

Genesis 1:1–2 (NRSV)

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Colossians 1:15–20 (NRSV)

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

John 3:16–18 (NRSV)

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

Ephesians 2:1–10 (NRSV)

You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Karma. Nirvana. These often heard words come to us from the religions that dominate Asia and India. Bridging the gap to our own beliefs will be a challenge.

I've taught several series on world religions in the past decade and every time I come to the religions of the East, I feel adrift. The worldview underlying these religions is just so different from the monotheistic religions of the West: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Take Hinduism for example. It is more a family of religions than a single religion with sacred texts and unified doctrines. Five or six millennia ago, Hinduism emerged on the Indian sub-continent from the culture, language, and religious practices of the Aryans. For some, Hinduism seems pretty clearly polytheistic, but once you get close enough, you can see a core that resembles monotheism, though not a monotheism in the way that you and I think about it.

Hinduism

In Hinduism, there is one overarching Cosmic Spirit known as Brahman. Brahman reveals himself to humanity through nearly countless manifestations or avatars, such as Krishna and Shiva. Each of these reveals something of Brahman, though not all of Brahman. It is said by some that there are more than 330 million such manifestations of the One. Hence, in Hinduism, religious and devotional practices proliferate around

many such gods. Most Hindus see themselves as a devotee of one of these gods. Indeed, being Hindu has little to do with beliefs or doctrines and everything to do with behavior and actions.

In Hinduism, the cosmos isn't really a creation of Brahman's. It is Brahman. The "reality" that we perceive is called *maya* and is really an illusion. Life in this illusion that we perceive as real is a story of cycles, a wheel that turns without end and can be summed up in the word "suffering." This wheel is called *samsara*. It is an endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. When a person dies, they remain on the wheel and are born again. The place in life into which one is reborn (a hard life or an easy life) is determined by one's *karma*. Karma provides the "trajectory" for this cycle of rebirth. Good karma stems from doing good things; bad karma stems from doing bad things.

Thus, if one is born into the lowest caste in India, the "untouchables," it is because of the bad karma from their last life. In other words, they get the poverty and mistreatment they deserve.

This wheel of *samsara* is actually every depressing. Life is hard for most people. There is much suffering and pain across humanity. But how would one get off the wheel? Suicide wouldn't work – for rebirth would lie just ahead and the next life might be worse than this one!

The solution is to gain *moksha*, namely, release. Release is achieved when a person realizes, with every fiber of their being, the true nature of the cosmos – the truth that they and Brahman are one. This realization, the achievement of this enlightenment, is called *nirvana*. It is the moment when you understand that there is no "you," no "self," there is only Brahman. It is a bit like the flame of a candle being extinguished, though there was never really a flame or a candle, only the illusion of them. There is only Brahman.

You can see how foreign all this is to those of us raised in the west. Our vocabularies and categories aren't really much help. But let's try to see Hinduism as a worldview, a description of how things really are. Here are answers to those four worldview questions as a Hindu might give them:

- Who are we?
In truth, we don't truly exist; there is only one ultimate reality. "Self" is an illusion and the sooner we realize it the better.
- Where are we?
We live out our everyday "reality" in an illusion.
- What is the problem?
The problem is ignorance. We do not understand that Brahman comprises all of reality.
- What is the solution?
To be freed from ignorance by realizing that we do not actually exist, that we are one with Brahman. This moment of realization is *nirvana*, extinguishment of self. The pursuit of this realization is the highest purpose we can seek. There are three paths: the "way of works," the "way of knowledge," and the "way of devotion." Yoga and master teachers are key to this.

The Buddha

Siddhartha Gautama was born a prince in modern Nepal almost 600 years before Jesus and grew up in a Hindu world. The story is told that his father sheltered him from the outside world until Siddhartha made a trip on his own and saw the extent of human suffering and confronted the reality of his own death. All this overwhelmed him, throwing him into deep anguish and torment, for which the Hinduism around him provided little solace. Even the pleasures and riches of his palace life brought him no relief.

His response to this personal angst was to renounce ordinary human life and seek a “middle” path between pain and pleasure. After six years or so, while sitting under a tree, he had a profound experience and understood the truth about reality. He lost his ignorance and even his desire. He had achieved enlightenment. He was now the enlightened one, the Buddha.

Buddhists do not worship the Buddha; they revere him. Siddhartha was a man, but one who achieved the enlightenment sought by all Hindus. Siddhartha showed the path ahead for other “Buddhas-to-be.” Buddhists are those who follow this path, seeking also to achieve *nirvana*.

Siddhartha Gautama saw the depressing disillusion of the wheel and set out to find a solution. He said there are three ways to understand suffering. There is the obvious sense that we are all far too familiar with. Then there is the suffering that comes from being too attached to something that brings pleasure. Finally, Siddhartha said that suffering that comes from believing that pleasure is real.

Siddhartha, grounded in Hinduism, believed that nothing – not a tree, not a dog, not a person – has any permanent identity. He taught that this understanding of “no-self” was the beginning of wisdom and starts the process of unraveling the chain of suffering. This is expressed in the Four Noble Truths:

- Life is suffering
- Suffering is caused by craving and attachment
- Craving and attachment can be overcome (nirvana)
- The path of overcoming is eight-fold

This eight-fold path consists of right understanding, right purpose, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right alertness, and right concentration.

As you might imagine, pursuing enlightenment isn't easy. Buddhists often live in a community, *sangha*, in which monks pursue nirvana, assisted by “lay people” who do all the regular stuff of life that must be done. These laypeople thus gain good karma for themselves in the hope that in the next life they will be the monks pursuing nirvana.

Because Buddhism sprang from Hinduism, their worldviews are very similar. In Buddhism the emphasis is less on ignorance of reality and more on the suffering caused by our attachments.

- Who are?
We are one ultimate reality. “Self” is an illusion.
- Where are we?
We live out our everyday “reality” in an illusion, characterized by suffering.
- What is the problem?
The problem lies in our cravings and attachments, not just to stuff but to others. We are ignorant of “no-self.”
- What is the solution?
To be freed from ignorance by realizing that we do not actually exist, that we are one with the ultimate reality. This moment of realization is *nirvana*, the extinguishment of self, and is reached by leaving behind all attachments.

Key differences? What can we learn?

The differences between Hinduism/Buddhism and Christianity are immense, so vast that it is hard to even have a conversation. I once had several long talks with a thoughtful Hindu – we used similar words, but meant very different things. They were challenging conversations.

In Hinduism and Buddhism, the focus is on what we do and how we live as the means of achieving nirvana. For Christians, however, the story begins and ends with God's grace, what God has done for us, not what we might do for ourselves.

The idea of “no-self” has no place in Christianity. We proclaim that there is a creator God who is not one with his creation and we proclaim that his God has made every human in his own image, unique and valued.

Further, we proclaim that Jesus is, indeed, God himself, present at the creation and creating still. For Hindus and Buddhists, Jesus is merely one of many manifestations or avatars of the One, the Brahman.

We tell the story of a personal God, deeply involved in our lives, loving us and desiring to be loved.

It is in the Buddhist teachings about the suffering resulting from our attachments there is something for us to hear. Didn't Jesus say, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, or what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?” (Matt. 6:25). Didn't Paul tell us that we brought nothing into the world and can take nothing out, that the pursuit of wealth is a trap (1 Tim. 6:6-10). We Christians bring much grief on ourselves from our over-attachment to the things of this world. Such attachment is the path to avarice, not to God.

Some more on Hinduism (taken from the BBC religion site)

Hinduism is the religion of the majority of people in India and Nepal. It also exists among significant populations outside of the sub continent and has over 900 million adherents worldwide.

In some ways Hinduism is the oldest living religion in the world, or at least elements within it stretch back many thousands of years. Yet Hinduism resists easy definition partly because of the vast array of practices and beliefs found within it. It is also closely associated conceptually and historically with the other Indian religions Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism.

Unlike most other religions, Hinduism has no single founder, no single scripture, and no commonly agreed set of teachings. Throughout its extensive history, there have been many key figures teaching different philosophies and writing numerous holy books. For these reasons, writers often refer to Hinduism as 'a way of life' or 'a family of religions' rather than a single religion. . . .

The term 'Hindu' was derived from the river or river complex of the northwest, the Sindhu. Sindhu is a Sanskrit word used by the inhabitants of the region, the Aryans in the second millennium BCE. Later migrants and invaders, the Persians in the sixth century BCE, the Greeks from the 4th century BCE, and the Muslims from the 8th century CE, used the name of this river in their own languages for the land and its people.

The term 'Hindu' itself probably does not go back before the 15th and 16th centuries when it was used by people to differentiate themselves from followers of other traditions, especially the Muslims (Yavannas), in Kashmir and Bengal. At that time the term may have simply indicated groups united by certain cultural practices such as cremation of the dead and styles of cuisine. The 'ism' was added to 'Hindu' only in the 19th century in the context of British colonialism and missionary activity.

The origins of the term 'hindu' are thus cultural, political and geographical. Now the term is widely accepted although any definition is subject to much debate. In some ways it is true to say that Hinduism is a religion of recent origin yet its roots and formation go back thousands of years.

Some claim that one is 'born a Hindu', but there are now many Hindus of non-Indian descent. Others claim that its core feature is belief in an impersonal Supreme, but important strands have long described and worshipped a personal God. Outsiders often criticise Hindus as being polytheistic, but many adherents claim to be monotheists.

Some Hindus define orthodoxy as compliance with the teachings of the Vedic texts (the four Vedas and their supplements). However, still others identify their tradition with 'Sanatana Dharma', the eternal order of conduct that transcends any specific body of sacred literature. Scholars sometimes draw attention to the caste system as a defining feature, but many Hindus view such practices as merely a social phenomenon or an aberration of their original teachings. Nor can we define Hinduism according to belief in concepts such as karma and samsara (reincarnation) because Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists (in a qualified form) accept this teaching too.

Although it is not easy to define Hinduism, we can say that it is rooted in India, most Hindus revere a body of texts as sacred scripture known as the Veda, and most Hindus draw on a common system of values known as dharma.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 The first story of creation – from God’s perspective.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Genesis 2:4-25 The second telling of the creation story – more from the perspective of the humans. What do these two stories tell us about the nature of God and of humanity?</p>
<p>Wednesday, Genesis 3 The story of when it all went wrong. What does this story tell us about the cause of nature of suffering?</p>	<p>Thursday, Genesis 12:1-9 God sets out to put things right; to fix what the humans made wrong.</p>
<p>Friday, Romans 5:12-21 Death through Adam, life through Christ!</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What is your personal experience with Hinduism or Buddhism? Have you known people who practice one of the eastern religions? If so, what did you learn from them?
2. There are some ideas from these religions that have made their way into our cultural vocabulary, such as *karma* and *nirvana*. How do you think most people would define *karma*? *nirvana*? How do these definitions compare to the ideas we looked at in this study?
3. Most Americans have had some experience with one or more forms of Buddhism, even though it might be pretty “American-ized.” What do you think we could learn from Buddhism?
4. In your view, what are the most important ways in which Buddhism differs from Christianity. You might make a list based on the ideas in this study. Which of these differences do you think really matter?

