

CORE BELIEFS

Of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism

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Core Beliefs of Christianity

The term *Christianity* seems to imply a religious system, in the same way that Islam and Buddhism are religious systems. Within religious systems are core beliefs, along with codes, rules, and standards that must be mastered in order to achieve a desired end. Christianity doesn't fit that definition, so the term can be slightly misleading.

Jesus did not come into the world to start another religion. There were already plenty of religions (see Acts 17:22–23), including Judaism, which had begun as a relationship with Almighty God (Leviticus 20:12). But it had deteriorated into another religious system on a par with idol-worship (Matthew 15:8). Jesus came to bear witness to God's truth (John 18:37), to seek and to save the lost—those separated from God by their sin (Luke 19:10)—and to “give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:32). With that said, those who follow Christ do share some core beliefs.

Biblically speaking, Christians are those who are forgiven of their sins, and who have entered a personal relationship with Almighty God through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8–9; Romans 10:9–10). In order to become a Christian, a person must fully accept as part of his or her own personal worldview the following core beliefs:

- Jesus is the Son of God and is equal with God (John 1:1, 49; Luke 22:70; Mark 3:11; Philippians 2:5–11)
- Jesus was born of a virgin (Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:26–35)
- Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life to fulfill God's law on our behalf (Hebrews 4:15; John 8:29)
- Jesus was crucified to pay the penalty for our sins (Matthew 26:28; 1Corinthians 15:2–4)
- Jesus rose from the dead (Luke 24:46; Mark 16:6)
- We are saved by the grace of God alone, not by works; that is, we cannot add to or take away from Christ's finished work on the cross (Ephesians. 2:8–9; Philippians 3:9). Good works cannot earn our salvation; rather, they evidence our faith in Christ (James 2:20).

It could be argued that belief in the inerrancy of God's Word is also a core belief of Christianity because, if the Bible's veracity is suspect, then everything we know about God is in doubt. Saving faith is inextricably linked to the Word of God: “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ” (Romans 10:17).

But the mental acceptance of the above points of doctrine is only the framework around which salvation occurs. Faith is more than intellectual assent; and mentally agreeing with the core beliefs of Christianity does not equal entrance into God's kingdom. Even Satan and the demons know certain things about God (James 2:19). We can mentally agree with facts without making those facts the centerpiece of our lives.

Can a person be saved without holding to the core beliefs of Christianity? No. But along with accepting those core beliefs as true, there must be a spiritual transformation. Jesus said that in order to inherit eternal life one must be “born again” (John 3:3). To be born again is a work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of a repentant sinner. Just as a mother in labor does all the work in bringing forth a new life, so the Holy Spirit does all the work in transforming a sinner into a new creature (2Corinthians 5:17). This process begins when God draws a heart through conviction of sin, and hope of forgiveness (John 6:44). When we surrender to God and repent of our sin (Acts 2:38), God applies the blood of His own Son to our account and cancels the debt we owe Him (Colossians 2:14). By this act of transference, God pronounces us “not guilty;” that is, He justifies us (Romans 4:5). Salvation is a divine exchange: Jesus becomes our sin so that we can become His perfection (2Corinthians 5:21). This gospel is the very core of Christianity.

Core Beliefs of Judaism

So, what do Jews believe in? And of course, you want to know what are the main Orthodox Judaism beliefs?

We will list the core beliefs of [Judaism](#). We will inform you with the beliefs of Judaism, which all Orthodox Jews believe in. You will get to know the Orthodox Jewish beliefs on God, Jewish beliefs about Jesus, Jewish beliefs about death, Jewish beliefs on afterlife and much more on what do Jews believe.

Thirteen principles of belief

The thirteen principles of faith were condensed by the great scholar Rabbi Moses Maimonides, an orthodox Torah giant from the twelfth century. According to Maimonides whoever doesn't believe in these thirteen principles of faith, he is not considered a Torah observing Jew. All sects throughout Orthodox Judaism believe that the thirteen principles of faith are the central beliefs of Judaism. For the list of the thirteen principles of faith click [here](#)

Orthodox Jews, including Orthodox Jewish scientists, condemn the theory of evolution, and strongly believe that the world was created 5,771 years ago.

There are many approaches how to deal with the scientific research of evolution by the Orthodox Jews. All Orthodox Jews believe fully in creation, denying or even not recognizing the theory of evolution. The ultra orthodox believe that the Torah is above science. One of the core Judaism beliefs, mentioned in the beginning of the Torah, is the belief of creation. Many ultra orthodox won't even know about the theory of evolution, and never heard of Charles Darwin.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, one of Ultra-Orthodox leading Rabbis ruled that reading about evolution is strongly forbidden. According to Rabbi Feinstein, belief in evolutionary history is Apikorsus (heresy). (Igrot Moshe, Yoreh Deah. 3,73).

The modern orthodox also firmly believe that the world was created by Hashem (God). Human creation is solely an act of creation by Hashem. The modern orthodox will not accept any evolutionary theory that mankind evolved from lower animals. Although they will acknowledge the theory of evolution and deal with it, their core Jewish belief is still the same as the Ultra Orthodox Jew.

There are multiple ways to deal and make sense between evolution and the Torah. Some will accept some parts of the evolutionary theory, while rejecting other parts that contradict with the Torah. Some will explain the Torah in other ways, so it shouldn't contradict. Many Jewish Modern Orthodox scientists wrote many books and articles on this topic.

Torah min Hashmayim (Torah from heaven)

One of the key beliefs of Judaism, or if you want a short answer to the question "what do orthodox jews believe?" is the belief that the Torah is a divine work of Hashem (God). The Torah was revealed and given to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai in front of a crowd of six hundred thousand Jewish men. By the **Sinai revelation** Hashem chose the Jewish people as his chosen nation. This has been the basis of Jewish loyalty to the Torah for the past 3,300 years.

The Sinai revelation is a fundamental belief of Judaism and according to many Jewish sages in the twelfth century is the proof to the truth of the Jewish religion.

The revelation at Sinai is the foundation of Jewish evidence to know that the Torah is true.

Of the 15,000 known religions in recorded human history, how many stake the foundation of their belief on the idea that G-d spoke to their entire nation? **One: Judaism!**

Torah Shebaal Peh (The Oral Torah)

Orthodox Judaism believes that the Torah is not complete without the oral part of the Torah that Hashem verbally spoke to Moses to explain the written Torah. Believing in the written Torah without believing in Torah Shebaal Peh is considered Apikorsus (heresy) according to orthodox beliefs of Judaism. The Torah Shebaal Peh is written in many volumes of the Talmud.

Jewish beliefs on afterlife

Many people want to know what Jews believe about afterlife. Honestly spoken, Judaism believes in afterlife takes a major role in the life of an Orthodox Jew. One of the core religious beliefs of Judaism is the belief that for every action on earth by humans he will be rewarded or punished in the world to come. In Talmud, earth is named a corridor to the palace, the real world that first takes place after a person dies. Every small child is educated with the to live with a vision to prepare for the world to come.

In the world to come there is **Gan Eden** (Paradise) and **Gehinom** (Hell). If a person did more deeds than sins on earth that he goes to Gan Eden after death. If his sins are greater than his good deeds than he goes to Gehinom. Sometimes a person needs to go in Gehinom to clean his soul from sins before he can enter Gan Eden. The work of any Orthodox Jew is to prepare himself in the corridor in order to be able to enter the palace.

Belief on death

In Judaism beliefs death is not an end of life, but a beginning of a new and better life. Even though the family will mourn and cry on the death of their loved one, they will take comfort of the fact that the soul (Neshama) of their loved one is now in a better and brighter place. It is therefore that Judaism has special laws in honoring the dead body and desecrating graves is strictly prohibited.

What do Orthodox Jews believe about Jesus?

Orthodox Jews don't believe in Jesus! One of the fundamental beliefs of Judaism is the Jewish belief that Hashem (God) is one. Hashem is beyond human grasp of mind and no human action or traits can be related to him. The biggest prophet was Moses, and no other prophet could come later and change his words. The "[Messiah](#)" has not yet come. Jesus has no place in Orthodox Judaism.

Orthodox Jews are very upset on all the "Jews for Jesus" movements. There are many Orthodox Jewish organizations fighting all these missionary activities.

More important beliefs of Judaism

One of the central Orthodox Judaism beliefs is that they are the **chosen nation**. The Jewish people believe that they must be a light for all the nations. One of Judaism's beliefs is that if a Jew behaves immoral, he than desecrates the name of Hashem (God). This is considered a great sin, because Hashem expects the Jewish people to glorify and bring respect to his great name.

Read more: <http://www.orthodox-jews.com/judaism-beliefs.html#ixzz4aOZqML4P>

Some Basic Islamic Beliefs

1) *Belief in God:*

Muslims believe in one, unique, incomparable God, Who has no son nor partner, and that none has the right to be worshipped but Him alone. He is the true God, and every other deity is false. He has the most magnificent names and sublime perfect attributes. No one shares His divinity, nor His attributes. In the Quran, God describes Himself:

Say, "He is God, the One. God, to Whom the creatures turn for their needs. He begets not, nor was He begotten, and there is none like Him." (Quran, 112:1-4)

Chapter 112 of the Quran written in Arabic calligraphy.

No one has the right to be invoked, supplicated, prayed to, or shown any act of worship, but God alone.

God alone is the Almighty, the Creator, the Sovereign, and the Sustainer of everything in the whole universe. He manages all affairs. He stands in need of none of His creatures, and all His creatures depend on Him for all that they need. He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing, and the All-Knowing. In a perfect manner, His knowledge encompasses all things, the open and the secret, and the public and the private. He knows what has happened, what will happen, and how it will happen. No affair occurs in the whole world except by His will. Whatever He wills is, and whatever He does not will is not and will never be. His will is above the will of all the creatures. He has power over all things, and He is able to do everything. He is the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, and the Most Beneficent. In one of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, we are told that God is more merciful to His creatures than a mother to her child.¹ God is far removed from injustice and tyranny. He is All-Wise in all of His actions and decrees. If someone wants something from God, he or she can ask God directly without asking anyone else to intercede with God for him or her.

God is not Jesus, and Jesus is not God.² Even Jesus himself rejected this. God has said in the Quran:

Indeed, they have disbelieved who have said, "God is the Messiah (Jesus), son of Mary." The Messiah said, "Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord. Whoever associates partners in worship with God, then God has forbidden Paradise for him, and his home is the Fire (Hell). For the wrongdoers,³ there will be no helpers." (Quran, 5:72)

God is not a trinity. God has said in the Quran:

Indeed, they disbelieve who say, "God is the third of three (in a trinity)," when there is no god but one God. If they desist not from what they say, truly, a painful punishment will befall the disbelievers among them. Would they not rather repent to God and ask His forgiveness? For God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. The Messiah (Jesus), son of Mary, was no more than a messenger... (Quran, 5:73-75)

Islam rejects that God rested on the seventh day of the creation, that He wrestled with one of His angels, that He is an envious plotter against mankind, or that He is incarnate in any human being. Islam also rejects the attribution of any human form to God. All of these are considered

¹ Narrated in Saheeh Muslim, #2754, and Saheeh Al-Bukhari, #5999.

² It was reported by the Associated Press, London, on June 25, 1984, that a majority of the Anglican bishops surveyed by a television program said, "Christians are not obliged to believe that Jesus Christ was God." The poll was of 31 of England's 39 bishops. The report further stated that 19 of the 31 bishops said it was sufficient to regard Jesus as "God's supreme agent." The poll was conducted by London Weekend Television's weekly religious program, "Credo."

³ The wrongdoers include the polytheists.

blasphemous. God is the Exalted. He is far removed from every imperfection. He never becomes weary. He does not become drowsy, nor does he sleep.

The Arabic word ALLAH means God (the one and only true God who created the whole universe). This word Allah is a name for God, which is used by Arabic speakers, both Arab Muslims and Arab Christians. This word cannot be used to designate anything other than the one true God. The Arabic word Allah occurs in the Quran about 2700 times. In Aramaic, a language related closely to Arabic and the language that Jesus habitually spoke,⁴ God is also referred to as ALLAH.

2) Belief in the Angels:

Muslims believe in the existence of the angels and that they are honored creatures. The angels worship God alone, obey Him, and act only by His command. Among the angels is Gabriel, who brought down the Quran to Muhammad.

3) Belief in God's Revealed Books:

Muslims believe that God revealed books to His messengers as proof for mankind and as guidance for them. Among these books is the Quran, which God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad . God has guaranteed the Quran's protection from any corruption or distortion. God has said:

Indeed, We have sent down the Quran, and surely We will guard it (from corruption). (Quran, 15:9)

4) Belief in the Prophets and Messengers of God:

Muslims believe in the prophets and messengers of God, starting with Adam, including Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Jesus (peace be upon them). But God's final message to man, a reconfirmation of the eternal message, was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad . Muslims believe that Muhammad is the last prophet sent by God, as God has said:

Muhammad is not the father of any one of your men, but he is the Messenger of God and the last of the prophets... (Quran, 33:40)

Muslims believe that all the prophets and messengers were created human beings who had none of the divine qualities of God.

5) Belief in the Day of Judgment:

Muslims believe in the Day of Judgment (the Day of Resurrection) when all people will be resurrected for God's judgment according to their beliefs and deeds.

6) Belief in Al-Qadar:

Muslims believe in Al-Qadar, which is Divine Predestination, but this belief in Divine Predestination does not mean that human beings do not have freewill. Rather, Muslims believe that God has given human beings freewill. This means that they can choose right or wrong and that they are responsible for their choices.

The belief in Divine Predestination includes belief in four things:

- 1) God knows everything. He knows what has happened and what will happen.
- 2) God has recorded all that has happened and all that will happen.
- 3) Whatever God wills to happen happens, and whatever He wills not to happen does not happen.
- 4) God is the Creator of everything.

⁴ NIV Compact Dictionary of the Bible, Douglas, p. 42.

Contrasting the Quran with the Christian Bible

William H. Gross www.onthewing.org 2007

There is a notable difference between the Quran and the Bible. It regards JUDGMENT. The Bible defers punishment to Judgment Day, with the exception of the civil magistrate's duty to uphold the law (Rom 13.1). God Himself will punish sins against His people (Luk 18.7), and against Himself (Mat 12.32). Whereas the Quran calls believers to punish others *in this life*, personal revenge is prohibited in the Bible (Rom 12.19). Christians are called upon to correct one another, but not to judge or punish others (Rom 14.4). Personal righteousness (obedience), is not a way to compare ourselves to others (2Cor 10.12) — it is a faithful and thankful response to Christ's righteousness and love (1Joh 4.19; 1Pe 2.23-24).

Judging those inside the Church is distinguished from judging those outside (^{NKJ} **1Cor 5:12** For what *have I to do* with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside?). Even inside the Church, the means of correction is exhortation. Only if necessary, is "punishment" exacted by separating an unrepentant sinner from fellowship; he is not corporally punished. This is seen in Paul's two letters to the church at Corinth (2Cor 2.6-7). And it is the standard laid down by Jesus in Matthew 18.15-18. Even there, "If your brother sins against *you*," what is required is forgiveness, not revenge or punishment.

The absolute standard of right and wrong is given in the Ten Commandments. But enforcement is divided between the CIVIL WORLD — where God has ordained rulers to enforce Civil Law by the sword (Rom 13.4) — and the CHURCH, where God has ordained rulers to enforce Divine Law, gently (Gal 6.1; Heb 13.17;). In the *Civil World*, the purpose or end of punishment is to exact the penalty provided for under the Law. In the *Church*, the end is to restore the person to fellowship with God and men (*i.e.* reconciliation), so that believers may abide in love.

In the *Civil World*, the standard is the Law of men. In the *Church*, the standard is the Law of Love (Rom 13.10; Mat 22.37-40). Where these two standards conflict, believers are to obey the Law of Love (Act 5.29), regardless of personal consequences. And where the believer deals with those outside the Church, that standard of love remains applicable: "But I say to you, love your enemies..." (Mat 5.43-45)

In the Quran, there is no such distinction between the civil world, and the world of true believers. Allah's law is all-inclusive, and all violations are punishable by the sword (corporal punishment) — this is true for believers and non-believers alike. Love and mercy are exercised only for the benefit of *believers*; conversion and submission are required of all others.

These are two radically different world views, with two opposing Gods, and two kingdoms that cannot be reconciled by the sword, only by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet Islam will carry the sword, as it is commanded to do by the Quran. And the Church will refuse to carry the sword, as it is forbidden to do by the Bible (Mat 26.52). For Christians, the only blood to be shed was by Christ on the cross, atoning for the sins of men, and bringing eternal life to all those who believe in His name (Joh 1.12-13; 3.16).

It may also be noted that the Bible is *historical narrative* when it comes to God's commands to the Israelites in the Old Testament to make war against their enemies in the Promised land. These commands do not apply to His people at all times and in all places. They were limited to their historical context. The Quran has no such limits. Allah's command to convert unbelievers or else strike their neck (behead them), applies as much to our world today as to the seventh century.

47:4. When you meet the **unbelievers**, strike their necks; then, when you have made wide slaughter among them, tie fast the bonds;

The Islamic view of the Quran is that Mohammed received it by direct revelation from God, and its message has existed since the dawn of creation — it was merely recorded by Mohammed.

However, the inconsistencies between the text of the Bible, and the text of the Quran, imply that God was inconsistent in His revelation — they cannot both be true and accurate. Of course, each religion claims it possesses the authentic word of God. But the text of the Bible's Old Testament was recorded a thousand years before Mohammed; Christians accept it as it has been recorded by the prophets and scholars of Israel.

It should be noted that the Christian religion was widely known in the area in the time of Mohammed. Its monotheistic view of God was very attractive to much of the Arab population, which worshipped some 260 gods at the time. It is also noteworthy that when Mohammed encountered "the people of the Book," and heard the various misconceptions of the Trinity, of Mary the mother of God, etc., it was a period of widespread doctrinal disputes within the Christian religion. Monophysites and the Nestorians of Syria were promoting their errors.⁵ There was a growing rift between west and east (Rome and Constantinople). Some of Mohammed's criticisms of various doctrines in Christianity, were the same criticisms that would be raised by the Protestants during the Reformation. The Quran (*Arberry's translation*) says this:

5:76. They are **unbelievers** who say, 'Allah is the Messiah, Mary's son.' For the Messiah said, 'Children of Israel, serve Allah, my Lord and your Lord. Verily whoso associates with Allah anything, Allah shall prohibit him entrance to Paradise, and his refuge shall be the Fire; and wrongdoers shall have no helpers.'

They are **unbelievers** who say, 'Allah is the Third of Three. No god is there but One Allah. If they refrain not from what they say, there shall afflict those of them that disbelieve a painful chastisement.

Will they not turn to Allah and pray His forgiveness? Allah is All-forgiving, All-compassionate.

The Messiah, son of Mary, was only a Messenger; Messengers before him passed away; his mother was a just woman; they both ate food. Behold, how We make clear the signs to them; then behold, how they perverted are!

This misconception of the Trinity indicates the Quran's criticisms of Christianity were responses to the *human errors* of the day — not God-revealed and eternal truths. They weren't in the Bible, but in the writings and doctrines of fallible men. It may therefore be objected that the Quran records Mohammed's responses to men, rather than what he received from God. Such an assertion is of course offensive to Muslims. Yet it reflects the inconsistencies that exist between the Quran and the Bible — inconsistencies which both Muslims and Christians agree exist. The *reason* for those inconsistencies is what they disagree about; and also which of these two contradictory texts is the *only* word of God.

⁵ *Monophysites* taught that Jesus had only one nature (either divine or human), but not a dual nature (truly God and truly man, at the same time). *Nestorians* taught that Christ, as a man, is the adoptive Son of God, but not God incarnate. They said he has two natures, or is two persons, but these are separate and distinct from each other. Mary was therefore the mother of the human part, not the divine part.

Core Beliefs of Hindus

By [Amrutur V. Srinivasan](#)

Part of [Hinduism For Dummies Cheat Sheet](#)

Hinduism is not an organized religion and has no single, systematic approach to teaching its value system. Nor do Hindus have a simple set of rules to follow like the Ten Commandments. Local, regional, caste, and community-driven practices influence the interpretation and practice of beliefs throughout the Hindu world.

Yet a common thread among all these variations is belief in a Supreme Being and adherence to certain concepts such as Truth, dharma, and karma. And belief in the authority of the Vedas (sacred scriptures) serves, to a large extent, as the very definition of a Hindu, even though how the Vedas are interpreted may vary greatly.

Here are some of the key beliefs shared among Hindus:

- **Truth is eternal.**

Hindus pursue knowledge and understanding of the Truth: the very essence of the universe and the only Reality. According to the Vedas, Truth is One, but the wise express it in a variety of ways.

- **Brahman is Truth and Reality.**

Hindus believe in Brahman as the one true God who is formless, limitless, all-inclusive, and eternal. Brahman is not an abstract concept; it is a real entity that encompasses everything (seen and unseen) in the universe.

- **The Vedas are the ultimate authority.**

The Vedas are Hindu scriptures that contain revelations received by ancient saints and sages. Hindus believe that the Vedas are without beginning and without end; when everything else in the universe is destroyed (at the end of a cycle of time), the Vedas remain.

- **Everyone should strive to achieve dharma.**

Understanding the concept of dharma helps you understand the Hindu faith. Unfortunately, no single English word adequately covers its meaning. Dharma can be described as right conduct, righteousness, moral law, and duty. Anyone who makes dharma central to one's life strives to do the right thing, according to one's duty and abilities, at all times.

- **Individual souls are immortal.**

A Hindu believes that the individual soul (*atman*) is neither created nor destroyed; it has been, it is, and it will be. Actions of the soul while residing in a body require that it reap the consequences of those actions in the next life — the same soul in a different body.

The process of movement of the atman from one body to another is known as *transmigration*. The kind of body the soul inhabits next is determined by *karma* (actions accumulated in previous lives).

- **The goal of the individual soul is moksha.**

Moksha is liberation: the soul's release from the cycle of death and rebirth. It occurs when the soul unites with Brahman by realizing its true nature. Several paths can lead to this realization and unity: the path of duty, the path of knowledge, and the path of devotion (unconditional surrender to God).

The Hindu religion originated in India thousands of years ago. To people raised in other faiths, Hinduism may seem very complex, but the core beliefs of Hinduism are actually quite simple to understand. For example, Hindus believe there is only one Supreme Being, Brahman; they pursue

knowledge of Truth and Reality; they strive for moral order and right action; and they promote tolerance. Many Westerners also know that Hindus worship a variety of gods and goddesses who personify aspects of Brahman; take pilgrimages to holy sites; celebrate festivals throughout the year; and believe that time is cyclical. These aspects of the religion introduce some of the complexities that are fascinating to study.

The Caste System in India

All societies have some sort of social class system in which people are classified based on education, culture, and income levels. In ancient India, such a system was inspired by Hindu scriptures and implemented as a way to create a society in which all essential functions were addressed, and all people assumed vital roles based on their abilities.

Centuries later, the classification was dubbed the *caste* system. While the caste system in practice became seriously flawed, its concept was based on this ideal division:

- **Brahmin: The priestly/intellectual class**

The ideal brahmin has qualities of serenity, self-restraint, purity, forgiveness, uprightness, knowledge, realization, and belief in God. The associated “job description” includes

- Serving as a gatekeeper of knowledge of Brahman
- Providing intellectual advice to governing bodies
- Offering priestly services and religious leadership
- Grappling with fundamental questions of life

- **Kshatriyas: The warrior class**

The requisite talents for kshatriyas are physical prowess, courage, splendor, firmness, dexterity, stalwartness in battle, generosity, and lordliness. The associated functions include

- Defending the country from external aggression or internal strife
- Specializing in the science of arms, ammunition, strategies, and tactics of warfare

- **Vaishyas: The trade/commerce class**

The Vaishyas specialize in trade and commerce in order to procure goods and services so that the society as a whole can lead a life of plenty. Modern Vaishyas are primarily traders and entrepreneurs. No specific qualities are prescribed in the Hindu scriptures for this and the next caste.

- **Shudras: The agricultural/labor class**

The Shudras do manual labor such as tilling the land, working in the fields, and raising cattle and crops. In practice, this caste came to include everyone not belonging to the other three castes, except for the *untouchables*: people performing the most menial labor, such as sweeping streets and tanning leather.

Note that the creation of a group called *untouchables* was a manmade perversion of the caste concept set forth in Hindu scripture — a perversion fought by modern Indian leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi.

Hindu Gods and Goddesses

Hindus acknowledge that, at the most fundamental level, God is the One without a second — the absolute, formless, and only Reality known as Brahman, the Supreme, Universal Soul. Brahman is the universe and everything in it. Brahman has no form and no limits; it is Reality and Truth.

Thus Hinduism is a **pantheistic** religion: It equates God with the universe. Yet Hindu religion is also **polytheistic**: populated with myriad gods and goddesses who personify aspects of the one

true God, allowing individuals an infinite number of ways to worship based on family tradition, community and regional practices, and other considerations.

Here are just some of the many Hindu gods and goddesses:

- **Brahma, the Creator**

Brahma is the first member of the Hindu Trinity and is “the Creator” because he periodically creates everything in the universe. (The word *periodically* here refers to the Hindu belief that time is cyclical; everything in the universe — except for Brahman and certain Hindu scriptures — is created, maintained for a certain amount of time, and then destroyed in order to be renewed in ideal form again.)

- **Vishnu, the Preserver**

Vishnu is the second member of the Hindu Trinity. He maintains the order and harmony of the universe, which is periodically created by Brahma and periodically destroyed by Shiva to prepare for the next creation.

Vishnu is worshipped in many forms and in several *avatars* (incarnations). Vishnu is an important, somewhat mysterious god. Less visible than nature gods that preside over elements (such as fire and rain), Vishnu is the *pervader* — the divine essence that pervades the universe. He is usually worshipped in the form of an avatar (see below).

- **Shiva, the Destroyer**

Shiva is the third member of the Hindu Trinity, tasked with destroying the universe in order to prepare for its renewal at the end of each cycle of time. Shiva’s destructive power is *regenerative*: It’s the necessary step that makes renewal possible.

Hindus customarily invoke Shiva before the beginning of any religious or spiritual endeavor; they believe that any bad vibrations in the immediate vicinity of worship are eliminated by the mere utterance of his praise or name.

- **Ganapati, the Remover of Obstacles**

Ganapati, also known as Ganesha, is Shiva’s first son. Lord Ganapati, who has an elephant head, occupies a very special place in the hearts of Hindus because they consider him the Remover of Obstacles. Most Hindu households have a picture or statue of this godhead, and it’s not uncommon to see small replicas of Ganapati hanging from rearview mirrors of cars and trucks!

- **Avatars of Vishnu**

The literal meaning of the word *avatar* is “descent,” and it’s usually understood to mean divine descent. Avatars are savior forms of a god that descend to earth to intervene whenever help is needed to restore *dharma* (moral order) and peace. Two of Vishnu’s ten avatars are Rama and Krishna.

- **Rama**

Rama is one of the most beloved Hindu gods and is the hero of the Hindu epic called the *Ramayana*. He is portrayed as an ideal son, brother, husband, and king and as a strict adherent to dharma. Millions of Hindus derive satisfaction from reading and recalling Rama’s trials and tribulations as a young prince who was exiled from his kingdom for 14 years.

- **Krishna**

If one Hindu god’s name is known and recognized throughout the world, it is Krishna. Hindus identify Krishna as the teacher of the sacred scripture called the *Bhagavad Gita* and as the friend and mentor of prince Arjuna in the epic the *Mahabharata*.

For his devotees, Krishna is a delight, full of playful pranks. But most of all, Lord Krishna's promise to humanity, that he will manifest himself and descend to earth whenever dharma declines, has sustained Hindu belief in the Supreme Being over thousands of years.

- **Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning**

Saraswati is the consort of Brahma the Creator and is worshipped as the goddess of learning, wisdom, speech, and music. Hindus offer prayer to Saraswati before beginning any intellectual pursuit, and Hindu students are encouraged to offer prayers to her during the school/college term and especially before and during examinations.

- **Lakshmi**

Lakshmi is the goddess of good fortune, wealth, and well-being. As the consort of Vishnu, she plays a role in every incarnation. (She is Sita, wife of Rama; Rukmini, wife of Krishna; and Dharani, wife of Parashu Rama, another avatar of Vishnu.)

- **Durga Devi**

Durga Devi is a powerful, even frightening goddess who fights fiercely in order to restore *dharma* (moral order). Yet, while Durga is terrifying to her adversaries, she is full of compassion and love for her devotees.

- **Indra, the King of Heaven and lord of the gods**

Indra wields a thunderbolt and is a protector and provider of rain.

- **Surya, the sun**

Surya (or Soorya) is a golden warrior arriving on a chariot pulled by seven white horses.

- **Agni, the fire god**

Agni holds a special place in Hindu fire ritual to this day as the *sacrificer* (the priest who performs the ceremony); the *sacrifice* (the ritual fire and the offerings made into it); and the *witness* to all rites.

- **Hanuman, the monkey king and devoted servant**

Hanuman is featured in the great Hindu epic the *Ramayana*. He earned his path to deification by performing feats of strength, devotion, and courage while helping Rama (an avatar of Vishnu) in countless exciting incidents.

THE HINDU PRACTICE OF SATI

(Widow Burning)

by [Linda Heaphy](#) May 02, 2017

In this age of ascending feminism and focus on equality and human rights, it is difficult to assimilate the Hindu practice of *sati*, the burning to death of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre, into our modern world. Indeed, the practice is outlawed and illegal in today's India, yet it occurs up to the present day and is still regarded by some Hindus as the ultimate form of womanly devotion and sacrifice.

Sati (also called suttee) is the practice among some Hindu communities by which a recently widowed woman either voluntarily or by use of force or coercion commits suicide as a result of her husband's death. The best known form of sati is when a woman burns to death on her husband's funeral pyre. However other forms of sati exist, including being buried alive with the husband's corpse, and drowning.

The term *sati* is derived from the original name of the goddess Sati, also known as **Dakshayani**, who self-immolated because she was unable to bear her father Daksha's humiliation of her (living) husband Shiva. Sati as practice is first mentioned in 510 CCE, when a stele commemorating such an incident was erected at Eran, an ancient city in the modern state of Madhya Pradesh. The custom began to grow in popularity as evidenced by the number of stones placed to commemorate satis, particularly in southern India and amongst the higher castes of Indian society, despite the fact that the Brahmins originally condemned the practice (Auboyer 2002). Over the centuries the custom died out in the south only to become prevalent in the north, particularly in the states of Rajasthan and Bengal. While comprehensive data are lacking across India and through the ages, the British East India Company recorded that the total figure of known occurrences for the period 1813-1828 was 8,135; another source gives the number of 7,941 from 1815-1828, an average of 618 documented incidents per year. However, these numbers are likely to grossly underestimate the real number of satis as in 1823, 575 women performed sati in the state of Bengal alone (Hardgrave 1998).

Historically, the practice of sati was to be found among many castes and at every social level, chosen by or for both uneducated and the highest ranking women of the times. The common deciding factor was often ownership of wealth or property, since all possessions of the widow devolved to the husband's family upon her death. In a country that shunned widows, sati was considered the highest expression of wifely devotion to a dead husband (Allen & Dwivedi 1998, Moore 2004). It was deemed an act of peerless piety and was said to purge her of all her sins, release her from the cycle of birth and rebirth and ensure salvation for her dead husband and the seven generations that followed her (Moore 2004). Because its proponents lauded it as the required conduct of righteous women, it was not considered to be suicide, otherwise banned or discouraged by Hindu scripture. Sati also carried romantic associations which some were at apparent pains to amplify. Stein (1978) states "The widow on her way to the pyre was the object (for once) of all public attention...Endowed with the gift of prophecy and the power to cure and bless, she was immolated amid great fanfare, with great veneration". Only if she was virtuous and pious would she be worthy of being sacrificed; consequently being burned or being seen as a failed wife were often her only choices (Stein 1978). Indeed, the very reference to the widow from the point at which she decided to become a "Sati" (Chaste One) removed any further personal reference to her as an individual and elevated her to a remote and untouchable context. It is little wonder that women growing up in a culture in which they were so little valued as individuals considered it the only way for a good wife to behave. The alternative, anyway, was not appealing. After the death of a husband an Hindi widow was expected to live the life of an aesthetic, renouncing all social activities, shaving her head, eating only boiled rice and sleeping on thin coarse matting (Moore 2004). To many, death may have been preferable, especially for those who were still girls themselves when their husband's died.

Over the centuries, many of India's inhabitants have disagreed with the practice of sati. Since its very foundation the Sikh religion has explicitly prohibited it. Sati was regarded as a barbaric practice by the Islamic rulers of the Mogul period, and many tried to halt the custom with laws and edicts banning the practice. Many Hindu scholars have argued against sati, calling it "as suicide, and...a pointless and futile act"; both abolitionists and promoters of sati use Hindu scripture as justification of their position. At the end of the 18th Century, the influx of Europeans into India meant that the practice of sati was being scrutinised as never before; missionaries, travellers and civil servants alike condemned official Raj tolerance of the "dreadful practice" and called for its end (Hardgrave 1998). In 1827 the Governor-General of India, Lord Bentinck, finally outlawed the custom in its entirety, claiming it had no sound theological basis (James 1998). James also notes that the outlawing of sati practice was considered the first direct affront to Indian religious beliefs and therefore contributed to the end of the British Raj. However the common

people felt about it, many Indian rulers of the 19th century welcomed its abolition (Allen & Dwivedi 1998).

Most recorded instances of sati during the 1800's were described as "voluntary" acts of courage and devotion (Hardgrave 1998), a conviction that sati advocates continue to promote to this day. At the very least, women committing sati were encouraged by priests (who received the best item from the women's possessions as payment), the relatives of both families (who received all the women's remaining possessions and untold blessings) and by general peer pressure. However it appears that at least in some recorded cases the women were drugged. In "An Account of a Woman Burning Herself, By an Officer," which appeared in the *Calcutta Gazette* in 1785, the observer describes the woman as likely under the influence of bhang (marijuana) or opium but otherwise "unruffled." After she was lifted upon the pyre, she "laid herself down by her deceased husband, with her arms about his neck. Two people immediately passed a rope twice across the bodies, and fastened it so tight to the stakes that it would have effectually prevented her from rising had she attempted".

Once the reality of burning to death became obvious, many women tried to escape their fate. Measures and implements were put into place to ensure that they could not. Edward Thompson wrote that a woman "was often bound to the corpse with cords, or both bodies were fastened down with long bamboo poles curving over them like a wooden coverlet, or weighted down by logs." These poles were continuously wetted down to prevent them from burning and the widow from escaping (Parkes, 1850). If she did manage to escape, she and her relatives were ostracised by society, as is related by the redoubtable Fanny Parkes, wife of a minor British civil servant during the early 1800's, who gives a frank eyewitness account in 1823 of a sati burning and the consequences:

A rich baniya, a corn chandler, whose house was near the gate of our grounds, departed this life; he was an Hindu. On the 7th of November, the natives in the bazaar were making a great noise with their tom-toms, drums, and other discordant musical instruments, rejoicing that his widow had determined to perform sati, i.e., to burn on his funeral-pile.

The [English] magistrate sent for the woman, used every argument to dissuade her, and offered her money. Her only answer was dashing her head on the floor, and saying, 'If you will not let me burn with my husband, I will hang myself in your court of justice.' The shastras say, The prayers and imprecations of a sati are never uttered in vain; the great gods themselves cannot listen to them unmoved.'

If a widow touches either food or water from the time her husband expires until she ascends the pile, she cannot, by Hindu law, be burned with the body; therefore the magistrate kept the corpse forty-eight hours, in the hope that hunger would compel the woman to eat. Guards were set over her, but she never touched anything. My husband accompanied the magistrate to see the sati: about five thousand people were collected together on the banks of the Ganges: the pile was then built, and the putrid body placed upon it; the magistrate stationed guards to prevent the people from approaching it. After having bathed in the river, the widow lighted a brand, walked round the pile, set it on fire, and then mounted cheerfully: the flame caught and blazed up instantly; she sat down, placing the head of the corpse on her lap, and repeated several times the usual form, 'Ram, Ram, sati; Ram, Ram, sati;' i.e., 'God, God, I am chaste.'

As the wind drove the fierce fire upon her, she shook her arms and limbs as if in agony; at length she started up and approached the side to escape. An Hindu, one of the police who had been placed near the pile to see she had fair play, and should not be burned by force, raised his sword to strike her, and the poor wretch shrank back into the flames. The magistrate seized and committed him to prison. The woman again approached the side of the blazing pile, sprang fairly out, and ran into the Ganges, which was within a few yards. When the crowd and the brothers of the dead man saw this, they called out, 'Cut her down, knock her on the head with a bamboo; tie her hands and feet,

and throw her in again' and rushed down to execute their murderous intentions, when the gentlemen and the police drove them back.

The woman drank some water, and having extinguished the fire on her red garment, said she would mount the pile again and be burned.

The magistrate placed his hand on her shoulder (which rendered her impure), and said, 'By your own law, having once quitted the pile you cannot ascend again; I forbid it. You are now an outcast from the Hindus, but I will take charge of you, the [East India] Company will protect you, and you shall never want food or clothing.'

He then sent her, in a palanquin, under a guard, to the hospital. The crowd made way, shrinking from her with signs of horror, but returned peaceably to their homes: the Hindus annoyed at her escape, and the Musulmans saying, 'It was better that she should escape, but it was a pity we should have lost the tamasha (amusement) of seeing her burnt to death.'

Had not the magistrate and the English gentlemen been present, the Hindus would have cut her down when she attempted to quit the fire; or had she leapt out, would have thrown her in again, and have said, 'She performed sati of her own accord, how could we make her? It was the will of God.' ... 'What good will burning do you?' asked a bystander. She replied, 'The women of my husband's family have all been satis, why should I bring disgrace upon them? I shall go to heaven, and afterwards reappear on earth, and be married to a very rich man.' She was about twenty or twenty-five years of age, and possessed of some property, for the sake of which her relatives wished to put her out of the world.

As a result of being outlawed, sati began to decline in the 19th Century but persisted in parts of India, particularly Rajasthan, a state with one of the lowest literacy rates in India. Chimnabai, wife of Sayajirao Gaekwad III, Maharaja of Baroda from 1875 to 1939, was a tireless campaigner for the rights of Indian women. In 1927 in a speech at the first All-India Women's Conference she called sati a curse, but also noted that the practice no longer posed a great risk to Indian women, unlike the practices of girl-child marriage and the institution of purdah.

In the late 1950's, a royal sati took place. Performed in Jodhpur by Sugankunverba, the widow of Brigadier Jabbar Singh Sisodia, her act of self-immolation occurred illegally and supposedly in secret. The Maharani Padmavati Gaekwad of Baroda, her close friend, provided this account of her death in 1984:

About a month before he died she stopped eating and drinking. She went about her household chores, looked after her husband and nursed him, but without letting on she got together all the things required for the last rites. I used to go to their house to cheer them up and one evening just a little before sun-down as I drove into the compound, I heard this very deep chanting of Ram-Ram as if coming from a deep, echoing chasm. He had passed away two minutes earlier and she had already announced that she was going to commit sati when he was cremated at sunrise. While they attended to his body she went to her bathroom, had a bath and put on the brand new clothes that she had stored in her trunk. For sati we don't wear widow's clothes but wedding clothes, with the ivory bangles and everything. The colour she chose was a sort of light pink called saptalu, which none of the wives of the Sisodias can now wear because they now do puja to that colour. When she had dressed she sat with her husband's head on her lap all night. Twice his body perspired and twice she wiped it down saying, 'Why are you so impatient, I am coming with you. Be calm. The sun's first rays are still to come.' Morning came and her devar arrived, her husband's brother who was going to perform the last rites. When he doubted her intentions she got up and sat over the lamp which they kept burning near the dead body. She fanned the flames with the hem of her sari and sat there for five minutes until he said, 'I'm satisfied.' Now normally when a sati goes to the pyre she is accompanied by a procession, but the word had spread like wildfire through the whole city and people started gathering. So she said, 'We can't walk, bring cars and a truck,' and in this way they avoided the police who were waiting at the entrance to the big burning ghat. She had sent for me, but I didn't get the message and got there late and by that time the flames had got too

high for me to see her – but I heard her voice saying ‘Ram-Ram’, which never stopped for a second until she died. She is worshipped today not only by Rajputs but by everybody and so many artists and bhajans (devotional songs) have been composed about her, and her funeral pyre burnt for almost six months non-stop with all the coconuts that people kept putting on it.

There are many interesting points about this particular sati event. The woman was obviously deeply attached to her husband and devastated at his death. However no attempt was made to dissuade the woman from committing suicide; indeed her brother-in-law was concerned only with whether she would go through with it on the day and not bring shame to the family name. While several thousand people manage to catch wind of the event and attend the immolation, the authorities did absolutely nothing to prevent it, despite its illegal status. And at least up to the mid 1980’s when this account was recorded, Sugankunverba was still regarded as a martyr, idolised in poems and songs and worshiped as a saint by the women of her family. If the Indian authorities were serious about stamping out sati altogether, then well publicised voluntary satis such as this one did nothing to remove any lingering glamour associated with the act.

In today’s India, sati is rarely discussed openly. Ostensibly, it is considered a shameful practice, particularly by the burgeoning middle class, long outlawed and of interest only as a minor historical footnote. And yet the practice continues, particularly in rural areas of India, with over forty documented cases occurring since the 1950’s (The Team, 2006), approximately one recorded incidence per year, with some anecdotal evidence to suggest that there are a much greater number of successful and unsuccessful sati attempts (Shiva 2008). Indeed, pro-sati advocates, generally men, demand the right to commit, worship, and propagate sati (Parilla 1999). One well documented case, that of 18-year old Roop Kanwar, occurred in 1987 at the village Deorala in Rajasthan. Eyewitness reports of the incident present conflicting stories about the voluntariness of her death: that she was dragged from a shed in which she had been hiding, that she was sedated, that she herself told her brother-in-law to light the pyre when she was ready. Several thousand people managed to attend the event, after which she was hailed as a “pure mother”. Devotees from all over India flocked to her shrine to pay homage, bringing huge revenues and status to the village. The event produced a public outcry in urban centres and served to pit a modern Indian ideology against a very traditional one. After Kanwar’s death, the Sati Dharma Raksha Samiti or Committee for the Defence of the Religion of Sati was formed (Hawley 1994), run and supported by educated young Rajput men who stated that sati was a “fundamental part of their traditions; a refusal to legitimize sati, they said, was a deliberate attempt to marginalize the Rajputs” (Kumar 1995). Kanwar’s sati led to the creation of state level laws to prevent the occurrence and glorification of future incidents and the creation of the central Indian government’s The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act 1987. However, of the 56 people charged with her murder, participation in her murder or glorification of her murder during two separate investigations, all were subsequently acquitted.

Other incidents of sati continue to take place. Fifty-five year old Charan Shah’s self-immolation in 1999 at Satpura village in Uttar Pradesh is shrouded in mystery as witnesses refused to cooperate with official investigations. Shah’s suicide is notable because it led to the publication of a vitriolic article apparently justifying the practice of sati and demanding the repeal of the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, by a respected female academic, Madhu Kishwar (published in Manushi, Issue 115). In May 2006, Vidyawati, a 35-year-old woman allegedly jumped into the funeral pyre of her husband in Rari-Bujurg Village, Uttar Pradesh. In August 2006, Janakrani, a 40-year-old woman, died on the funeral pyre of her husband in Sagar district. In October 2008, a 75-year-old woman committed sati by jumping into her 80-year-old husband’s funeral pyre at Checher in Raipur.

Following public outcries after each instance there have been various reforms passed which now make it illegal even to be a bystander at a sati event. Other measures include efforts to stop the glorification of the victims, including the erection of shrines over their ashes, the encouragement

of pilgrimages to the site of the pyre and the derivation of any income from such sites and pilgrims. However, it must be recognized that the tradition of sati in India is very complex indeed. Despite the existence of state and country-wide laws prohibiting the act and its glorification, incidents continue to occur every year and may be on the increase. As one Indian feminist notes, these occurrences confirm that deeply held and deeply cherished norms cannot be changed simply by enacting laws (Shiva 2008).

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