

ENGAGING  
*with...*

# Hindus

understanding their world  
*sharing good news*

Robin Thomson

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Engaging with Hindus

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Engaging with...

## Preface

Christians have a wonderful message to tell the world. As the angel said at the birth of Jesus, it is “good news that will cause great joy, *for all the people*” (Luke 2 v 10). But at times we have been slow to take that message of forgiveness and new life to others.

Sometimes it’s because we have become *distracted*. There are so many things that can push the need to tell others from its central place in our calling as individuals and churches. We get wrapped up in our own church issues, problems and politics. Or we get sidetracked by the very real needs of our broken and hurting world, and expend our energies on dealing with the symptoms rather than the cause.

Sometimes it’s because we have lacked *conviction*. We look at people who seem relatively happy or settled in their own beliefs, and don’t think Jesus is for them. Or

perhaps we have simply forgotten just how good the good news is, and how serious the consequences are for those who enter eternity unforgiven.

But sometimes it has been *fear* that has held us back from sharing the good news about Jesus. When we meet people whose culture, background or beliefs are so different from ours, we can draw back from speaking about our own faith because we are afraid of saying the wrong thing, unintentionally offending them, or getting into an unhelpful argument that leads nowhere.

This little series of books is designed to help with this last issue. We want to encourage Christian believers and whole churches to focus on our primary task of sharing the good news with the whole world. Each title aims to equip you with the understanding you need, so that you can build meaningful friendships with others from different backgrounds, and share the good news in a relevant and clear way.

It is our prayer that this book will help you do that with a Hindu neighbour, friend or work colleague and that the result would be “great joy” as they understand that Jesus is good news for them.

*Tim Thornborough*  
*Series Editor*

# Understanding Hindus



# Chapter one

## A global faith

Hindus are the world's third largest religious community, with increasing influence on every aspect of life. Politicians, film stars and royalty consult their astrologers or their gurus. People often talk about *karma*.

Management consultants (the new gurus) tell chief executives to unlock the potential of "the Self" within, while some recommend Transcendental Meditation to relieve stress and clear the mind.

Yoga is everywhere. Doctors have begun using it to help people with asthma, arthritis or high blood pressure. Health authorities are looking seriously at the ancient Ayurvedic health system of India to see what insights might be helpful to our modern lifestyle.

Recent surveys show that increasing numbers in the West believe in reincarnation.

The New Age movement is a rainbow of beliefs and practices, but its philosophical foundations are essentially Hindu, along with ideas from Buddhism and other Eastern religions. It incorporates Hindu spiritual disciplines like

meditation, yoga, and channelling occult powers.

The Hindus you meet could be doctors, pharmacists, IT professionals, business people, shopkeepers, call-centre workers, media people, your neighbours, colleagues or friends. You may have seen devotees of Krishna dancing and singing in the streets.

On the big screen, you might have seen Hindus or the influence of Hindu ideas in *Life of Pi*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Eat Pray Love* or *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*.

According to C. S. Lewis, the Hindu worldview is the major alternative to the biblical worldview.

But what is Hinduism?

You may have met Hindus or know them as friends, but still find it difficult to explain what Hinduism is.

That's because Hinduism is so diverse. One scholar described it as "probably the most varied and flexible religious system in the world". There is no founder. There is no figure like Buddha, Jesus, Confucius or Mohammed. There are libraries of scriptures and at least six major schools of philosophy.

Hindus hold widely different beliefs and follow widely different practices of spirituality and worship. Each Hindu you meet believes that their way is right—and the other is not wrong. You may feel you are grasping water, as you try to bring these ideas together. "But what do you expect?" your Hindu friend replies. "How can you grasp God? All you can say is 'Not this, not that'. Our quest for God takes us to the heights and depths of human spirituality. We have autonomy in belief. I will be glad to borrow your insights and way, and incorporate them into my own."

Hinduism contains many strands, developed over long periods of time and in different regions. The word “Hindu” was originally a geographical term, used by the Persians to describe the people of the Indus River region. Later Muslim invaders called the region Hindustan, the country of the people of Hind or Sind. In the 18th and 19th centuries the term “Hinduism” was coined to describe the religions, customs, culture and way of life of the peoples of India.

Scholars debate whether the word “Hinduism” has any meaning at all. Is it an artificial term, constructed by Europeans? Or is there an underlying unity? Some Hindus call it “the world’s oldest religion”, tracing it back thousands of years, or refer to the “*Sanatana Dharma*”, which could be translated “the eternal religion”.

Listen to this conversation:

I arrived in Mr. Patel’s home and we chatted in Gujarati for a while. I enquired about which satsang [religious gathering] he attended, his family and background. He spoke of his belief in his guru and their weekly meeting. Finally we switched to English for the benefit of my English friend. He asked what Mr. Patel believed and he responded “I am a Hindu.”

I was surprised. In four years of learning Gujarati, building friendships within the various Gujarati communities, visiting temples, I had never heard anyone refer to themselves as a Hindu. And yet, when confronted with a Westerner, an English person, “Hindu” became a useful label.

*from 30 Days’ Prayer for Hindus*

As this conversation illustrates, “Hinduism” has become a useful label for its adherents when facing the other world religions like Islam and Christianity, but many do not think of themselves as “Hindu”. For them, their community is important, worship of their gods is important, and living a good life is important.

“What makes Hinduism so different from other religions is that there is no agreed list of do’s and don’ts,” a Hindu woman in Delhi told me once. “You are free to do what you want, as long as you don’t condemn others.”

Hindus use “Hinduism” as shorthand for the collection of beliefs, customs, rituals, religious practices and social relationships that have grown up over centuries. Some believe it was revealed all at once to the ancient sages. Others describe it as:

“... more like a tree that has grown gradually than like a building that has been erected at some point of time. It contains within it ... the influence of many cultures.”

K M Sen, *Hinduism: The World's Oldest Faith*

We will use the same shorthand, referring to Hinduism, but remembering that it describes an astonishing diversity of belief and practice, a complex “family of religions”. Through it all runs a strong thread of autonomy.

### A way of life

It is more helpful to think of Hinduism as “a way of life” or a civilisation that has absorbed ideas from all sides and held them together. This has largely been through

### **Fact File**

- The majority of the world's Hindus live in India (up to 900 million). But Hindus also live in many other countries.
- Until recently Nepal was the world's only Hindu kingdom.
- Other Asian countries have substantial Hindu minorities: Bangladesh, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bhutan, Myanmar (Burma), Fiji, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Philippines.
- Over 10 million Hindus are scattered round the world in the South Asian Diaspora, with their own distinctive identity—eg: USA over 1.2 million, UK 815,000. South Africa 750,000, Canada 330,000 (estimated figures).
- Some believe that Russia will soon have more Hindus than the West.

the strength of the family. From one perspective every Hindu has their own unique destiny, appointed by their *karma*, which cannot be transferred. But every Hindu is born into a family in which they grow up and absorb the conduct, ideas and outlook on life of their parents and the other family members:

“I was raised in a rigidly-structured and despotically-ruled Hindu home with well-preserved traditions, well-devoted customs, and well-formulated

expectations, along with, of course, a great deal of love, understanding, and exhortation. You imbibed the family culture as it were, by being a member of the family, and you emulated the family's perspective on history, art, and religion, by repeated reminders, to enhance the family's image in the local community. Into such a wonderfully strict and kind family I was born."

Mahendra Singhal, formerly  
Professor of Mathematics in Chicago

What holds this way of life together? Are there any key ideas or beliefs that we can identify?

*From the unreal lead me to the real  
From darkness lead me to light  
From death lead me to immortality.*

This ancient prayer from the *Rig Veda*, the earliest Hindu scriptures, is sung daily in many schools in India. For many Hindus it reflects the desire of their heart: to know the unknowable, for the mortal to become immortal, for the darkness of this world to become light. We should be very cautious about generalisations. But it would be true to say that through the wide variety of ways of worship, works, spiritual exercises, or discipleship under a guru runs the aim of taking the seeker from the physical realm to a higher spiritual realm.

Many Hindus see life as a journey towards God and a journey towards truth. Few would say they have reached God or even that they will reach God in this lifetime, but

the hope is that through repeated lifetimes they might reach God.

Ed Viswanathan, a Hindu living in the USA, answers questions from his 14-year-old son:

“Daddy, what do you or anyone try to achieve through the practice of Hinduism?”

“It is easy to say ‘salvation’, but that is the ultimate goal. Right now, we are trying to achieve peace and harmony in life ... The Hindu way of life aids that effort ... As I told you before, it is quite easy to follow Hinduism, because Hinduism believes that ignorance is the root of all evil and true knowledge is the answer to all problems. First, try to understand the truth, and then try to practice and realise that truth. So, most of us who adhere to Hinduism are not trying to become gurus or hermits or philosophers. We are just trying to have a stress-free, peaceful life.”

*from Am I a Hindu? The Hinduism Primer*

As you meet Hindus and develop friendships, you will experience warmth and affection. You will also encounter the wealth of their cultural and spiritual heritage.

As you learn more about what Hindus believe and practise, you may find some ideas that are very different from what you believe. You will find others that seem remarkably close. For many Hindus their God is personal, one whom they seek and whose grace they need. When describing their religious experience, they may use lan-

guage that is remarkably similar to how we describe our own faith and trust in Christ.

Jitu Patel is a successful Hindu businessman. He draws strength for his work from his faith in God:

“This faith gives you immense energy and courage from within to go ahead. Everything just falls into place. It’s as if the Lord is there getting me through this maze and gives me the right energy and the right time and the right opportunity. I have immense faith in the Lord.”