

On Hinduism

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Om

HOW CLOSELY do the Seen and the Unseen in our world match up? Do our beliefs in God(s) fit with what we know about the natural world? Simply, do religion and science cohere? Awhile back, I concluded that they do not cohere very well. And so I departed from my Christian faith.

But what about other religious traditions? Do the Hindu traditions, say, suffer similar existential onslaught from science that my Christianity suffered? To answer, I must learn more about Hinduism. So here is what I know thus far.¹

Hinduism is the world's third-largest religion, with over 1.2 billion followers.^[1] It is a diverse system of thought marked by a range of philosophies, cosmologies, and shared textual sources. Two important sources are the Agamas^[2] and the Vedas.

The Vedas. The Vedas comprise a large body of religious text originating in ancient India.^[3] The texts are the oldest layer of Sanskrit literature and the oldest scriptures of Hinduism. There are four Vedas: the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Sama Veda and the Atharva Veda. The Rig Veda was written 1500–1200 BCE. The Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda were written 1200–900 BCE. Each Veda has four subdivisions: the Samhitas, the Aranyakas, the Brahmanas and the Upanishads.

The Upanishad subdivisions of the Vedas deal with meditation, philosophy and ontological² knowledge.^[4] The Upanishads are commonly referred to as the Vedānta, which are variously interpreted to mean “last chapters, parts of the Veda” or “the highest purpose of the Veda”.

¹These notes are essentially a synthesis of a series of Wikipedia pages. I have not read any of the Agamas nor the Vedas yet.

²*Ontology*—Metaphysics study concerning the essence of things, or the nature of existence of being.

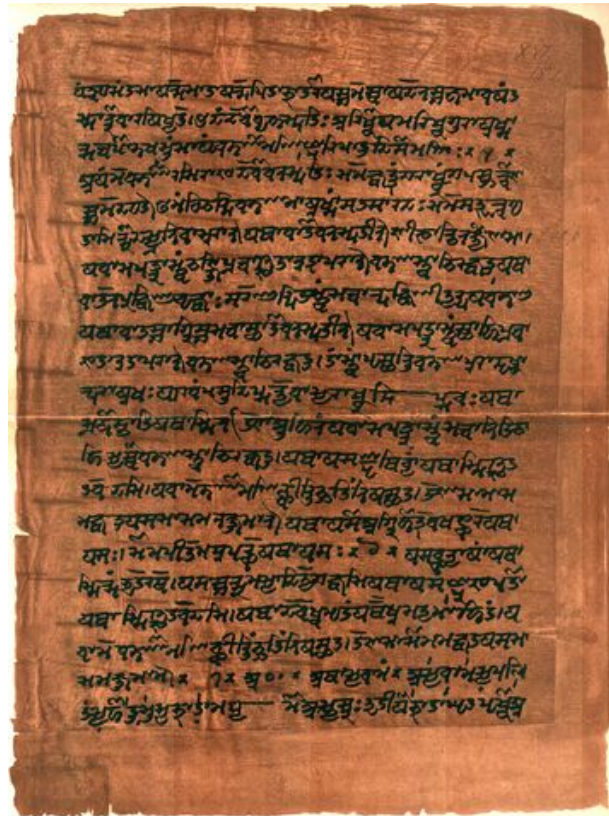


Image of Codex Cashmirensis folio 187a from Atharva Veda Samhitā, second half.^[5]

Orthodox vs heterodox. During the Shramanic Period (800–200 BCE), the Vedic religious tradition split,^[6] forming the orthodox pro-Vedic (*āstika*) branch comprising the six orthodox Hindu schools, and the heterodox (*nāstika*) branch which includes Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Charvaka and others. The three principles of Jainism are *ahimsa* (non-violence), *anekantavada* (non-absolutism) and *aparigraha* (non-attachment).^[7] Charvaka was a school of thought which embraced materialism and hedonism.^[8] It held that only direct perception, empiricism and conditional inference are proper sources of knowledge. It embraced philosophical skepticism, and rejected supernatural concepts like god, soul, afterlife, reincarnation and *moksha* (See below).

Hindu life. In Hinduism, the four aims of human life are:

Dharma—To lead a virtuous, proper and moral life.

Artha—To obtain material prosperity, income security and a means of life.

Kama—To enjoy pleasure, sensuality and emotional fulfillment.

Moksha—To become liberated from suffering, unhappiness and pain. (*duhkha*),^{[9][10]} and from the cycle of death and rebirth (*samsāra*).^[11] It is understood that *moksha* may be attained through knowledge of the true self (*ātman*). *Moksha* is also an important aim in Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism.

The Five Precepts in Buddhism constitute a basic code of ethics to be respected by followers of Buddhism. They are to *abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication*.^[12]

Ahimsa is a key ethical principle in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism.^[13] *Ahimsa* advocates nonviolence to all creatures. It is inspired by the premise that all living beings have the spark of some divine spiritual “vitality”. And so to hurt another being is to hurt oneself. As an expression of *ahimsa*, vegetarianism features prominently in Jain culture.



The hand with a wheel on the palm symbolises the Jain vow of *ahimsa*. The word in the middle is “*Ahimsa*”.^[14]

Philosophy. The philosophical concepts of *brahman* (Ultimate Reality) and *ātman* (soul, Self) are central in Hindu thought,^[15] and feature prominently in all the Upanishad subdivisions of the Vedas. *Ātman* is a Sanskrit word that refers to the Self or self-existent essence of human beings. Within Western religious sensibility, it is often loosely and perhaps incorrectly translated as the soul. The abovementioned six orthodox *āstika* schools of Hinduism believe that there is *ātman* in every living being. In contrast, the heterodox *nāstika* branch posits no unchanging essence or Self to be found in the empirical constituents of living beings.^[16]

The non-dualist Advaita Vedānta tradition of Indian philosophy holds that the individual Self (*ātman*) and the primal Self or Ultimate Reality (*brahman*) are identical, and that all reality is an interconnected oneness.^[17] Conversely, the dualist Dvaita Vedānta tradition believes that *ātman* and *brahman* are distinct, existing as independent identities.

Param Brahma in Hindu philosophy is the “Supreme Brahman” in that it is beyond all descriptions and conceptualisations.^[18] It is described as the formlessness that eternally pervades everything, everywhere in the universe and whatever is beyond. In the Advaita Vedānta tradition, Param Brahma is synonymous with *brahman*, an attribute-less Absolute. But in the Dvaita Vedānta tradition, Param Brahma is the attribute-endowed Absolute.

Deities. Trimūrti is the triple deity of supreme divinity in Hinduism.^[19] The members of Trimūrti are Brahma (not to be confused with *brahman*),^[20] Vishnu,^[21] and Shiva.^[22] Trimūrti personifies the cosmic functions of creation (Brahma), preservation (Vishnu) and destruction (Shiva). Many Hindu schools consider Buddha, Rama, Krishna and twenty-one other divine entities to be incarnations or avatars of Vishnu.



An art depiction of the Trimūrti at the Hoysaleswara temple in Halebidu. Trimūrti is the Hindu trinity deity with members Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.^[23]

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