

1 Sermon, August 5, 2012

Texts: Colossians 3:18-25, Matthew 19:16-22

Title: "Christianity Compared: Doing your duty in Christianity and Hinduism"

Intro

This week, we're going to take a look at possibly the world's most confusing religion to most people in North America: Hinduism.

In fact, the name Hinduism is really not a very good one. Christians follow Christ, Buddhism is following the Buddha, Judaism is connected to a particular people whose beliefs are distinctive.

But Hindu simply means someone who lives in India.

Hindus themselves would most likely identify themselves as Vishnu followers or Krishna followers, etc.

Hindus believe that there is one God, but many paths, and they would tend to identify the path by (lower case g) god who is a manifestation or avatar of the one God.

Hinduism – doing duty is part of cosmic order

In Hinduism, each person is pursuing their own path, perhaps content with pleasure or worldly success. And that's OK to pursue pleasure or success, but when a person is mature and wants to really be spiritual, then the Hindu tries to unite himself or herself with the universe.

It may be that the average Hindu is caught up in daily life, and may give an offering at the local shrine to one of the gods or goddesses. But those who dedicate themselves to deeper spirituality do so with the belief that infinite being, infinite awareness, infinite bliss are within their reach.

They discover this infinite being, awareness and bliss by becoming one with the consciousness of the universe.

It seems that the religious faith of the average person in India is very different from the one who has the time and resources to devote himself or herself to the pursuit of renunciation of self.

But even that is deceptive. Hinduism's central concept is called dharma, the meaning of which is "duty". Dharma is the duty of every human being, which he or she must fulfill. Yet that duty depends on one's

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station in life, one's commitments and relationships. Everyone is in relationship, and so has duties of son, spouse, mother, friend, citizen, leader, etc. Some have a higher position in life than others. The person who has greater resources has greater responsibility.

Doing your "dharma" or duty is not simple. Some of your duty is straightforward. If you are a parent, part of your dharma is to provide for your children. If you are in a caste that traditionally has been the ones in the village to take care of dead bodies, this may be part of your dharma.

Dharma is at once the practical duties of your station in life, and the undergirding order that upholds the entire universe, a natural law or reality which is responsible for all existence.

The pursuit of *dharmā* is a quest for order and harmony both within oneself and with the environment within which one lives. *Dharma* also means all thought and action that is in sync with this natural law.

Dharma is one of the reasons that most people in India still marry within their caste. It is just seen as the order of things. Some castes are vegetarian – that is the order of things. In the higher castes, widows do not remarry – that is also the order of things.

The ultimate goal of dharma to a Hindu is Moksha, to escape the ongoing cycle of birth and death and joining into the godhead as a drop of water in an ocean. A drop of water does not feel itself different from the ocean. It is just a part of the ocean. That is the union with God that is longed for by the Hindu.

Christian concept of duty assumes a different kind of eternal reward – cosmic justice rather than cosmic absorption

Christians also believe in doing their duty and honoring their commitments and relationships.

But for us the motivation is not becoming united with creation as a drop of water becomes united with the ocean.

No, in Christian faith, God names us, calls us, and gives us our identity. So there is a sense that, even in death, we are somehow still unique persons.

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Biblical faith is about God's justice, which means God putting things right. It's not some kind of cosmic absorption we believe in, but cosmic justice – that everything will be put right, and the balance will be restored. As today's Colossians reading says:

The wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done."

6. Christian duty does not require asceticism

In Christian faith, doing one's spiritual duty can be done at any stage of life. We don't have to renounce the world in order to know God. Instead, we can know God in our everyday experience and in our prayer.

Christian faith is about living in relationship to a dynamic God who comforts us and makes demand on us. We believe that God's will is not just a matter of fulfilling our place in life, but that God may have desires for us that take us places we never thought we might go.

In fact, Christian faith tells us that God wants the world to be different from what it is right now. Rather than conforming to the world, we try to change it for the better.

There is no sense of passivity about being Christian. Being Christian requires action.

Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother." All these things would be obeyed, too, by a good Hindu doing his dharma.

A Hindu would affirm the first part of the Colossians reading:

"Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.
Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly.
Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart. Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything..."

But then Jesus goes further he says, "also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Now, that's *against* the natural order of things. It is natural to love your family and take care of those closest to you. But to love the ones not related to you, the ones who are different from you – that's unnatural.

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We are able to do this because God has first loved us. Christ Jesus showed us the path of love, and the Holy Spirit helps us on the path.

And this is probably the central difference between Christianity and Hinduism regarding duty. Christians do their duty out of love, not just because they're supposed to as part of the natural order of things. Christians do their duty because we know we need to give back – because God has given so much to us.

So as we gather together at the Lord's Table, let's think about God's active love that is still transforming the world.

"Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart. Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality." Colossians 3:18-25, NRSV.

"Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions." Matthew 19:16-22, NRSV.