



HINDUISM: 300,000,000 GODS AND ONE GOD

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In past articles, we have looked at Judaism and Islam. Because of our common Abrahamic roots, these religions are truly our siblings. However, the Church also teaches that other religions speak of God. In the next articles, we are turning our attention to the two great traditions of India: Hinduism and Buddhism. *Nostra Aetate* says that Hindus “contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an inexhaustible abundance of myths and through searching philosophical inquiry. They seek freedom from the anguish of our human condition either through ascetical practices or profound meditation or a flight to God with love and trust.” As with other religions, the Church urges us to enter into dialogue with Hindus.

Hinduism is a very diverse religion; in fact, it can seem more like a collection of loosely related “sub-religions.” There are Hindus who believe that God is Impersonal Being, and those who believe that God is Personal. There are Hindus who approach God through philosophical inquiry, those who approach God in loving devotion, and those who approach God through service to God and fellow humans (remember the Baltimore Catechism? “God made me to know, love and serve Him in this life, and to be happy with him forever in the next life.”) One Catholic scholar of Hinduism has said that Catholicism and Hinduism are the two religions that contain “all the archetypes,” overarching concepts and images, such as Divine Transcendence (God is beyond

our ability to understand or express), Divine Immanence (God is closer to us than we are to ourselves), God as supreme Truth, God as Love. Though our historical and theological roots are very different, we hold much in common.

Some Hindus seek God in the silence of deep meditation, while others sing devotional hymns to God and chant God’s Holy Names. Many combine these approaches (think Centering Prayer, the Rosary, devotion to the Sacred Heart and Holy Name of Jesus). Like Catholicism, Hinduism has what one scholar calls “the three M’s”: mysticism, monasticism and metaphysics (philosophy of being). These, in themselves, are rich grounds for dialogue.

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One of the most puzzling things about Hinduism for Christians is the statement that there are “300,000,000 gods,” usually followed by the assertion that there is only one God. The number is symbolic, of course (who could count all those gods?), and is a reminder that God manifests Godself in countless ways. St. Bonaventure said that the Divine Word “contains” all the possibilities for Creation, and that each of those possibilities is stamped with God’s “footprint.” God is the center of each creature, and the fullness of Being that embraces the whole of Creation. We Christians, and especially we Franciscans, believe that each creature is a “sacrament” of God’s Presence (Brother Sun, Sister Moon). Just as there is no “rivalry” between someone who has a deep devotion to St. Anthony and someone with a deep devotion to St. Jude (indeed, even a devotee St. Jude will pray to St. Anthony when trying to find car keys), so, too, Hindus devoted to God as Shiva (divine energy) and those devoted to God as Krishna (divine love) dwell in harmony, and pray to other “aspects” of God when the need arises.

These are not perfect parallels, of course, but they can help give us some insight into the richness of Hinduism. There are, of course, some of the “odder” forms of Hinduism, their equivalent of snake handlers, but even that can help reveal the diversity found in this tradition. But in its more developed forms, Hinduism provides some rich possibility for interreligious dialogue, and the Franciscan spiritual and theological traditions are especially equipped for that encounter.