

## HINDUISM

### A Brief Overview of the Development of Hinduism

There are several important historical facts about Hinduism that are relevant to the humanist context. Its origin can be traced back to the pre-historic era with its ancient scriptures dating back more than four thousand years, but no specific point of origin can be cited. While its roots can be seen in Iron Age India and, hence, it is recognized as “the oldest living major religion” it was not founded with a religious perspective.

Hinduism essentially originated as a set of rules or regulations to help people lead a disciplined life. This set of rules adhered to the fulfillment of duties, moral values, and the importance of self-realization through meditation. It is not confined to the teachings of a specific person or a single deity. In fact, it is polytheistic in the practice of worshipping innumerable gods, each corresponding to either a philosophy, a natural power, or a representation of a certain moral value or quality.

Hinduism is an accumulation of diverse traditions and has no specific person to point out as its founder. It was not started as a religious system but rather as a regulated way of life which, with the passage of time, was transformed into religious concepts. Writings originally meant for the betterment of life of the common people took up the form of holy books such as the Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas which existed to enlighten practitioners. The four Vedas -- the Rig Veda, the Sama Veda, the Yajur Veda and the Atharva Veda -- are the authentic texts of Hinduism and are comprised of hymns, incantations, rituals and the importance of practicing them in daily life. The concept of God in Hinduism is largely empathic with natural powers such as Agni (fire), Vayu (wind) and Varuna (water). The concept of “Trimurti” or “Three-forms” (comprising of the Gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva) is related to the three stages of life: birth, life and death. Hinduism, therefore, is a philosophical approach to life as much as it is a religious concept.

According to Klaus Klostermaier, a prominent scholar of Hinduism, the Hindu tradition has proven to be open to new ideas and scientific thought and that numerous elements of Hinduism overlap with and share the values of humanism. Scholars often refer to Hinduism as a “way of life.” Humanism also is a way of life, the lifestyle of many people across the world.

Researchers indicate that constructing a reliable timeline for Hinduism is challenging for several reasons including the fact that Hinduism is extremely diverse and only relatively recently was conceived as a single, distinct religion and, secondly, its written narratives span many eras of time and forms of existence. Nonetheless, researchers have drawn up extensive timelines for Hinduism. Most sources identify the roots of Hinduism with the Aryan migration into India around 1500 BCE and with the subsequent composition of the *Rig Veda*.

The chronology below is commonly presented and has been simplified to include only the more relevant elements:

3,000–1500 BCE: Indus Valley Civilization

6,000–1900 BCE: Indus-Sarasvati Civilization

1500–500 BCE: Vedic Period -- beginning with the Aryan migration

500 BCE–500 CE: Epic, Puranic and Classical Ages

500 CE–1200 CE: Early and Middle Medieval Period --Theological establishment of Vedanta.

1200–1757 CE: Muslim Period -- Development of the theistic traditions

1757–1947 CE: British Period -- The reform movements and birth of neo-Hinduism

1947 CE -- present: Hinduism established as a world religion

Source: <http://hinduism.iskcon.org/tradition/1001.htm>

The term Neo-Hinduism is generally used to describe Hindu thinkers who, among other things, have been willing to re-interpret concepts and traditional philosophies in the light of new circumstances and influences external to Hinduism and who have been committed to organized, practical service to humanity. (<http://what-when-how.com/religious-movements/neo-hinduism-religious-movement/>)

### Recommended reading

*A Survey of Hinduism* by Klaus K. Klostermaier, State University of New York Press; 3rd edition, 2010. A comprehensive survey of the Hindu tradition, the book deals with the history of Hinduism, the sacred writings, the Hindu worldview, and the specifics of the major branches of Hinduism--Vaisnavism, Saivism, and Saktism. It also focuses on the geographical ties of Hinduism with the land of India, the social order created by Hinduism, and the various systems of Hindu thought. The third edition includes chapters on the origins of Hinduism as well as its history of relations with Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

**The Key Principles, Beliefs and Concepts of Hinduism.** Hinduism is defined and described in a variety of ways, as the following items indicate:

- Hinduism gives less importance to the image of God in one's mind than to what values one carries and how the individual evolves. The evolution of the individual mind and personality is more important in the Hindu value system than the faith or religion one adheres to. Because of the importance it gives to the values ingrained in all religions, it is – along with Buddhism – often referred to as the most secular religion in the world.
  - Hinduism is heterogeneous in that it consists of several schools of thought. There is variation in local practices and the worship of particular deities. However, there are central tenants that unify it as one tradition. The core of traditional Hinduism is faith in Brahman, the underlying universal life force that encompasses and embodies existence which may be worshiped in personal forms such as Vishnu, Shiva or Shakti.
  - Hinduism allows people to develop and grow at their own pace by making different spiritual paths available to them. It allows various schools of thought under its broad principles.
  - Hinduism grants absolute and complete freedom of belief and worship.
  - Hinduism is both a religion and a way of life.
  - The set of rules for “good living” or “Dharmic” living that have been laid down constitute the Hindu religion.
- Source: Core Values of Hinduism (<http://hinducorevalues.blogspot.com/2009/04/core-values-of-hinduism.html>)

Within these broad principles, there are a number of specific beliefs and concepts.

**Dharma.** According to Hinduism, all humans are born with certain duties and obligations. Hindu scriptures teach that when a person fulfills his or her duties, all will benefit and when all people submit to their individual dharma, the society as a whole flourishes. Dharma has been described in a number of ways: right conduct, righteous living, and moral law. It connotes not only rules but also duties that arise from rules. Anyone who makes dharma central to one's life strives to do the right thing according to one's duty and obligations.

**Karma.** Most Hindus share a belief in the concept of karma, the effect of past actions on present circumstances. Traditionally, Hindus believe in reincarnation -- the cycle of life, death and rebirth -- and karma is connected to this belief. According to Hindu philosophy, if one's thoughts and deeds are kind and compassionate, the “soul” will reap positive results. Karma directly influences the life situation into which one is “reborn.” If a person creates good karma, he or she will be reborn into a pleasant situation in the next life.

**Moksha.** Moksha means liberation or the soul's release from the cycle of death and rebirth. It occurs when the soul unites with Brahman by realizing its true nature. Several paths can lead to this, including “the path of duty.”

**Brahman.** The conception of Brahman has not been replicated by any other religion and is exclusive to Hinduism. “.... Brahman does not refer to the anthropomorphic concept of God of the Abrahamic religions....

Brahman is not a 'He' at all, but rather ... the transcendent origin of all things.”

(<http://hinduism.about.com/od/basics/a/brahman.htm>)

Yamas. In order to achieve liberation from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, Hindus who practice Raja Yoga (one school of Hindu philosophy) place value on a number of essential morals called yamas and niyamas. The first yama is nonviolence, a core moral value on which all other yamas are said to be built. The yamas, which refer to a person's behavior in day-to-day life, include truthfulness, honesty and compassion.

Niyamas. In addition to the code of personal behaviors in the yamas, Hindu scriptures teach that following a code of practices called niyamas will improve a person's karma. The niyamas include, among other things, showing modesty and giving to others.

In short, “Hinduism is a religion based on universality. It gives less importance to the image of God in your mind than to what values one carries and how the individual evolves. The evolution of the individual mind and personality is more important in the Hindu value system than the faith or religion one adheres to. Because of the importance it gives to the good value systems ingrained in all religions, it is – along with Buddhism –the most secular and most tolerant religion in the world.” -- “Core Values of Hinduism”

(<http://hinducorevalues.blogspot.com/>)

### **The Key Principles of Humanism**

There are numerous statements by individuals and organizations in the United States and elsewhere that express the principles of humanism. Several relate to the issue of a “set of rules”, or more accurately, a “set of beliefs and values.”

Humanism is a non-religious ethical outlook based on an interest in human affairs at the human scale. It is not a doctrine or a set of rules; it is a starting point, its founding idea being that ethics must be based on the facts of human experience. For some, the result of thinking for themselves about ethics might be close to a conventional moral outlook; for others, the result might be less conventional. Either way, one's choices must not be aimed at harming others and that one must be able to make a solid case for one's outlook if challenged by others.

Source: Humanism's faith in reason represents our best hope

(<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/mar/03/humanism-religion-reason-our-best-hope>)

Humanism is a label for a certain range of beliefs and values. To the extent that you do or do not share these beliefs and attitudes, so you may be more or less inclined to call yourself a humanist. Taken together, they are a set of beliefs and values which constitute a view of the world – a philosophy by which many people live their lives. Source: Humanism: Beliefs and Values (<http://david-pollock.org.uk/humanism/humanism-beliefs-and-values/>)

Humanism is a life-stance and as such it rests on a set of values, such as human dignity and the recognition of the inherent and intrinsic worth of the human personality, which allow human beings to lead a full and meaningful life. These values inspire humanists in their interpersonal relations and, more generally, in their behavior towards other people as well as in their views on a just society. Source: Humanists stand for Human Rights; European Humanist Federation

([humanistfederation.eu/our-position.php?page=human-rights](http://humanistfederation.eu/our-position.php?page=human-rights))

There also are numerous sources that present the broad principles of humanism. We have drawn from several of them and listed a number of them below.

### **From Humanist Manifesto I (1933)**

-- In place of the old attitudes involved in worship and prayer, the humanist finds his religious

emotions expressed in a heightened sense of personal life and in a cooperative effort to promote social well-being.

--The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good.

([http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist\\_Manifesto\\_I](http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_I))

#### From Humanist Manifesto II (1973)

-- From the Preface: "Humanism is an ethical process through which we all can move, above and beyond the divisive particulars, heroic personalities, dogmatic creeds, and ritual customs of past religions or their mere negation."

-- From the Closing: "We will survive and prosper only in a world of shared humane values.... At the present juncture of history, commitment to all humankind is the highest commitment of which we are capable."

([http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist\\_Manifesto\\_II](http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II))

#### From Humanist Manifesto III: Humanism and Its Aspirations (2003)

"...Thus engaged in the flow of life, we aspire to this vision with the informed conviction that humanity has the ability to progress toward its highest ideals. The responsibility for our lives and the kind of world in which we live is ours and ours alone."

([http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist\\_Manifesto\\_III](http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_III))

#### From the Amsterdam Declaration 2002 (International Humanist and Ethical Union)

-- Humanism is a lifestance aiming at the maximum possible fulfillment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times. Humanism can be a way of life for everyone everywhere. ( <http://iheu.org/humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>)

#### From "What Is Humanism?" by Fred Edwords

Former AHA Executive Director and currently the director of the United Coalition of Reason, Fred Edwords has written prolifically about the principles of humanism. In an essay on *What Is Humanism?* he concluded: "So, with modern humanism one finds a lifestance or worldview that is in tune with modern knowledge; is inspiring, socially conscious, and personally meaningful. It is not only the thinking person's outlook but that of the feeling person as well, for it has inspired the arts as much as it has the sciences; philanthropy as much as critique. And even in critique it is tolerant, defending the rights of all people to choose other ways, to speak and to write freely, to live their lives according to their own lights. So the choice is yours. Are you a humanist? You needn't answer 'yes' or 'no.' For it isn't an either-or proposition. Humanism is yours -- to adopt or to simply draw from. You may take a little or a lot, sip from the cup or drink it to the dregs. It's up to you." ([http://americanhumanist.org/humanism/What\\_is\\_Humanism](http://americanhumanist.org/humanism/What_is_Humanism))

Helen Bennett's poem "What Humanism Means to Me" in her book, *Humanism, What's That? A Book for Curious Kids* (Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 2005).

Humanism means to me  
I've got the opportunity  
To realize that I am free  
To take responsibility.

To me, it doesn't seem so odd  
That many people pray to God  
Whenever they are feeling low --  
It's just the way they have to go.

But when I do not know the way  
I do not feel the need to pray.  
I use my brain to figure out  
What the problem's all about.

I'm grateful that I have my eyes  
To see the beauty of the skies,  
I'm glad I have my ears to hear  
The voices of my friends so dear.

But best of all, my brain's the one  
That figures out what must be done  
To help me run a better race,  
To make the world a better place.

For additional essays on Living the Humanist Life, Humanism and Traditional Religion and related issues, see:  
[http://americanhumanist.org/Who\\_We\\_Are/About\\_Humanism](http://americanhumanist.org/Who_We_Are/About_Humanism)

### **Comparisons and Contrasts: On Common Ground**

In several ways, Hinduism and humanism are on common ground. As M. J. Akbar, former editor of the Indian newspaper *Asian Age*, has written, "Hinduism is synonymous with humanism. That is its essence and its great liberating quality." Others have indicated that "Hinduism is marked by a very high level of flexibility and openness to reason and skepticism." -- Humanist's Guide to Religion: Hinduism (<http://secularist10.hubpages.com/hub/Humanists-Guide-to-Religion-Hinduism>)

In his book, *Essays for Our Time, Essays in Gandhian Perspective*, M. V. Nadkarni asserts that Hinduism, far from being inconsistent with humanism, shows concern both for human responsibility and human welfare, not merely in the scriptures and other literature, but also in practice. The website simply called "Humanism" indicated that in the 2500 BCE era, and likely before, alternatives to religious thought emerged that rejected the supernatural but accepted humanistic ideas and that (as we well know) a person can be a humanist within any religious or non-religious system. It noted that humanism is ecumenical in the sense of being able to exist within many different world views. (<http://www.humanistictexts.org/humanism.htm>)

A primary commonality, as noted above, is that Hinduism prioritizes values and personal growth over the image of God in one's mind. The evolution of the individual mind and personality is more important in the Hindu value system than the faith or religion one to which one adheres.

A disparity which should be noted relates to the traditional Hindu belief that "Hinduism has a supernatural aspect, which involves faith in an afterlife." Humanism, however, is defined as "a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity." Humanist Manifesto III: Humanism and Its Aspirations)

Humanists believe that when a person dies there can be no further existence. For some, it is comforting to believe in a reunion with family and friends in some future life or rebirth, but we believe that that the idea that something about oneself can transcend our body's physical end is wishful thinking. What matters is "the here and now" for ourselves and future generations.

The concept of Karma also is relevant in that it can be reinterpreted in a rational way as increasing the likelihood of positive and negative feedback for positive and negative actions as opposed to a mystical force

keeping everything in balance. For example, being kind to someone surely tends to increase the likelihood that they would counter by being kind in turn. Acts of kindness are infectious and reciprocal.

Hinduism traditionally supports the belief in reincarnation -- that the soul is eternal and lives many lifetimes in one body after another. The soul is thought to sometimes be born in a human body, sometimes in an animal body and sometimes in a plant body. The traditional Hindu belief is that all forms of life contain a soul and that souls have the chance to experience life in different forms. Centuries ago the Roman poet Lucretius summed up the humanist perspective when he wrote "You have nothing to fear in death. Someone who no longer exists cannot suffer, or differ in any way from one who is not born."

Humanists strive to embrace the moral principle in the Golden Rule, the ethic of reciprocity, and to treat each other as one would like to be treated themselves -- with tolerance, consideration and compassion. The Golden Rule, a unifying humanistic principle, cannot be claimed for any one philosophy or religion. Throughout the ages, many traditions have promoted one or another version of it. In Hinduism the Golden Rule is: This is the sum of duty; do naught onto others what you would not have them do unto you."

-- Mahabharata 5,1517

In many ways, we are on the same page as you will see in the following quotes, first from the Hindu perspective and then the humanist.

### **We Are on The Same Page**

"If I were asked to define the Hindu creed, I should simply say: Search after truth through non-violent means. A man may not believe in God and still call himself a Hindu. Hinduism is a relentless pursuit after truth... Hinduism is the religion of truth. Truth is God. Denial of God we have known. Denial of truth we have not known." -- Mahatma Gandhi

"People tend to forget their duties but remember their rights." -- Indira Gandhi, the second-longest-serving Prime Minister of India and the only woman to hold the office

"Hinduism is not a religion; it is just a way of life that thousands of Rishis have written about. It is such a democratic religion where everybody has the freedom to think, write or say whatever they want. We have no opposition for any other philosophy coming into us." -- Ravi Shankar, commonly known as Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, is the founder of the Art of Living Foundation whose goal is to relieve societal problems and the International Association for Human Values whose goals are to foster shared global values.

"We are responsible for what we are, and whatever we wish ourselves to be, we have the power to make ourselves. If what we are now has been the result of our own past actions, it certainly follows that whatever we wish to be in future can be produced by our present actions; so we have to know how to act."

– Swami Vivekananda was a Hindu monk and a key figure in introducing Hindu philosophies to the Western world and is credited with raising interfaith awareness.

"Hinduism is focused on the present moment. It's not focused on what happens after we die, it's not focused on some future event, it's not focused on tomorrow, it's not focused on later today. It's focused on living in as high a state of consciousness as possible, right now!" -- Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami is a Hindu monk and religious leader and publisher of *Hinduism Today* magazine

The following is from an editorial in *Karma Yogin* by Sister Nivedita which depicts her intense respect for India:

"The whole history of the world shows that the Indian intellect is second to none. This must be proved by the

performance of a task beyond the power of others, the seizing of the first place in the intellectual advance of the world. Is there any inherent weakness that would make it impossible for us to do this? Are the countrymen of Bhaskaracharya and Shankaracharya inferior to the countrymen of Newton and Darwin? We trust not. It is for us, by the power of our thought, to break down the iron walls of opposition that confront us, and to seize and enjoy the intellectual sovereignty of the world.” -- Sister Nivedita, born Margaret Elizabeth Noble, was a Scot-Irish social worker, author, teacher and a disciple of Swami Vivekananda.

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“It is our common humanism that defines our morality. Our obligations start with ourselves. We have to value our own existence before we can see the value in other lives. Our next duty is to our mates, friends, and family. We share life with those closest to us and depend on each other for support. Beyond our friends and family, we owe allegiance to our tribe or community. Beyond that, we have duties to broader units such as state and country. Ultimately, our duties and identities culminate with our common humanity.” -- “Secular Humanism is Truth”, Ron Herman, humanist activist from Albuquerque, New Mexico

“Human rights exist only because of reciprocal sharing of assumed societal obligations with other humans. We are obligated to treat others in society ethically and responsibly as they treat us; this reciprocal and mutual treatment is the basis for human rights.” -- “How Do Humanists Find Meaning, Purpose, Values, and Morals in Life”, Steven Schafersman, humanist activist from Midland, Texas

“... (Humanism) it is a way a thinking about ethics that emphasizes both our personal development and our moral obligations. As I like to say: live life, love other people and leave the world a better place.”  
-- From Jennifer Hancock’s “Handy Humanism Handbook”

“We recognize that all humans share a common planetary habitat and that our moral obligations do not end at the boundaries of our own nation-states, but encompass the entire globe and every person on it.” From Planetary Humanism, *Free Inquiry*, December 1, 2003 by Paul Kurtz

“... what I am is a humanist before anything -- before I'm a Jew, before I'm black, before I'm a woman. And my beliefs are for the human race -- they don't exclude anyone.”

Whoopi Goldberg – (She also said that anyone can be a humanist no matter what their religion, race or sex....)

“My ethical obligations and potentialities—and yours—remain exactly the same, whether God exists or does not exist. Our shared task is to live decently, compassionately, and caringly in the world we inhabit.” -- Edward L. Ericson, retired Ethical Culture leader, professor and author of *The Humanist Way—An Introduction to Ethical Humanist Religion*

### **Hindu Nontheism**

“Nontheistic Hinduism does not require a God to prescribe laws of morality. It does not employ rewards or punishment as methods of imposing morality. It simply asserts that the same spirit manifests as all living things, so there is a deeper level of connection and this imposes a natural moral obligation.” -- Dr. Jay Lakhani, Education Director for the Hindu Council, United Kingdom, is a theoretical physicist.

An interesting and highly relevant study was conducted in 2008 by the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life. The study indicated that 53% of the Hindu population in the United States believes that “God is an Impersonal Force” and 5% do not hold a belief in God at all. By our account, a conservative estimate is that there are as many as 550,000 Hindus living in the United States who hold a non-traditional belief in God and as many as 30,000 who deny its existence. You surely would not be alone in adding the humanist identity to your beliefs. Many Hindus realize that they have a home in humanism. We welcome you!

## **A Concluding Word**

The Hindu concept of dharma is highly appealing and resonates with humanism. As defined in a paper on the “Ethics of Hinduism” ([www.academia.edu/4481235/Ethics\\_of\\_Hinduism](http://www.academia.edu/4481235/Ethics_of_Hinduism)) and, as we have repeatedly noted, dharma “means those duties and obligations.... and those actions and duties which are intrinsic to the moral nature of man.... it is the heart of Hindu Ethics.”

Throughout this paper, we have used the words “duties and obligations” to describe both Hinduism and humanism. Both have been described as a “way of life.” As noted, however, humanism is not a “set of rules” but rather “a starting point,” a set of beliefs and values which constitutes our worldview and life stance. Similar values are at the heart of both Hinduism and humanism. Whether we call it “dharma” or “duties and obligations”, we are, indeed, on common ground. Let both “dharma” and “duties” be the starting points for our shared belief in humanism and a humanistic way of life.

## **What is the next step?**

*Humanism As the Next Step* by Lloyd and Mary Morain (Humanist Press, Washington, DC, revised edition 2008) presents a concise overview of the history and principles of modern humanism. We also suggest that you begin to dialogue with humanists in your area on the core principles discussed above and look for additional commonalities which you are certain to find.

Also, if you harbor any doubts about the concept of a divinity (as many do according to the Pew Forum’s data noted above), the next step would be to explore the American Humanist Association’s website ([americanhumanist.org](http://americanhumanist.org)) where you will find a wealth of information about humanism, our local groups, programs, publications and resources of all types for people of all ages. You can, of course, follow the American Humanist Association on Facebook and Twitter and become a member of the AHA. Perhaps you may wish to identify yourself as both humanist and Hindu. You surely would not be the first to do so!

For additional information and for answers to any questions you might have about the humanist worldview and life-stance, please contact us at: [aha@americanhumanist.org](mailto:aha@americanhumanist.org)