

# A CATECHISM ON HINDUISM

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by

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(Swami Krishnananda answers questions regarding Hinduism)

**Q:** When was Hinduism founded?

**A:** The word 'Hinduism' originated due to historical and linguistic circumstances, and refers to what more properly be designated as Bharatiya-dharma, or Sanatana-dharma. There is no personal founder for Hinduism. People who follow the faith or religion which goes by the name of Hinduism hold that the foundation of this outlook of life, or way of living, is eternal, since the way of life is an expression of the basic law operating in the universe. In fact, what popularly is known as Hinduism is a practical and ethical manifestation in day-to-day living of what should be considered as the inviolable law of existence, both in its immutable form known as Satya and operating form known as Rita. Hence, the name Sanatana (eternal or ever-present) associated with this inclusive 'attitude to life'.

**Q:** Where was it founded, and who founded it?

**A:** Hinduism is not believed to be founded in any place, since it has no founder.

**Q:** What were the prevailing circumstances when it was founded?

**A:** While Hinduism has no founder, and therefore no circumstances can be cited in that regard, students of Hinduism and scholars who are accustomed to do research in its field have usually traced some sort of a logical background of the general structure of Hinduism in the panoramic vision of the Supreme Being as recorded in the Veda-Samhitas, which are supposed to find their detailed promulgation in the Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads. This, if we would so like, may be cited as the circumstance explaining the fundamentals of Hinduism. The Bhagavadgita is regarded as the quintessential summing up of the general attitude to life as a whole.

**Q:** What are its basic principles?

**A:** Briefly, the principles of Hinduism may be stated as follows:

- The ultimate reality of the universe is one and not more than one.
- The nature of this reality is spiritual in the sense of Intelligence or Consciousness.
- Therefore, this reality is Universal, Omnipresent, and hence at once Omniscient and Omnipotent.
- Creation is a veritable Body of this All-pervading Almighty Omnipresence.
- The relationship between this reality, which is called God, and the created universe is intrinsic, organic and vital, and not external or mechanistic.
- There are several planes in this creation, broadly classified into fourteen realms known as *lokas*, all which are inhabited by different categories of beings, right from the lowest level of the physical elements up to the region of the Creator Himself.

- In the sense stated above, the whole universe and all beings are vehicles of divinity and radiant with the immanent Godhead, all potentially having the birthright of attaining union with the Supreme Almighty through gradual evolution.
- The human being is one such created species among the many others which are said to run to 84 *lakhs* in number.
- Man, thus, occupies a stage in the process of a still higher ascent and he is not the end of creation or evolution.
- The human life is to be organised by the integrating principles of *dharma* (moral value), *artha* (material value), *kama* (vital value) and *moksha* (spiritual value), the last one mentioned being in fact the infinite value of existence.
- Society is also to be brought into a united force of hierarchy through mutual cooperation by the application of what is known as Varnashramadharma, which means the arrangement of society into classes of spiritual power, political power, economic power and man-power, known usually as Brahmans, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra, and the order of life into the levels of education, the performance of the duties of life, withdrawal from personal attachments, and attainment of spiritual illumination, which stages go by the names of Brahmacharya, Garhasthya, Vanaprastha and Sannyasa.
- Every faith, cult, creed, belief, religion or outlook represents a facet or phase of the evolving consciousness in the process of the universe, thus transforming life in the world, nay, life in the universe itself, into a wide family of internally related and mutually cooperating members who have all a system of obligations and duties, excluding nothing

but including everything, finally with the purpose of universal spiritual realisation.

**Q:** Which are its Scriptures?

**A:** The principal Scriptures of Hinduism are:

- the Vedas, consisting of the Samhitas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads
- the Smritis, of which the most important are of Manu, Yajnavalkya and Parasara
- the Itihasas, viz., the Ramayana and the Mahabharata (which contains the Bhagavadgita)
- the eighteen Puranas.

**Q:** Which are the other important books written on it, and who are their authors?

**A:** The other important texts associated with Hinduism, apart from the basic canons mentioned above, are:

- the Agamas and Tantras (mystical and esoteric texts)
- the Purva-Mimamsa and the Uttara-Mimamsa schools of theology and philosophy
- the writings of the great exponents and commentators in the field of philosophy and religion, such as the Acharyas, viz., Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhya, Vallabha, Nimbarka, Gauranga Mahaprabhu and Krishna Chaitanya, as well as the propounders of the religious schools of Vaishnavism, Saivism and Shaktivism in a variety of ways, which are all too vast to be enumerated here. The latter include the writings of the saints and sages who taught religion in its manifold phases.

**Q:** What is the method of prayer?

**A:** Within the fold of the Hindu religion, prayer is mainly an inward contemplative submission before the Almighty felt as an immediate presence. But in popular practice, this inward

feeling of presence is usually expressed as recitations or chants of mantras or passages from the scriptures, such as the Vedas, Itihasas and Puranas. Prayer is offered either individually by one's own self in private, or collectively in a congregation, as it may be necessary. It may be verbally articulated or mentally contemplated with feeling.

**Q:** What are the rituals?

**A:** Ritual in the Hindu religion is a manifestation through external performances of one's inward feeling of worship and adoration of the Almighty. The basic rituals consist of:

- ceremonial worship known as *puja*, as is usually seen being conducted in temples and shrines
- recitation of the Divine Name, known as *japa*
- prayer, known as *prarthana*
- ceremonies connected with the stages of one's life, the seasons of the year, as well as special occasions or holy days connected with the advent of a Divine Incarnation, the birthday of the Saint, or the departing day of any person.

The most important duties of a householder are the five great sacrifices known as the *pancha-mahayajnas* (i.e., the daily service to gods, guests, ancestors, sages, and the lesser creations like animals and birds) and the daily obligatory prayer known as *sandhya-vandana*, the latter imperative being applicable to all stages of life except of the *sannyasin*.

**Q:** Give glimpses of the life-sketch of its founder.

**A:** Hinduism has no founder, but it adores the great personalities mentioned in or associated with its fundamental scriptures mentioned earlier - for example, sages like Vasishtha, Vyasa, Suka, Valmiki, Yajnavalkya and Uddalaka, and all the propounders of the religion of knowledge, devotion and action.

**Q:** How and in which countries did it spread?

**A:** Hinduism has its stronghold in India, especially. But it spread outside India in the East and its impact in such countries and lands as Java, Sumatra, Cambodia and the like is well known to history. Today, a large population of Indians dwells outside India, in many different countries of the world. The way it spreads its message outside has been through its teachers, messengers, propounders and actual living participants, who accomplished this task either by travel or by written message, or through both.

**Q:** Where are its monuments/places of pilgrimage, and what is their importance?

**A:** The well-known places of pilgrimage by the Hindus are Badarikashrama (Badrinath) , Kedarnath, Ayodhya, Mathura, Haridwar or Kankhal, Kasi (Varanasi), Dvaraka, Avanti (Ujjayini), Puri (Jagannath), Pushkar and Manasarovara in North India, and Kanchi (Kanchipuram), Ramesaram, Madurai, Tirupati, Srirangam, Tiru-Anantapuram (Trivandrum), Palani, Kanyakumari and many other places in the South. There are several other holy places of pilgrimage associated with deities, saints and sages, such as Somanath, Pandharpur, Alandi, etc. and sources of holy rivers, like Gangottari and Yamunottari.

**Q:** What influence did it have on Indian Culture?

**A:** It would not be far from truth if it is stated that the foundational outlook of the entire culture of India is universally-oriented, since its policy has always been an accommodating, inclusive, friendly and absorbing spirit in regard to the different calls of life, whether philosophical, religious, social or political. This is the very forte of the Hindu view of life. Its policies of human relation have contributed vigorously not only to the stability of its internal structure in India as a nation, but also to international relationship as a gesture of perpetual harmony as a unit in the comity of the nations of the world.

**Q:** What are the moral and ethical codes?

**A:** In India, life has been always regarded as a process of progressive self-transcendence from the realm of matter (*annamaaya-jivatva*) to the realization of the supreme spiritual bliss (*parama-ananda*). Human values and ends in life have been classified into the scheme of the fourfold pursuit (*purushartha*) of existence, viz., the practice of righteousness and goodness (*dharma*), the effort towards earning the necessary material values (*artha*), the fulfilment of permissible desires through honest means (*kama*), and the endeavour for the final salvation of the soul (*moksha*). This analysis is based on a broad understanding of the different levels of individuals in relation to the Universe. The other aspects of its ethical and moral codes have been touched upon earlier.

**Q:** Who are the saints and prophets? Give their brief life-sketch.

**A:** The Hindus adore the well-known Divine Incarnations of Narayana or Vishnu, viz., Rama and Krishna, who are classified among the gods and are not regarded as humans. The great sages and saints who hold a pre-eminent position are Vasishtha, Vyasa, Suka, Dattatreya, Vamadeva, Yajnavalkya and the like; also, the great devotees associated with devotion to the principal gods popularly worshipped, viz., Vishnu, Siva, Ganesa, Devi, Skanda and Surya; included also are the Acharyas referred to above.

**Q:** What is its relation with modern science and how does it affect modern man?

**A:** Hinduism, as a religion of an almost universal inclusiveness, takes into consideration the different levels of not only the evolution of life by stages but also the levels of outlook in knowledge and experience. The question of the relation between science and religion arises due to the assumption that the objective of science and the aim of religion are perhaps different, maybe even irreconcilable. But Hinduism, if it is to be understood in the true spirit of its

internal structure, is fully awake to the levels of perception and knowledge available to the human individual. The epistemological doctrine behind the philosophy of the Hindu religion recognizes the relative value of sense-perception and rational investigation as avenues of knowledge, though it holds that direct intuition of truth is the final test of absolutely valid knowledge. Science comes under the field of sense and reason, and Hinduism accepts the value and utility of the findings through these means of knowledge in practical life, provided they do not contradict the ultimate value of all life, viz., the realisation of the Universal Reality in direct experience.

The manner in which this attitude of the Hindu religion would affect the life of the modern man should, thus, be clear and obvious. That is, the spirit of Hinduism is so accommodating that it does not reject the matter-of-fact value or the practical effectiveness of the findings of modern science. The most interesting outcome of this general outlook of Hinduism is that in its concept of the degrees of reality in the several planes of existence as manifestations through varying levels of density, any degree of reality- such as the relation of scientific findings to human life in general - is part of the total outlook of Hindu philosophy and religion. Thus, one should say that Hinduism as a religion introduces a new spirit of positivity and enthusiasm even into the field of science rather than look upon it as something alien to itself.

**Q:** What are the recommended duties for man?

**A:** Man has a duty towards himself as a physical, psychological and spiritual embodiment, as also to the family, the community, the nation and the world at large. Man has a duty to the whole universe of which he is an integral part and from which he can never be separated organically. The primary duty of man is abidance by the law of the universe, which determines the lower relative laws applicable to the lesser levels of life in the world, one's own country, community, family, and personality.

**Q:** How does it influence universal brotherhood and tolerance towards other religions?

**A:** Hinduism should be considered as the great friend of man, in the sense that it has no enemies. In this sense, again, its influence on others is one of a true friend, philosopher and guide. It accepts and holds as valid every faith and every religion in its own field and context and operational jurisdiction, in the light of its origin and circumstances of the place to which it is related and the historical and cultural background of the people in whose midst it arose. It takes things as they are, from their own points of view, and accommodates itself in them, bearing in view the basic fact that all thought and action originating from anywhere is like a river which has to find its destination in a single ocean, the ocean of all-existence.

**Q:** How is religion related to the practical life of man?

**A:** Religion is veritably the art and the science and the way of the practical life of man in the world. Hence, no question arises as to the relation between religion and life.

**Q:** Is religion one of the essential functions in life?

**A:** Religion is the homage which the finitude of man pays to the Infinitude of existence. Hence, true religion is not a 'function of life,' but 'the whole of life'.