

Hinduism

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson looks at one of the oldest religions in the world: Hinduism. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [History of Hinduism](#)
2. [Divisions of Hinduism](#)

1. History of Hinduism

Hinduism is often considered one of the oldest living religions (approximately 4,000 years old). The word Hindu itself can be traced back thousands of years to the Sanskrit word shindu, which refers to the river system in northwest India.

Sanskrit is the ancient language of Hindu, and it is no longer spoken. The sacred texts of Hinduism are collectively known as the Veda, and they were written in Sanskrit.

The other sacred texts or **scriptures** in Hinduism are known as the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads, among others. These scriptures are categorized according to the formal role they play as revealed texts or as what is remembered. The Sanskrit terms for these are sruti, which means revealed or, literally, “what is heard,” and smriti, meaning “recollected” or “remembered.”

The foundational sruti text is the Veda, a Sanskrit word that means “knowledge.” It contains four primary scriptures. The major part of the Veda is the Upanishads, which are also called “end of the Vedas,” or the Vedanta.

While many Hindus might be somewhat familiar with these formal, theoretical, philosophical texts, almost all Hindus have ready access to the smriti. These texts include many popular stories and long epic poems. The most well known are the Mahabharata, which contains the Bhagavad Gita, and the story of Ramayana. All of these contain many volumes and explore all religious and spiritual questions under the sun, and then some.

Hindu art is a major element of these stories.



The Battle of Kurkshetra, circa 3rd Century CE



The Disrobing of Draupadi, 1760-1765



Krishna and Arjun, 19th Century

The scriptures and stories, which are often acted out during celebrations, help guide one along the way of the Dharma. This is a Sanskrit term that refers to the natural law and order that sustains all being. As a way of being in the world, it means duty, morality, and virtue.

A central element of Hinduism is a belief in the law of Karma, or action, which governs the cycle of birth, life, and death. It's a cycle that's called Samsara in Sanskrit, and the hope is to break free of this perpetual reincarnation. Ultimate release from this cycle of suffering and reincarnation is called Moksha.



BIG IDEA

One must follow the Dharma, always being attentive to the laws of Karma.

In Hinduism, there is no one transcendent god who is worshipped. Instead, there is a supreme transcendent power who is often, usually, identified as Brahman. There are many manifestations of this universal force, many gods, more personal, which have particular purposes in Hindu life.

A Hindu is guided by his or her understanding and worship of the gods, all believed to be different personalities and manifestations of one universal essence, the divine and supreme Brahman consciousness.



TERM TO KNOW

Scripture

Any text or groups of texts held to be sacred and/or divinely inspired.

2. Divisions of Hinduism

Accordingly, there are four divisions within Hinduism.

- Shaivism: Refers to Hindus who worship the god Shiva as both immanent and transcendent.
- Vaishnavism: Refers to Hindus who worship Vishnu and his other forms, Krishna and Rama.
- Shaktism: Refers to Hindus who worship Shakti, the divine mother, and all her forms.
- Smartism: Refers to Hindus who worship any or all of six different gods, unified though distinct, under the more impersonal and absolute spirit of Brahman, or universal being.

Hinduism might seem like a polytheistic religion, but it has its own blend of polytheistic and monotheistic tendencies. Hindus approach divinity in a variety of ways, so scholars have applied the term **Henotheism**. This means that one principal god is venerated while others might also be regarded as manifestations or potentialities within the rich field of Hindu deities.



TERM TO KNOW

Henotheism

A religion in which one god is venerated while others are recognized as either actual or potential deities.



SUMMARY

In the **history of Hinduism** there isn't a founder like in some of the other religions. Sanskrit terms can be used to help give an understanding of the religious orientation of a Hindu. It is a Henotheistic religion, which generally is understood as worshipping one god and also recognizing the importance of other manifestations, or other gods, that play a role in this process of seeking release from Samsara, the cycle of reincarnation and suffering. Release from this is one of the ultimate goals of a Hindu. The sacred texts and the remembered stories are the primary tools for that. Brahman is the universal principle that most Hindus regard as the supreme intelligence and consciousness that informs and participates in the manifestation of all of the other gods. There are four **divisions of Hinduism**. They include Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism, and Smartism.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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