

# Evangelism: Defending the Faith

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**Four Stages of Life** – are correlated with the Four Purposes of Life or *ashramas*

1. **Brahmacarin** – *pursuing sacred knowledge* – the stage of being a student, when a young person lives in the home of the guru and learns about the tradition
2. **Grihastha** – *householder* – the stage of becoming married, raising a family, and fulfilling one's basic social responsibilities in the community
3. **Vanaprastha** – *forest-dweller* – the stage of retirement from ordinary family life and social obligations, when one begins to think about the ultimate goal of Moksha
4. **Sannyasin** – *abandoning – renunciation* – the stage when one renounces all worldly attachments and becomes naked, wandering ascetic in pursuit Moksha.
  - ✓ The stages are a matter of personal choice, and most Hindus go only as far as the first two.
  - ✓ The Four Purposes of Life and the Four Stages of Life are correlated with the four groups of castes, or *varnas* or *jatis*.
    - Caste is from the Portuguese word *casta* meaning breed, race or kind.
    - The word was first used by the Portuguese when they came to India in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in order to describe the peculiar social groupings that they noted among the people of India.
    - There were groups of families 1. Having the same name; 2. Intermarrying with one another; 3. Following the same occupations; 4. Following certain elaborate rules and restrictions about eating, drinking and exchanging with other groups; 5. Arranging themselves in each area in certain hierarchical orderings.

## **The division of castes is fourfold:**

1. **Brahmins** (priests), the highest castes, made up of those collections of families considered the purest and most learned among the people of India
2. **Kshatriyas** (warriors) the next highest castes, made up of those collections of families with primary responsibilities in the areas of governance and maintenance of social order, especially the function of kingship;
3. **Vaishya** – belonging to the people, those collections of families involved in commerce, business and ordinary economic productivity;
4. **Shudra** – servile, the lowest castes of servants or those collections of families who serve the higher castes. The highest three castes are referred to as twice-born (dvija) since they are eligible for initiation into sacred learning; in other words they are permitted to learn about the Vedas.

The lowest castes of Shudras are not permitted to study scriptures. In addition to this hierarchical fourfold grouping, there is yet another grouping that is even lower than the Shudras – the **Untouchables** (*asprishya* or *candela*).

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These are families that are considered to be polluted because they are involved in such activities as cleaning human waste areas, removing dead animals, tanning and so forth.

The Untouchables usually live in segregated areas outside of the main village or town.

The major different between as **caste in contrast to a class** system is for the most part there is almost no mobility. History depicts that that there has been more flexibility and mobility among these caste groupings in various parts of India than originally thought.

However the more rigid, modern system of caste developed during the 1200-1750 C.E. (C.E. – known as common/Christian/current era) of Muslim dominance in India.

## The Muslim Period – 1200 – 1757 C.E.

- Contact with Islamic culture occurred as early as the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century largely through Arab traders coming to India.
- The Muslim military traveled into India in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Muslim descendants of Mahmud established the Delhi Sultanate that ruled north India for 3 centuries.
- Islamic rule was sometimes harsh and uncompromising; however, Muslim rulers accommodated the Hindu culture.
- Dara Shikoh a follower of Sufi mystical orders – was a student of Hindu philosophy. His brother had him executed – mainly for political reasons but history reports that he had become too influenced by heretical Hindu ideas.
- As new leadership took place, the accommodation between Islam, Hinduism and other religious traditions came to an abrupt halt. Islamic orthodoxy was enforced in court circles.
- Any compromise or accommodation between Islam and Hinduism during the centuries of Muslim domination hardly went beyond a very small elite in court circles.
  - Basically, Islam and Hinduism have barely coexisted in India over the centuries
  - The mutual hostility and suspicion that the two communities had for each other eventually brought about partition of the subcontinent at the time of independence in 1947 – into India and Pakistan.
  - This developed distrust between these two communities in India as well as throughout the South Asia.
- **During this period there is some obvious contention.** The Hindus began to put great emphasis on preexisting traditions such as: vegetarianism, nonviolence (*ahimas*) and the veneration of the cow as a symbol of divine benevolence – these are ALL notions of ritual purity that clearly differentiate the Hindu from the Muslim.

## Hinduism in America

- There several Hindu temples in America evenly divided between eastern and western regions of the country.
- Many of them are quite small – of these you'll find private homes that have been converted.

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- One of the first temples to be built in the United States was the Hindu temple in Flushing, Queens. Hindu Indians from New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut contributed to the temple, and made weekend pilgrimages to Flushing. In its mission statement, The Council of Hindu Temples of North America states, **"To fill the spiritual void, we are constructing the Temples in several towns in North America, which will enable us to sustain, promote and practice" Hinduism.**
- Others are major temple complexes: LA – lord Venkateshwara Balaji Temple in Malibu Canyon near LA is an authentic south Indian temple. Artisans and priests were brought from India for the actual planning and construction of the temple, and priests from India continue to assist in the temple's ritual operations.

## Basic Types of Hinduism in America

- A broad general perspective would suggest five basic types:
  - 1. **Secular Hinduism** – Asian Indians who do not identify with any particular beliefs or practices of traditional Hinduism but have never chosen to be in any other religious grouping,
  - 2. **Non-sectarian Hinduism** – Asian Indians who do not identify with any particular branch of Hinduism but who practice a broad, eclectic form of Hinduism that relates to the regions and castes of India from which they come.
  - 3. **Bhakti or Devotional Hinduism** – Asian Indian Hindus who would identify themselves with a particular sectarian tradition
  - 4. **Reformist-Nationalist Neo-Hinduism** – Asian Indian Hindus who are followers of groups such as the Ramkrishna Mission
  - 5. **Guru Internationalist-Missionizing Neo-Hinduism** – Asian Indian Hindus who are followers of groups such as the Transcendental Meditation movement or the Hare Krishna movement.

## Basic Beliefs of Hindus in America

Remember, we said last week there is no specific required set of beliefs for a Hindu. An American Hindu organization, known as the Himalayan Academy of Hinduism, has set forth what it calls **Nine Beliefs of Hinduism**, as a general summary of Hindu views largely accepted by all of the types of Hinduism in America with the exception of Secular Hinduism. The nine beliefs are:

1. That there is one all-pervasive supreme being
2. That there are "endless cycles of creation, preservation and dissolution"
3. All "souls are evolving" toward or seeking Moksha or liberation
4. There is a "law of cause and effect" known as Karma
5. There is "reincarnation"
6. There are "divine beings and forces" that require "temple worship" and "personal worship" or Puja in the home

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7. That there is a need for an “awakened Master of Sat Guru” (reliable person teacher), for one’s personal and ethical life
8. That “all life is sacred” and that one should pursue “ahimsa or non-violence”
9. No particular religion teaches the only way to salvation above all others but that all genuine religious paths are deserving of tolerance and understanding.

## Basic Practices of Hindus in America

- Generally speaking, Asian Indian Hindus with the exception of the followers of Secular Hinduism, center their religious life around three kinds of practices; personal or family worship or Puja in the home; determining crucial times or seasons for important activities and celebration of important festivals or holidays.
- Most Asian Indians that you meet in the U.S. will probably fit into one of these broad general types.
- Almost every Asian Indian Hindu home will have a special room or at least a shelf or special place for daily worship and meditation (Puja).
- Usually the Puja room will have statues or color pictures of various deities and gurus. In most Asian Hindu families, the mother is in charge of the Puja room and the daily and seasonal devotional practices.
- For many traditional Hindus and Neo-Hindus all important events in the life of the family and community (family planning, a major journey, marriage of a child, building and dedication of temples, etc.) will consult with a professional astrologer or casting horoscopes.
  - Astrology is an important component in the family’s planning, especially in determining marriage. Most Asian Indian Hindu marriages are arranged. Many of these families will have horoscopes cast for the proposed bride and groom for determining the day and specific time of the wedding.

## Important Festivals and Holidays in Hinduism

These are important festivals and holidays that many Hindus in America observe.

- **Worship of the Goddess Sarasvati** – a special festival for scholars, teachers, and students celebrating the great goddess of learning
- **Shiva’s Night** – a special festival day for Shaivas but celebrated by many other non-Shaiva Hindus as well Shiva-the destroyer god-takes away life so that it can be recreated
  - **Shaiva** - is one of the four most widely followed sects of Hinduism, which reveres the god Shiva as the supreme being.

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- **Holi** – named after a demon-goddess Holika, a raucous fertility festival in which Hindus pour colored water or paint on one another and exchange humorous erotic obscenities and jokes
- **The Ninth Day for Rama** – celebrating the birth of lord Rama (the 7<sup>th</sup> of the most popular avatars – Rama is the hero of Ramayana, one of the great Hindu epic poems – Rama defeats demon-king Ravana-ruler of Sri Lanka.
- **The Guru's Full Moon Day** – a festival that honors the particular guru of the Hindu devotee
- **The Bracelet Tying for Protection** – a festival when brothers commit themselves to protecting their sisters, symbolized by having their sisters tie a special bracelet around their brother's wrists
- **The Eighth Day for Krishna** – the festival celebrating the birth of lord Krishna (worshipped as god in his own right, a popular avatar and is famous for killing the demon king Kamsa-many other stories are told about his qualities...as a soldier, lover and ruler, etc.
  - Krishna is a Hindu deity, one of the "avatars" (or "incarnation") of Vedic supreme god Vishnu or Narayana
- **The Fourth Day for Ganesh** – a celebration in which businesspeople, students, artisans and others implore lord Ganesh (the elephant god) for blessings on their work
- **The Nine Nights** – celebration (mainly for Bengalis) Durga Puja, or the worship of the goddess Durga who overcomes the buffalo-demon (the symbol of evil) or celebrating (for Vaishnavas devoted to lord Rama) the great struggle between the lord Rama and the demon Ravana
- **The Tenth Day** – celebrating the final victory of lord Rama over the demon Ravana
- **The Festival of Lamps** – involving the lighting of candles or colored lights or lamps signifying the reappearance of the sun and prosperity after the long rainy season.

All of Hinduism's gods are part of a universal absolute being, **called Brahman** – ultimate reality – the origin of all creation: **pure being, pure delight and pure intelligence.**

- **Three principal figures stand out in Hinduism:**
  - **1. Brahma – the creator**
  - **2. Shiva – the destroyer**
  - **3. Vishnu-the protector**
- Vishnu has avatars – when the world is under threat from evil, Vishnu appears in one of his avatars or incarnations, to protect it. Hindu myths select ten avatars from countless many as being of special importance and power. These avatars also ensure that good thrives in the world.
  - An avatar is a deliberate descent of a deity to earth, or a descent of the supreme being (i.e., Vishnu for Vaishnavites), and is mostly translated into English as "incarnation", but more accurately as "appearance" or "manifestation."
  - Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narashimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Buddha (founder of Buddhism), Rama, Kalki, Krishna

Hinduism is boundlessly various in its myriad forms and yet bears an unmistakable coherence in pattern in ritual performance, the pursuit of quiet mediation (yoga) and the expression of passionate devotion (bhakti).