

Lecture 3:

Groups of Religions; Hinduism and the Four Fours

Today we're turning to the first of the specific groups of religions we shall study this term. Up to this point, my lectures (both written and audio) have been designed to give you a sense of my overall approach and assumptions and how they compare with the attitudes and methods of other religious studies scholars. In the last couple of lectures, we've focused on the relationship between religion and science and on the relationship between the religions themselves. Without repeating the details, I'll simply remind you that mine is a *perennialist* point of view and that my plan is to assist you in *looking along* the religions we study so as to discover their inward or "esoteric" resemblances. Not that we shall be neglecting the differences. I'm also concerned that you come away from Religious Studies 120 fully aware of the great variety among the world's religions, including such things as the different views of God and salvation that I briefly mentioned last time. But I don't want for us to lose sight of the forest for the trees, and I'll therefore be stressing throughout the course the four common elements that I discussed with you last time: *Truth, Virtue, Beauty, and Prayer*—elements at the center or heart of every genuine or authentic religion.

As noted in the syllabus, I've organized the religions we study into four basic categories: South Asian Religion, East Asian Religion, Western Religion, and Primal Religion. The first three of these categories are obviously geographical or spatial, while the fourth is chronological or temporal. South Asia, East Asia, and the West refer to parts of the world, and as it happens the religions that originated in these areas are what we call *historical* religions—religions, that is, which have more or less dateable and traceable historical roots and trajectories. This is the kind of religion we're going to be studying during the first three quarters of the course. The last group, the Primal Religions, can't be geographically confined to any particular part of the world. Instead, what is most distinctive about them is the fact that they're *prehistoric* in character, with their roots going back beyond the earliest dateable texts and historical records to the dawn of prehistory many thousands of years ago. We'll be talking about religions in this category in the last part of the course.

I find that a handy way of keeping track of these four categories is to use a diagram that I'll show you during my audio-lecture—a little pie with three slices that can be overlaid on a map of the world. We're going to be starting our studies by looking first at South Asian traditions, and

as you'll be able to see by comparing the diagram with the map, South Asia in this case refers primarily to the country of India, where Hinduism and Buddhism (the first two religions we'll be discussing) arose. We'll be turning second to East Asian religions, and again by looking at the map and the diagram, you'll see that in this case we're going to be talking mainly about religions found in China and Japan: Confucianism, Taoism, and the Zen form of Buddhism. Thirdly, we'll look at the category of Western Religions, and with this in mind I've tried to arrange things on the map so that the third piece of the "pie" embraces the eastern end of the Mediterranean, including the Arabian peninsula, where Judaism and Islam—the two Western traditions we're going to focus on—both originated. Finally, we'll explore the category of Primal religion, represented in the diagram (as you'll see) by concentric circles. The circle is a very appropriate image since the religions that belong to this family, as I've already noted, don't come from any particular country, but rather can be found in many different settings throughout the whole globe. On the map, I've actually drawn three circles, with the area between the inner and middle circles positioned in such a way as to include such diverse places as Siberia in the northernmost part of Russia, the Polynesian Islands in the South Pacific, Australia, and also Africa, all of these being important centers of the Primal traditions. Between the middle and the outer circles, I've included an area that embraces both North and South America. Here too, prior to European colonization, there existed numerous groups of primal religious peoples; our emphasis in this class will be on the primal tradition of the North American Plains Indians.

Another way to think about the historical religions (South Asian, East Asian, and Western)—a philosophical rather than a geographical way—is in terms of the distinct problem or question that each of these three groups tends to focus its attention on. When it comes to dealing with life, every person is confronted with three basic problems. No matter who we are, or when or where we live, each of us is challenged by three different issues. The first is the problem of our own identity: Who am I? What does it mean to be *me*? In fact, what does it mean to have a *self* at all? People have answered this question in various ways, but everybody asks it at one time or another and in one form or another; it's an essential mark of being human. The second problem has to do with other people. Not only do I ask myself who *I* am; I also have to wrestle with the question of who *you* are. This is the problem of human relationships: Who are our neighbors? What are our responsibilities toward them? What is the best form of *society*? The third problem concerns our natural environment. I have to figure out who I am, and I need to understand how I

should relate to you and other people; but at some point I must also face up to the question of what it means to be alive in this particular world: Why am I *here* and not somewhere else? And for that matter, what exactly *is* here? How did the world get started, how does it work, and what is it made of? To sum up, we could refer to these three sets of issues as the questions or problems of *self*, *society*, and *nature*.

Alright, fine; but you're wondering what the point is! The point is that each of the three major groups of historical religions can be understood in broad terms as having "specialized", as it were, in one of these problems. (Huston Smith, author of the best-selling book *The World's Religions* and a good friend of mine for many years, often used this scheme in his lectures.) They certainly don't ignore the other questions—every authentic religion, by definition, is able to teach us about our selves, our neighbors, and our world—and yet their primary focus tends to be on one "problem" in particular. To be precise, the South Asian religions like Hinduism are concerned above all with the question of *self*; the East Asian religions like Confucianism and Taoism tend to focus on the question of *society*; and the Western religions like Judaism and Islam have a special interest in the question of *nature*.

I'll be returning to this point at the start of each corresponding unit of the course. For today, as we begin our discussions of South Asian religion, let me give you just a couple of quick examples of what I mean by saying that the traditions from this part of the world are typically focused on the question of self. Everybody, I said, is faced with the problem of personal identity: Who am I? Why am I myself and not someone else? What does it mean to have a soul or to be a human "self" at all? In the contemporary world, if you're having problems figuring out who you are, a personality or identity crisis, it's customary to go see a psychologist or psychiatrist, who will perhaps help to explain your difficulties by making a distinction between your ordinary waking awareness and a deeper *unconscious* or *subconscious* self. Differing schools of modern psychology use different technical terms for these levels of awareness, but basically their distinctions remain essentially two-fold: between a conscious and an unconscious dimension. By contrast, certain traditional Hindu schools of *yoga* distinguish up to 121 distinct levels or states of consciousness, leading Huston Smith (see above) to refer to India as "the world's greatest introspective psychologist". Three or four thousand years before the development of the idea of the unconscious in Europe (in the late nineteenth century), Indian religious teachers already knew about an even deeper and more subtle range of mental states and were instructing their students in precise

techniques for entering into these extraordinary realms of awareness. Along these same lines it's been observed that for every one psychological term in modern English, there are four in ancient Greek and about forty (!) in Sanskrit, the ancient language of Hinduism, a fact that clearly testifies to the subtlety and complexity of the South Asian understanding of the inward self. It's important to remember facts like this before we go flattering ourselves on how highly developed and intelligent people are today!

In any case, with these broader characteristics in mind, let's turn now to our first tradition, Hinduism. I'll be saying more later on in this lecture about the Hindu interest in the human self, but it's important to mention first of all just a few historical points.

Hinduism is the oldest of the religions in Asia, and probably the oldest *historical* religion in the world, although Judaism in the West may be a fairly close competitor. (Notice that I stressed the word "historical" here; the primal religions, which are *prehistoric* in character, are many thousands of years older yet.) The beginnings of Hinduism are actually a matter of considerable debate. Some have argued that the tradition dates back to around 2000 B.C., when a group of nomadic peoples from central Asia, the Aryans, began to settle in the northwest part of the Indian sub-continent, conquering the indigenous peoples who were already living along the banks of the Indus River; Hinduism as we know it today, these scholars say, stems from the combined religious beliefs of these two distinct peoples. Many Hindus themselves reject this theory, locating the origins of their religion exclusively within the Indian sub-continent and placing the beginning of their beliefs and practices at an even more remote, though still more or less datable, past; for example, based on astronomical data in the Hindu scriptures, the birth of Krishna (see Lecture 4) has been calculated to have occurred in 3112 B.C.

Either way it's agreed by all scholars that the word "Hindu" was first used (by the Persians) as a name for the people and culture of the Indus River valley, and this supplies a key to one important feature of this ancient religion. Unlike certain other traditions that have a strong missionary or proselytizing spirit—religions like Christianity and Islam, which are intended, according to their followers, for *all* people throughout the whole world—*H-ind*-uism is the religion of the *Ind*-us River civilization, and by far the majority of its adherents are still to be found in South and Southeast Asia: in India itself primarily, though also in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Fiji. In this respect Hinduism is rather like Judaism, which is also the faith (at least primarily) of a single ethnic group. In order to be a member of these two

religions, at least in their most traditional and orthodox forms, it is generally assumed that one must be born into them. In the case of Hinduism this is especially important, because certain religious practices depend upon which caste or class of society one belongs to, and these castes are traditionally determined by who one's parents are, hence by heredity.

Now here I need to pause for a short disclaimer. It's actually a little misleading to speak about Hinduism in the singular, as if it were one, single, monolithic religion that could be summed up in a creed or short statement of faith. The name "Hinduism" is in fact a western, scholarly invention used to refer to a widely variegated tapestry of spiritualities among the Indian people. A Hindu himself, however—unless he lives in the West or has been influenced by western terminology—would ordinarily have referred to his religion as the *Sanâtana Dharma*; this is a phrase in the ancient Indian language of Sanskrit that means "Eternal Law", a law which is understood to have been revealed to a group of ancient Indian seers called the *rishis* and which is meant to guide human beings toward a state of ultimate fulfillment. In any case, rather than naming one specific, easily definable religious path, the word "Hinduism" is in fact a generic term for a vast array of beliefs and practices. In general, and putting the matter in the simplest possible way, scholars usually distinguish three major branches of Hinduism: that of the *Vaishnavites*, the *Shaivites*, and the *Shaktas*. The differences have to do in part with the fact that each group directs its worship and devotion toward a different deity: Vaishnavite religious practice is focused on the god *Vishnu*; Shaivite practice on the god *Shiva*; and the Shaktas worship one or another of several Hindu goddesses, each of whom is an expression of the Divine feminine energy called *Shakti*. I'll be describing these deities more carefully in my next lecture.

My essential point for the moment, however, is simply to stress the enormous complexity and variation that can be found under the heading of Hinduism—a complexity and variety even more mind-boggling than that of contemporary Christianity, with its thousands of different denominations, all of which believe in the same God at least! Now you'll be glad to know, I'm sure, that we're not going to be overly concerned in this class with all this complexity. This after all is an *introductory* course, and my plan with each religion we study is to focus mainly on the doctrines and practices that are common to all of its various subdivisions. But I did think you should know that what we're discussing here is but the teeniest tip of the South Asian iceberg.

Alright, back to the question of self. I was saying above that in a way which is typical of South Asian religion in general, the various strands of the Hindu tradition tend to "specialize" in

the problem of personal identity, addressing themselves above all to the question of who *I* am and what it means to be a *self*. I've already mentioned Hinduism's extraordinary subtlety when it comes to analyzing the numerous layers or levels of consciousness, and we'll be seeing more of this when I describe for you in another lecture the spiritual techniques prescribed by certain schools of *yoga*. I'd like to use the last part of this lecture, however, to describe a somewhat different aspect of this characteristic focus. What I have in mind is the interest Hindus have traditionally shown not only in the different states of consciousness *within* a given self, that is, within the individual human being, but also in the many different kinds of consciousness one notices *between* selves, that is, between different human beings. Hinduism seems to be unique among the world's religions in its belief that such differences have a deep spiritual significance and in its insistence that different sorts of people should therefore be offered a corresponding variety of spiritual paths. Hinduism therefore tends to be the most "perennialist" of all the world's religions, if I could put it that way. As with every tradition, there are certainly important exceptions to this rule, but by and large Hindus are more likely than most other religious people to acknowledge—and often to rejoice in—the idea that there are multiple ways of ascending the mountain toward God.

According to Hinduism, people differ most importantly in four basic ways: (1) They differ with regard to their particular talents and *vocations*; (2) they differ over what they most *want* out of life; (3) they differ as to the *stage* of life they're presently in; (4) and they differ as to which religious *path*, which type of spirituality, is most suitable for them. In each case, Hindus have broken down the possibilities into further subdivisions of four: four *vocations*, four *wants*, four *stages*, and four *paths*. To make this easier to remember, you might think of these as four suits of cards (diamonds, hearts, spades, and clubs). It's only natural—the Hindus would say—that like any good card player each person should lead with the highest cards he's been dealt in each suit. To discern my calling or vocation in light of my strongest talents, to know which of the wants is most important to me, to take account of which stage of life I'm in, and to be aware of which spiritual path I can most successfully follow are all extremely important considerations when it comes to my ultimate union with God. I shall discuss these "Four Fours" more carefully with you in my YouTube lecture, but to anticipate that discussion, and to make it easier for you to understand what I'm saying, let me here simply list the key terms in Sanskrit, with a promise to define them carefully when I speak about this issue.

I. <i>Varnas</i> (Vocations)	II. <i>Purushârthas</i> (Wants)	III. <i>Âshramas</i> (Stages)	IV. <i>Margas</i> (Paths)
1. <i>Brahmana</i>	1. <i>Kama</i>	1. <i>Brahmacharya</i>	1. <i>Jnâna</i>
2. <i>Kshatriya</i>	2. <i>Artha</i>	2. <i>Gârhasthya</i>	2. <i>Bhakti</i>
3. <i>Vaishya</i>	3. <i>Dharma</i>	3. <i>Vânaprastha</i>	3. <i>Karma</i>
4. <i>Shûdra</i>	4. <i>Moksha</i>	4. <i>Sannyâsa</i>	4. <i>Raja</i>

In the meantime, give some thought to the question yourself. What would you say are the main sorts of things people are called to do? What are the most important human wants or desires? If you were carving up the typical human life span, where would you place the major divisions? And which would you say are the primary ways in which people relate, or endeavor to relate themselves, to God?