Chapter 4: Catholicism and Hinduism

Part One

What is Hinduism?

There are estimated to be between eight hundred million and fifty thousand and a billion Hindus living in the world today, or around fifteen per cent of the world's total population. The vast majority of Hindus live in India and the other countries of South Asia, especially Nepal, where, as in India, they form the vast majority, but Hindus are also to be found all around the world as sizeable minorities. Hindus thereby form the third largest religious grouping in the world after Christianity and Islam (www.adherents.com).

Both the terms, 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' are terms that can be misleading. The term, 'Hindu,' has long been used to refer very generally to those inhabitants of India (al-Hind in Arabic), who were not easily identifiable as Muslims or members of another religious tradition. The term 'Hinduism' itself was coined in the nineteenth century by Europeans to refer to the religious culture of the Hindus. Because any '-ism' suggests a single system with a definable set of beliefs and practises, it has often been assumed that there is a single religion that all Hindus ascribe to or at least that there is some system within Hinduism that might be taken to represent the 'essence' of Hinduism and might serve as a parallel for the kind of religion represented by Christianity or Islam. In reality, there is no single system of this sort to be found in Hinduism. There is no single founder, or commonly accepted sacred book or creed. As the German Indologist, Heinrich von Stietenchron has put it, Hinduism is best understood to denote a
‘civilisation that contains a plurality of distinct religions’ (‘Hinduism: On the proper use of a deceptive term’ in G-D. Sontheimer and H.Kulke (eds), Hinduism Reconsidered, Manohar, Delhi, 2001, p. 33). ‘Hinduism’ thus simply refers to everything that is present in Hindu culture, including its religions.

In fact, Hinduism includes a vast array of divergent religious traditions and ways of living. As we shall see, what some Hindus believe is in marked opposition to what others believe, and what counts as good practice by some Hindus is rejected by others. This does not mean, as has again often been supposed, that Hindus are relativistic when it comes to claims about truth or ethics, but it does means that there is no single system of beliefs or practices in Hinduism. Thus, the best approach to Hinduism, either in order to describe what is found in it or to consider a Catholic Christian engagement with it, is one that keeps the focus on the beliefs and practices of particular Hindu traditions or individuals, paying careful attention to the way any tradition or individual modifies, or even rejects, the terms, concepts and ethical norms used by others.

Hinduism as a ‘civilisation that contains a plurality of distinct religions’ has developed over many millennia. The varied traditional types of Hinduism continue and flourish in the modern world, adapting themselves to such new developments as the modern mass media. But there have also arisen forms of Hinduism that have been radically shaped through the encounter with the ideas and realities of Western modernity and of Christianity. Thus, from the late eighteenth century there developed what is known as the ’Hindu Renaissance’ or ‘Reformed Hinduism,’ promoted by such figures as Swami (‘Lord,’ a term of respect used for a Hindu monk) Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Mahatma (‘Great Soul’, an honorific title) Gandhi (1869-1948), who rejected many of features of traditional Hinduism and who revisioned Hinduism as an ethical spirituality and world religion tolerant of other religions and open to all. Likewise, the twentieth century has also seen the emergence of what is known as ‘Political Hinduism’ or ‘Hindu Nationalism,’ in which Hinduism is depicted as the national and ethnic identity of Hindus exclusive of Muslims and Christians in India, and whose groups have campaigned for India to become a Hindu state or at least for Hindu culture to be
publicly privileged. These distinctly modern forms of Hinduism have also had an immense, if very different, impact on India in the modern period and on Hindu-Christian relations in India and abroad.

In what follows no attempt is made to describe or engage with Hinduism as a whole. Most emphatically, no claim is being made to define Hinduism or set out the ‘essence’ of Hinduism. Instead, three important concepts and associated features of Hinduism are picked out, which are very significant for a very large number of Hindus and which continue to be very important for Christian approaches to Hindus and Hinduism: dharma (proper nature or order) and Hindu approaches to right social living and social religion; mokṣa (spiritual liberation or release) and the pursuit of world transcendence, together with the traditions of philosophy and theology that have developed around this; and bhakti (attachment or devotion) and the Hindu traditions of devotional theism that have emerged centred on different Hindu gods and goddesses. For most Hindus, dharma, mokṣa and bhakti are interrelated aspects of what they believe and do as Hindus, rather than wholly separate alternative ways of being a Hindu. Unless indicated otherwise, these and other Hindu terms are given in the form used in Sanskrit, the Indo-European language that has from ancient times served as the medium for much of Hindu religious and cultural expression. In order to indicate the particular sounds of Sanskrit and other Indian languages a standard system of diacritics is used throughout (for an explanation of which see, for instance, Gavin Flood, An Introduction to Hinduism, CUP, Cambridge, 1996, pp. xiii–iv).

1. Dharma: right social living and religion.

The concept of dharma has many meanings. It comes from a verbal root, dhr, which means ‘to uphold’ or ‘to support.’ It may perhaps be characterised in general as referring to the proper nature or order things have, either which they actually do have or which they should have. Dharma both describes and prescribes the proper order that upholds the natural world and human society. In part, it means the natural properties that things have in virtue of what they are. It is, for example, the dharma of fire to heat
other things up. *Dharma* also refers to right way human society should be, the right social norms, ethical practices and ritual activities that human beings should follow. It also refers to the right way of the world as a whole, the natural laws and order that should be manifest in the world. Living according to *dharma* is of immense importance for Hindus as being the way to have success in the current life and a good state after death, and serves to preserve the well being of the world as a whole. In the modern period Hindus have come to used the term *dharma* as a word to correspond to the English term ‘religion.’ Many Hindus today prefer the term *Sanātana Dharma* (Eternal dharma) as a Hindu term for ‘Hinduism.’ For some Hindus *dharma* is fixed and unalterable, while for others it has a more dynamic quality, open to revision and reapplication as times and situations change.

*Dharma* is about right living and the primary context for Hindus where this takes place is the family. It is as a member of a family that a Hindu learns his or her own identity within the set of relationships he or she has within the family and the wider community of which the family is a part. It is as a member of a family that he or she develops an understanding of how to act well and what to believe. The family or household is, then, the fundamental reality for most Hindus, the primary context in which the joys and the sorrows of life are experienced.

Most of what follows in this section relates closely to the form of Hinduism otherwise known as ‘Vedic’ or ‘Brahmanical Hinduism,’ which developed in the second millenium B.C. and gradually became a dominant strand within Hinduism as a whole. It refers to the Hindu traditions developed and promoted by the Brahmans and other high caste Hindus. Such Hindus accept the authority of a body of sacred literature called the Vedas, composed in Sanskrit, revered as revelation and held to be the principal source of dharma. Brahmanical Hinduism refers more widely to the whole religious and non-religious culture described and promoted in the vast and diverse body of Sanskrit literature that has developed over the centuries, including the *Dharma Sūtras* (the extant ones mostly dating from about the sixth to the third century B.C.) and *Dharma*
Śāstras (from about the end of the third century B.C onwards), texts that set out ritual and social dharma in great detail.

Hinduism, however, also contains many non-Vedic and non-Brahmanical traditions. In the long history and complex reality of Hinduism many alternatives to the dharma found in Brahmanical Hinduism have arisen. Alongside the Vedic tradition there is, for instance, that of Tantra, which is of great importance within Hinduism as a whole. Tantra (meaning ‘loom’), refers to a range of texts and traditions that have origins outside of Vedic Hinduism, but now permeates Hindu thinking and practice as a whole, having come to prominence around the eighth century A.D. There are also the traditions of world renunciation, emerging from the middle of the first millennium B.C as well as the many popular and regional movements arising down the centuries, often explicitly rejecting Brahmanical teaching and values. Many of these other traditions remain as alternatives to Brahmanical Hinduism, or in marked tension with it, while there has also been a continuous process of assimilation of non-Vedic traditions into Brahmanical Hinduism itself.

Caste

For centuries, Hindu society has been divided up into different high and low castes. The word ‘caste’ is derived from a Portuguese term (casta) meaning ‘breed’ or ‘race.’ In reality it refers to two schemes by which Hindus have structured and classified society: the scheme of varṇa (colour or class) and the scheme of jāti (birth or kind).

Varṇa

Within Brahmanical Hinduism, the varṇa scheme depicts Hindu society as made up of four broad classes of people having different natural characteristics and functions in society: the Brahmīns, who study the Vedas and perform Vedic rituals of different sorts, the Kṣatriyas, who are the warriors and kings, the Vaiśyas, who are the merchants and agriculturalists, and the Śūdras, who are the servants. Outside of this
scheme are those on the edges of settled Vedic Hindu society, historically the tribal people and forest-dwellers, who are said to be *avarṇa* or classless. The *varṇa* scheme is a ritual and social hierarchy with the Brahmins at the top and the Śūdras at the bottom. The top three *varṇas* are also said to be ‘twice-born’ (*dvija*), meaning that they are reborn through certain life-rituals. The top three *varṇas* and they alone are entitled to know the Vedas and to have Vedic rituals performed for them. Within this scheme, Śūdras and others are excluded from Vedic religion and so tend to have other forms of religion and ritual and to have non-Brahmin ritualists serving their needs. Within traditional Vedic Hinduism, then, there has never been the expectation that there should, or could be, one religion for all people, be it in India or elsewhere.

The *varṇa* system is held to be part of the natural order of the world, part of the original structure of the world from its creation. One very important hymn of the Veda (*Ṛg Veda* X.90) describes the production of the world in terms of the sacrifice of the Cosmic Man and depicts the *varṇas* as made from different parts of his dismembered body: the Brahmins from the head, the Kṣatriyas from the arms, the Vaiśyas from the thighs and the Śūdras from the feet.

**Jāti**

The other scheme of *jāti* corresponds more closely to the original Portuguese meaning of caste. Although the origins of *jāti* are not easy to identify, this way of viewing human society has been of great importance for very many Hindus. *Jāti* means ‘birth’ or ‘kind’ and refers to the thousands of different kinship groups that exist across India. A person is born into a particular *jāti* and is thought of as being a particular kind of person as a member of it, different from members of other *jātis*. The *jāti* scheme is also a hierarchy, based on the idea of purity, with some *jātis* being more or less pure than others. Members of *jātis* avoid the defilement that comes through contact with less pure ones. Thus, while *jātis* are often distinguished by occupation, the principal markers of difference centre on restrictions on intermarriage and eating together. At the bottom of the *jāti* scheme are those who are known as ‘untouchable,’ whose
occupations such as leather working or removal of human waste products render them so unclean that the other jātis avoid any form of contact with them. Traditionally, untouchables have tended to live in separate areas.

These two schemes of varṇa and jāti have tended to merge in the historical reality of Hindu society. However they remain different schemes and this distinction has been important for modern Hindu reformist movements.

Social and Ritual Life

Upholding the dharma of society is an integral part of upholding the right order of the world as a whole and the dharma of society is upheld when the members of each varṇa or jāti do the work appropriate to them. Certain types of behaviour are considered generally right for all people to do (sādharaṇa dharma, ‘common dharma’), such as truthfulness, non-violence, abstinence from theft and giving. However, great emphasis is put on the actions that are right for an individual within the particular stage of life and group to which he or she belongs, his or her svadharma, or own-dharma. The Hindu idea of dharma is thus said to be ‘context-specific.’ Thus, the dharma of a Brahmin is to study the Vedas and perform ritual duties, the dharma of a Kṣatriya is to fight and to rule and so on. One widely revered sacred text, the Bhagavad Gītā, affirms the idea of svadharma in these much repeated words, ‘Better the doing of one’s own duty (svadharma), badly done, than that of another, done well. Better death in one’s own duty, the duty of another causes fear.’ (BG 3.35).

Within Brahmancial Hinduism this idea of svadharma has also been expressed within the scheme of varṇāśramadharma (the dharma of class and stage of life). We have already considered what is meant by varṇa. There are also said to be four āśramas: that of the celibate student in Vedic study (brahmacarya), that of the married householder (grhasta), that of the forest dweller (vānaprastha), and that of the renouncer (saṃnyāsa). The last two stages represent increasing degrees of withdrawal from ordinary social and ritual life. This is an idealised scheme of the life of a high caste Hindu and most
Hindus ordinarily only move from being a child and student to being a married householder, while the option of world renunciation is open for anyone at any time of life. At the heart of this vision of Hindu society is the figure of the married householder, who maintains the dharma of the world and human society, through the performance of proper rituals, the production of offspring and the carrying out of the occupations proper to the different sections of society.

This Brahmanical Hindu understanding of right human living is manifest in another important scheme: that of the four legitimate goals to be pursued by human beings (puruṣārtha). These are: honestly gained wealth (artha); pleasure within the bounds of social norms (kāma); ritual and social obligations (dharma) and liberation from the world (mokṣa). The final goal of liberation links to the fourth stage of life and liberation from the world cycle is indeed held by very many Hindus to be the ultimate goal to be aspired for. However, the other three goals are also thought to be legitimate and worthwhile and this scheme of the four goals should serve to dispel a popular misconception that Hindus are solely concerned with liberation from the world. Most Hindus have valued the enjoyment of mundane goods and a successful life and concentrated their energies on their pursuit, just as they have valued the family life of the householder as the normative mode of human living.

**Vedic and non-Vedic Hindu Ritual**

Ritual plays a major role in the lives of almost all Hindus. Common rituals often serve as a unifying force for Hindus, who otherwise hold very different beliefs and ethical values, the function and meaning of any ritual being open to a number of different interpretations. Such ritual draws upon a number of authoritative sources in addition to the Vedic, especially those of Tantra. Indeed, central to Tantric Hinduism is an emphasis on rituals in the worship of deities, as a means to get powers and goods in the present life as well as final release from mundane existence.
For its part, Vedic ritual comprises a complex and comprehensive scheme for the public and domestic lives of the three upper castes. Vedic ritual is sacrifice (yajña) in the wider sense of ‘that which is made sacred,’ a central part of which is making oblations (homa) of different sorts into a sacred fire. Such ritual serves to uphold the dharma of human society and of the world as a whole. A member of the higher castes, especially a Brahman, should also ideally carry out rituals throughout the day, although many contemporary Hindus often perform only some of these or replace them with other non-Vedic ritual or devotional practices.

An important type of ritual is saṃskāra. These are rituals performed at different stages of a high caste Hindu’s life, from conception to death, and which enable a Hindu to progress from one stage to another and to the duties and entitlements that go with them. These include upanayana, when a male member of the three higher classes (varṇa) receives the sacred thread and becomes ritually one of the ‘twice-born,’ moving from childhood to being a student. Central to Hindu life is marriage (vivāha), whereby a Hindu becomes a householder, having the right and obligation to have rituals performed and to pursue the three goals of ordinary life, dharma, wealth and pleasure. The final saṃskāra is antyeṣṭi (the final sacrifice), the death rites. For most Hindus this means cremation and a set of rituals known as śrāddha, performed for ten days after the death, whereby the spirit of the dead person is enabled to move to the realm of the ancestors and the living are cleansed from the pollution that death brings.

One important type of ritual is that of mantra. Hindu ritual is suffused by the use of mantras drawn from Vedic, Tantric and other traditions. The importance and ubiquity of use of mantras in Hinduism testifies to the centrality of the spoken word in Hinduism as a creative and powerful force. A mantra is a verbal utterance, which may be a short phrase from a sacred text, or an invocation of a deity, or one or a set of syllables that may or may not have any recognisable meaning. Mantras are held to have great effectiveness when used properly by those entitled to do so. They are ‘verbal instruments’ containing the power of the transcendent reality that they express or address. In Vedic sacrificial ritual mantras drawn from the Vedic texts are essential
components of what makes the ritual effective. Among Vedic mantras is the āyatrī mantra, addressed to Savitar, the Sun, which while strictly something only a ‘twice-born’ male is supposed to recite each day, is now also far more widely used as a form of ritual activity, often in a recorded form. An even more important mantra is the sacred syllable, ‘Om,’ which is held to express the ultimate reality, the fundamental structure of the world and the essence of the Veda. Other non-Vedic mantras may invoke and serve as a way to experience the reality and grace of particular deities such as ‘Om namo Nārāyanāya’ or ‘Om namaḥ Śivāya’ addressed to the male deities, Viṣṇu and Śiva. A Tantric mantra held to express the reality and power of the Goddess, Tripurasundarī, ‘ha sa ka la hrīṃ, ha sa ka ha la hrīṃ, sa ka la hrīṃ,’ exemplifies the use of mantras made up of syllables without any ordinary meaning.

Festivals (utsava), pilgrimages (yātrā) and religious fairs (melā) are also important parts of Hindu ritual and have a wide appeal, open to a wide number of Hindus from different sections of society, and invested with a wide variety of meanings by different groups. They are immensely popular, with thousands, often millions taking part. Festivals, such as Dīvalī, the festival of lights, celebrated throughout the Hindu world, punctuate the year, while pilgrimage sites, such as Varanasi (Benares), are held to be ‘fords’ (tīrtha), crossing places where the transcendent realm is open to the mundane. The Purṇa Kumbha Melā, held at Prayaga (modern Allahabad), every twelve years, has in modern times been attended by crowds of up to twenty million.

Hindu ritual in general is informed by a number of important distinctions. One is between what is auspicious (śubha, mangala) and what is inauspicious, the idea being that certain times and certain things are auspicious and others not. Hindus will routinely aim to discern the auspicious time to hold a ritual such as marriage or undertake some activity, such as a business venture. Likewise, there is the distinction between purity (śauca, śuddhi) and impurity. Activities such as bathing or some types of food or substances, such as the products of the cow, promote purity, while other types of food or substances or people bring impurity. The idea of purity becomes a way of characterising life as a whole, covering attitudes of mind and morals as well as ritual
activities. A further important distinction is between merit (puṇya) and sin (papa). Merit is that which conduces to a good state of life or to a good state after life, for oneself or others, and can be gained from acting according to dharma, as well as by particular activities that are meritorious in character, such as properly performed ritual, or devotion to a deity, or giving, while sin accrues through acting against dharma. Sin can be of greater or lesser degree, but most sins can be expiated through the performance of penances, often determined by the community to which the individual belongs. Such penances include washing, fasting, pilgrimage or taking purifying substances from the cow.

**Dharma and Sādhanā**

The emphasis on dharma or right behaviour (orthopraxy) has also gone along with considerable tolerance of diverse beliefs (orthodoxy). Hindu individual and groups certainly regard some beliefs as more true than others and have engaged in vigorous intellectual debate with each other over this. Hinduism is not relativistic as such. However, since the upholding of dharma is primarily about right behaviour, there has been less emphasis that all publicly conform to one set of beliefs. Hindu society has thus accommodated many different world views (darśana), theistic traditions and paths of spiritual practice (sādhana) and allowed a considerable freedom of choice in what to believe and follow, even for those who belong to the same caste, community or family.

**Social Conflict and Reform**

The historical reality of the caste system has very often been experienced as exclusive and oppressive by those who are not ‘twice-born’ within the varṇa scheme, or those who are less pure within the jāti scheme, above all by those who are ‘untouchable.’ Lower castes have often been regarded as naturally inferior, enjoyed the least power, tended to have the worst occupations and the least wealth. Insofar as the caste system means the affirmation of a social and ritual hierarchy fixed by birth and justifies oppressive attitudes and conditions, it has received a number of challenges over the
centuries within Hinduism. Within traditional Brahmanical Hinduism itself there has long been a counter suggestion that the behaviour rather than the birth of an individual determines where in the caste system that individual should be classified. Moreover, in the course of Hindu history there have been ways in which the lower castes have tried to improve their status, either through simply claiming a higher caste status, or changing to a more pure life-style in order to get a higher status, or through adopting forms of religion that offer escape from the caste system. Thus, many theistic and devotional (bhakti) movements have developed in Hinduism that reject the caste hierarchy and exclusiveness, insisting that all people have equal and direct access to the divine. Moreover, mass conversion to other religions such as Islam, Christianity or Buddhism has always been a favoured option for lower castes in India.

In the modern period opposition to the inequalities in the traditional way the caste system manifested itself has been an important part of the reforms promoted by the leaders of the Hindu Renaissance or Reform. Hindu reformers often called for a retrieval of an idealised form of the varṇa scheme, as a system that simply distinguishes occupations within a harmonious society, based on individual talents and merits rather than birth. Moreover, they campaigned for the social emancipation of the poor, seeing it as an integral part of human duty and of the spiritual life. Central to Swami Vivekananda’s teaching is the idea of the common divinity of all people, meaning that all have one and the same divine spirit within them. He thus argued that service to the poor is both service to God and service to oneself. Mahatma Gandhi insisted that all people have an equal dignity and campaigned relentlessly against untouchability, renaming them Harijans (Children of God) and insisting that they be accepted as equal members of the Āśrama communities he set up. At the heart of Gandhi’s vision of religion is that it is a spiritual quest for God as Truth, realised through promoting a common ethic of non-violence (āhimsā) and service of all (sarvodaya).

The call and work for such reform has now become part of the modern political life of India. The Indian constitution that came into effect after Indian Independence in 1947 also made untouchability illegal and made provision for positive discrimination for
disadvantaged castes, who may form as much as fifty per cent of the present Hindu population. Moreover, in the twentieth century lower caste groups, especially the ‘untouchables’ have often renamed themselves as Dalits (derived from Sanskrit, meaning the ‘broken’ or ‘oppressed’) and actively asserted their voice and rights in the modern Indian state, even rejecting all association with the Hinduism of the upper castes, and insisting that they have a distinct culture and religion of their own.

2. **Moksha: World Renunciation and the pursuit of Liberation**

An abiding image of Hinduism for many people is the figure of the holy man (saṃnyāsin or sādhu), who has renounced the world (that is, the ritual and social world of dharma we have just considered), and who wanders as a mendicant, practising feats of great asceticism and meditation. The ultimate goal of these efforts is moksha (liberation from the world). Here we encounter an understanding of reality and of human life that permeates wider Hindu life and thought: the idea that a human being is composed of a spiritual core (ātman, the self or soul), which is immortal and an integral substance, but which comes to have a material body; that all embodied human beings are enmeshed in a cycle of countless rebirths (samsāra) generated by earlier good or bad actions (karma); and the idea that the life we experience in the world is fundamentally unsatisfactory and the source of suffering (duḥkha), but that it is possible to be liberated from the cycle of rebirth and come to experience a transcendent and blissful type of existence (mokṣa).

Over the course of the centuries many very different views have developed in Hinduism about what the precise nature of reality is, what the transcendent state of liberation is like, what relationship there is between ultimate reality and the finite things that make up the world, especially the finite self (ātman), and what the way to get to liberation is. There is a dualist view, which divides reality into material and spiritual causal principles. There is a monist view that views reality as ultimately just spirit. There is the realistic theist view that posits a divine Lord (Īśvara), who produces, sustains and destroys the world of spiritual and material entities. Over the centuries these views
have been developed into highly sophisticated and intellectually rigorous traditions of theology and philosophy (doṣana), engaged in active debate with each other, and producing textual accounts quite similar to Western Scholastic theology.

**Vedānta**

One of the most influential such tradition is that of Vedānta. Vedānta means the ‘end of the Veda,’ referring both the final section of the Vedic revelation, the sacred texts known otherwise as the Upaniṣads, and the traditions of theology that are based on them, the Vedāntic schools. Following the Upaniṣads, the Vedāntic traditions commonly call ultimate reality, Brahman, but they differ on whether they take a monist or a theistic view of how Brahman relates to the world, that is to say, whether they conceive of Brahman as the sole impersonal spiritual reality with which the finite self is identical, or whether they conceive of Brahman as a personal divine Lord with whom the finite self is in communion. The Upaniṣads teach that there is a close relationship between Brahman and the finite self, saying for instance, ‘this self is Brahman,’ (ayam ātmā brahma), or ‘you are that’ (tattvamasi), ‘I am Brahman, (aham brahmāsmi).’ The Vedānta schools differ on how precisely to interpret these and other texts. The monist tradition is known as Advaita (Non-dualism) and its most important teacher is Śaṅkara (788-820 A.D.). The theist traditions are many, but among them two of the most important are Viśiṣṭādvaita (Non-dualism of the Differentiated), whose great teacher is Rāmānuja (1017-1137 A.D) and Dvaita (Dualism), whose great teacher is Madhva (c. 1238-1317 A.D). For monists, liberation from the world consists in the blissful realisation of identity with Brahman, whereas for theists it is the realisation of a communion of knowledge and love with God.

The later tradition of Advaita Vedānta that developed after Śaṅkara and which has become accepted as the standard form of Advaita asserts that Brahman is ultimately the only reality that there is, being spiritual and pure blissful consciousness, and that the conscious core or self within each of us is identical with Brahman. The world as we experience it in all its diversity, including the experience that each of us has a finite self
distinct from others and from Brahman, seems real enough to us as we live ordinary lives. It is thus said to be practically real (vyāvahārika-sat), in contrast to Brahman, which is ultimately real (pāramārthika-sat). But this is actually the product of ignorance (avidyā). It is said to be indescribable either as existent or non-existent. As long as we remain in ignorance we go about our business, doing good and bad deeds, gaining their fruits, meritorious or sinful as the case may be, and so end up undergoing rebirths again and again. We also experience the shortcomings of such life; the fact that all good things come to an end and that often life is full of trials and suffering. It is only when we are liberated from this worldly existence that we see clearly that it is product of ignorance and illusory. Liberation comes through renouncing the ordinary life of dharma, through ascetical practice and above all through meditation on the teaching of the Upaniṣads, guided by a guru, a teacher who is already liberated. The central teaching of Advaita has often been summed up as ‘Brahman is real, the world is false, the self is Brahman not other.’

In Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, on the other hand, Brahman is identified with the personal divine Lord of theism. The permanent reality and distinction of God, spiritual finite selves and material things are affirmed. At the same time, the relation between them is described as advaita (non-dualism), because the finite selves and material things are contingent on the Lord for their existence at all times. In the teaching of the great teacher of this tradition, Rāmānuja, the central conception of this relationship is that the entities of the world form the body of Brahman. Liberation consists in the blissful realisation of this relationship and of the direct knowledge or vision of Brahman. In this state the self regains its proper nature as a non-material being, characterised by consciousness and bliss, enjoying an integral existence free from any material body. This comes about through bhakti (devotion), which Rāmānuja depicts in Vedāntic terms as a form of devotional mediation on the Vedāntic texts, a steady calling to mind of God that leads into vision of God. This process and the attainment of the final goal are, however, dependent on the God’s own choice for the devotee and the gift of his grace (anugraha).
Yoga

The term ‘yoga’ comes from a verbal root (yuj) meaning ‘to yoke together’ or ‘to unite.’ Yoga refers to a wide range of ethical, physical and meditational disciplines, which serve to control human behaviour, the body, and the consciousness. Yoga is used as a general term in many different traditions for such disciplines, but also more specifically for the Yoga traditions, where there is systematic exposition of yoga as a discipline and path to liberation from the confines of material embodiment.

One of the most important systematic tradition of yoga is the Rāja Yoga found in Patañjali’s Yogasūtra (around third century A.D.). Here yoga is said to be an ‘eight-limbed’ (āṣṭāṅga) process, whose aim is ‘the suppression of the fluctuations of the consciousness (citta).’ (Yogasūtra 2). Yoga accepts a dualist view of reality, in which there are two separate principles: a plurality of non-material conscious selves (puruṣa) and matter itself in its different forms (prakṛti). The self mistakenly thinks that it has a connection with matter and thus becomes bound up with bodily rebirths and experiences the suffering that this entails. The consciousness fluctuates because it has lost control of itself, influenced by the sense impressions and memories generated in the embodied state. One much favoured simile for yoga is that of a horse-drawn chariot. The fluctuating consciousness is like a man in a chariot when the horses are out of control, whereas yoga is like learning to control the horses. Yoga enables the consciousness to be controlled and to become ‘one-pointed’ (ekāgra), restraining human behaviour and the body.

The ‘eight limbs’ of Rāja Yoga are: restraint, observance, posture, breath-control, sense-withdrawal, concentration, meditation and absorbed concentration. By ‘restraint’ is meant general ethical practices of refraining from injuring other beings, lying, stealing, unchaste behaviour and greed. By ‘observance’ is meant the promotion of purity, contentment, austerity, study of sacred texts and devotion to the Lord. The stages of ethical, physical and mental control lead onto each other and allow the practitioner to control his or her consciousness. In the final stage of absorbed concentration
(samādhi), the practitioner becomes no longer conscious of his or her body and
environment. This leads eventually to final liberation (mokṣa), which in yoga is thought
of as a state of ‘isolation’ (kaivalya). Liberation is, thus, a freedom from any
involvement with matter, the self becoming isolated in blissful absorption in its own
consciousness.


Within Hinduism as a whole there are a vast number and huge variety of theistic cults
and gods and goddesses. Theistic religion is the primary religious expression of the
majority of Hindus. These theist religious traditions (sampradāya) have also developed
sophisticated systems of theology and demanding paths of ethical and spiritual
practice, centred around the particular deity worshipped in them, with their own
understanding of what constitutes dharma and mokṣa.

Theistic Traditions

While the many different local and regional cults and traditions have diverse historical
origins, they are often depicted as all being forms of three great pan-Indian theistic
traditions: Vaiṣṇavism centred on the god Viṣṇu; Śaivism centred on the god Śiva; and
Śākta religion centred on the Goddess often simply known as Śakti. Vaiṣṇavism
includes a variety of cults and traditions either centred on a form of Viṣṇu or on his
avatāras (descents). Images of Viṣṇu may be either anthropomorphic or theriomorphic,
depending on which form of his manifestation or descent they represent. Śaiva cults
and traditions likewise show a considerable variety of forms, some highly devotional in
character, others centred on initiation and ritual practice, some of which are on the
edges of or reject the norms of society. Śiva is depicted in a variety of forms, both
benign and terrifying, represented as a great ascetic and world renouncer, or as a great
lover and perfect householder. His images are either anthropomorphic or in the
aniconic form of the linga. Śakti or the Goddess is worshipped either as a local deity,
the consort of a male deity or as the ‘Great Goddess,’ the one who produces, sustains
and destroys the world. She too has benign and terrifying forms, and is the focus either of devotional worship or ritual practice. Often she is a force to be placated and animal sacrifice is a common feature within the Śākta traditions. Yet she is also the divine mother, whose ferocity liberates her devotees from the forces of ignorance and bondage.

The different theistic traditions in various ways draw on the many sources of Hinduism, such as the Vedic, Tantric, Purānic (of the sacred literature known as Purāṇas and hence the religion expressed by them) and more local traditions. The South Indian Śrī Vaishnava tradition, for example, is centred on Viṣṇu in the form of Nārāyaṇa together with his consort or Śakti, Śrī. This tradition bases its theology and practice on the theistic Vedānta of Rāmānuja, the Viṣṇu Purāṇa, the Tantric Pāñcarātra texts, as well as the devotional hymns of the Tamil saints, the Āḻvārs. Within this tradition Viṣṇu is depicted as having five forms or modes of manifestation: his supreme form; his creative manifestations; his descents in human or animal form (the avatāras); his descents into consecrated images (arcavatāra) and as the inner controller immanent in all things. Śrī Vaishnava practice affirms variously the Vedāntic path of meditation on Upaniṣadic texts, yogic discipline similar to that found in the Yoga Sūtras, the performance of the ritual and social dharma we have considered, and the devotional worship of the deity, focused especially on the images found in the South Indian temples of the tradition. Another South Indian tradition, Śaiva Siddhānta, is centred on Śiva, as the one who, along with his Śakti, has the five-fold action of producing, maintaining and destroying the world, and of concealing and revealing himself. Within this tradition reality is divided into a characteristically Śaiva scheme reflecting the depiction of Śiva as ‘Lord of beasts’ (Paśupati). Accordingly, there is said to be: pati (the Lord, Śiva); paśu (the ‘beast,’ the finite conscious self); and pāsa (the ‘bond,’ the material substrate, which binds the selves through impurity, karma and the obscuring power of the Lord). Through ritual action and the grace of Śiva, the paśu becomes freed of pāsa and comes to be like Śiva. Śaiva Siddhānta has its own Tantric Āgama texts as well as the devotional hymns of the Tamil Śaiva poet-mystics, the Nāyaṇmārs.
Forms of Worship

Images or symbols of these deities are housed in temples, found in domestic or wayside shrines. The actions of the deities are recounted in the vast traditions of Hindu mythology as recorded in sacred literature, portrayed on temples, or enacted in dramatic performances. The gods are worshipped in their shrines with offerings, lamps and chants (puja). They are celebrated in the many festivals that punctuate the year. In the modern period, traditional forms of Hinduism have found fresh expression through the media, so that there have been television serialisations, such as of the epic Rāmāyaṇa centred on the Vaiṣṇava deity, Rāma. Broadcast in 1987-88 every Sunday morning it captivated the Indian nation, with many millions watching every week.

Hindu theistic religion is also called bhakti religion. Bhakti means ‘attachment’ or ‘devotion’ and this encompasses all the different ways in which the deities are worshipped and human beings are attached to them, be it in the performance of rituals, recitation of sacred texts, singing of devotional hymns, or meditating on the deity. Theist traditions often distinguish between lower and higher forms of bhakti. Lower bhakti is shown to deities for protection and success in this life. A higher bhakti is when men and women cultivate intense devotional relationships of love and service for the deities, patterned on human relationships, such as that of parent and child, servant and master, or two lovers. Such devotion is focused on the deity as himself or herself the supreme object to be obtained, rather than the lesser motivation of protection or mundane goods. This is a source of delight in this life, as well as the means to get release from rebirth and realise blissful communion with the deity. Such release (mokṣa) is experienced as the fullest manifestation and eternal enjoyment of the relationship cultivated in this life. A central emphasis in different Hindu theistic traditions is the human need for divine grace (anugraha) and God’s willingness to give it to those who wish it either for success in this life or liberation from the world.

Conception of Deity
Are Hindus polytheists or monotheists? We have noted that Hinduism embraces all the different religions present in Hindu culture. Thus, Hindus cannot just be labelled as polytheist simply because of there being many theistic traditions. It is true that many Hindus treat the deities as distinct and localised forms of divine presence. However, within the sacred texts and practice of the developed theistic traditions there is the assertion that there is only one God and they relate the vast number of gods and goddess to that God in some way, as manifestations of it or as inferior beings. We have already seen that in Vedānta the concept of Brahman is that there is one ultimate reality, which is the source, or the reality, of everything else. Within the sacred literature of Hindu theism there is also found the concept of Bhagavān (the Lord) or Bhagavatī (the female form) and which asserts that is one God or Goddess who the creator, sustainer and destroyer of all the world, who is concerned for the welfare of human beings and who reaches out to them out of love for them. The members of the different theistic traditions, be they Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, or Śaṅkta, simply identify the deity they worship as Bhagavān/Bhagavatī with all that that entails in terms of attitudes towards other religious traditions. In theistic forms of Vedānta, moreover, the two concepts of Brahman and Bhagavān are naturally identified. Thus, it is fairer to say that Hinduism as a whole contains many different monotheist religions within it, as well as some polytheistic elements. As we have seen in the examples of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism and Śaiva Siddhānta, the male deity is conceived along with his Śakti, who is regarded as a eternal and integral aspect of that deity’s reality and activity. Since the unicity of the divine is also affirmed in such traditions such a conception of deity should not be regarded as polytheistic, since neither male nor female aspect has a separate existence. Rather the Hindu concept of deity here is perhaps better characterised as ‘binitarian’ in nature.

Most Hindu theistic traditions make much of the worship of images. Emphasis is placed on the proper ritual consecration of an image, especially the rite of prāṇa pratiṣṭhā, whereby the power and presence of the deity is installed into and enlivens the image. The consecrated image is thus regarded as the deity present in the image and treated as the deity. In the Pāñcarātra system, as we have noted, the consecrated image is said to
be the ‘image-descent’ of God. For members of the South Indian Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition the consecrated image is considered to be the most important way in which God makes himself easily accessible to human beings everywhere in the vulnerability of the materials used and is therefore the focus of intense devotion and reverence. As the Śrī Vaiṣṇava scholar, S.M. Srinivasa Chari, puts it, ‘The arcāvatāras (image-descents) are similar to the water present in the pools of the river bed and available at all times for a thirsty person’ (Vaiṣṇavism, Motilal Banarsidass, 1994 p.225).

**Part Two. A Catholic Approach to Hinduism**

**Official Church Teaching**

The Second Vatican Council gives a basis on which any Catholic approach to Hinduism should be formed. *Nostra Aetate* (the Declaration of the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), says of Hinduism:

> Thus in Hinduism men explore the divine mystery and express it in the limitless riches of myth and the accurately defined insights of philosophy. They seek release from the trials of this present life by ascetical practices, profound meditation and recourse to God in confidence and love (NA 2).

This statement clearly points to some of the important aspects of Hinduism we considered in part one, in particular to the pursuit of *mokṣa* (‘release from the trials of this present life’) and to the intellectual traditions that have developed around this, such as Vedānta and Yoga (‘the accurately defined insights of philosophy’) and to *bhakti* devotional theism (‘recourse to God in confidence and love’) and the rich and diverse narrative traditions with which Hindus celebrate and explore this (‘the limitless riches of myth’).

This short passage should be read in the wider context of what the rest of *Nostra Aetate* and other Conciliar documents teach about the Church’s relationship with other
religions. *Nostra Aetate* affirms the unity of humanity, which is rooted in the fact that all human beings have a common origin and destiny in God. Human beings look to their different religions for answers to the fundamental questions facing human life:

What is man? What is the meaning and purpose of life? What is upright behaviour, and what is sinful? Where does suffering originate and what end does it serve? How can genuine happiness be found? What happens at death? What is judgement? What reward follows death? And finally, what is the ultimate mystery, beyond human explanation, which embraces our entire existence, from which we take our origin and toward which we tend? (NA 1).

Thus, the features of Hinduism pointed out represent the answers Hinduism gives to these universal human questions. They also point to possible common ground between Hinduism and Christianity. *Nostra Aetate* goes on to establish the principles that govern the Church’s attitude and relation to other religions in general. The Church:

rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who the ‘the way, the truth and the life.’ (Jn1:6) (NA 2).

The Church’s approach, then, is one of openness to common ground, the ‘true and holy,’ as it may be found in Hinduism, as being a reflection of the truth and holiness, the saving revelation, that she proclaims to be fully present in Jesus Christ and which the Church manifests in her life and teaching.

In *Ad Gentes* (the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity), Christians are encouraged to ‘be familiar with their national and religious traditions and uncover with gladness and respect those seeds of the Word which lie hidden among them’ *(Ad Gentes*
Whatever truth or holiness is to be found in other religions serves as a ‘preparation for the Gospel’ (Ad Gentes 3). The ‘true and holy,’ wherever it is to be found, is a participation in, and points towards, the truth and holiness of Christ, just as the ‘seeds of the Word’ are a sharing in the Word that is incarnate as Christ. In like manner, Lumen Gentium (the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) talks of ways in which other religious traditions are ‘ordered’ or ‘related’ (ordinantur) to the Church (LG 16). Again, Gaudium et Spes (the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) affirms that the ‘Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery’ (GS 22).

In continuity with this, Papal teaching has affirmed that there are areas where Christians encounter common ground in Hinduism. Pope Paul VI characterises India as:

the home of a nation that has sought God with relentless desire, in deep meditation and silence, and in hymns of fervent prayer. Rarely has this longing for God been expressed with words so full of the spirit of Advent as in the words written in your sacred books many centuries before Christ, ‘from the unreal lead me to the real; from darkness lead me to light; from death lead me to immortality’ (Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad 1.3.28). (To the Representatives of Various Religions of India, Bombay 3 December 1964, in Francesco Gioia (ed), Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church (1963-1995), Pauline Books and Media, Boston, 1994 p.125).

He also points to the ‘religious disposition and a deep attachment to family life’ that ‘characterises India, and in general all the peoples of Asia.’ (To the People of India, Bombay 4 December, 1964, Gioia p.127).

In Redemptoris Missio, Pope John Paul II states that relations with members of other religions are governed by ‘Respect for man in his quest for answers to the deepest questions of his life, and respect for the action of the Spirit in man’ (RM 29). This refers
both to the natural dignity of all human beings and for what safeguards and promotes this, and to the spiritual calling of man, which finds its fulfilment in God, urged on by the universal presence and activity of the Holy Spirit drawing men and women to God. In keeping with this, the Pope praises the ‘spiritual vision of man’ found in the religious traditions of India:

In Fides at Ratio Pope John Paul II also promotes a Christian theological engagement with the intellectual traditions of India:

In preaching the Gospel, Christianity first encountered Greek philosophy; but this does not mean at all that other approaches are precluded.... My thoughts turn immediately to the lands of the East, so rich in religious and philosophical traditions of great antiquity. And among these lands, India has a special place. A great spiritual impulse leads Indian thought to seek an experience which would liberate the spirit from the shackles of time and space and would therefore acquire absolute value. The dynamic of this quest for liberation provides the context for great metaphysical systems (FR 72)

Earlier in the encyclical the Pope points to the continuing importance of the work of the St Thomas Aquinas as a model for how Christian theology can engage with non-Christian thought:

A quite special place in this long development belongs to Saint Thomas, not only because of what he taught but also because of the dialogue he undertook with the Arab and Jewish thought of his time. In an age when Christian thinkers were
rediscovering the treasures of ancient philosophy, and more particularly of Aristotle, Thomas has the great merit of giving pride of place to the harmony which exists between faith and reason (FR 43)

The Pope’s words suggest, then, that there can also be a dialogue between Christianity and Hindu thought, rooted in the same concern that Aquinas had for the harmony between faith and reason.

Pope Benedict XVI’s approach to interreligious relations, for its part, represents a continuation and re-affirmation of this tradition. In his teaching as Cardinal and Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, as well as Pope, a number of abiding themes emerge: a commitment to the objectivity of truth against relativism and the call for all to engage in a mutual search for truth; the affirmation of the importance of the use of reason in the exploration of faith; and the need for Christian theologians to consider the relationship that other religions actually have to Christianity, with a careful discernment of the difference between those traditions within a religion that have something in common with Christianity from those that are opposed to it (as, for instance, in Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. Many religions – One Covenant: Israel, the Church and the World, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1998; Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2004)

Such Conciliar and Papal teaching provides a set of principles and models that govern any Catholic account of Hinduism as a religion and any Christian theological engagement with Hindu religious traditions, as well as gives some concrete points of common ground with Hinduism. The Indian Christian community has itself sought in different ways to engage with the religious traditions of Hinduism in order to embed Christianity more fully in the religious cultures of India and to develop an authentically Indian Christian theology and spirituality. Catholics outside of India, for their part, encounter Hinduism both through the work of Christians in India, though Hindu communities in the West, and through academic and popular theological and spiritual writing promoting different forms of engagement.
In what follows we shall consider what a Catholic approach to those particular aspects of Hinduism we outlined in part one might be, giving some examples of existing Catholic engagements.

**Dharma and Caste**

Christian attitudes to Hindu dharma and to the caste system in particular are matters of great sensitivity in the modern encounter between Christians and Hindus, both in India and the rest of the world. What is required is a careful and balanced approach. There is a need to avoid generalisations. Hindus have had many different views on and ways of realising the dharma of society, some of which have greater common ground with Christian teaching, some less.

For instance, Catholic teaching about the structure of Church life and social teaching would seem to be comfortable with the principle of svadharma in itself. Catholic Christianity teaches that the Church has a hierarchical structure instituted by Christ, in which there is a variety of offices as well as charisms (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), Revised English edition, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1999, para. 874-945). Moreover, as articulated especially in canon law and social doctrine, the Church depicts Christian life as a matter of different duties and rights that pertain to the states of life and the offices that particular members of the Church may have (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Compendium), Pontifical Council for Social Justice, English translation: Continuum, London and New York, 2005, para.156). Catholic social teaching also recognises the diversity of human beings, with different characters and talents, as part of the divine will that people find their fulfilment through sharing their abilities and resources with each other (CCC 1936-7).

At the same time, the Church teaches that all people have a common and equal natural dignity and set of rights that follow from this, as created in the image and likeness of God (CCC 1934; NA 5; Compendium 144-148) and that within the redemptive order
brought about by Christ there is a fundamental unity and inclusiveness that means that there is ‘neither Jew nor Greek, male or female, slave nor free’ (Gal: 3:28). Christianity does not restrict access to the Bible or to the sacraments to any particular group. As a religion, Christianity has also moved away from laws of ritual impurity or restrictions on contact or eating. The fundamental unity and equality of all members of the Church is expressed above all in the central Christian act of religion, the Eucharistic meal. The Church teaches also that all people have the duty to work in solidarity with other members of society against unjust inequalities and for the just distribution of goods, out of respect for the human dignity of all (CCC 1938-42; Compendium 192-96).

Catholic teaching, then, balances a recognition of the good of diversity in occupations and gifts with an insistence on the common dignity of all people. Inevitably it approaches Hindu accounts of caste from this perspective and welcomes Hindu accounts of dharma that also affirm this. We have already noted that there have been many traditions or individuals within Hinduism, such as the devotional or bhakti movements, or modern reformist Hindus like Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi, that have sought to counter inequalities and oppressive attitudes and practices present in Hindu society and to affirm the equal dignity of all people. The teaching of these Hindu reformers represents, for its part, an important manifestation of the influence of Christian social ethics has had on Hindus in the modern period, since the leaders of Reformed Hinduism had great admiration for the ideas they found in the New Testament, allowing them to inform their own understanding of what Hindus should think and behave.

On his first visit to India, Pope John Paul II made a point of praising Gandhi and promoted Gandhi’s teaching as a model for India and the world:

Mahatma Gandhi taught that if all men and women, whatever the differences between them, cling to the truth, with respect for the unique dignity of every human being, a new world order – a civilisation of love- can be achieved. Today we hear him still pleading with the world: ‘Conquer hate by love, untruth by truth.
by violence by suffering.’ (Tribute to the Monument of Gandhi, New Delhi 1 February, 1986, Gioia, p.309)

Likewise, in calling on all the people of India to affirm that working for the social emancipation of those who are suffering or in want is part of genuine spirituality, he drew attention to the words of one of the many leaders of the devotional movements, the Śaiva Siddhānta Nāyaṇmār, Pattinattar:

Because we believe in man, in his value and in its his innate excellence, we love him and serve him and seek to relieve his sufferings. As the sage of Tamilnadu, Pattianattar, puts it: ‘Believe the One above. Believe that God is. Know that all other wealth is naught. Feed the hungry, know that righteousness and good company are beneficial; be content that God’s will be done. A sermon unto you, O heart!’ (To Representatives of the Various Religions of India, Madras 5 February, 1986, Gioia, 325)

The Catholic community in India has had to evolve its own approach to the teaching and realities of dharma and caste. Low caste Hindus have, in the course of the centuries, been attracted to Christianity in large numbers, but Catholic missionaries have also tried to accommodate higher castes concerns as well. This has meant that attempts were often made to accommodate some caste distinctions, though always in a much reduced form. Thus, the early Jesuit missionary, Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) argued that certain aspects of caste were social rather than religious and could therefore be accepted by Christianity. He adopted the life-style of a high caste Hindu and make provision for separate space for Brahmins within Christian churches. And as late as the early 20th century, there were attempts to set up separate establishments for Brahmins. However, to what extent caste traditions could and should be accommodated within the Indian Christian community always remained a matter of contention.

In the second half of the twentieth century the Indian Catholic community has come to be much more sensitive to the particular difficulties and perspectives of Dalit
Christians (those Christians belonging to the lower caste groups, especially the ‘untouchables’), who now make up the overwhelming majority of the Church community. Dalit Christians argue that the Church should reject any association with Hindu caste hierarchy, be it with its social customs and the distinctions made within it, or with those elements of Hindu theology and spirituality that have supported caste hierarchy. Some Indian Catholic theologians have accordingly developed forms of liberation theology that critiques Hinduism from a liberational perspective, accepting only those elements that affirm equality and social emancipation in this life as well as spiritual liberation.

Dalit Christians also complain of the continuing presence of the exclusivity of the caste system within the Church community itself, because the Church hierarchy tends to be dominated by a high caste minority, with very few Dalit clergy. It also remains the case that in some places high caste and Dalit Christians worship separately and are buried in different cemeteries. Dalit Christians feel that they are subject to a double discrimination with modern Indian society. As Christians they do not enjoy the same rights as Hindu Dalits under the Indian Constitution, because, whereas Dalit Hindus receive forms of positive discrimination, Christians get none on the grounds that there is no caste in Christianity.

The perspective and concerns of Dalit Christians thus represents an important challenge to the longstanding tendency on the part of Western missionaries working in India to privilege Brahmanical Hinduism when they seek to develop and Indian Christianity by adopting forms of Hindu culture or engage in Christian-Hindu dialogue. For Dalit Christians this represents a form of collusion with the ideologies of oppression found within Hinduism. Moreover, they argue that in any case they have a different culture and that this is the one with which Christianity should engage and find an authentically Indian expression. At the very least, we can see here something of the difficulties in the inculturation of the Gospel when it comes to something as complex and contested as Hinduism.
Vedānta

Vedānta is a tradition where Hindus 'seek release from the trials of this present life by ascetical practices and profound meditation' (NA 2). Vedānta is also a system of exegesis and reasoning, which manifests the 'the accurately defined insights of philosophy' (NA 2) to be found in Hinduism. Theological and spiritual engagement with Vedānta has, in fact, proved very significant in Catholic engagement with Hinduism, especially in the modern period. Because of the particular importance of Thomism (the theology based on the thought of Thomas Aquinas) for Catholic theologians, there has been a particular emphasis on exploring what relationship Thomism might have with Vedānta both in the general assessment of how Christianity and Hinduism relate as religious traditions, as well as within a particular interest in how Vedāntic ideas might help develop an Indian Christian Thomist theology. Thus, in the modern period, a considerable number of theologians working in India, such as Fr Pierre Johanns S.J. (1885-1955), Fr Richard de Smet S.J. (1916-1998), and Sr Sara Grant RSCJ (1922-2000) all studied the Vedānta and sought to relate it to the Thomist account. This particular encounter, then, serves as a good example of what Pope John Paul II promotes in *Fides et Ratio*. Just as Christian theology in the Mediaeval period could engage with different forms of non-Christian thought, so Christian theology might also engage in a similar manner with Hindu traditions, such as the Vedānta.

Likewise, there has an interest in a deep experiential encounter with Vedāntic spirituality in a monastic context, bearing fruit in the development of Christian Ashrams, modelled on Hindu religious communities. Thus, the French Benedictine monk, Fr Henri Le Saux (otherwise known as Swami Abhishiktananda) (1910-73), founder of the best known Christian Ashram, Shantivanam, immersed himself totally into the life-style of a Hindu saṃnyāsin and into Vedāntic spirituality as he found it in the *Upaniṣads* and in the teaching of the contemporary Hindu guru, Ramana Mahārshi (1879-1950).
Thus, the possibilities, as well as the problems, associated with Catholic engagement with Vedānta can serve as a representative model for engagement with the many other intellectual and spiritual traditions of Hinduism. Clearly, there is here the general problem that Vedānta has developed in such a very different context, drawing on sacred texts and paradigms ideas that have no historical connection with those of Christianity. Much of Vedānta would seem simply incompatible in its present form with Christian faith and practice. The model of the medieval period is, however, instructive for what might be involved in a Christian appropriation of Vedānta, since when a theologian like Aquinas engaged with Greek, Jewish or Muslim thought, there was a process of transformation as well as adoption of ideas and we should expect the same to take place when it comes to engagement with Hindu traditions. Yet, there is here also the problem of how to find the right balance between what any Christian theologian or spiritual practitioner might want to conclude or do as an individual and what accords with the ecclesial responsibility that person has to the wider Christian community not to promote ideas or to engage in activities that contradict or undermine what that community in India or in the Church as a whole can make sense of or accept at any given point. Unfortunately, that balance has often not been maintained, when it comes to Christian engagement with Vedānta in the modern period.

Much of the encounter with Vedānta in this period has been an engagement with the particular tradition of Advaita Vedānta, for the historical reason that at the end of the nineteenth century and into the first half of the twentieth century, Advaita Vedānta was given huge prestige by Western and modern Hindu scholars, so that it seemed that this was the Hindu tradition that Christians should engage with, often to the relative neglect of other traditions, Vedāntic or otherwise. In its standard form outlined in part one, Advaita is, however, clearly incompatible with the articles of Christian faith. Christianity is theistic and Trinitarian, whereas the Brahman in Advaita Vedānta is not the personal Lord of theism, nor is there any real parallel for the Trinitarian distinction within Brahman. Christianity holds to the reality and goodness of a created world, whereas Advaita takes the world to be the product of ignorance and the arena of
rebirth and suffering. Christianity maintains that the human being is an integral composite of body and soul, created in the image of God and an entity distinct from God, whereas Advaita maintains a dualist understanding of the human person, in which the spiritual core, the self, is identical with Brahman. Christianity is concerned with the redemption of the world, whereas in Advaita the goal is the transcendence of the world.

Some theologians engaging with Advaita, such as Richard de Smet S.J and Sara Grant R.S.C.J., however, have suggested that Thomism and Advaita are in fact compatible (for de Smet see Malkovsky, B.J. ed, New Perspectives on Advaita Vedanta; Essays in Commemoration of Professor Richard de Smet S.J., Brill, Leiden, 2000 and for Grant see Grant,S., Towards an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-dual Christian, University of Notre Dame, Indiana, 2002). Śaṅkara, the greater teacher of Advaita, they argue, has a theist and a realist account very different from the later form Advaita takes. De Smet and Grant argue that in Śaṅkara’s account the Advaitic distinction between the ultimately real and practically real should be taken as one between self-subsistent being and contingent being, rather than between what is real and what is the product of ignorance. Likewise, Śaṅkara’s affirmation of the identity of the soul with Brahman is to be understood as teaching only that the soul has no independent existence apart from Brahman. Statements that seem to deny the real production of the world, likewise, only deny that Brahman undergoes change in the production of the world. Śaṅkara’s account can, thus, be said to be compatible with the Thomist account of God and creation, concerned to express the same non-reciprocal relation of dependence that Aquinas does through his account of mixed relations. The central concept of non-dualism (advaita) in Śaṅkara is thus not the same as monism, for it affirms dependence not identity of being.

For de Smet the difference between Śaṅkara and Aquinas is one of expression, not of content. Śaṅkara affirms contingency by a more negative approach, whereby the reality of finite pales into insignificance when set against that of absolute being, whereas Aquinas has a more positive approach, using the language of participation. De
Smet and Grant have also come to talk of the Advaitic account as a complementary expression that might enrich the Thomist account and Christian experience. Grant argues that non-dual language and experience, as well as the Vedantic emphasis on the immanence of Brahman, challenges tendencies in western theological discourse towards a dualism between God and the world, in which God is depicted as outside and remote from the world.

This attempt to argue for an alternative reading of Advaita remains problematic, since it has won little wider acceptance, despite the painstaking efforts of de Smet and Grant to argue that this is the meaning of Śaṅkara’s own account. Nonetheless, we could say that it is at least a possible Christian re-reading of Śaṅkara’s Advaita in the light of Thomas Aquinas and very much in the tradition of what Aquinas himself did with non-Christian accounts. Likewise, spiritual or contemplative encounter with Advaita has often worked well as a form of a Christian transformation of the Advaitic experience. This is the case with the early work of Henri Le Saux. In his earlier encounter with Advaitic spirituality, Le Saux sought to find ways in which Advaita might be transformed by and fulfilled in Christian Trinitarian faith. Contemplating the Vedāntic description of Brahman as ‘being, consciousness and bliss’ (sat-cit-ānanda), he found there a Vedāntic understanding of Brahman that could be transformed into a Trinitarian concept, of Father (sat), Son (cit) and Spirit (ānanda). In this he picked up a long-standing Christian Trinitarian reading of this Vedāntic formula that still remains popular in India.

Unfortunately, later in life, Le Saux failed to maintain the balance needed in such encounter. Instead, he allowed his Christian faith in the Trinity to be sublimated by the Advaitic experience of the unity of all in Brahman. For Le Saux Christian faith about the Incarnation of Christ had to be transformed into Advaitic categories, so that Christ is no longer the unique union of God and man, but an exemplar of the relationship that all human beings have with Brahman. (For an insight into the evolution of Le Saux’s thought, see James Stuart, ed, *Swami Abhishiktananda:His Life Told Through His Letters*, 33
ISPCK, India, 1995. His final assimilation to the Advaitic perspective is evident in the letters written in his last year of 1973).

Catholic theological and spiritual encounter with Advaita Vedānta, then, works best when it results in a Christian transformation of Advaita, similar to the transformation of Greek, Jewish and Islamic thought by Aquinas. The fact that in the case of some thinkers it appears to have done the reverse makes clear the need for careful discernment on the part of the Church community as a whole before adopting any such account.

Apart from Advaita, there are the many theistic traditions of Vedānta with which Christianity might seem to have more immediate common ground. Such forms of Vedanta, such as that developed by Rāmānuja, are monotheistic and realist and so already lack some of the marked incompatibility that Advaita has with the Christian account of God and creation. Theistic Vedānta, moreover, serves as the intellectual system supporting many of the devotional (bhakti) traditions in Hinduism, which would also seem to have much in common with Christian theism.

Theistic Vedānta would, in fact, seem to have much that is compatible with the particular account of God and of the creation and governance of world found in the *Prima Pars* of Aquinas’ *Summa Theologia*, although also manifestly different in certain respects. The concept of God found in theistic Vedānta is in many ways fundamentally similar to Aquinas’ account of God considered in the unity of the divine essence. Both traditions affirm that God is one, omniscient, omnipotent, wholly perfect and immutable, intimately present in all things. On the other hand, theistic Vedānta affirms the real distinction of attributes in God in a way that contrasts with the absolute simplicity emphasised by Aquinas. Moreover, the God of theistic Vedānta remains Unitarian rather than Trinitarian in character, although when this is combined with the other theistic traditions, such as that of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism, which affirm the existence of the divine consort, Śakti, as an eternally existing and integral part of the divine being, then the concept of God does acquire a binitarian character.
Theistic Vedānta can also be said to teach a creational relationship between God and the world, insofar as it maintains both that the world depends on Brahman at all times for its existence and that God governs the world in general and exercises a particular moral rule over human affairs, without undermining the freedom of human beings. On the other hand, theistic Vedānta also affirms the eternity of the world. The world as we experience it is produced from a more subtle state at each beginning of a new cycle of time, rather than created ex nihilo in the sense of created in or with time. Like Advaita, much of theistic Vedānta uses language and imagery that affirm a unity between God and the world in a way unfamiliar to Christian imagery, as in Rāmānuja’s depiction of the world as the body of God. However, it is a mistake to think that theistic Vedānta is pantheistic as a result, since the language are images are interpreted in such as way as to affirm the transcendence of God, as well as the world’s difference from God.

At the same time, when it comes to the understanding of human nature and hence human destiny, theistic Vedānta remains the product of a very different tradition from the Thomist account. As with other Hindu traditions it affirms a fundamentally dualist anthropology that contrasts with the Christian understanding of the human person as a body and soul composite (For a fuller account of the relationship between theistic Vedānta and the Thomist account, see Ganeri, M., Indian Philosophy and Western Theism, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, forthcoming).

Yoga

Many Christians have been on courses in Yoga and found it to be of considerable value as a method of control over the body and mind, whether for therapeutic purposes or better concentration. However, it is important to bear in mind that Hindu traditions of yoga and meditation are also embedded in spiritual paths with goals somewhat different from those found in Christianity. There is a need for a certain caution, then, in taking up these forms of practice.
A considered official guide on these matters is to be found in *Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, a document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1989. The document notes the interest many Christians have in Eastern methods, be they derived from Hindu or Buddhist traditions. As the document asserts, however, the value of engagement with such traditions is determined by the degree to which it accords with authentic Christian spirituality, which is determined by the principles and goals of Christian faith. Christian spirituality is Trinitarian and incarnational in character and aims at a personal encounter with God and a communion of knowledge and love with God’s triune life. Thus, while the Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in Eastern traditions, ‘one can take from them what is useful so long as the Christian concept of prayer, its logic and requirements, are never obscured.’ (*Some Aspects of Christian Meditation* Para. 4, Gioia, p.600).

In terms of the systematic yoga of the *Yoga Sūtras* the difference in goals and the means to them is quite marked. The dualist metaphysics of Yoga and the goal of separation from any materiality contrasts with the Christian view of creation, human nature and the goal of bodily resurrection. Although, in Yoga the concept of a Lord is affirmed, this is simply an object for meditation. The goal is not union with the Lord, nor is the Lord the creator of the world. Moreover, the path of Yoga remains something the practitioner has to achieve for him- or herself, in contrast to the fundamental Christocentric and grace-dependent path of Christian soteriology.

**Bhakti**

In section one we also considered Hindu devotional theism (*bhakti*). Here too Hindus ‘seek release from the trials of this present life by ascetical practices, profound meditation and recourse to God in confidence and love’ and express it through ‘the ‘limitless riches of myth and the accurately defined insights of philosophy.’ (NA 2).

What should a Catholic attitude to Hindu theism be? What sense should Catholics make of the Council’s words that Hindus have ‘recourse to God in confidence and love?’ This is also a difficult area and what follows is meant simply as a possible pointer to a
Catholic approach that upholds the two principles of Church teaching: that the Church ‘rejects nothing that is true and holy’ and that the Church ‘proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the ‘the way, the truth and the life.’’ (Jn1:6) (NA 2).

Hindu theism abounds in a rich mythology, which includes many vivid accounts of the exploits of the gods and goddesses depicted within them. Christians have often found the events and the imagery contained in these myths to be surprising and even shocking. A particularly difficult case for Christians has been the rich and very important body of erotic mythology, which comes to play a central part in the formation of Hindu devotional attitudes towards the divine. A good example of this is the account of the male deity, Kṛṣṇa, who descents as a human being to live with the cow-herding people of the North Indian region of Vraja. Here he grows up and as a young man engages in various love-games with the cow-herd women (gopīs), even though many of them are already married and hence such a relationship flaunts the established dharma. Enchanted by the sound of his flute and driven by intense desire for him, they abandon homes and husbands to dance with their divine lover in the autumnal moonlight. The pain of separation, and the bliss of erotic union, especially the love-affair between Kṛṣṇa and his favourite cowherd woman, Rādhā, has been retold time and again in the devotional literature, often in quite graphic detail.

Here, however, it is important to have an informed understanding of what myths and imagery do within Hinduism. For Hindus, these serve as vehicles for expressing the nature of the divine and to promote human relationships with the divine. They serve to explore and evoke devotional and ethical attitudes. The mythology and imagery are also interpreted according to the norms of dharma and the sophisticated theologies that have developed in Hinduism, such as the Vedānta. It is, then, these, truths and models for behaviour that Hindus derive from the myths and imagery that need to be considered in any Christian approach to Hindu mythology. In the mythology of Kṛṣṇa, for example, the erotic exploits of the deity with the cow-herd women of Vraja serve as a vehicle for promoting intense devotion to God, both with the blissful delight of
mystical union with God and the unbearable pain of separation from God. The mythology itself is not understood to encourage sexual licence between human beings. The problematic nature of such mythology is acknowledged and addressed in the devotional literature and their commentaries. In the case of Kṛṣṇa and the women of Vraja, one explanation is that Kṛṣṇa remains untouched by such acts and engages in them only in order to arouse devotion in human beings (Bhāgavata Purāṇa X. 33).

The imagery and modes of Hindu bhakti find their counterpart in the rich devotional traditions of Mediaeval Christian spirituality. As we have seen, Hindu devotional theism’s emphases and explores the cultivation of a range of devotional relationships found expressed in the mythology and which mirror the different relationships human beings have with each other, such as that of master and servant, parent and child, as well as that of two lovers. Christian spirituality has likewise explored and cultivated these relationships in developing the devout and mystical life. We might call to mind here the long tradition of Christian commentary on the Song of Songs, such as that by Bernard of Clairvaux, and the ‘bridal mysticism’ of the mediaeval period, or the exploration of the motherhood of God in the writings of Julian of Norwich.

Christianity would, then, find some common ground in those traditions of Hindu theism that are centred on bhakti, when this cultivates a loving relationship with God, and when the need for divine grace is emphasised. Here we might identify ‘recourse to God in confidence and love’ (NA 2). In one sense Christians and Hindus still do not worship the same God, since the particular accounts of God found in these traditions and the modes of worship are different. To say that Hindus have ‘recourse to God’ is then to say that Hindus have recourse to the same concept of God, but to the same reality behind the conception of God. At the same time, however, there are also common elements in the conception of God and common modes of approaching God. So, a Hindu might be also said to participate in the ‘true’ of the Christian understanding of God. We have already noted the theistic Vedānta traditions as a case of this.
Above all, it is with Hindu bhakti traditions that Christianity finds a common experience of divine love as being at the heart of the human encounter with God and as the dynamic within a God-centred life. Reflecting his own deep knowledge of the South Indian devotional tradition of Śaiva Siddhānta and affirming his sense of the common ground between this tradition and Christianity, the Indian theologian Dhavamony, for instance, describes the Hindu bhakti religions as India’s ‘Religions of Love.’ He sees this as the proper meeting point of Christianity and Hinduism. As he puts it:

Of all Hindu religious experience, bhakti experience comes close to Christian experience, for in this experience we come across the necessity of repentance and of a purified heart before God’s grace can become effective, the need of realizing fellowship with God in union with Him, and the profound sense of dependence on Him alone and of loyal service and surrender to Him (Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Theological Soundings and Perspectives, Rodopi, 2002, p. 47)

Such bhakti experience might be a point where a Christian can also identify the presence of the ‘holy’ in Hinduism. We have noted that Pope John Paul II makes the universal presence and activity of the Spirit and the universal offer of divine salvation through the Spirit important themes in his teaching about other religions. This is always the Spirit of Christ, who offers the salvation found in Christ and who brings about a relation to the Church, as the sacrament of that salvation (Redemptoris Missio 10). The Pope teaches that:

The Spirit manifests himself in a special way in the Church and in her members. Nevertheless, his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time (DEV 53). The Second Vatican Council recalls that the Spirit is at work in the heart of every person, through the ‘seeds or the Word,’ to be found in human initiatives – including religious ones - and in man’s efforts to attain truth, goodness and God himself (AG 3,11,15; GS 10-11,22,26,38, 92-3) (RM28).
The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history, ‘The Spirit of God with marvellous foresight directs the course of the ages and renews the face of the earth’ (GS 26) (RM28)

The Church does not teach that other religious traditions are ways of salvation, separate from, or equal and alternative to, the way of salvation found in Christ. Insofar as the Spirit communicates divine grace and makes members of other religious traditions holy and insofar as that holiness is then manifest in other religious traditions, this is always a participation of the holiness of Christ. As the Pope teaches, the Spirit is manifest in the ‘the ‘seeds of the Word’ to be found in the human initiatives – including religious ones – and in man’s efforts to attain truth, goodness and God himself.’ In this sense then, Catholics might look to see the holy in the traditions of Hindu theism.

Dhavamony, for his part, offers us a helpful account that affirms the presence of the holy in Hindu bhakti religion. His account is important and helpful because it combines both a deep knowledge of Hindu bhakti traditions in their historical and theological reality and a sensitivity to the issues facing a Catholic Christian theological account that aims to adhere to normative Christian teaching. Dhavamony relates the central Christian experience of the gift of God’s love to the Hindu experience of bhakti of divine grace within it. Whereas Christianity and Hinduism clearly differ as objective, or ‘thematic,’ historical religions, they nonetheless meet ‘at the horizon of unthematic theological life’ where, as Dhavamony puts it, ‘theological’ refers to the communion with the living God. This communion surpasses the ‘natural’ capacities of the human being, and is possible only through the gratuitous self-communication of God.’ (2002, p. 33).

The theological life experienced by both Christian and Hindu is a common experience of the same God of love and of the gift of God’s love. In other words, the bhakti experience, which is then expressed in the historical and particular bhakti traditions, should be acknowledged to be an encounter with the Spirit, the grace of God, a place...
where the ‘holy’ clearly manifests itself in Hinduism. Dhavamony likens the relationship of this common theological life and the particular experience of the gift of God’s love in Christ to the relationship between grace and sacrament. The grace given in the sacrament is more widely experienced than the sacrament, but remains the same grace as given in the sacrament and a participation in the fullness of what is given in the sacrament. (2002, pp. 33–41).

This account has the strength that it both recognises what the evidence of the Hindu bhakti religions themselves suggest, while reaffirming the absolute and universal character of Christ as the Way of salvation. At the same time it has to be balanced from a Christian perspective with an affirmation of the qualitative difference that the Incarnation and the sacramental economy of the Church make to the communication of divine grace and the realisation of salvation for human beings. In other words, the particularity of the saving revelation and action found in Christ and the particular efficacy of the Christian sacraments mean that the relationship between Hinduism and Christianity cannot be reduced adequately to one of a quantitative part-whole relationship or just the difference between implicit and explicit access to the same divine grace, as if it does not really make that much difference at the end of the day whether one is a Hindu or Christian theist.

Indian Christians have themselves felt able to engage with the literary forms, concepts and sentiments found in Hindu devotional theism in order to develop forms of Indian Christian hymns and poets, directed towards the Trinity, Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary. As we have noted in our discussion of Christian approaches to dharma, the egalitarian aspects of the Hindu theism found in the devotional movements have also appealed to Indian Christians concerned with what in Hinduism seems most conducive to social emancipation. This had led to the evolution of an Asian form of liberation theology that finds in the bhakti traditions a liberative core within Hinduism. It is in this context that a liberative hermeneutic of religions is favoured by many Indian theologians for determining what kind of inculturation there can be into the traditions of Hinduism. A prominent advocate of this in India, Soosai Arokiasamy, (‘Theology of
Religions from Liberation Perspective’ in Pathil (ed) *Religious Pluralism: An Indian Christian Perspective*, ISPCK: 1999, pp 300-323), identifies the bhakti movements, themselves usually inspired by members of the lower castes or outcastes, as liberative because God is held to offer salvation equally to all whatever their status, thereby rendering irrelevant the spiritual hierarchy and exclusiveness of the caste system, and because they emphasise the need for social emancipation in this life along with final liberation. Within this perspective bhakti has historically often lost its liberative power, when it has been combined with an affirmation of the values of the caste system or a world-transcending spirituality. Nonetheless, this kind of Asian liberation theology in encounter with bhakti represents an interesting point of Christian encounter with Hinduism that has the potential to mediate between concerns to engage with Brahmanical Hindu culture and the social concerns of Dalit Christians.

The positive approach to Hindu bhakti religion among Indian Christians, such as Dhavamony, contrasts with the condemnation of Hindu theism by earlier generations of European missionaries, for whom Hindu theism represented the epitome of polytheism, idolatry and superstition. Moreover, it stands in contrast with the tendency to favour Advatia Vedānta as the Hindu tradition as both the best that Hinduism had to offer and the one with which Christian theologians and contemplatives should engage. This more positive attitude to and engagement with Hindu theism represents a remarkable shift in the Catholic and wider Christian approach to Hinduism and a substantial advance in interreligious understanding of significance both for the Catholic community in India and more widely.

**Further Reading**

**Introductions to Hinduism**


**Christian Approaches to Hinduism and Hindu-Christian Dialogue**

Robinson, B., Christians Meet Hindus, Regnum, Delhi 2004

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