Hinduism in 2000 words.

By Krishna Sharma.

krishna@medhajananm.org

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(I wrote this article in response to questions sent by David B. Musco, Student at Wake Tech Community College, Raleigh, NC, USA. on October 17, 2011)

Hinduism is deep. It deals with the depths of you, the depths of life and the depths of universe. To call it a religion is to put it in a finite framework that it doesn't fit in. If you force fit into a framework, you will miss its essence. Same thing will happen if you try to reduce it into a term paper.

Religions provide answers to these deep questions, but only by reducing the infinite into finite. Once the infinite is reduced to finite, you are not dealing with the infinite any more. Hinduism is not a religion. It doesn't reduce the infinite into finite. Rather it focuses on expanding the finite you into the infinite you. Expanding yourself into the infinite is the only way you can understand the infinite. You cannot understand the infinite by remaining finite. The more you are prepared to pursue the infinite depths of you and the universe the more Hinduism can help you. If you are used to the idea of 'religions' that asks you to 'accept' something stated somewhere, there is a good chance that you will miss the point of Hinduism.

The infinite is embedded into you and it is also surrounding you, say the Upanishads. So you can look within or without to seek the infinite. Even saying 'seek' is not adequate, because that would mean you can grasp it while being finite. So the only way is to expand yourself. Only Shiva can understand Shiva, say the Vedas. You have to become Shiva to understand Shiva. You have to become the infinite to understand the infinite.

How do you become infinite? Keep thinking and pursuing it constantly. You will find the way yourself. As long as you are careful not to trade your infinite question for a finite answer given by a book or religion or an individual, you will get there. If you think it is too much for you to take it on your own, the next best thing is to follow someone who already did that. And that will

be your Guru. The one who can help you see beyond the normal layers of your mind that tends to focus on the finite. And all Gurus may not take the same route. But they will help you reach the same infinite. So Hinduism establishes that there can be and will be many paths to reach the same goal. Hence the religions, by necessity, will be many, says Hinduism. Humongous number of religions are bound to come and go, both within Hinduism (Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Sikhism, etc.) and without Hinduism (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) and there will be many, many branches and variations in it.

That is normal. There can't be only one path to get to the top of the mountain. It depends on where you start and what comes naturally to you. If you are a bird, you would fly. If you are a snake, you would crawl. If you are a frog, you would, well, leap. If you are a human, you would seek the paths that are already travelled, for the sake of ease, or you would seek the paths that were never tried, for the sake of thrill and fun. But you *will* get to the top of the mountain as surely as the water on the mountain can find its way to the ocean. This trek comes naturally to you. The religions that come to your help on the way can be helpful or they can be just distracters. They may kill or dilute the natural quest and energy you have towards trekking the mountain.

Hinduism also says that it is OK to start your quest for the infinite, with the help of a religion, because it is built around a path that worked, at least for some. But when put in words, the infinite becomes finite. It becomes confined. At some point, you need to grow beyond it. You need to liberate yourself from the confines of religion, to liberate yourself and to become infinite. The sooner you figure out its confines and the sooner you pick up the courage to discard it, the sooner you will see the infinite. Every definition of God that you come across, has to become inadequate at some point, and that is a sign that you are making progress. You don't understand god, until you question god. You don't understand god, until you doubt god.

There are many ways to see the infinite in you. There are many ways to get in touch with your core. If it appeals to you, start with the idea that the infinite is formless. You can focus on the infinite as formless through meditation. (Yoga is one of steps in that direction). If formless is too abstract, seek a symbol or a shape that you like. If concepts are abstract, chisel out a specific time in the day or week or month or year or whatever, and chisel out a place in this finite world,

to focus on that object. Create stories around it. Focus on it by singing or dancing or by giving lovely offerings; whichever brings the best out of you and makes you will melt away. When the finite melts away, you will go to a state of infiniteness and boundlessness. In the beginning, it will be only for very brief moments. Then you will be able to 'lose yourself' at any time you want and come back to the finite whenever you want. Once you see the infinite, everything in the finite make sense. Nothing will bother you any more. You live in the infinite and the finite simultaneously, says Bhagavad Gita.

So the core of Hinduism is simple. Keep expanding yourself. In that process you identify yourself with everything. Once you start expanding yourself, you can't hurt anything, because it is like hurting yourself. You will love everything, because it is like loving yourself.

People in the east have followed multiple paths to melt their identities away, but reaching the same ultimate. Jesus, after his sojourn to India, has took back this message of the east to the west. For, perhaps, the first time in that part of the world, he said, 'look within'. Both the contemporaries of Jesus and all the denominations of Christianity that came later hardly understood this wisdom in full. They were and are still suffering under the weight of the dictum, 'no god, but me'. Not only Christianity, but even some of the religions within Hinduism has succumbed to similar sounding dictums. They happened to glorify a path of their liking exclusively, going to the extent of denying other paths at times, and even venturing into destroying and demeaning other paths. Jingoism and Xenophobia were the obvious consequences. In the West, people used God many a time, to establish their own supremacy and to oppress or persecute others. In the East, people always used God to unite everybody, regardless rich or poor, scholar or lay person, oppressor or oppressed. The idea that no one is farther or closer to god than anyone else, is very widespread in India. You can find it in the scriptures, in the stories, in the folk lore and in everyday life.

There is a nice story that illustrates this phenomena. There is a temple in South India called Sri Kaala Hasti in a town with the same name, near the famous Tirupati. The three words Sri, Kaala, and Hasti mean, spider, snake and elephant respectively. The three used to come to the temple to pray to the god, the way they know it. The snake used to bring diamonds from under the ground and place them in front of the god, with all its being seeking to be one with god. Then the

elephant used to come and get annoyed by these shiny rocks and remove them off and place beautiful flowers in front of the god, with all its being seeking to be one with god. Then the spider used to come and get annoyed by the lifeless plant material and used to hide them by weaving thick webs on them and weave a beautiful web on top of them, with all its being seeking to be one with god. Then it is the snakes turn again to come to only get annoyed by the garbage around the god. Days passed by. And it came to the point that the snake can't take this anymore. It hides itself in the temple and sees the elephant coming and removing the diamonds. It enters the trunk of the elephant driving the elephant mad. Elephant goes crazy and beats its head against the walls of the temple killing itself and the snake along with it. As it is violently moving around, it knocked off the lamps in the temple causing a fire that burnt the spider webs and the spider. Passionately they prayed. Violently, they killed each other. At the end, god took all of them into himself, taking them to the realms of infinity and liberating them from the relative views caused by the finiteness.

So Hinduism, says, as long as you consistently think of the infinite and seek it, you will get there, here and now or later. Don't get lost in comparing and judging which path is best. Just take one that naturally comes to you. Once you get to the top, you will get the panoramic view. You will not only see the path you trekked, but every path leading there.

Seek not even liberation. Expand yourself to infinite. Love and liberation, you will verily find, en-route the path, for sure and certain. Hinduism doesn't distinguish between god and universe and you. They are all the same. If they seem to be different to you, it is because, you are still on the way to become the infinite.

The simplest things are the most complex to verbalize. Hence, though the truth is one, Hinduism says, that the learned are bound to describe it in multiple ways. Kabir says it differently. Vishnu Sahasra Namam says it differently. Rudram says it differently. Ramana Maharshi say it differently. Jesus said it differently. Buddha said it differently. But it is all the same. Until you reach the top of the mountain, one path looks different from the other. Once you reach the top of the mountain, the paths melt into the mountain and there is only one mountain.

Life here is a different story. It is a parameterized equation of the finiteness. We can only make it the best. We cannot make it perfect. Accepting it as the imperfect is the perfect thing to do. But

there is a lot in the life that is magical, if not perfect. The attraction of all of us to utterly functionless childhood is nothing short of magical. The attraction that draws us to the opposite sex constantly is nothing short of magical. The attraction that draws us to the mountains is nothing short of magical. Expressing and cherishing these attractions in a way that we can sustain them for long is the mechanics of life. And there is plenty of advices that Hinduism provides in all these aspects.

Marriage is not a contract. Marriage is not an alliance. Marriage is not a partnership. Marriage is a glorious and sustained manifestation of the attraction between energy and matter. If we are blind to that, we get into the vicious cycle of bean counting and fault counting. Appreciation for marriage doesn't stem from logic. It grows on you. By watching people manage their relationships. By trusting the basics of the attraction. By letting it take its course, and not hurry, before it bears the fruits and you develop a taste for them.

A person is not just an economic entity. A person is not just a legal entity. A person is not a just a human entity. A person is not just a spiritual entity. A person is all of them at the same time. Which poses many challenges for any of us, in terms of balancing life. And there is tons of advice on how to balance. That is where the abundance of texts of Hinduism comes in place. But the texts tell you that you should follow your instincts first. Where your instincts seem to fail you, you can take recourse to the advice. But your instincts should not be any subordinate to the guidance. You are the winner, not the sinner. Because you are it. The infinite. Enjoy the partial, but magical views of the finite and enjoy the complete, infinite and blissful. Both are within your reach.

Appendix

Questions sent by David B. Musco, student at Wake Tech Community College, Raleigh, NC, USA and my answers shown as sub-bullets.

- How did you become a Hindu? Family already in the faith, a girl or a friend…
    - Born into Hindu family.
- Christianity says God made Earth and all the heavens. What's the Hindu outlook on how we got here?

    - There are many theories about it. Many of the are fascinating. The point is we got used to accepting multiple theories and be open to another theory that can explain it even better. Every Sage in Hinduism discovered a Mantra which revealed a secret aspect of the Universe.
- Do you believe in Extra Terrestrials? (if they were discovered it would disprove the way Christians view their religion) Would the discovery of Aliens in outer space destroy how you view your religion? I sometimes challenge the validity of my religion. Do you?
    - If the aliens are there, they are there. If they are not there, they are not there. Either way it doesn't matter. If they are benign it is good. If they are malign, we will stay away from them, just like we stay away from poisonous snakes. Hinduism does not fall apart because of their existence or non-existence. The fundamental concept in Hinduism is AUM. Aum includes everything that ever existed and is existing and is going to exist.
- How does Hinduism help you cope with all of the hard obstacles life places in your path?
    - The world is imperfect and finite. Everyone cannot have their way in a finite world. So you have to work through it. Lord Ganesha represents the power in you to get through them. You have to constantly invoke that power.
- What were some of your favorite stories growing up?
    - Read the Sri Kala Hasti story in my write-up.
- What are some of the most popular practices or ceremonies?
    - There are many. Marriage has many ceremonies in it. Child birth is celebrated with many ceremonies. Festivals include many ceremonies. It is matter of a sub-culture, rather than a matter of Hinduism, how they are celebrated. Even popular festivals like Diwali and Dusshera vary in the way they are celebrated in India, across the states and regions and even among the castes, which give rise to a variety of fascinating sub-cultures.
- Are there things that you'd like to change about Hinduism?
    - No. It doesn't place any constraints regarding reaching ultimate or infinite. It, in fact, recognizes all of them as equal. For a Christian accepting Islam may mean denying Christianity. For a Muslim accepting Christianity may mean denying Islam. For a Hindu, all of them are just different paths. Regarding daily life, Hinduism relegates the options and choices to the sub-cultures, which vary by region, sub-region, caste and sub-caste. Bad practices did come into vogue because of this freedom. But they also vanish over time, unless they serve a meaningful social function. Hinduism also allows new interpretations of everything. I have heard many different interpretations of Shiva's third eye. All are fascinating and deep.

- How do you view marriage? Can you get a divorce?
    - Marriage is for life. If you can get a divorce, it is not a marriage. That is the ideal. However, in practice, it is left to the law givers and to the sub-cultures. For example, Manu Smriti says that if the husband goes on a sojourn and des not return within seven years, the woman can remarry. Many such exceptions are mentioned in many places. Within a given community and sub-culture, the urge to get a divorce or the acceptability of getting a divorce always varied. Hindus in modern times follow the land of the law, regarding divorce.
- What do you believe Jesus was? Was he just a man or a prophet or…?
    - Jesus is a great personality. Hindus don't try to worry about whether he is a man or a prophet or some such entity. We like all the good things he said. That's about it. Shirdi Saibaba said good things. Kabir said good things. They are all normal people. They had normal lives. But they spoke the words that seemed to come from a different world. We just enjoy, cherish and follow as much as we can.
- Once all your Karma is gone what happens?
    - You truly become infinite, or one with the infinite. Karma captures the idea of your inclination to be finite and stay as finite.
- If you are upper-class or a priest does that mean you have probably removed all the Karma and that much closer to not being reincarnated again and staying…uh… Does one know how close they are to reaching the end of their Life's travels (for lack of better words)
    - Some upper-class people may assume that they are closer to the god than others. But most of them do not. There are enough local stories across the breadth of India, like that of Bhakta Kannappa, which tell that everyone is equally capable of being one with the infinite.
- What is your afterlife supposed to be… or look like? Some say Heaven is a certain way others say Heaven is what you believe it is?
    - There are many theories about this. Too complicated. But the main point is that there is nothing to worry about, once you understood that god is within you at this moment, and he is there no matter where you go. If there is a heaven, there is god. If there is a hell there is god. If I become an ant in my next life, god is still in me. It doesn't matter.