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## Mind Games Survival Course Manual



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# World Religions

## Do all religions lead to God?

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### Introduction

To launch into today's world without studying the world's religions is a serious mistake for a number of reasons. For one, world events are shaped not only by political and economic factors, but by religious forces as well. For another, the university campus is a microcosm of the world, where students from virtually every country and religious background gather to study. There are more international students on U.S. campuses than in any other country!

A study of the world's religions is also necessary because the Christian faith claims to be uniquely and exclusively true among all others. We must understand other religions in order to see how this claim can be sustained.

In this outline, we will provide an overview of the major world religions and also discuss the appropriate attitude we as Christians should take toward them.

### **I. *Animism/Spiritism***

#### **A. *What is Animism?***

Animism is very simply the worship of spirits, rather than God. It is the most ancient of non-biblical religions and prevails among the world's tribal peoples. However, it is also widespread among adherents of other religions. Some say that 40 percent of the world is animistic or spiritistic.

#### **2. *What are Animism's basic beliefs?***

1. There is a hierarchy of supernatural beings.
  - a. A supreme God/creator

2. Many lesser gods
  3. A host of spirit beings
  4. The souls of the deceased
2. There is an all-pervading life force. This force or power is often called mana ("mysterious power").

**3. *What are Animism's basic practices?***

1. Magical words
2. Offerings and sacrifices
3. Ceremonies and rituals
4. Taboos
5. Charms and fetishes
6. Symbolic designs
7. Specialists (shamans, priests)
8. Magic
9. Divination
10. Witchcraft/sorcery

**4. *What is the appeal of Animism?***

Animism appeals to the need of people to gain power and control over life, through manipulation of the supernatural realm.

**5. *What are Animism's weaknesses?***

1. Animism has no foundation for ethics. One's personal welfare is the only real good.
2. It provides no real hope, particularly beyond this life.
3. Fear is a dominant emotion among animists.

**6. *What is the Christian response to Animism?***

God must be presented as the Lord of life, able to free us from fear and bondage to all other spiritual forces and able to empower us to live a life

pleasing to Him.

## 2. Hinduism

(Much of the material on Hinduism is adapted from the chapter on Hinduism in *World Religions in America*, ed. by Jacob Neusner [Louisville: Westminster, 1994].)

### A. *What is Hinduism?*

The word *Hindu* is a Persian word that designated the people who lived beyond the Indus River. In time it came to apply to the religion of the people of India. Indian people call their religion *Dharma* ("law"). Hinduism is really a "family" of religions that has evolved among the peoples of India since about 1800 B.C.

### 2. *How did Hinduism develop?*

#### 1. Pre-Aryan period (3000--1500 B.C.)

Discovery of figurines in the Indus valley suggests the existence of a fertility cult and the worship of a mother goddess.

#### 2. Brahmanic period (1500--600 B.C.)

Migrating Aryans (from E. Europe and C. Asia) settled in the Indus valley early in the 2nd millennium B.C., bringing a religion characterized by a priestly class (Brahmins), a system of sacrifices, and worship of numerous gods. (Sacrifices were intended to induce the gods to grant prosperity and success.)

During this era, the Vedas (lit. "secret knowledge, wisdom") were composed. Four Vedic collections eventually emerged: Rig, Sama, Yajur, Atharva. Each is divided into four sections: Samhitas (priestly ritual), Brahmanas (commentaries on the Samhitas), Aranyaka (appendices to the former), and the Upanishads (lit. "sittings near a teacher"). The Upanishads contain philosophical reflections on religious and metaphysical topics. The Vedas, as well as other works such as the Vedangas, Darshanas, Sutras, and Tantras, compose the Shruti (lit. "what is heard"), and are considered to be inspired.

Important ideas emerged in the Upanishads. One is that there is a single, all-pervading divine reality, called Brahman. Brahman conceived as possessing personal attributes is called Saguna Brahman (often referred to as Isvara). Brahman conceived as impersonal is called Nirguna Brahman.

Another important idea is that this divine reality is identical to the innermost self of all living things. The phrase appears: "Atman (the soul) is Brahman."

Still another important concept is that of maya. Maya may be thought of as the mysterious power by which divine reality appears to us in the form of the material world (which is illusory).

### 3. Buddhist and Shramana period (600 B.C.--A.D. 300)

This was a period of reaction against the priestly religion of the Brahmanic era. This reaction was manifested in two ways:

#### a. New literature

Foremost among this new literature were the Darmashastras (law books, such as the Code of Manu), the Paranas (myths and legends about the origin of the cosmos, and about the gods), and the Epics (the Ramayana and the Mahabharata). The Mahabharata contains the famed Bhagavad Gita ("Song of the Lord"), which is considered the "New Testament" of Hinduism. This group of literature is referred to as the Smriti ("what is remembered").

Foremost among the gods depicted in this literature were Brahma (the creator), Shiva (the destroyer), and Vishnu (the preserver). Vishnu is believed to have appeared in history through nine Avatars ("descents"), with a tenth yet to appear.

#### 2. New religious expressions

One of these was the search for enlightenment through meditation and yoga, among the Shramana groups (shram = "to practice austerities"). If the divine is within, then we must turn inward.

Another was development of bhakti, or devotion to one of the personal gods.

### 4. Classical period (A.D. 300--1200)

This was a period of synthesis in Hinduism. The concepts of deity as the impersonal Brahman and as existing in the form of many gods and goddesses were synthesized. It is common for Hindus to conceive of the multitude of gods (some say there are 330 million!) as simply different manifestations of the one divine reality.

Some Hindu philosophers opted for a dualistic conception of reality. For them, the world is real, and God and persons are individual beings. Others favored a non-dualistic conception: the world is illusion, behind which there exists one all-pervading, impersonal reality.

### 5. Muslim period (A.D. 1200--1757)

The influx of Muslim traders eventually resulted in Muslim rule over India, through the Delhi Sultanate (1206--1526) and Mughal Dynasty (1526--1858). Tensions between Hindus and Muslims resulted in the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.

#### 6. Modern period (A.D. 1757--present)

British rule over India (beginning in mid-1800s) spawned two major reactions among Hindus:

- a. Neo-Hindu reformist movements focused on modernization of India, rejection of outdated Hindu practices (such as the caste system and subjugation of women), and social reform.
  1. Ramakrishna Mission (in India) and Vedanta Societies (in West) were founded by Vivekananda. These spread pantheistic philosophy and social reform.
  2. M. K. Gandhi led a non-violent movement to expel the British from India.
2. Neo-Hindu revisionist movements were international in focus, and emphasized submission to a religious guru and the practice of yoga.
  1. Self-Realization Fellowship in Los Angeles
  2. Int'l. Society for Krishna Consciousness
  3. Center of Satya Sai Baba
  4. Transcendental Meditation

### 3. *Common Hindu beliefs*

1. Karma (lit. "action") refers to the belief that all events in life are the result of past actions or thoughts. We can accumulate good karma or bad karma.
2. Samsara refers to belief in the cycle of reincarnation. Every soul experiences a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. One's karma determines the kind of body and life- situation into which a soul is reborn.
3. There are four major castes: the Brahmins (priests), the Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), the Vaisyas (working people), and Sudras (servants). Below these are the Pariahs (untouchables, outcasts). There are also about 3,000 subcastes!
4. There are four legitimate aims in life: kama (pleasure, sexual desire),

artha (success, wealth), dharma (moral duty), moksha (liberation from this world into Nirvana).

5. There are three ways to salvation (moksha): jnana yoga or the way of knowledge (attainment of insight into one's identity with the divine through meditation), karma yoga or the way of works (pursuing good works without thought of personal reward), and bhakti yoga (transcending one's finite self through devotion to a personal god).
6. Most Hindus engage in three forms of religious practice: puja (personal or family "worship" in the home), consulting astrology when making decisions, and observation of popular festivals.
7. Ultimate salvation is conceived of as either "absorption" into the divine one, or as personal adoration of God in heaven.

#### 4. *Five Hinduisms in the U.S.*

1. Secular Hinduism (Indians who do not identify with any traditional Hindu beliefs, but neither do they identify with any other religion)
2. Non-sectarian Hinduism (high caste Indians who practice an "eclectic" kind of Hinduism)
3. Bhakti Hinduism (Hindus who identify with devotion to one of the many Hindu gods, such as Vishnu or Shiva)
4. Reformist-nationalist Hinduism (Hindus who follow one of the reformist groups such as the Ramakrishna Mission)
5. Guru-internationalist Neo-Hinduism (followers of a group such as TM or Hare Krishna)

#### 5. *What is a Christian response to Hinduism?*

Hindus often accept Jesus as a divine being or avatar of Vishnu, yet resist believing in Him as the unique Son of God and Savior. In Hinduism, salvation is conceived of as a matter of evolutionary progress toward the realization of our true identity as one with the divine. The basic problem is ignorance (avidya) of the true nature of reality, which gives rise to acts resulting in bad karma. This ignorance and bad karma can be overcome through our own efforts (even if with divine assistance).

Christianity teaches that our problem is not ignorance, but sinful rebellion against the will of God, resulting in our experience of His judgment and alienation from Him. Salvation is something which only God in His grace can accomplish, which He has through the atoning death of Christ. We experience this salvation through trusting in Him for forgiveness and restoration to fellowship with God.

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