

# From Krishna to Mohammed: A World Religions Primer



# Reading Suggestions for World Religions and Hinduism

❖ Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*

❖ Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction*

❖ Nirad Chaudhur, *Hinduism: A Religion to Live By*

❖ Nancy Auer Falk, *Living Hinduisms: An Explorers Guide*

❖ Windy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*

# Religion Matters

- Demographics

2.4 Billion Christians

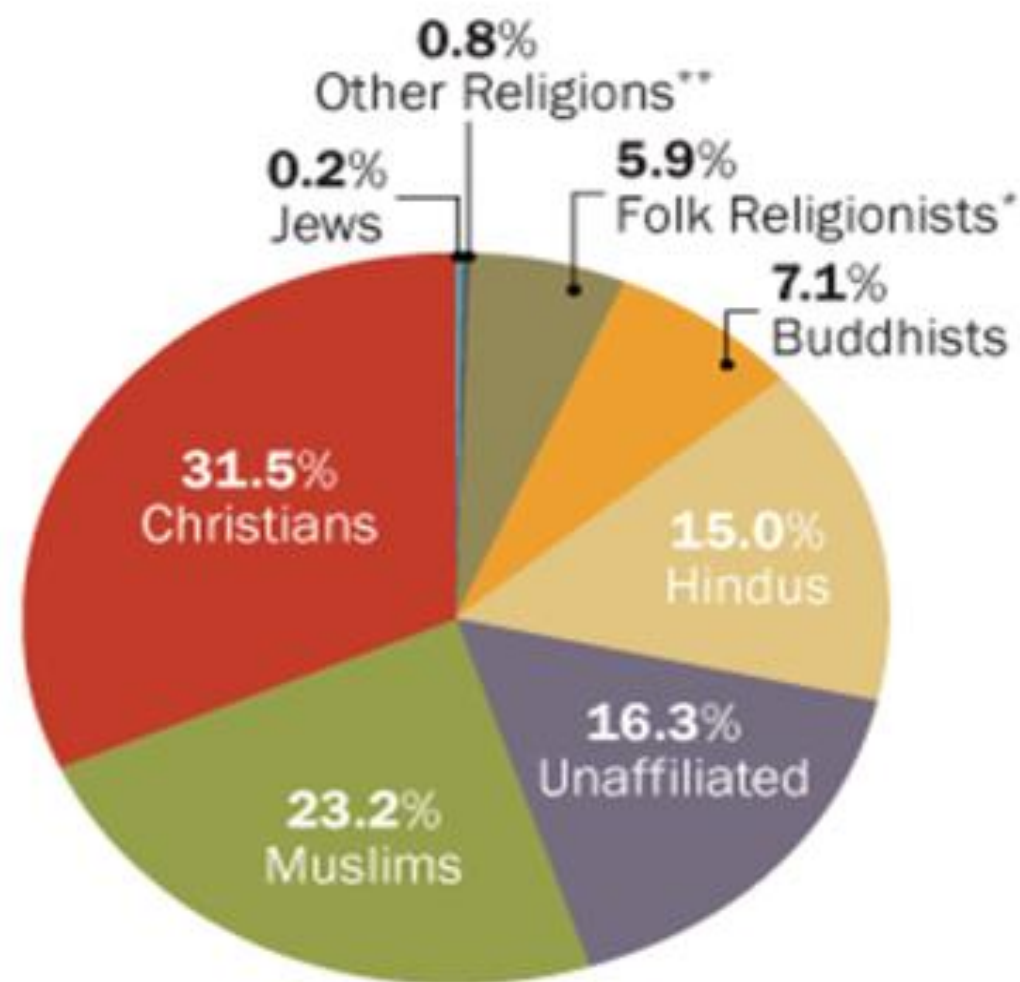
1.9 Billion Muslims

1.2 Billion Hindus

510 Million Buddhists

## Size of Major Religious Groups, 2010

*Percentage of the global population*



\*Includes followers of African traditional religions, Chinese folk religions, Native American religions and Australian aboriginal religions.

\*\*Includes Bahai's, Jains, Sikhs, Shintoists, Taoists, followers of Tenrikyo, Wiccans, Zoroastrians and many other faiths.

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

# The Value of A World Religions Study

- Crossing Boundaries for the sake of better understanding, empathy, and self-critical engagement with one's own
- Basic Religious Literacy:
  - What is the Quran? Is the Dalai Lama a Buddhist? Is India a Hindu country? Are all Palestinians Muslims?
  - Buddha taught that there is no god, can Buddhism really be a religion? Do Hindus really believe in reincarnation? What do Muslims think of Jesus? Christians? What do Christians think of Muslims? What do Jews think of Christians? One Judaism? Many? Can you convert to Judaism? Is Islam an inherently violent religion? Is pacifism an optional or a foundational belief/practice for Christians?

# Religion? Religious?

Post-Enlightenment Transformation from a State of Being to a Noun

An entity that could be joined and convictions accepted, rituals enjoined  
A Human Phenomena (to include its 'sacred texts') that is Open to Human Inquiry – In turn begs the question of a definition



The pursuit of a definition of religion has been long and full of contested efforts. A good definition is hard to find as each effort seems to stumble because it is too narrow, too broad...focusing on beliefs to the exclusion of practice.

- “Religion is what grows out of and gives expression to the experience of the holy in its various aspects.”
- “The essence of religion is the feeling of absolute dependence.”
- A Unified System of Beliefs and practices relative to sacred things – things set apart – beliefs and practices which lead to a uniting into one single moral community
- “Religion is essentially comparable to a childhood neurosis...the persistent need for a father to tell one what to do.”
- “Religion is the opium of the people that allows for the continuation of oppression.”
- Religions are tools of Patriarchy Pretending to be Otherwise

All are flawed in one way or another

But the need for a working definition of religion persists...some guide to the phenomena we are studying and willingness to adjust that definition as it is applied

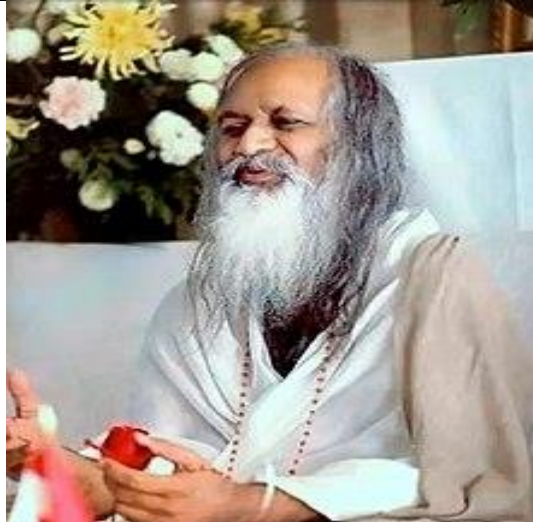
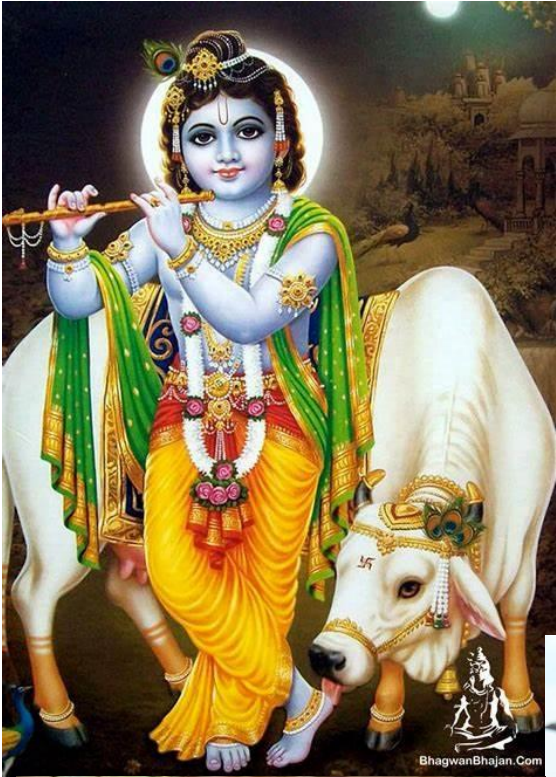
# Forging a Definitional Path

- Fashioning a Definition By:
  - Acknowledging Religions are Not in Essence All Alike (Rejection of Perennialism) – All Climbing the Same Hill – At the Base are Different Paths but the Same Hill – to There are ‘10,000 Gates’ – Christians Do Not Believe the Quran is Sacred...Muslims do not Believe Jesus is Divine...Buddhists do not Believe there is a God...
  - Acknowledge that Generalizations are Flawed – Christians condemn Homosexuality...Muslims pray 5 times per day...
    - Religions are internally Diverse
    - Religions Change over time – not static
    - Religious influence is pervasive not just private
- At The Same time Generalizations are useful and necessary – Forks? Humans?



- Religions Begin From a Presumption of a (or several) Human Problem(s) To Which They offer a Solution( almost always including a God or Gods – as present? Or Absent?) + Technique(s) + Exemplar(s) are offered
- In Doing its Work, Religions Utilize
  - Narratives
  - Creeds
  - Rituals (rites and ceremonies) – *religare* -Festivals and Holidays that recall or reenact critical moments in mythic/historical past – The Night Journey of Mohammed, the Enlightenment of Buddha, the Crucifixion of Jesus - Consumption of certain foods that may be understood as facilitating joining with the divine through ingestion – Christian’s eating the body of Jesus, drinking the blood or Avoidance of Foods that Offend the Divine – Kosher - Halal
  - Codes or Ethical Guidance – Laws and Moral Codes – Prayer 5 Times Per Day, Hindu Dharma
  - Community often Linked to Material Dimension – Dress, Buildings
  - Experts, Authority Figures - Interpretive (especially critical when myths become written texts – around 3000 BCE) and Ritual Specialists – Shamans, Priests, Monks, Ministers, Scholars

# The Many Faces of Hinduism



# Ganesha



The Absence of a Canonical Text (other than the Vedas), the Problematic Issue of Dating the Vedas, the Absence of a Single Elite or Institution that exerted control

Results in

- ❖ The Proliferation of Devotional Practices and Belief Systems...Hinduisms
- ❖ And Contested Interpretations of Origins, Texts, and Core Identity

# Brahman and Atman

# Hinduism – A Theological Starting Point

- While Hinduism is more correct than Hinduism... Nonetheless, a starting point is to define the human problem in terms of alienation from the divine – which leads to

## Samsara and How the Alienation Can Be Resolved Achieving Moksha

- ❑ Our infinite self not apparent – that which is eternal is buried under a mass of distractions and false assumptions – the problem life poses for the human self is to cleanse the dirt – the scum – so the infinite can shine forth – just as a man carrying on his head a load of wood that has caught fire would go rushing to a pond to quench the flames – so the seeker of truth scorched by the flames of life – birth, death, self-deluding futility – would seek the path to achieving liberation from the trap of finitude
- ❑ Underlying the human self is a reservoir of being that never dies, is unrestricted in terms of consciousness, and can achieve infinite bliss – the hidden self (Atman) is Brahman (The Infinite)

“The Brahman, thou art.” Chandogya Upanishad

Hinduism offers a path – in fact several paths from passive (devotion/ sacrifice to a deity) to activist (yoga, renunciation) to contemplative (discovering the oneness with Brahman) – that achieves liberation – the release from the cycle of birth – rebirth – fully realizing the infinite self

-Infinite being – the release from a fear that there is a future without the self

-Infinite knowledge or awareness

-Infinite joy

# • Key Dates and Concepts

2500-1600 BCE = Indus Valley Civilization

1500 – Decline of Indus Valley = Migration East to Gangetic plain

1500-500 BCE – Formative Period of Vedic Civilization

1200 – Probable First Written Copy of Vedas

900-400 BCE – Period of Wandering Ascetics and Composition of Upanishads (Buddha born 483 BCE)

400- 100 BCE – Composition of Brahmin Texts, Epics (e.g., *Ramayana*), *Bhagavad Gita*, and *Yoga Sutras*

320 – 647 CE – Classical Temple Hinduism Established

Around 1500 CE – Earliest Written Vedas Used as Basis for Current Text

## Concepts:

Karma

Yoga (derived from the same root as the English word ‘yoke’ – double connotation – to unite/to place under disciplined training – a method of training designed to lead to integration/union)

Atman

Samsara

Moksha

Brahman

Brahmin

Brahma

Avatar(s) – Krishna, Rama

Guru

Dharma – Varna – Ashrama (Jati)

# The Diachronic Turn - A Historical Point of Origins

- Who Received (Composed) the Veda? Who are the Aryans?
  - The Aryans Were the Ancient Indigenous People of India – Using Sanskrit – And Built a Powerful, Rich Civilization Out of the Received Text – the Rituals, Laws, Literature All Go Back to this Noble Origin (and Also Gave Birth to Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism) – Hindu Nationalism Built On This Mythic Past
  - The Aryans Were a non-indigenous migratory Force that invaded (Destroying the Great City-States of the Indus Valley – **Note the Similarities with Hebrew Scriptures Tales of Conquest and Quranic Tales of Destruction of an Inferior Group**) or slowly Migrated into the Indus Valley and the Ganges Plain (NW India) and Imposed Upon the Local Population Its More Sophisticated/Advanced Civilization and Language (Sanskrit Being Identified as an Indo-European Language) – The First Veda – Rig Veda – Is then Dated to 1500 BCE
    - One Variant on this Version Holds that The Aryans were not only Culturally Superior but Also Were Racially Distinct – Light Colored – and Drove the Darker Skin Local Population to the South – Creating the Current Linguistic and Racial Zones
- Archaeological Excavations of The Indus Valley Civilization (3500-1600 BCE) Now Suggest Decline was Not Result of Invasion But of Climate Change (Similar to Bronze Age Decline in Mesopotamian Valley and Levant) – And It is An Open Questions About the Relationship Between that Civilization and the Vedic Civilization (1500 – 500 BCE)
- Most Reject the Notion of Aryan Ethnicity (as scholars also reject there was a distinct ancient Israel – rather mix of local/other) and use “Aryan” as a Social Term to Describe Those Who Participated in Early Vedic Sacrifices and Rituals – By 700 BCE, it Appears Most of the Politically Dominant Groups Across the Indo-Gangetic Plain Had Been Absorbed into Vedic Civilization – The Reality is that Most of those Who Identify as Hindu Draw Rituals and Beliefs from Texts Composed After the 4 Original Vedas





Khyber Pass

HINDU KUSH

Indus River

Harappa

Brahmaputra River

Mohenjo-daro

Indus Valley Civilization

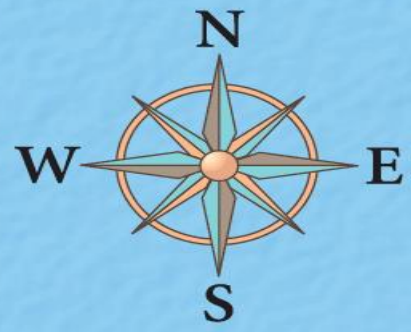
Thar Desert

Ganges River

HIMALAYAS

Arabian Sea

Bay of Bengal



INDIAN OCEAN







- 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
- UPPER CITY LOWER CITY
- सिन्धु नदी  
1. Main Gate  
2. Main Street  
3. Cattle Bazaar  
4. Market Square  
5. Granary Square  
6. Shrine Forest  
7. Entry to Shrine  
8. Arena  
9. Upper City Gate  
10. Maham's House  
11. Great Bath  
12. Senate  
13. River Gate  
14. North Gate

# THE MAP OF MOHENJO DARO



# Ugarit





# From Diachronic to Synchronic: Sacred Texts

Differentiate Shruti and Smriti

- **Shruti**

Manifestation of the Divine in the World – Jesus and God Incarnate/Quran)

- ❖ Vedas and Upanishads

- **Smriti**

Revealed and Composed (dependent on a Revelation)





## Shruti

### **Vedas (Indus Valley Religion) – Sanskrit – Around 1200 BCE – Earliest Written Copy available = c. 300 CE – Laying the Foundation for a Sacrifice-Based Religion**

- 4 with over 1000 Hymns of praise and supplication to gods, (oldest = Rig Veda) - revelations of sacred sounds and texts heard by ancient sages after intense meditation
- Elite Texts for a Priest class – brahmins – carrying out rituals (reciting Vedic mantras/sacrifices (to appease Aryan deities) and offer sacrifices – They also manage the life cycle of the individual – maturation of the young male, marriage, childbirth, death (smooth transition of soul) – each having duties (varna-ashrama-dharma)
- Universe maintained by these rituals – the deities well fed would sustain the universe and ensure prosperity

#### **Deities**

- Agni – fire god
- Indra – warrior god
- Soma – Divine Presence to enable warriors
- Varuna – uphold moral universe

**“Then I sent forth and set free a raven. The raven went forth and, seeing that the waters had diminished, he eats, circles, caws, and turns not around. Then I offered a sacrifice. I poured out a libation on the top of the mountain...upon the pot-stands I heaped cane, cedarwood, and myrtle. **The gods smelled the sweet savor, the gods crowded like flies around the sacrificer.**” Epic of Gilgamesh**

**“Then Noah sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew the waters had subsided from the earth. Then Noah waited another seven days and sent out the dove and it did not return to him....Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and took every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when **the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of humankind...**” Gen 8:10-12, 20-21**

**“Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, the fat portions.” Gen 4:3-4**

**You shall not delay to make offerings from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses.**The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me.** <sup>30</sup> You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall remain with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me.**

**Exodus 22:28**

## The Upanishads – *Upanishad* means “sitting near devotedly”

Suggesting a context of disciples learning at the feet of masters who had gone beyond the Vedic sacrificial framework to **adopt ascetic practices** – by way of those practices one comes to know the fundamental realities underlying all existence – from mediated to personal responsibility

“By austerity a man achieves goodness, and through goodness he takes hold of the mind. Through the mind he reaches the self, and reaching the self he comes to rest.”

Maitreya Upanishad

- **Appear to Have Been Appended to the Vedas (around 900 BCE) as the Religion of Sacrifice Evolved into (or was competed with) a Religion of Ascetic Practice (Individual Taking Responsibility) and responded to growing Heterodoxy – Forest Dwellers/Ascetics Experimenting with Different Means to Be Liberated from Death and Rebirth (e.g., Jainism and Buddhism)**
- **Set Forth the Concepts of Reincarnation, Karma, Dharma Replacing the Central Role of Sacrifice** – Also the Growing Prominence of the Concept of Karma as Explaining the Human Situation Rather than Gods’ Actions