

**Christians at the Roundtable of World Religions:
“What Can Christians Learn from Hindus?”**

Ephesians 2:1-10

Dr. J. Howard Olds

January 29, 2006

When I announced this series of sermons on World Religions, I quickly realized that I knew little, if anything, about the great religions of the world. These Sunday deadlines have pushed me into extensive research. I've read books, listened to tapes, and interviewed anybody I could find who could enlighten me. One of my interviews was with Bob Waldschmidt, a member of this congregation who has studied comparative religions extensively in his own search for faith. Bob came to my office with a wealth of knowledge and a sack of books. "Here is one book you desperately need," said Bob. "Its title is The Complete Idiot's Guide to World Religions." I have used this book. And especially when I approach Hinduism, the world's oldest religion, I feel like a complete idiot. Nevertheless, here we go. What can Christians learn from Hindus?

THE NATURE OF GOD

Imagine an idiot like me having a conversation with a Hindu guru. I ask, "Is your religion monotheistic or polytheistic? Do you have many gods or one God?" The guru thoughtfully replies, "Yes." "Is your God transcendent or immanent? Is God up there or down here?" I ask. He replies, "Certainly." Feeling ill at ease now, I push a step further. "You refer to God as Brahman, Vishnu, and Shiva. Do Hindus embrace a Trinity as Christians embrace the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?" With kindness in his eyes the guru replies, "As you like it." Frustrated now by evasive answers I say, "You can't have your cake and eat it too. Just give me the facts, yes or no." The guru with increasing kindness replies, "God has made different religions to suit different aspirations, times, and countries. All religions are simply different paths to God. So it doesn't matter which way you eat your cake – icing first, straight, sideways—it's still cake. Truth is one, but the wise call it by many names." "So you do believe in one God?" I ask again. He replies, "Well, maybe so, or maybe not. Come let me show you the images that inhabit our temple."

Our Understanding of God

Westerners who embrace a pluralistic belief that all paths are equally valid routes to God are attracted to Hinduism. There are about 837 million Hindus in the world, about a million of them in the United States. In a world where religions compete and even fight with one another, there is something comforting about the inner path to peace promoted by Hinduism.

In an age when Methodists, Baptists, and Churches of Christ are constantly fighting over sheep, the Hindu commitment 'never to proselytize' sounds inviting. In an age when institutional religion is being criticized, the Hinduism broad confluence of ideas and attitudes gathered together under one tent of faith is appealing.

As I reverently walked through the Hindu Temple, the images of God were so different. I was reminded of what the Apostle Paul said when he arrived in Athens. He was stunned by the multiple idols he discovered on Mars Hill. These ancient intellectuals embraced all gods, and even erected an idol to an unknown God. So when Paul got a chance to speak, this is what he said: *"O Men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious. Let me tell you, if I might, about this unknown God. This God made the world and everything that is in it. This master of sky and land doesn't live in custom made shrines or need the human race to run errands for him. . . He made the creatures; the creatures didn't make him... He doesn't play hide and seek with us. He is not remote; he is near. In him we live and move and have our being."* Such is the nature of the God Christians call Father. God is personal and relational. God is love.

THE PATH TO SPIRITUALITY

For Hindus the path is yoga. Yoga means "to unite or yoke together with God." Yoga is the process by which we can detach from the ego and discover the Atman—the God within. It is a way to lose ourselves in order so that we can find God. There are at least four different kinds of yoga: Jhana Yoga for reflective people, Bhakta Yoga for feeling people, Karma Yoga for active people, and Raga Yoga for scientific seekers. There is also a psychophysical form of Yoga which is a popular form of exercise. You can attend such a class on our campus.

For Christians the path to God is prayer. They will know we are Christians when we can attract as many people to a prayer meeting as we can get to a pot luck supper. Prayer is more than conversation with God, prayer is communion with God. Jesus said, *"Abide in me as I abide in you."* Henri Nouwen tells about meeting Mother Theresa. "I was struggling," says Henri, "so I decided to seek her advice. I sat down, started explaining my problems, my difficulties, describing how complex and complicated life was. After about ten minutes, I stopped to get my breath. That's when Mother Theresa said, 'Well when you spend one hour a day adoring your Lord and never doing anything which you know is wrong. . . you will be fine.' Suddenly I realized she had spoken the truth and I had the rest of my life to live it." In prayer we do not lose our egos, we align our egos with the will and purposes of God. Therein lies our peace.

THE WAY OF ACCOUNTABILITY

For Hindus it's karma, "the law of cause and effect." What goes around comes around. We all get what we deserve. The world is the soul's gymnasium. Here we have to work it out. Karma explains the differences that exist between people. Some are healthy – others are tormented by physical disease. Some are rich– others are starving. Some have success– others are constant losers. Galatians 6:7 says, "A

man reaps whatever he sows.” Hindus take that thought to its ultimate extreme.

For Christians it’s grace, the law of pardon. *“Because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions— it is by grace you have been saved”* (Ephesians 2:4-5). To be pardoned is to be forgiven for the crime and the penalty associated with it. George Washington pardoned the Whiskey Rebels. Gerald Ford pardoned Richard Nixon. George Bush pardoned six Reagan administration officials convicted in connection with the Iran-Contra affair. Bill Clinton pardoned 140 people on his last day in office. Twenty-five thousand, one hundred fifty-two people have petitioned President Bush to pardon Martha Stewart. The Lord pardon’s us.

When I a poor lost sinner, before the Lord did fall,
And in the name of Jesus, for pardon loud did call.
He heard my supplication, and soon the weak was strong,
For Jesus took my burden, and left me with a song.

THE QUESTION OF ETERNITY

For Hindus it’s reincarnation until we reach Nirvana. Shirley Maclaine says, “Reincarnation is just like show business, you just keep doing it until you get it right.” Twenty percent of Americans believe in reincarnation. Of course, the goal of such transmigration of the soul is to ultimately merge with God, which means to reach Nirvana, where my self-centeredness is evaporated and my little drop of spirit is returned to the ocean of God’s spirit.

As a Christian I see eternity in light of Resurrection and life. In II Corinthians 5:8 Paul says, *“To be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord.”* I don’t have to keep coming back until I get it right, for God in Christ Jesus has already made it all right. Evangelist Billy Graham said not long ago, “When you hear of my death, remember this — I know who I am and I know where I’m going.”

When we come to the river, at ending of day,
When the last winds of sorrow have blown,
There’ll be somebody waiting to show us the way,
We won’t have to cross Jordan alone.

Let us conclude with this Hindu prayer:

Lead me from the Unreal to the Real,
Lead me from Darkness to Light,
Lead me from Death to Immortality,
In the Name of the Eternal,
Let there be peace, peace, peace, everywhere. Amen.

