

Lecture 4: Conceptions of God; Hindu Theology

Last time we embarked on an exploration of our first major religion, the South Asian tradition of Hinduism. I began the lecture by calling your attention to the four main categories or families of religions that we'll be studying this semester, and I gave you some tips on how to remember the historical traditions both geographically and in light of their "specializations": South Asian = Self; East Asian = Society; and Western = Nature. I then gave you a quick glimpse of where Hinduism came from, emphasizing that unlike certain other religions that stress missionary activity, it has always been mainly the religion of a particular people, namely, the people of India. I also explained that the term "Hinduism" is really a generic category, which includes numerous subdivisions, and I mentioned three of these groups: the Vaishnavites, the Shaivites, and the Shaktas. Finally, during the last part of the class, we spent some time talking about what I called "The Four Fours"—the four Vocations, Wants, Stages, and Paths—all of which Hinduism honors in its efforts to take seriously the differences between and within human selves.

In this lecture I want to spend a few minutes introducing you to the Hindu understanding(s) of God. I say "God" simply as a kind of shorthand right now and to get us into the subject. As you'll see very shortly, however, the western word "God" is not entirely satisfactory for getting at the Hindu points of view. (Nor is "God" quite the right term when it comes to East Asian and Primal religions, but more of that down the road.)

It's best if I lead up to my topic gradually by distinguishing first between several concepts or ideas of the Divine in general. What Hindus believe will make the most sense if we pause initially for a sort of panoramic survey of the possibilities. I'm going to propose that there are nine different conceptions of the Divine to be found among the world's religions, and I'd like to make use of a further organizing principle: namely, a distinction (common among theologians and scholars of religion) between *transcendence* and *immanence*. The word "transcendence" refers to the fact that the Divine Reality *surpasses* all things—that it "goes beyond" (that's literally what "trans-cendence" means) the world; "immanence", on the other hand, points to the fact that this same Reality nonetheless is present *within* all things—that it "dwells inside" (that's the meaning of "immanence") the world and is inwardly present in the heart of every creature.

Let me try to paint a mental picture for you. Imagine yourself standing outside on top of a hill in the middle of a crisp winter night, gazing straight up into the vastness of a starlit sky. You can be said at that moment to have sensed the most extreme form of Divine transcendence insofar as your primary feeling is one of distance, remoteness, absence—the absence, perhaps, of God Himself. This feeling, in fact, could be referred to as a kind of

1. *Atheism*, though I need to emphasize at once that I'm using this term in a different way from the usual. When I speak about “a-theism” in this present context, I *don't* mean the out and out denial of God's existence (as we've encountered it, for example, in Marx and Freud and Richard Dawkins), but rather a profound personal experience of emptiness or remoteness. Certain mystics (like Saint John of the Cross) have described this experience as the “dark night of the soul”, and Christians may recall in this connection Jesus's words of dereliction on the Cross: “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me” (Mark 15:34)—words that mysteriously testify to God the Son's own keen awareness of the “distance” at the moment between Him and His Father. For each conception of the Divine, I've drawn a little picture that I'll show you in my YouTube lecture, and in this case, when it comes to experiencing the absence of God, I've attempted to depict an empty sky above a bare hill. As you'll be discovering a bit later on in the course, this first point of view can help us in understanding certain teachings of Buddhism.

2. A second view of the Divine is *Deism* (from the Latin word *Deus* for “God”). As perhaps you'll remember from your studies of history or philosophy, seventeenth and eighteenth century thought in Europe owed much to a group of thinkers whom we refer to as Deists, who pictured God as a sort of cosmic “clock-maker”; the God they envisioned was responsible for the creation of the world—it was He who got it all put together and “wound it up” to begin with—but He then had no subsequent contact with it. Deism goes hand in hand with what we might call a sort of Divine “aloofness”: There is no intervention (and therefore no miracles) on God's part in the world, no special care nor particular concern for His creatures. As you'll see, my picture for this possibility adds a star (representing God) to the previous image, but the star has been placed at a distance from the hill and with no indication of having any connection with the earth. No major religion I know of has ever conceived of God in quite this way—and so I don't have a tradition to connect with this diagram. As I've already mentioned, however, deism was a very influential view among many scientists and philosophers during the European Enlightenment, and it continues to be a rather popular theology today among people who would like to believe in God while

nonetheless accepting the modern scientific worldview, so it seemed to me that it ought at least to be mentioned.

3. *Dualism*. This is a way of conceiving the Divine that believes in the existence of two Gods, one good and one bad, who are engaged in a cosmic struggle for universal supremacy. I've placed dualism with the other perspectives that stress transcendence because the battle in question is often represented as a struggle between somewhat distant celestial potentates, whose concern for the world is largely a function of their wish to be in charge, and not (or not primarily) because of any special care they might have for the world or its creatures. Certain schools of thought within the ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism exemplify theological dualism, for in addition to a good deity named Ahura Mazda (or "the wise Lord"), they also conceived of an "evil spirit" named Angra Mainyu, who is Ahura Mazda's virtual equal in power. (I should perhaps add that there are only a few remaining members of this very tiny tradition, most of whom live in India today. Referred to as Parsis, these contemporary Zoroastrians stress the supreme lordship of Ahura Mazda and therefore the unitary, not dualistic, character of their religion.) In my diagram, there are now two stars in the sky.

4. *Henotheism*, from the Greek adjective *henos*, meaning "one". This perspective believes in the existence of multiple deities, but only one of them is regarded as worthy of worship. The God who is worshiped, the High God of the pantheon, is conceived in this scheme as having a closer contact with the world and man than His divine competitors. Hence in my picture, as you'll see, there are several little stars and a somewhat closer Big Star. God, in this scheme, is not simply a possessor of power or an enforcer of territory, but also a moral authority, who seeks the good of His creatures. This is the most "immanent" of the transcendent possibilities. Scholars believe that in its earliest form, the religion of the ancient Hebrews was henotheistic in nature, as is suggested by the first of the Biblical Ten Commandments, where God tells Moses, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). Notice that He doesn't say that there *aren't* other gods, only that they shouldn't come first, and this notion is confirmed in Exodus 22:20 when God adds that "whoever sacrifices to any god, save to the Lord only, shall be utterly destroyed".

5. *Monotheism*. Monotheism, like henotheism, is based upon the notion of unity, the word in this case coming from another Greek root that also means "one", the adjective *monos*. In this instance, however, the claim is not merely that only one God should be *worshiped*, but that only one God *exists*. The monotheist believes that there is only one true Divinity, and that other alleged

deities are mere pretenders or illusions. This way of viewing God is a kind of half-and-half combination of transcendence and immanence. From the monotheistic point of view, God is certainly other than the world—and beyond the world—for He created it, but nonetheless (unlike the Deist God) He sustains and cares for that world, intervening in history and moving in and among men in order to ensure that human events fall into line with His overall plan. When it comes to the religions that we'll be exploring this term, Islam will be our main focus for monotheism. In my corresponding picture, there is one star, relatively close to the "hilltop", with lines of "mercy" extending down.

Now we pass over to a second set of conceptions and to an emphasis on the dimension of immanence. As we make this transition, I need for you to redraw your mental picture. Let's say that you've come down from the hill you were standing on and entered a lush green valley, and that it's no longer night; instead it's the middle of a beautiful springtime day, and rather than gazing up at the sky, you're looking down toward the earth, carefully inspecting the flowers and butterflies and other myriad creatures as you stroll along the banks of a bubbling stream or brook. I suggest that in this case your fundamental feeling is not going to be one of absence or emptiness, but rather of presence and fullness, as you sense in some inexplicable way that the Divine is radiating forth from the entire world beneath and around you.

6. *Polytheism*. The first point of view I'll mention on this immanent side of the ledger is polytheism, which means literally "many-god-ism"; it's the belief in a plurality or multiplicity of deities, all of which (or at least many of which) are regarded as appropriate objects for worship. In placing this conception among the "immanent" views of the Divine, I have in mind in part the accounts of the gods and goddesses we find in ancient Greek and Roman mythology (figures like Zeus, Athena, Poseidon, Hera, Apollo, and so on); and I'm thinking of their intimate interest in the affairs of the world, their characteristically anthropomorphic representations, and the way in which they were believed to be involved in the superintendence of particular natural forces or human activities (Poseidon = god of the sea; Ares = god of war, *etc.*). I've tried to picture this way of looking at things in my diagrams by drawing several little stars right next to the earth, as if they were dwelling on the top of Mount Olympus. Ancient Greek and Roman religions were examples of this conception, as are a number of primal religions today.

7. *Panentheism*. This word must not be confused with the very similar term "pantheism". A pantheist is someone who believes that everything *is* God, but a pan-*en*-theist—note the extra

syllable—says that everything is *in* God; the word means literally “all-in-God-ism”. Those of you who are Christians may remember a famous line from Saint Paul’s speech to the Athenian intelligentsia, found in Acts 17. God, says Paul, “is not far from each one of us, for [and then Paul quotes one of the ancient Greek poets] ‘*In* Him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:27-28). The Divine is here pictured as one and not many, and as containing the myriad beings and powers of the world within itself. As you’ll see in YouTube Lecture 4, my diagram of this conception includes a large star with the semicircle of the world inside of it. This way of looking at things is probably best represented among the traditions we’ll study by the Chinese religion of Taoism. (Note that this conception is relatively more transcendent than No. 8 since God is here seen as the circumference or container, with the world as His content.)

8. *Animism*. Where the panentheist says that God contains all things, the animist believes that all things in a sense contain God. The term “animism” comes from the Latin word *anima*, which means “soul”; it’s also the source of our English words “animal” and “animate”. An animal is a creature that possesses a soul, the soul being understood in this case as an inward principle of feeling and consciousness; and of course to *animate* something is to bring it to life, to give it the power of feeling and knowing and moving. What the religious animist says is that everything that exists, whether we’re aware of the fact or not, is inwardly enlivened by the presence of God. God is the “soul” of all things, and He can be sensed, not merely in the movements of animals, but in the growth of plants, in the running of water, and in the shining of the sun and moon. You will notice that in this picture the Divine star is inside the semicircle of the world. The religious traditions of the American Indians are probably best placed in this category. (This conception is relatively more immanent than No. 7 since God is now seen as the center or content.)

9. *Monism*. Finally, there is one additional viewpoint that we need to have in mind this semester, and this is monism, a perspective which says that there’s only one (again from the Greek *monos* = one) true Reality and that this Reality is Divine. This conception of God goes much further than either panentheism or animism; it’s not simply that the world is in *God*, and it’s not simply that God is in the *world*. Rather there is *only* God and *no* world! Monism is thus the total opposite of religious “Atheism”. Where for the “atheist” God seems so far away as to be utterly absent, leaving the Ultimate and emptiness meaning much the same thing, for the monist He is so close as to be utterly present—so close and all-pervasive, in fact, that He excludes or displaces everything else. The Divine completely eclipses or submerges the universe, which is understood

in this conception to be nothing but an illusion. My drawing for this possibility pictures a star that is now so big as to take up the entire area of the diagram. As you'll see shortly, this final way of looking at the Divine is especially characteristic of the religion of Hinduism.

Alright, with these nine conceptions in mind, and with a bit of a preview as to where the religions we'll be studying should be positioned, I want to circle back now to the Hindu tradition.

I just said that the Hindu's perception of the Divine can be understood as a form of monism, but in saying this I'm radically simplifying an admittedly much more complicated picture. When it comes to its conception of God, there's undoubtedly a strong monistic tendency within the Hindu tradition, but at the same time Hinduism can also be seen to embrace all the other immanent conceptions as well, for it's also polytheistic, panentheistic, and animistic, depending on your emphasis, and depending above all on whether you're interpreting Hindu doctrine *exoterically* or *esoterically*. Let me try to explain what I mean by giving you some details, adding the specific Hindu terminology as I go along.

The Supreme Spiritual Reality—what a Christian would simply call “God”—is referred to in Hinduism by the Sanskrit word *Brahman*. *Brahman* is a neuter term—in other words, it's not a “he” or a “she” but an “it”—and it designates accordingly an *impersonal* metaphysical Principle. Now a distinction can be made, say the Hindus, between two dimensions or aspects of this Principle: *Nirguna Brahman* and *Saguna Brahman*. You might think of these as two sides of one coin. The word *nirguna* means “without quality”, and it refers to that dimension of the Supreme Reality which cannot be described by any categories or qualities known to man. *Nirguna Brahman* remains forever an utter mystery; the only word we can use in referring to it is the Sanskrit pronoun *Tat*, which simply means “That”. On the other hand, the word *saguna* means “with quality”, and it refers to that aspect of *Brahman* which *can* be expressed in human words and which *does* have qualities we can understand. To be precise, *Saguna Brahman* can be described in terms of three basic concepts: *sat*, which means being or existence; *chit*, which means consciousness; and *ananda*, which means joy or bliss. Take your idea of what it means to exist, your idea of what it means to be conscious, and your idea of what it means to be happy, and then project those ideas out toward infinity, imagining the greatest possible kind of being, the greatest possible knowledge, and the greatest joy, and you'll have a dim glimpse (say the Hindus) of what *Saguna Brahman* is like. (Christians and other religious people of the West are familiar with the idea that God is omnipotent or all-powerful and omniscient or all-knowing, but to these familiar concepts the

Hindus add that the Divine is also omni-felicitous or “entirely-blissful”.) In any case *Sat-chit-ananda* is the greatest thing we can say about *Brahman*, though this still leaves untouched its other, ever-elusive, and always hidden side of *nirguna*.

Going a step further, Hinduism adds that *Saguna Brahman* manifests or reveals itself in three main ways, and that in doing so it takes on certain personal characteristics whereby man can better understand it. As a personal Being, the Divine Reality is called *Īshvara*, and it is said to manifest itself in the form of three different gods: *Brahmā* (the Creator), *Vishnu* (the Preserver), and *Shiva* (the Transformer or Destroyer). Each of these gods, moreover, is believed to have a feminine counterpart—that is, a corresponding goddess (called *shakti*)—who shares in the same basic function or operation. I said earlier that *Brahman* is impersonal, but it would actually be better to say that Brahman is *supra*-personal; its “it-ness” doesn’t mean that it’s *neither* masculine nor feminine, but rather that it’s *both*. Therefore, says the Hindu, it only makes sense that when *Brahman* takes on personal forms, it should do so in both masculine and feminine ways. Hence there are various pairs of gods and goddesses. The goddess *Sarasvati* is matched up with *Brahmā*; the goddess *Lakshmī* accompanies *Vishnu*; and the goddess *Pārvatī* goes with the god *Shiva*. As I mentioned last time, Vaishnavites are Hindus whose principal god is Vishnu; Shaivites are Hindus who worship the god Shiva; and Shaktas are Hindus who are focused primarily on one of the goddesses, usually the goddess Parvati.

Now, as if all that’s not enough (!), I need to tell you about a further twist. Like Christianity, Hinduism teaches that the Divine has become incarnate—that God, in other words, has willingly chosen to come to earth in visible, tangible form. Unlike Christianity, however, which says that this happened just once, when Jesus Christ, the Son of God (and second person of the Trinity), became man (see John 1:14), the Hindu believes it has taken place many times. This is an especially important doctrine to know about when it comes to the Vaishnavite branch of Hinduism, which teaches that the god Vishnu has already appeared on earth nine times, at different moments of history. These appearances, manifestations, or (literally) “descents” of God are referred to as *Avatāras*. Four of those incarnations were in the form of animals—a fish, a tortoise, a boar, and a lion—and five more have been in the form of human beings. The best known of these human incarnations are *Rama* and *Krishna*. (I mentioned Krishna last time and the traditional year of his birth.) They are to the Vaishnavite Hindu religion what Jesus is to Christianity, appearing in the Hindu scriptures as the principal heroes in two great epics. But this isn’t the end of the story. A

tenth, and final, incarnation of Vishnu is yet to come, according to Vaishnavite belief; he's called the *Kalki Avatâra*, and his appearance on earth, at the very end of the world, is described in Hindu prophecies in much the same language as the Second Coming of Christ. The primary purpose of all these incarnations is to manifest Divine mercy and love and to bring justice to the world. In the *Bhagavad Gita* (I'll say more about this extremely important Hindu sacred text in my next lecture) Krishna says: "Whenever the *Dharma* (spiritual Law) is forgotten, whenever anarchy prevails, I incarnate myself. In every age, I come back: to deliver the righteous, to destroy the wicked, to establish the *Dharma*" (IV, 7-8).

Now I realize these ideas must look very complicated to those of you who've never heard anything about Hinduism before. To tell you the truth, though, the actual situation is in fact even *more* complicated—but paradoxically it's also much *simpler*! Let me underscore first the complexity. I've talked about Brahmâ, Vishnu, Shiva, and their corresponding goddess companions, and I've done so because these are certainly the main Hindu deities of classical and modern times, but you need to realize they are just chapter one, even paragraph one, of a huge book: there are hundreds (even thousands and millions) of additional deities, many of whom are capable of manifesting themselves in multiple forms. Talk about *polytheism*! Hinduism includes more deities than any other world religion.

On the other hand—and now here comes the simplicity—it turns out that in the final analysis all these multitudinous beings are really the projections or expressions of an ultimate One, namely, *Brahman*—so that in fact, you see, there is but a single Divinity. There's a passage in one of the *Upanishads* (another very important set of Hindu scriptures) that makes this point very nicely. A spiritual seeker named Vidagdha Shakalya asked his teacher, Yajnavalkya, "How many gods are there, O Yajnavalkya?" The teacher replied, "As many as are mentioned in the hymn to the Vishvedevas, namely, 333,000,000." "Yes," Vidagdha Shakalya said, "But how many gods are there *really*, O Yajnavalkya?" "33", the teacher replied. "But how many gods are there *really*, O Yajnavalkya?" "6". "But how many gods are there *really*, O Yajnavalkya?" "3". "But how many gods are there *really*, O Yajnavalkya?" "2". "But how many gods are there *really*, O Yajnavalkya?" "1 and 1/2" [!]. "But how many gods are there *really*, O Yajnavalkya?" "1", the teacher said finally. Then Vidagdha Shakalya asked, "Who, then, *are* these 333,000,000?" Yajnavalkya replied, "These are only the various powers" (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, III. 9. 1). A similar point is made in one of the prayers that's recited by a Hindu priest at the beginning of certain temple ceremonies:

“O Lord, forgive me three sins: Thou art everywhere, but I worship you here; Thou needest no praise, but I offer you these prayers and salutations; Thou art without form, but I worship you in these forms.”

So from one point of view all the millions of gods are really just *Brahman* in disguise. All the multiplicity is really just Unity. Moreover—here’s the final point I want to make in this lecture, and it’s a point that will probably be the most surprising of all to you—not only are these numerous gods really one; not only is *Brahman* the only true Divinity. It’s also the case, according to many Hindus, that what this Divinity really is ... is *you*! Believe it or not, *you are the Ultimate Reality*. Of course, you’ve forgotten this astounding fact, and most of the time you don’t live up to your real nature. But it’s nonetheless true: although God can be conceived as transcending all things, as existing beyond the furthest reaches of the universe, at the same time He is equally immanent, dwelling in fact at the root of your own deepest Self, which the Hindus call *Atman*. Hence the unparalleled importance of a famous phrase from the Hindu scriptures, *Tat tvam asi*: “That thou art.”

Hindus have a wonderful story to illustrate this astonishing doctrine, a story about a baby tiger and some goats that befriend him. But I’ll save that, and further discussion of *Tat tvam asi*, for my YouTube lecture.