between midday until early evening. During festival seasons, people go the temples on early mornings. Occasionally festivals are celebrated during the nights but mostly the temples close by 9 PM in the night. Hindus consider Friday as the most auspicious day. Please sometimes fast on Tuesday and Fridays.

- **Does corporate worship take place in temple?**

Worship is usually done individually or as a family unit. Occasionally during big festivals large crowds come together to worship.

- **Why does one go to temple?**

Hindu *dharma* prescribes that one of the important duties of Hindus is to go to the temples for worship. Most towns and villages are formed with temple at the center with good drinking water and fertile fields surrounding it. Families instill in children that they and adults should go to temples at least once a week or once a month.

- **What does the priest do in worship?**

Usually the priest chants the prayers for the devotees. Many Hindus are not well versed in all prayers and they are neither taught at schools or Sunday schools. Traditionally priests (who were always upper class, Brahmins) were brought up with reading of scriptures and practice of rituals and rites. Slowly there is a change underway where ordinary people are encouraged to be priests and worship and chant the prayers in their own languages rather than in Sanskrit (which like Latin is difficult to learn and is rarely used as a spoken language). Some parts of India even women (even during menstrual times) are encouraged to visit the temples and be priests. But women priests are rare despite the fact they are NOT forbidden.

- **In India:**

- **1) Who builds temples?**

Traditionally they have been built by kings and queens. They have been the main benefactors for a long time. They bequeathed the land to the temple and allowed the trustees to maintain and manage the books. But now it is now done collectively by people or groups.

- **2) Who is allowed to enter the temple?**

In principle, everyone is allowed to enter a temple. There are usually no guards except during festival times to regulate the crowds. But in some orthodox temples non-Hindus will be prohibited to enter. There is no law banning other people.

- **3) Pre-requisites for entering the temple?**

Should be pure (clean, and neatly dressed), remove your shoes, hats and gloves. Encouraged to bring flowers, fruits, incense sticks, coconuts or other offerings. Wear religious symbols like *pottu*, *vebuti*, or sandal wood paste. Except for the first none of above is required.

- **How is the priest trained?**

There are schools in various parts of India where they go and study. *Guru/Shishiya* (teacher/pupil) system is very much in vogue at these places. They then become apprentices and go on to become independent priests.

- **How is he supported?**

The temple pays them a monthly salary. They are also supported by gifts left by the devotees.

- **What authority does the priest have?**

Not very much except for the fact they only can perform the *pooja* and reach near the idols. Some places they have lot more control.

## *Personal Practice*

- **How do you teach your faith to children?**

Usually when goes to the temple or during holy periods parents explain why they should pray and what is expected of them. Elders usually tell stories about great epics of *Ramanyanam, Shiva puranam, Mahabharatham*, adventures of *Murugan, Ganesh, and Kali* etc. Recently picture books and movies have filled the void.

- **Is there any act or rite by which they accept the faith?**

As far as I know there is nothing equivalent to Baptism. But please refer to sacred thread ceremony we discussed earlier.

- **How do you describe Brahman?**

*Brahman* and *Ishvara* are two concepts of impersonal and personal Gods. It is rare that most Hindus discuss about *Brahman* but they usually talk about their favorite God/Goddess.

- **How is your faith expressed in your family life? And personal life?**

We begin most of the important duties by first praying to God's blessings. We try to avoid doing certain duties during prohibited times of the day. We routinely pray to God and visit temples whenever possible. Teach our children about *karma/dharma* by giving examples of good deeds and bad deeds.

- **Describe Home Worship Center**

It is usually a room or closet where pictures/idols are kept. We keep the place clean and decorate with flowers (old ones are thrown out but never stepped upon). There is usually small lamp or light kept on (if oil-lamp it is lit in the evening and put out in the night). Shoes are not allowed we don't do any decoration unless bathed; women who are menstruating don't go near the place or keep the doors closed during their periods.

- **What problems do you have in practicing Hinduism in Tallahassee? As a minority Group?**

None or minimal, we never personally been threatened for practicing Hindu religion in the USA. People have experienced more problems being immigrants than Hindus.

- **Are there are threats to your religion in India? Or in the USA?**

In general no, but just after 9/11 people who wear turbans (people of Sikh faith had encountered problems since some were mistaken to be radical Muslims from Afghanistan rather than from India). Hindus in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have experienced lots of problems.

## *Indian-Hindu Culture*

- **Are there are different forms of Hinduism?**

No. But one has to be careful with people who preach and try to influence people I am personally skeptical of organized people who travel to rich countries and try to preach Hinduism. What is needed is for those to go to impoverished countries and do services.

- **Is cremation a necessary practice of Hinduism?**

Yes. Hindus don't attach much significance to the body anyway. In Vedas it is referred to as people remove worn clothes to put on new clothes atman moves from one body to another. Rarely very small children are buried.

- **Is suttee still or ever practiced in India?**

Hopefully this disgraceful thing is no longer practiced. Raja Ram Mohan Rai fought against it during late 19<sup>th</sup> century. But another curse called dowry still exists and need to be rooted out. But it is hard to accomplish since it is has become a pride issue.

- **What is the relationship of people of different castes?**

We discussed this earlier.

- **Is the caste system changing in India? How?**

We discussed this earlier.