

Hinduism for Beginners

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If you're new to this faith, here's where to begin. In this simple introduction to a complex religion, get your basic questions on Hinduism answered and explained in brief.

What is Hinduism?: Hinduism is the world's oldest extant religion, with a billion followers, which makes it the world's third largest religion. Hinduism is a conglomeration of religious, philosophical, and cultural ideas and practices that originated in India, characterized by the belief in reincarnation, one absolute being of multiple manifestations, the law of cause and effect, following the path of righteousness, and the desire for liberation from the cycle of births and deaths.

How is Hinduism unique from other religions?: Hinduism cannot be neatly slotted into any particular belief system. Unlike other religions, Hinduism is a way of life, a Dharma, that is, the law that governs all action. It has its own beliefs, traditions, advanced system of ethics, meaningful rituals, philosophy and theology. The religious tradition of Hinduism is solely responsible for the creation of such original concepts and practices as Yoga, Ayurveda, Vastu, Jyotish, Yajna, Puja, Tantra, Vedanta, Karma, etc.

How and when did Hinduism originate?: Hinduism has its origins in such remote past that it cannot be traced to any one individual. Some scholars believe that Hinduism must have existed even in circa 10000 B.C. and that the earliest of the Hindu scriptures – The Rig Veda – was composed well before 6500 B.C. The word "Hinduism" is not to be found anywhere in the scriptures, and the term "Hindu" was introduced by foreigners who referred to people living across the River Indus or Sindhu, in the north of India, around which the Vedic religion is believed to have originated.

What are the basic tenets of Hinduism?: There is no "one Hinduism", and so it lacks any unified system of beliefs and ideas. Hinduism is a conglomerate of diverse beliefs and traditions, in which the prominent themes include:

- Dharma (ethics and duties)
- Samsara (rebirth)
- Karma (right action)
- Moksha (liberation from the cycle of Samsara)

What are the key Hindu scriptures?: The basic scriptures of Hinduism, which is collectively referred to as "Shastras", are essentially a collection of spiritual laws discovered by different saints and sages at different points in its long history. The Two types of sacred writings comprise the Hindu scriptures: "Shruti" (heard) and "Smriti" (memorized). They were passed on from generation to generation orally for centuries before they were written down mostly in the Sanskrit language. The major and most popular Hindu texts include the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, and the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata.

What are the major Hindu deities?: Hinduism believes that there is only one supreme Absolute called "Brahman". However, it does not advocate the worship of any one particular deity. The gods and goddesses of Hinduism amount to thousands or even millions, all representing the many aspects of Brahman. Therefore, this faith is characterized by the multiplicity of deities. The most fundamental of Hindu deities is the Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva - creator, preserver and destroyer respectively. Hindus also worship spirits, trees, animals and even planets.