

The Cultural Core of Hinduism

Timothy Paul

The following is excerpted from an article in *Rethinking Hindu Ministry*, available by contacting info@rethinkingforum.com.

From a distance, Hinduism seems to resemble a vast and intricate complex of deities, customs, philosophies, languages and holy books. Many people find it confusing, so they try to classify it in terms that they can understand. The most

Hindus emphasize that Hinduism is not a religion or a philosophy but a culture or a way of life.

common is to refer to Hinduism as a religion with its own doctrine and world-view philosophy. While there are concepts and traditions that seem to extend to almost every sect

of Hinduism, there is also an endless panoply of detail that makes either a straightforward religious or philosophical explanation impossible. What can be done to unravel the complexity and enable people to begin to understand it?

A good starting place, perhaps, is to ask Hindu people to tell the world who they are and what they believe on their own terms. What Hindu people emphasize is that Hinduism is not a religion or a philosophy. It is a culture or a way of life that evolved over time in India. Furthermore, it is a uniquely Hindu culture, defining itself according to Hindu cultural dynamics; it is culture as Hindus define culture. It may not be incorrect to say that Hinduism is actually nothing more or less than the expression of how the idea of social and spiritual culture emerged in India over the cloistered centuries of Indian history. It is actually a unique civilization, indigenous to India

Group relationship is the life force of Hindu social and spiritual culture. To outsiders, the relationships between and within groups in Hindu culture appear very formal and occasionally complicated. They are also static or resistant to change. Hindu group dynamics appear this way because they are circumscribed by an ancient and powerful Hindu concept called *Dharma*. *Dharma* is the heartbeat of Hindu group dynamics. It can be translated variously as duty, way of life, religion or relationship. All of the different kinds of cultural groups in Hindu civilization follow a known *Dharma* that governs their relationships. Hindu people, individually, are expected to live according to



the *Dharma* in each group that they belong to. This is why Hindu group relationships struggle with change; they are not supposed to change! *Dharma* governs everything.

Dharma can best be understood in the context of the Hindu family. The extended family is the center of Hindu life and the most authoritative group in Hindu culture. ... Everybody has a role within the family or larger clan, and they fulfill their *Dharma* when they keep the formalities that their identity prescribes for them. Each clan is part of a larger group of clans referred to as castes or sub-castes, and the different castes are a part of even larger "people groups" that may have commonality of language, region or specific cultural distinctives. *Dharma* prescribes how relationships are carried out between and within all of these groups. *Dharma* is how Hindu culture functions.

Culture is absolute for Hindu people. Everything, especially spiritual ideas, is evaluated on the basis of how it will affect their present way of life, or culture. In our western culture, ideas are absolute. They stand alone and are evaluated according to their own intrinsic truth. Understanding that culture is more powerful than ideas to Hindu people is a significant clue why gospel ministry among Hindu people is frequently difficult. Most American-style gospel ministry is carried out all over the world on the basis of the conviction that the gospel is an intrinsically superior idea that stands alone, apart from any culture. This is why many Hindu people who are fully aware of the gospel do not follow Christ.

To Hindus, the gospel as an idea does not stand apart from culture. Hindu people will

not judge the gospel on its own merits. It will be evaluated according to the culture of its proponents, and most importantly, on the basis of the changes that "gospel culture" will bring to Hindu culture. There is a culture in which the gospel lives, and this culture must be presented as both the source and the destination of

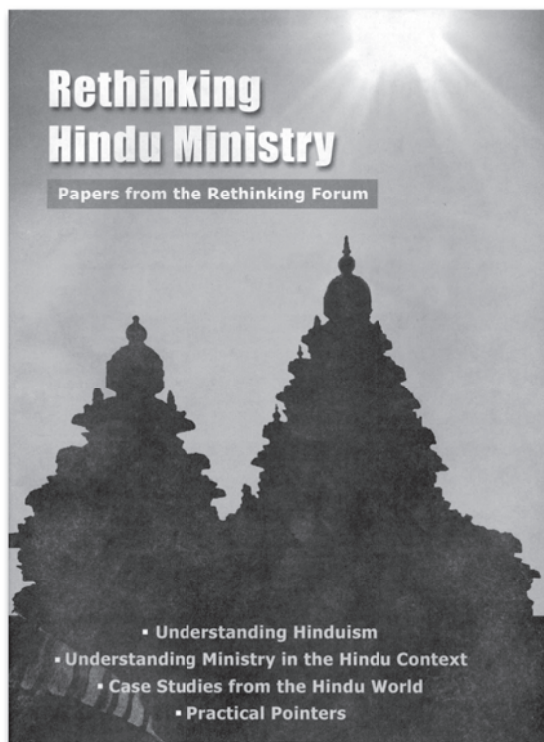


Hinduism

the gospel idea. This culture is universal and brings the benevolent authority of Jesus over sin, Satan and death to all of the world's imperfect cultures, transforming them into a pleasing home for Jesus, the king, to live in. That culture is the kingdom of God or the kingdom of the heavens. A "gospel of the kingdom" that will be effective within a Hindu context is one in which the ambassadors of Christ clearly explain life in the gospel culture of the heavenly kingdom and demonstrate in everyday life how the lordship of

The gospel will be evaluated on the basis of the changes that "gospel culture" will bring to Hindu culture.

Christ is the path to fullness of joy, peace and blessing for Hindu civilization 🌐



Timothy Paul developed his understanding of Hinduism and ministry among Hindus during 15 years of hands-on ministry in the metropolitan New York area, where he continues to live.