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The Worldviews of Hinduism and the Christian Believer

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Abstract

In this thesis, the Vedanta branch of Hinduism will be studied in order to gain an understanding of this diverse religion. The Vedanta concept of God, the self, the problem of life, the cause of this problem, the solution, and means to reach this solution will be examined in detail. After explaining these concepts, they will be compared with Christianity in order to see what common ground exists. Along with this, apologetic thoughts will be presented so that the Christian can better evangelize the Hindu. Finally, the concepts will be reexamined with the goal of finding truths that may help the Christian to strengthen his or her faith.

Introduction

Hinduism is one of the world's oldest, largest, and most diverse religions. No single belief or set of beliefs is representative of all of the various traditions and beliefs of Hinduism, but several branches share basic concepts and beliefs that, when examined, help to understand the vast majority of Hinduism. In order to gain a basic understanding of Hinduism, the worldview of this particular religion will be examined. Detail will be given to the Hindu view of the ultimate reality, the concept of man and the self, the problem with life, the cause of this problem, the solution to this problem, and the means by which to reach this solution. After examination of these concepts, apologetic thoughts applicable to Hinduism will be presented. This will seek to relate the concepts studied to Christian concepts in order to build a common ground upon which the Hindu and the Christian can stand, which will provide the basis for the apologetic that will be presented. Finally, the concepts of Hinduism will be reexamined in order to see if any of them can be studied by the Christian to better his/her own walk with Jesus Christ.

Basic Overview

First of all, a foundation for most of Hinduism must be laid in order to understand most, but not all, Hindu beliefs. Hinduism is primarily a school of metaphysics, because its aim is to make mankind one with the ultimate reality of god, the eternal, universal Spirit (Brahman).¹ The goal of becoming one with ultimate reality can only be reached by transforming human consciousness. Through religious and ethical disciplines, salvation

1. Throughout this thesis, the terms Brahman and god will be used. The term *Brahman* refers to the ultimate reality of everything. When the term *god* is used in reference to Hinduism, this term will signify a personal God (Vishnu, etc.) which the Hindu worships as a personal deity. All references to the Hindu concept of god will begin with a lower case letter. When Christianity is discussed later in the thesis, the Christian concept of God will begin with a capital letter.

(*moksha*) can be attained.² Once this is accomplished, the human self (atman) is released from the bondage of life and is absorbed into or achieves oneness with God as the ultimate reality, although the various schools differ as to exactly what this means.³

The concepts that are explored in this paper are taken largely from the Vedanta school of wisdom, a philosophical system based on the Vedas and particularly the Upanishads, which are two sacred texts of Hinduism.⁴ As it is the only surviving school of orthodox Hinduism, this school of thought is widely accepted in India and many other areas that practice Hinduism. It is generally considered a representative of the highest peaks of spiritual experience. Vedanta is divided into three main branches: *Dvaita* Vedanta, *Advaita* Vedanta, and *Vishishtadvaita* Vedanta. The key word in all three branches is *dvaita*, or dualism. Ray Billington, in his *Understanding Eastern Philosophy* states that dualism is "the experience of being aware of oneself as subject and the world, in whatever form, as object."⁵ In the religious context, *dvaita* is the belief that the believer and God are two separate entities and will remain so forever.⁶ In order to lay a foundation for the various concepts discussed below, the three branches of Vedanta will be briefly examined. These three branches, particularly *Advaita* and *Vishishtadvaita*, are further explicated in each section as they relate to the concepts being discussed.

2. Morgan, 3.

3. Hackett, 147.

4. Morgan, 417.

5. Billington, 29.

6. Ibid., 29.

Dvaita Vedanta

The Indian thinker Madhva is *Dvaita's* chief representative. *Dvaita* teaches a qualified dualism in which Brahman is different from human souls and the creation or universe.⁷ Madhva taught that there were essentially three different realities which would eternally remain separate from each other: god or Brahman, the soul, and the world. Brahman is seen as the ultimate reality and the creator of the universe. The world and the soul are subordinate to Brahman, as he is their creator. Madhva equated Brahman with *Vishnu*, who has appeared in the world in many forms throughout history.⁸

Advaita Vedanta

Advaita is the school of non-dualism, which was advocated primarily by Sankara. *Advaita* means "non-dualism," and its central tenant is that there is only one universal consciousness. Therefore, Brahman and atman are identical. However, the external world seems real because of *maya* (illusion), and *maya* will only be dispelled when the individual realizes that he/she is identical with Brahman.⁹

Vishishtadvaita Vedanta

Between *Advaita* and *Dvaita* is the school of *Vishishtadvaita*, which means "qualified non-dualism." This school was founded by Ramanuja, who believed that all creatures are forms of Brahman. The atman is dependent on, rather than identical with, Brahman.¹⁰ Ramanuja believed that the world is not illusory. Rather, the world is the

7. Robinson and Rodrigues, 163.

8. Billington, 29.

9. Ibid., 30.

10. Ibid.

result of Brahman's desire to become manifold. Indeed, individual selves are real, and they are identified with Brahman in the way that a part is related to a whole.¹¹

Brahman

As will be seen, there are various views for each concept, even within the Vedanta school as a whole. Accordingly, Brahman is defined in various ways within each school of thought. The word Brahman is derived from the verb meaning "to grow" or "to expand," and the word literally means "vast expanse." The term is commonly translated as "the Absolute." In the early Upanishads, the term referred to the creative source of the universe. In this way, Brahman could be compared to the creator gods of other religions. However, as more pantheistic elements were introduced, Brahman became identical with the universe; this view is the particular view of Sankara and *Advaita* Vedanta.¹²

Advaita Vedanta

According to Sankara and *Advaita*, Brahman is the ultimate reality, the supreme self. He is characterized by pure existence (*sat*), pure consciousness (*chit*, *cit*), and pure bliss (*ānanda*), the *sat-chit-ānanda* relationship.¹³ However, these three characteristics are not really characteristics; rather, they are Brahman's essence. He is pure existence-consciousness-bliss as one essence without any distinction between them. Ultimately, Brahman is devoid of all qualities and distinctions.¹⁴ From a purely philosophical standpoint, Sankara states that Brahman cannot be described at all. The description of

11. Smart and Hecht, 202.

12. Billington, 34.

13. Morgan, 83.

14. *Ibid.*, 239.

Brahman as *sat-chit-ānanda* "only serves to direct the mind toward Brahman by denying of him nonexistence, unconsciousness, and misery."¹⁵

Sankara also conceived of Brahman apart from the purely philosophical aspect. From the practical standpoint, the world is real and Brahman is considered to be its creator, sustainer, and destroyer. Brahman, in this respect, is omniscient and omnipotent, and Brahman is called *Ishvara*. He is the practical god of the Hindu religion and the object of devotion and worship. However, this description of Brahman as *Ishvara* only holds true for those who regard the world as ultimately real.¹⁶ For those who have realized that the world is a mere illusion and that it is in fact identical with Brahman, the descriptions of Brahman as *Ishvara* have no meaning.¹⁷

Vishishtadvaita Vedanta

According to Ramanuja, Brahman is wholly good. However, in the Upanishads, Brahman is described as being *nirguna*, without qualities or attributes.¹⁸ Therefore, *nirguna* must mean that Brahman is devoid of all bad attributes. Further, Ramanuja believes, that since Brahman is a person, he is possessed of all good qualities to an infinite degree.¹⁹ Brahman is the absolute reality, the only reality in the sense that there is nothing independent of him. Internally, Brahman possesses distinctions including conscious selves and unconscious matter. These material objects and finite selves qualify

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 40.

18. Zaehner, 99.

19. Ibid.

Brahman. Brahman, which is a unity, contains the many and is qualified by the many.²⁰ He is described by Ramanuja as compassionate, omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent; he responds to the prayers of his faithful devotees.²¹ Ramanuja further identifies Brahman as *Ishvara*, or a personal god, and this god is *Vishnu*. As *Vishnu*, god has a perfect, eternal body. He is radiant, full of beauty, omnipresent, and the inner ruler of all.²² In the Svetasvatara Upanishad, the attributes of this personal god are brought out. It states, "He in whom is the Supreme Lord of lords, who is the highest deity of deities, the supreme master of masters, transcendent, him let us know as god, the lord of the world, the adorable."²³

After Ramanuja identifies Brahman with *Vishnu*, he describes him as *raksaka*, the Redeemer. In this belief, *Vishnu* comes down from his heavenly abode to enter this world and the cycle of rebirths in order to help struggling individuals obtain salvation. As an embodied human, *Vishnu* suffers and endures pain with his devotees; he leads them by the hand as a friend would. The lord *Vishnu* stays with his devotees in order to guide them, but he does not take away their freedom to follow other paths. Moreover, *Vishnu* is described as the *mukti-data*, the giver of salvation.²⁴

Dvaita Vedanta

Much in line with Ramanuja, Madhva views Brahman as *Vishnu* as well. Madhva states that Brahman is the absolutely independent being. He is free from all imperfections

20. Morgan, 229.

21. Singh, 144.

22. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 377.

23. Svetasvatara Upanishad 6.7.

24. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 237.

and infinitely possesses every good quality. Again, Madhva believes god is *sat-chit-ānanda*. He lives in his heavenly abode with his consort Lakshmi. Additionally, Madhva states that Brahman dwells in the oceans and surpasses understanding; he is eternal.²⁵

Morgan summarizes Madhva's description of god:

He is the Lord of all beings and the creator, preserver, and destroyer of all things. He is the highest of all, since there is nothing like Him nor greater than He in the universe. It is He who controls all things, gives us the light of all knowledge, and also obscures it at times. It is He who leads us from life to life in bondage and it is He who helps us attain final deliverance. He is the Lord even of the gods and the sole ruling and controlling power of the universe.²⁶

The Two Selves of Man

Atman is defined in various ways, but with the same concept running throughout each definition. The first and simplest definition of atman is the Self.²⁷ This concept is differentiated from the concept of "soul." Another definition of atman is "the unmanifested ultimate reality."²⁸ A more complex definition is given as "the essence or principle of life. This term is variously derived from *an*, to breathe; *at*, to move; and *va*, to blow."²⁹ Atman is to be distinguished from the empirical self (*jiva*), or "the sum of the sense faculties."³⁰ It is essentially the state of human consciousness as the existing or

25. Ibid., 383.

26. Morgan, 225-226.

27. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 406.

28. Chaudhuri, 87.

29. Stutley, 31.

30. Ibid., 30.

living self.³¹ The empirical self is also known as the *sarira*, the physical body of a human.³²

The Essential or Real Self

In his chapter on the atman, Singh gives a description of the self, acknowledging that it cannot be described:

We seek to reduce it [the self, atman] to a definite concept or category and fondly believe that the self is an object of knowledge like any other object. It is in this sense, then, that the self is declared to be not anything (*neti, neti*). It is not describable in any way whatever. What it is in its inmost essence it cannot be known from a distance.³³

However, the Upanishads seek to depict the atman in broad strokes. It is described as the being of all beings; it is the self that is hidden in all beings. In this sense, the self is describable, but ultimately any description is inadequate. What is clear is that no human description of the atman can explain its intrinsic nature.³⁴

As mentioned above, the essential self is the essence of life, the atman. The essential self, unlike the empirical self, is not identical to the body or the mind. Because of this, the atman is free from all limitations, changes, and experiences of the physical body and mind. Atman is eternal and unchanging.³⁵ Its individuality has always existed

31. Ibid., 128.

32. Stroup, 130; Chāndogya Upanishad 8.12.1.

33. Singh, 54.

34. Ibid., 55.

35. Morgan, 120; Bhagavad-Gita (BG) 2:12, 17, 20.

and will always exist without interruption.³⁶ The atman is described as being more than pure existence and pure consciousness.³⁷ Further, the atman is not defined by space and time. In fact, the atman is illustrated in the Chandogaya Upanishad as smaller than a grain of rice, yet it is also greater than the earth and all the worlds.³⁸ The Brhad-aranyaka Upanishad tells of the atman in this way: "That self is not this, not this. It is incomprehensible for it is not comprehended. It is indestructible for it is never destroyed...It is unfettered. It does not suffer. It is not injured."³⁹

Upon analysis of the Upanishads, one finds that the Supreme Reality is the *sat-chit-ānanda* relationship. Further, it is discovered that the ultimate nature of the essential self is pure existence (*sat*), pure consciousness (*chit, cit*), and pure bliss (*ānanda*).⁴⁰ Therefore, according to Sankara, it follows that the atman and the Supreme Cosmic Reality (Brahman) are the same.⁴¹ Sankara believes and teaches that Brahman is everything and everything is Brahman, including the atman. Therefore, there is no duality within the universe and no diversity.⁴² This shows that the empirical self and the phenomenal, physical world do not possess any ultimate reality. True philosophical knowledge comes when one realizes the difference between the essential self and the

36. Prabhupāda, 23.

37. Morgan, 120; Brhad-aranyaka Upanishad 4.4.22-23i.

38. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, 391-393; Chandogaya Upanishad 3.14.3.

39. Brhad-aranyaka Upanishad 3.9.26.

40. Klostermaier, *Hinduism: A Short History*, 255.

41. BG 15:7.

42. Sharma, 283.

empirical self. The empirical self is often mistaken for the essential self, but the essential self is in no way attached to the changes and forces of the phenomenal world.⁴³

Like Sankara, Ramanuja believes that the atman is eternal, timeless, spiritual, pure consciousness, and of the same substance as Brahman.⁴⁴ However, Ramanuja disagrees vehemently with Sankara on the ultimate nature of atman. Atman is not identical with Brahman, as the atman is finite, while Brahman is infinite. However, atman is pervaded by Brahman and controlled by Brahman.⁴⁵ The atman is viewed as the body of Brahman, who is the atman's soul.⁴⁶ Ramanuja teaches that there are as many souls as there are bodies to house them. Further, even though souls are like each other and like Brahman in that they are eternal, they are very distinct from each other and from Brahman, who is seen as their source. The individual souls, as well as the world, are viewed as the body of Brahman.⁴⁷

Similar to Ramanuja, Madhva believes that the atman is a finite but eternal entity. Individual selves are fundamentally different from each other. They are totally dependent on Brahman; however, they do not form the body of Brahman. They contain imperfections such as ignorance and suffering, but they contain, to a limited degree, some

43. Morgan, 121.

44. Zaehner, 98-99.

45. Morgan, 231.

46. Sharma, 351.

47. Zaehner, 99.

attributes of Brahman such as knowledge and bliss.⁴⁸ Again, according to Madhva, the individual self can never be identical with Brahman.⁴⁹

Furthermore, the overall concept of atman shows that one should not mourn when a person dies. The atman is still alive but takes a different form for the physical body. The essential self does not die but continues. Death means that the atman has either been reborn or has finally achieved liberation from rebirth and has become one with Brahman.⁵⁰ The Bhagavad-Gita maintains that there is no cause to grieve over someone who has died. Indeed, the atman does not die, nor was it ever born. It is "unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial..."⁵¹

The Empirical or Physical Self

The empirical self is the self that experiences the forces of the phenomenal world, the changing world of the senses.⁵² It is known by several names and is described in several ways. As the physical body, the empirical self is referred to as the *sarira*, while the word *deha* describes it as the covering for the atman. As described above, *jiva* is also another name for the empirical self. The *jiva* compares the body to the earth; the bodily fluids are compared to the waters of the rivers and seas, the bones are compared to the earth itself, and the breath is compared to the air or wind.⁵³ According to the most widely accepted view, the essential self falls from its identity with Brahman through original

48. Morgan, 226.

49. Ibid., 227.

50. Prabhupāda, 24; BG 2:20, 23.

51. BG 2.19-21.

52. Morgan., 122.

53. Stroup, 130.

ignorance (*avidyā*). The atman then becomes part of the phenomenal world that is also a creation of original ignorance. Hinduism is not concerned with the question of how or why original ignorance operates, so these questions are not answered or even addressed.⁵⁴ The individual is distinguished by the physical body. Therefore, the body is understood as having various limitations because of the original ignorance of the essential self. The empirical self is sometimes also called the embodied self.⁵⁵

The main view is that there are three different bodies of the empirical self: physical, subtle, and causal. Morgan asserts, "It [the physical body] serves as the abode of all the experiences related to the external world, and as the basis of consciousness in the state of wakefulness."⁵⁶ At the time of death, the physical body perishes and dissolves back into the elements. Therefore, death can affect only the physical body. The second aspect of the empirical self is the subtle body. The subtle body is the home of the vital, mental, and intellectual functions.⁵⁷ The most important role of the subtle body is connected with rebirth. It is believed that the subtle body serves as the repository of all of the moral consequences of karma that affect the next rebirth. According to Morgan, "The subtle body is the medium by which the individual changes from one physical body to another."⁵⁸ The third body is the causal body. The causal body is signified by the condition of deep sleep. During deep sleep, the physical and subtle bodies temporarily cease to function. Moreover, the causal body seems to absorb and give rise to the

54. Morgan, 122.

55. Ibid., 123.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid., 124.

physical and subtle bodies. The empirical self shows that one can only speak of the role of man in the world in reference to the empirical self and its three bodies.⁵⁹ Therefore, the physical body is that part of an individual that is involved in all of the emotions and activities of the physical world. Now that the essential self has been distinguished from the empirical self, the belief in rebirth and karma can be examined.

The Problem with Life: Samsara and Karma

The problem with life, according to the Hindu, is *samsara*, the process of rebirths and reincarnations, and karma, the law of moral causation. In order to better understand the Hindu's need for liberation and salvation, these two concepts will be dealt with below.

Samsara: The Cycle of Rebirth and Reincarnation

The term *samsara* literally means "journeying," which refers to the journey that the atman must undergo through many incarnations and rebirths.⁶⁰ The first thing that must be remembered when discussing the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) is the belief that the essential self is the real self, the self which is unchanging and free from all the changes of the physical world. The atman is that which is transmigrated in the process of rebirth. When the atman becomes embodied in the empirical body, there are two options that arise: an individual, through true knowledge, can return to the original state of the atman through liberation (*moksha*), or an individual can continue on through various rebirths until *moksha* is reached, according to the law of karma.⁶¹

The Bhagavad-Gita compares the process of *samsara* to the stages of life. An individual moves from boyhood to youth to adulthood and finally to old age. This is the

59. Ibid.

60. Billington, 38.

61. Prabhupāda, 125; Caitanya Caritamrita Madhya 19:115

same with the atman, as it passes into another body after death.⁶² Moreover, the Bhagavad-Gita uses the picture of a person changing clothes. When a garment is old and worn, the garment is discarded and a new one is purchased. Similarly, the atman receives a new body when its current body becomes old and useless.⁶³ Further, the Maitri Upanishad declares, "...having seen (the self) which abides in his own greatness, he looks down on the wheel of births and deaths as on a revolving wheel (of a chariot)."⁶⁴

However, any type of existence characterized by *samsara* cannot produce final security. Worldly gains, wealth, and all other positive things gained in this life will ultimately pass away, leaving only their effects (karma) to carry over to the next life. Even if worldly gains could be considered inherently good or bad, it is of no importance, because they can never be considered permanent. From the ultimate point of view, all worldly progress is irrelevant.⁶⁵ This is the essential problem with life; everything that is of value in this life is ultimately meaningless and transitory. Hopkins states, "Rebirth is inevitable for one who through ignorance is desirous of worldly goals and performs actions directed toward those goals."⁶⁶ In order to find what is really meaningful, Hindus believe that one must escape this seemingly endless process of *samsara*. Closely related to the concept of *samsara* is the concept of karma; Billington states that *samsara* may be viewed as the domain of karma.⁶⁷

62. BG 2:13.

63. BG 2:22.

64. Maitri Upanishad 6.28.

65. Hopkins, 50.

66. Ibid., 47.

67. Billington, 38.

Karma: The Law of Moral Causation

Another doctrine that is involved in the problem of life is karma, which is also known as the law of moral causation. The verbal root of the word is *kr-*, which means to act or to do. It can be thought of as a deed done or a work performed, which is neither material nor spiritual.⁶⁸ The principle of karma is unique to the religious/philosophical systems of India. The law of karma can be understood when compared to the law of cause and effect in the physical world; karma is the same principle as applied to the moral world.⁶⁹ Karma is more simply defined as action, although this can be deceptive.⁷⁰ Furthermore, karma can be described as the law of retribution.⁷¹

The law of karma presupposes that any person will have to pass through various lives before he/she obtains *moksha*. The life a person has at the present time is a direct result of what that particular person was in his/her past life or lives. Therefore, an individual's future life will be a result of what he/she does now in the present life. One's past is carried with him/her until salvation is reached.⁷² Each human action makes its imprint upon the personality of that individual. Human actions and thoughts do not simply evaporate, nor are they lost at the death of the physical body. The actions and thoughts leave a deposit with the atman and are carried over into the next life; a person is

68. Klostermaier, *Hinduism: A Short History*, 205.

69. Morgan, 22.

70. Klostermaier, *Hinduism: A Short History*, 233; BG 14:18.

71. Stroup, 27.

72. Morgan, 22; Chandogya Upanishad 5.10.7.

what he/she has thought and done in the past life.⁷³ Once the actions of karma have been fulfilled the cause of them disappears. Thus, karma can be produced or annihilated, as it is always finite. There must come a point when all karma is fulfilled, at which point liberation is reached.⁷⁴

As long as creatures (plants, animals, humans) are creatures, they are involved in the cycle of *samsara*. Because of the law of karma, each individual creates his/her own destiny. This shows that life is not guided by a whimsical and external god(s), but life and one's destiny is shaped by one's choices and actions.⁷⁵ The course of nature and one's life is not determined by some capricious spirit, but by the operation of immutable laws. Although this may sound like man is not free, it does not mean this. When rightly viewed, karma does not interfere with the reality of freedom. One is shaping and making his/her character and destiny at every moment.⁷⁶ Morgan states, "The causes of an individual's present condition are to be traced back ultimately to the individual himself."⁷⁷

Moreover, the law of karma shows that every act is being weighed on the cosmic scales of justice. Unlike many religions, the day of judgment is not some future event; it is in the here and now, and no one can escape it.⁷⁸ If one deliberately ignores his/her wrong doings and shuts his/her eyes to any moral or spiritual light, he/she can be assured, by the unchanging law of karma, that his/her misdeeds will catch up to him/her. The

73. Stroup, 57; Purana Upanishad 6.1.45.

74. Klostermaier, *Hinduism: A Short History*, 205.

75. Morgan, 23.

76. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*, 52.

77. Morgan, 129.

78. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*, 53.

concept is that a just god cannot refuse a person that which he/she has earned, whether it is bad or good.⁷⁹ Further, karma shows that one's past guilt cannot be wiped away by the atoning sacrifice of a substitute; guilt cannot and will not be transferred. Each individual must suffer and atone for his/her own actions.⁸⁰ However, the law of karma does encourage the sinner that it is never too late to amend his/her ways. It does not shut the gate of hope. The individual knows that he/she can eventually work off all of his/her wrong deeds and advance in this life or a life to come.⁸¹

The Cause: Avidyā and Maya

Although karma and *samsara* are the two main problems encountered within life, the cause of these problems is mainly *avidyā* and *maya*, which are ignorance and illusion respectively. Because of ignorance, one assumes that the material world is the only reality, when it is really an illusion. In order to achieve fulfillment, one often seeks pleasure from the material world in the form of other people, sensual pleasures, work, leisure, and monetary gain. However, attachments to these things are keeping one entrapped in the material, illusory world. One fails to recognize that this world is an illusion, and one's interests in it keeps one in the continuous cycle of *samsara*.⁸²

Avidyā: Original Ignorance

Original ignorance (*avidyā*) is a condition whereby the essential self falls from its identity with Brahman; this results in the inhabitation of the empirical, physical self and

79. The effect of karma is both a cause-effect relationship and theistic in nature. More than anything it is a cause-effect relationship. However, a god(s) oversees this process to ensure that the individual receives what he deserves. Karma is an external force that a god oversees; god has no way to cease the effects of karma on the individual.

80. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*, 54.

81. *Ibid.*, 55.

82. Young, 73.

body. It is defined as "ignorance, lack of true knowledge (*vidya* or *jñana*)."⁸³ It is beginningless.⁸⁴ However, this definition of a lack of knowledge should not be confused by the Western conception of knowledge. More precisely, *avidyā* is a state of spiritual confusion about one's true human nature and the nature of all reality. The lack of knowledge is really a delusion about one's own self and the world. The delusion is that the world in which one lives is the only reality.⁸⁵

Avidyā is the state in which the self associates and identifies with the body. In this state of ignorance, it forgets that it is really one with Brahman and behaves like a limited, finite, and miserable creature. It thinks of itself in individual terms, as possessing its own ego, and other individuals as possessing their own egos.⁸⁶ *Avidyā* is further described as a time when the natural person does not know how to distinguish between relative and absolute being, between "things" and "being," and between the atman and the non-atman. This is described as innate *avidyā*; it is nescience of which a person is not even aware. It is the ignorance that keeps a person in *samsara*.⁸⁷ It is the working of *avidyā* that causes the essential self to assume an empirical, physical body.⁸⁸

Maya: The Illusion of the Material World

Closely related to *avidyā* is the concept of *maya*. These two concepts are so closely related that sometimes they are used interchangeably. However, *maya* relates

83. Stutley, 33.

84. Morgan, 241.

85. Young, 73.

86. Morgan, 241.

87. Klostermaier, *Hinduism: A Short History*, 375.

88. Morgan, 125.

more to the world in which one lives, while *avidyā* relates more to the understanding of the self and its true identity. The basic description of *maya* is illusion in that the material world obscures the spiritual world and the true spiritual reality. Because of the working of *avidyā*, one fails to see that he/she must penetrate through the veil of illusion in order to discover the unchanging spiritual reality. Where the various schools of Vedanta differ is in their main definition of *maya* and how it relates to the world.⁸⁹

The common example of the rope and snake experience is used by Sankara to explain the concept of *maya*. Suppose there is a rope lying in a dark room. There is a person in this room, and when he/she passes by the rope, he/she instinctively mistakes it for a snake. The moment he/she is convinced that the rope is a snake, he/she is filled with fear and nervousness. As long as he/she is deluded to think that the rope is a snake, he/she will continue to fear. However, a flash of light comes into the room and reveals to this person that what he/she thought was a snake is really the rope. Immediately, the fear and nervousness dissipates, and the person returns to his/her normal consciousness. Sankara explains the concept of *maya* in reference to this example.⁹⁰

The Hindu metaphysical point of view is illustrated by the snake-rope example. Just as the mind created the snake and imposed a "snakeness" upon the rope, the mind also creates this world and imposes it "worldness" onto it. As long as one retains this mental mechanism, one cannot help but create this illusory world.⁹¹ The entire phenomenal world is illusory; this is the concept of *maya* at work. The existence of this

89. Young, 77.

90. Singh, 62.

91. Ibid., 63.

world results from the false imposition of qualities upon Brahman, who is devoid of all qualities. However unreal the world may be in the ultimate sense, Sankara still asserts that it is not unreal in a practical sense.⁹² Sankara in fact claims some type of reality even for illusion.⁹³ The resultant created world is referred to as *maya*.⁹⁴

The above example also points out the two main characteristics of *maya*, the positive aspect and the negative aspect. *Maya* not only conceals the underlying truth, either the rope or Brahman as the ultimate reality, but it also makes it appear as something completely different, either a snake or the physical world. In this sense, *maya* is negative in character, but positive in appearance.⁹⁵ With these two concepts, it is shown that Brahman is the ultimate truth, yet human limitations cause one to take the ultimate reality to be something else, namely, the physical world and universe. Therefore, what it termed "the world" is nothing more than a creation of human thoughts. Just as the rope is the underlying reality behind the "snake," so is Brahman, the all-pervasive spirit, the underlying reality behind the "world."⁹⁶

In stark contrast to Sankara's *Advaita*, Ramanuja and Madhva argued that the phenomenal world is in fact real. For him *maya* is not illusion. Rather, it is the Lord's creative power, which is used to fulfill his goal of becoming manifold. The world is seen as the body of Brahman, and individual selves are also viewed as real and eternal. Each self is related to Brahman as parts are related to a whole or as light is related to the fire

92. Hopkins, 119.

93. Sharma, 277.

94. Singh, 63.

95. *Ibid.*, 64.

96. *Ibid.*, 139.

from which it proceeds.⁹⁷ The various passages within the Upanishads that assert the unity of Brahman and condemn a multiplicity of forms are simply explained away by Ramanuja. He comments that these passages deny the independent existence of the world outside of Brahman, but they do not deny the reality of the world. In other words, Ramanuja believes that the Upanishads teach that the world is real, but it is dependent of Brahman for its existence.⁹⁸

The Ultimate Aim of Life: *Moksha*

The ultimate goal of the Hindu believer is release or liberation from the continuous cycle of *samsara*, which is known as *moksha*. This is accomplished by the realization of absolute truth, knowing who one really is and knowing the true nature of reality, which is different for the three branches of Vedanta. The knowledge of the true nature of atman provides liberation from *samsara*. *Moksha* is viewed as the liberation from *samsara*.⁹⁹ Although all branches of Hinduism share *moksha* as their ultimate goal, they differ on the nature of the liberated state. The bhakti movements, particularly of Ramanuja and Madhva, see *moksha* as communion of the atman with a personal deity, characterized by eternal bliss and enjoyment. The more philosophical schools, such as *Advaita*, tend to take a more impersonal view. These branches state that *moksha* is beyond description; all one can really say about this state is that, once the atman reaches it, there is no more rebirth, but only a state of total release.¹⁰⁰

97. Hopkins, 122.

98. Sharma, 359.

99. Robinson and Rodrigues, 170.

100. Young, 74.

The name for liberation is either *moksha* or *mukti*, which are used interchangeably; *moksha* will be used here. *Moksha* simply means "release" or "liberation." The *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* derives both words from *moks*, literally "to free one's self, to shake off." Likewise, the *Pāli-English Dictionary* derives the *Pāli*¹⁰¹ form *mokkha* from *muc*, meaning "letting loose, releasing."¹⁰² The person that desires to obtain *moksha*, desires to remove the obstacles and wrong notions of life, an event that comes from within the atman itself.¹⁰³ It is essentially release from the cycle of *samsara*.¹⁰⁴

Explanation of Moksha

The release from *samsara* consists in "knowing the unknowable Brahman."¹⁰⁵ The ultimate end of human life and this cycle is liberation from the finite human consciousness that makes individuals see things as separate from one another and not as part of the whole. The individual parts of the universe derive their significance, not from their individuality, but from their unity with the central spirit. The beginning of this experience and the realization that everything is part of the whole is called the second birth, or the opening of the third eye or the eye of wisdom.¹⁰⁶ This experience of knowledge involves both "a separation of consciousness from sense-object knowledge

101. Pāli - an ancient Indo-Aryan language.

102. Stutley, 193.

103. Svetasvatara Upanishad 6.23.

104. Klostermaier, *Hinduism: A Short History*, 207.

105. Mundaka Upanishad 3.2.6.

106. Morgan, 4.

and an extension of consciousness until it finally includes everything."¹⁰⁷ The consummation of the experience leads to a more or less permanent establishment of the transcendent consciousness, which is the ultimate goal of the Hindu.¹⁰⁸

When *moksha* is finally reached, man is lifted above the mortal plain of Earth and becomes one with the pure being, consciousness, and bliss, which is Brahman.¹⁰⁹ The Prasna Upanishad says, "...the liberated becomes everything."¹¹⁰ The liberating statement is "atman is Brahman." Klostermaier points out, "Brahman is not to be seen, not to be heard, not to be thought, but to those who understand the seeing of the seeing, the hearing of the hearing, the innermost principle underlying all, know Brahman also in a positive way."¹¹¹ In the Bhagavad-Gita there are numerous statements about the characteristics of this state. A few of these are as follows: the soul is conformed to Brahman, infinity, and the one self of all things; it is free from all notion of "I" or "mine"; it casts off its lower self to enter into its higher self; it transcends time and space, fear and joy; it does not grieve; and it does not die, nor is it reborn.¹¹² Further descriptions of *moksha* are found in the various Upanishads. The Mundaka Upanishad states, "One's self, indeed, is the arrow. Brahman is...the target of that. It is to be hit without making a mistake. Thus one becomes united with it as the arrow (becomes one with the target)."¹¹³ The Svetasvatara

107. Klostermaier, *Hinduism: A Short History*, 207.

108. Morgan, 4.

109. Ibid.

110. Prasna Upanishad 4.11.

111. Klostermaier, *Hinduism: A Short History*, 208.

112. Zaehner, 77.

113. Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.4.

Upanishad explains, "The knowers of Brahman by knowing what is therein become merged in Brahman, intent thereon and freed from birth."¹¹⁴ The best passage explaining the relationship between Atman and Brahman at the time of *moksha* is found again in the Svetasvatara Upanishad:

Even as a mirror stained by dust shines brightly when it has been cleaned, so the embodied one when he has seen the (real) nature of the Self becomes integrated, of fulfilled purpose and freed from sorrow. When by means of the (real) nature of his self he sees as by a lamp here the (real) nature of Brahman, by knowing God who is unborn steadfast, free from all natures, he is released from all fetters.¹¹⁵

This passage shows that *moksha* is the purpose of all persons, and that *moksha* consists in becoming integrated with Brahman.

Advaita Vedanta

In *Advaita Vedanta*, atman is not differentiated from Brahman. Therefore, the state of *moksha* is not different from the real nature of the atman.¹¹⁶ *Moksha* is not to be reached, created, or received as a result of some modification or change, and it is not to be received as the result of attempts to gain refinement or perfection of atman. Again, *moksha* does not imply that the atman gains something that it does not already possess; *moksha* is the process by which an individual realizes his/her own true self, which is and has always been there, but has not been realized because of original ignorance.¹¹⁷

114. Svetasvatara Upanishad 1.7.

115. Svetasvatara Upanishad 2.14-15.

116. Morgan, 126; Mundaka Upanishad 3.2.7-8; Prasna Upanishad 4.9-10.

117. Morgan, 126.

Again, the atman is not differentiated from the Brahman.¹¹⁸ Therefore, there is no need to cleanse the atman of sin or to make it perfect; it is free from sin, incapable of sin, and incapable of being perfected because it is already all of these things.¹¹⁹ *Moksha* is not to be reached, created, or received as a result of some modification or change, and it is not to be received as the result of attempts to gain refinement or perfection of atman. Again, *moksha* does not imply that the atman gains something that it does not already possess; *moksha* is the process by which an individual realizes his/her own true self, which is and has always been there, but has not been realized because of original ignorance.¹²⁰

The concept of "deathlessness" can also be used to understand *moksha*. When a person achieves *moksha*, unity with the Brahman, whatever has been created goes back to its source. The body and all of its parts and faculties are dissolved back into the elements from which it was derived. When the atman withdraws itself from the physical body, the physical things go back into nonexistence, which shows that any physical entity is nothing without the indwelling atman.¹²¹ *Moksha* is not an ontological change, but a psychological breakthrough. It cannot be thought of as a resurrection or transfiguration of the body, nor can it be thought of as heaven. Indeed, it is a rejection of all these things and an overcoming of heaven. It is "bliss redundant."¹²² For *Advaita*, the concept of

118. Ibid.

119. Klostermaier, *Hinduism: A Short History*, 208.

120. Morgan, 126.

121. Mundaka Upanishad 3.2.7.

122. Klostermaier, *Hinduism: A Short History*, 208.

moksha is vague, and is explained by stating the *moksha* is the atman's uniting with Brahman, which is its true nature.

Vishishtadvaita Vedanta

Like Sankara, Ramanuja believes that perfection of the atman consists in obtaining a state of freedom from worldly, mundane existence.¹²³ However, other aspects of *moksha* are vastly different from that of the *Advaita* school. The liberated soul, according to *Vishishtadvaita* Vedanta, becomes similar to Brahman, but not identical to it as *Advaita* believes. It realizes that it is in fact the body of Brahman.¹²⁴ The freed soul, according to Ramanuja, enters into a supra-mundane existence, where it enjoys the highest bliss and happiness possible in the presence of Brahman.¹²⁵ Further, upon discarding the mortal body at the time of death, the soul receives another body made of the immortal stuff, referred to as *shuddhasattva*.¹²⁶ Through this body, the liberated soul enjoys eternal bliss in the presence of its master in heaven.¹²⁷ It is able to comprehend the infinite attributes and glories of Brahman; the liberated soul rejoices in this by singing praise to Brahman.¹²⁸

As stated, the soul takes on this new body. This shows that the liberated soul retains its individuality. If it did not, then enjoyment of bliss in the presence of Brahman would not be possible. It differs from Brahman in two important respects. First, the

123. Singh, 145.

124. Sharma, 353.

125. Singh, 145.

126. Ibid., 145-146.

127. Ibid., 146.

128. Ibid.

liberated soul is atomic and finite, while Brahman is infinite. Secondly, it does not share in various attributes of Brahman, such as his immanent controlling power and his transcendent power as creator, sustainer, and destroyer of the universe.¹²⁹ The state of *moksha* is summed up nicely by Singh, who states, "There the soul leads an existence full of eternal bliss and self-sufficiency. It is a state where there is neither suffering nor want."¹³⁰

Dvaita Vedanta

Madhva takes a similar approach to Ramanuja. When the self is liberated, Madhva says, it does not become identical with Brahman. However, it closely resembles Brahman in that it possesses knowledge and bliss; however, this knowledge and bliss are finite and limited when compared with those attributes of Brahman, which are infinite and unlimited. Therefore, the self is similar to Brahman, but not identical with him. Further, as there is a distinction between individual selves and Brahman, there is also a distinction between one self and another self.¹³¹ Particular to Madhva is the doctrine that some souls like demons, ghosts, and some men are eternally damned. These individuals can never hope to achieve liberation.¹³² In order to better understand *moksha*, the three-fold path or means to liberation will be examined.¹³³

129. Sharma, 354.

130. Singh, 147.

131. Morgan, 227.

132. Sharma, 375; This doctrine of eternal damnation is also found in Jainism. Along with Madhva, Jainism is the only other field in the whole of Indian philosophy that has a doctrine or concept of eternal damnation.

133. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 151.

The Three Paths to Moksha

Within Hinduism there are various ways to reach *moksha*. However, three paths are most widely recognized: *Karma Marga* (the path of action), *Bhakti Marga* (the path of devotion), and *Jñāna Marga* (the path of knowledge). The term *marga* means "path."¹³⁴ Each of these can also be referred to as *yoga*, which means union, instead of *marga*; perhaps the term *yoga* emphasizes the uniting of one's seemingly separate self with one's true self, the atman.¹³⁵

These three main paths to *moksha* have coexisted for a long time. They mix and merge at various points, but each branch of Vedanta seems to stress one particular path above the remaining two. However, the practice of the average Hindu includes elements from all three of these primary paths and many others. It is very personalized, as each worshipper emphasizes one path according to personal preference. Hinduism does not differ from other religions in its idea of a "path" or "way." However, the idea of a plurality of paths is particularly characteristic of Hinduism. Some emphasize one path over the others, but the general view is that all are equally valid for achieving individual *moksha*.¹³⁶

Karma Marga: The Path of Action

Karma Marga is related to the concept of karma, as its name implies. Traditionally, *karma marga* meant the regular performance of Vedic rites which were

134. Young, 74.

135. Robinson and Rodrigues, 170.

136. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 145.

given to obtain good karma, and therefore, more desirable rebirths.¹³⁷ However, the Bhagavad-Gita brought an additional perspective on how karma is used to obtain liberation. The Bhagavad-Gita prescribes that actions are to be performed without attachment to their results or fruits.¹³⁸ The Bhagavad-Gita proclaims, "You have the right to work, but never to the fruit of the work, You should never engage in action for the sake of the reward...."¹³⁹ If all actions are done in a spirit of detachment, karma is thought not to accumulate. As actions are performed in a detached manner, the atman eventually detaches from the chain of karma.¹⁴⁰

Further, these detached actions allow one to participate in a full range of activities within life, including family life, community service, and religious rites. The notion of detached action developed into various forms of social activity, including voluntary service at temples, at hermitages, and in the community. These services provide the individual with opportunities to provide for the needs of others, not as an end in itself, but as a means for the individual to approach god through his service in a manner of detachment.¹⁴¹ The path of karma *marga* is appealing to many because of its simplicity and accessibility. Many traditionalists believe that, through karma *marga*, a lower caste individual can only improve his/her status in his/her next reincarnation. However, others

137. In this instance, the sense of the word "more" is qualitative in nature. The Hindu works to achieve a better, improved life in the next rebirth.

138. Robinson and Rodrigues, 174.

139. BG 2.47.

140. Robinson and Rodrigues, 174.

141. Ibid.

believe that karma *marga* opens the way to *moksha* regardless of one's class and even one's gender.¹⁴²

Bhakti Marga: The Path of Devotion

The path of devotion is the most widely applied approach among contemporary Hindus.¹⁴³ The word "bhakti" is derived from the root "bhaj-" meaning "to worship, to be devoted to;" it signified the acts of worship and loving devotion to a personal god.¹⁴⁴

Bhakti marga had a very wide appeal from the beginning because it broke down the barriers of privilege.¹⁴⁵ Essentially, it became a way of liberation for everyone, including women, children, lower castes, and even those outside of the caste system.¹⁴⁶ While *jñana* is directed at intuitive insight and philosophical approaches and karma involves selfless action, bhakti elicits the aid of a deity in the attainment of *moksha*.¹⁴⁷

Bhakti is based on the notion that one must demonstrate love and devotion to a god/goddess, which will ultimately secure the god's help to achieve liberation. The spirit behind the idea of bhakti is expression of a selfless love for a deity without the expectation of anything in return, although the devotee hopes that help will be given.¹⁴⁸ In this way, *moksha* is regarded as a gift from God and cannot be achieved by the efforts

142. Young, 74.

143. Robinson and Rodrigues, 174.

144. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 210.

145. Although karma *marga* also broke down many of the barriers of caste and privilege, bhakti seemed to demolish all barriers and allow for open worship and devotion of all people as a means to salvation.

146. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 212.

147. Robinson and Rodrigues, 175.

148. Ibid.

of man alone.¹⁴⁹ The central act in bhakti, according to Ramanuja and *Vishishtadvaita* Vedanta, is *prapatti*, or self-surrender to a personal god/goddess, and consists of five individual components: the intention of submitting to god, the giving up of resistance to god, the belief in the protection of god, the prayer that god may save his devotees, and the consciousness of utter helplessness.¹⁵⁰ The Bhagavad-Gita states, "Be My devotee, prostrate thyself before Me, thou shalt come upto Me. I pledge thee My Word; thou art dear to Me. Abandoning all dharmas [supports] come unto Me alone for shelter; sorrow not, I will liberate thee from all sins."¹⁵¹

In addition, Ramanuja advocated "*arta-prapatti*," or a feeling or self-surrender in times of extreme distress and need. This is a moment in which the devotee finds himself/herself most near to god; in fact, this single moment may be enough to bring the devotee to the point of *moksha*. This one moment is seen as the simplest and easiest path to *moksha*. Perhaps this accounts for the fact that *Vishishtadvaita* Vedanta became very popular among the destitute, poor, and outcasts of India. This form of bhakti is the point where one has nothing to offer to god except oneself and one's whole being and soul. The destitute and poor saw this route as their only way of achieving liberation, and therefore, it became very popular.¹⁵²

Madhva took a similar approach. He stated that while knowledge is a part of mankind's salvation, it is not a sufficient condition. Mankind cannot be liberated without the grace of god. More important than knowledge is mankind's devotion to and love of

149. Anand, 215.

150. Klostermaier, 220.

151. BG 18.65-66, as quoted in Sharma, 37.

152. Singh, 145.

the Lord. In order to foster this love and devotion, a person should keep himself/herself in constant service and worship of god. He/she should study the holy scriptures, and devote his/her body, mind, and speech to god. Through these actions, god is pleased and gives grace to him/her. With this grace, the person is able to be liberated, leave his/her body, and live in communion with god for all eternity.¹⁵³

In contrast to Sankara's concept of Brahman without qualities, the two other branches of Vedanta developed theologies around a personalized vision of Brahman.¹⁵⁴ The most common way of explaining the multiplicity of gods/goddesses within Hinduism is bhakti. Bhakti recognizes all the varying gods/goddesses as manifestations of one Supreme Lord, who accepts being worshipped by various names with various attributes. However, each bhakti movement considers their own personal deity as ultimate (i.e., Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, etc.).¹⁵⁵ Further, bhakti formalized varying methods of demonstrating loving devotion to an individual deity, including worshipping at temples and home shrines, devotional singing, and pilgrimages. All of these acts contribute to the individual showing his love and devotion to his own personal god.¹⁵⁶

For Sankara and *Advaita* Vedanta *jñana marga* is the ultimate path of *moksha*. However, bhakti is a step on the ladder to the realization that the atman is Brahman. Once this is realized, no further spiritual progress is necessary. For *Advaita*, worship of a god/goddess is illusory and is ultimately a worship of one's own self. Therefore, bhakti is

153. Morgan, 228; By "leave his body," the Hindu believes that the atman departs from the physical, empirical body, much like the Christian believes that the soul leaves the body at death to go to either heaven or hell.

154. Robinson and Rodrigues, 175.

155. Young, 74.

156. Robinson and Rodrigues, 175.

not given much emphasis within Sankara's thought.¹⁵⁷ However, Ramanuja and the theistic sects stress worship of a sectarian god. Devotion to a personal deity is of much concern¹⁵⁸ Ramanuja does agree that ordinary bhakti, characterized by *prapatti*, is a means to the realization of the highest form of bhakti, which is pure *jñāna*, or the immediate intuitive knowledge of god, which is in itself the direct cause of liberation. However, this knowledge only dawns on the individual by the grace of god.¹⁵⁹

Jñāna Marga: The Path of Knowledge

Jñāna marga can also be referred to as the "Path of Transcendental Knowledge," as this path emphasizes a mental and meditative approach to self-realization and liberation.¹⁶⁰ *Advaita* Vedanta stresses that *jñāna* is the best path to achieve liberation, although it does not totally discount the value of *karma marga* and *bhakti marga*. Likewise, Ramanuja and Madhva both advocate true knowledge as the primary means to obtain *moksha*, although both place a greater emphasis on bhakti than Sankara does.¹⁶¹ In particular, Madhva teaches that the first step in liberation is to acquire true knowledge about Brahman and the self. This knowledge consists in knowing that Brahman is the omniscient, omnipotent, all-merciful ruler of the world.¹⁶² The devotee must realize that he/she is completely dependent on god, although he/she is never identical with god. It is through this constant consciousness of his/her dependence on, and not the false notion of

157. Zaehner, 100.

158. Hopkins, 122.

159. Sharma, 352.

160. Robinson and Rodrigues, 172.

161. *Ibid.*, 173.

162. Morgan, 227.

oneness with, Brahman that will save the individual and liberate him/her from *samsara*. However, *jñāna* is not all sufficient for salvation. Therefore, Madhva puts a great emphasis on bhakti, as explained above.¹⁶³

Jñāna seeks to penetrate *maya* and the illusive nature of this world by meditation and knowledge.¹⁶⁴ This knowledge is not a result of intellectual acumen or any type of dialectical power. Essentially, *jñāna* can be described as "realized experience."¹⁶⁵ The knowledge that must be realized is that the absolute truth is Brahman, that Brahman is the true and ultimate reality.¹⁶⁶ This knowledge, according to Sankara, does not make the seeker become Brahman, for he/she is already Brahman. What one must realize is not a new state of being, but the state of being that has always been. This state consists in being Brahman.¹⁶⁷ The Brhad-aranyaka Upanishad states, "Being just Brahman, unto Brahman he (the self) arrives."¹⁶⁸

Under the influence of *maya*, the consciousness believes that there is a plurality within the world. Further, because of the affects of *maya*, the atman is mistakenly conceived as a separate entity from Brahman. However, *jñāna* allows the individual to move beyond this pluralism and realize that the only reality is Brahman and that atman is Brahman.¹⁶⁹ This knowledge destroys ignorance and illusion. *Advaita* stresses that through *jñāna*, which consists of a process of moral, physical, mental, and spiritual

163. Ibid., 228.

164. Robinson and Rodrigues, 173.

165. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*, 59.

166. Robinson and Rodrigues, 173.

167. Singh, 101; Also see Brhad-aranyaka Upanishad 4.4.24-28.

168. Brhad-aranyaka Upanishad 4.4.8, as quoted in Hopkins, 46.

169. Robinson and Rodrigues, 173.

disciplines, the seeker slowly and patiently reaches a point of final preparation for *moksha*. Then, in a single moment of blinding enlightenment, the goal of *moksha* is reached and the door to union with Brahman is opened. After this experience, however, one continues to live on earth until one's karma is worked off.¹⁷⁰ This state of liberation while still living in the human body is known as *jivanmukti*.¹⁷¹ In this state, the liberated self never again identifies itself with the physical body, nor is it deceived by the physical world which is still around him/her.¹⁷² Following this, the atman is finally liberated, and there are no more rebirths.¹⁷³

Concluding Statements about the Three Paths

The three main paths to *moksha* have been analyzed. Although each school of thought places a different emphasis on a certain path, all three paths relate in order for an individual to reach *moksha*. If one has the right knowledge and true insight (*jñana*), right action will take care of itself (karma). The way of devotion (bhakti) is the most popular because sinners as well as saints, the ignorant and learned, the foolish and the wise all find it easy.¹⁷⁴ Even Sankara, as much as he emphasized *jñana*, recognized the relative truth of karma *marga* and bhakti *marga*, as both served as preparations for *jñana marga*.¹⁷⁵ Essentially, for Sankara, one stage was preparatory for the next stage until the

170. Young, 76.

171. Morgan, 127.

172. Ibid., 242.

173. Young, 76.

174. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*, 59.

175. Hopkins, 120.

final stage of *jñāna* is reached.¹⁷⁶ Karma and bhakti are simply viewed as manifestations of *jñāna*. Within the scholarly ranks of Hinduism, *jñāna* is viewed as the most important of the three paths, as one cannot overcome the illusion of the universe unless he/she has the right and true knowledge of the ultimate reality.¹⁷⁷ However, for the average Hindu, the three paths are combined in various ways, with much personal preference involved. Again, the general view, particular to Hinduism, is that all three paths and many others are equally valid for achieving individual liberation. The Bhagavad-Gita makes it clear that whatever methods are used, sincerity in one's quest will lead to *moksha*.¹⁷⁸

Common Ground with Apologetic Thoughts

The Rationale and Method

In order to build an atmosphere where the Christian can speak intelligently and somewhat successfully with a Hindu regarding salvation in the Christian sense of the term, common ground must be established.¹⁷⁹ In this section, the various concepts already discussed will be compared with Christianity where the two religions have similar doctrines and beliefs. Although *Advaita* Vedanta is one of the most common views within Hinduism, this view comprises the greatest difference from Christianity. Therefore, *Advaita* will not be dealt with as much as the *Dvaita* Vedanta of Madhva and the *Vishishtadvaita* Vedanta of Ramanuja. The author of this paper takes the view, much like Gerald R. McDermott, in *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?*, that God has revealed Himself in some way to those outside of Christianity. Much of this revelation is

176. Singh, 102.

177. Sharma, 37.

178. Robinson and Rodrigues, 176.

179. The truths of Christianity will be presented from here on out.

termed "general revelation," which is "that divine disclosure to all persons at all times and places by which one comes to know that God is and what he is like."¹⁸⁰ Also, these things could be considered types, or a "representation by which God points human beings to spiritual realities."¹⁸¹ The Bible states that the heavens declare the glory of God.¹⁸²

Theologians generally agree that religious truths in other religions are only considered general revelation when it coincides with the knowledge of God as revealed in the Bible and Christian faith.¹⁸³ McDermott makes the point that recognition of the true identity and nature of God can only come from God Himself. Mere human insight into these attributes, according to McDermott (and agreed to by this author), does not seem to cohere with the biblical view of God's sovereignty.¹⁸⁴ Finally, it must be admitted that these "types" or the general revelation in other religions give only a broken, partial, and distorted view of divine truths. This author agrees with McDermott when he states that the world's religions are scattered with promises of God in Christ, and that these promises are revealed types placed there by the triune God of the Bible.¹⁸⁵ This approach will be taken when examining the Vedanta branch of Hinduism in order to see where it and

180. Bruce Demarest, as quoted in McDermott, 110.

181. McDermott, 104.

182. Psalm 19:1; Indeed, the Old Testament is full of types that point to the work and life of Christ found in the New Testament (i.e., the sacrificial Lamb of God). God desires that all come to salvation, so it seems rational to believe that God has placed types in other religions to bring these people to at least seek out answers and maybe find Him as their Savior. Therefore, there is good reason to believe that God has revealed Himself in various ways and types in the world's religions.

183. McDermott, 112.

184. *Ibid.*, 113.

185. *Ibid.*, 114.

biblical Christianity coincide, which will be interspersed with apologetic thoughts on how to relate to and witness to the Hindu.¹⁸⁶

The Christian God as the Ultimate Reality

The first concept that will be examined in the light of Christianity is the concept of Brahman, or god.¹⁸⁷ Hindus believe that Brahman is the ultimate reality of the universe. Sankara goes so far as to say that Brahman is the only reality, that all else that appears to be reality is false from the ultimate point of view. The Christian view is that God is also the Ultimate Reality, although He is not the ultimate reality in the way Hinduism believes. He is not a part of everything. Rather, He is different from His creation. The first book of the Bible, Genesis, presupposes God, and it offers no explanation for God's origin. Genesis 1:1 states, "In the beginning, God..." Just as Brahman is the highest and ultimate authority for the Hindu, the God of the Bible is the Highest and Ultimate Authority for the Christian. There is no further ultimate reality beyond God. God is not like *Ishvara* or another manifestation of some higher reality. The God of Christianity Himself does not admit to any higher reality. In fact, He Himself states that He is the Ultimate Reality. In Isaiah 44:6 God says, "Thus says the LORD... 'I am the First and I am the Last; Besides Me *there is* no God.'"

The Christian God as Creator

After showing the Hindu that God is the Ultimate Reality, the Christian can then proceed to enumerate some of the qualities or attributes of God. The first one of these is

186. For a much fuller explanation of "type" and "general revelation," see McDermott's book, particularly Chapter Four: "Theological Considerations."

187. To avoid confusion as to what God or god is being mentioned, all references to the Hindu concept of Brahman as god/lord, etc. will begin with a lower case letter (other than Brahman). The Christian concept of God will begin with a capital letter.

that God is the Creator. In the early Upanishads, Brahman was identified with the creator of the universe. For Hindus that still hold to this view, Brahman can be compared to the Creator God of the Bible. The very first verse of the Bible shows that God created the heavens and the earth.¹⁸⁸ Like Ramanuja, who believes that *maya* refers to the creative power of Brahman, Evangelical Christians wholeheartedly believe that God created the entire universe. This forms the second common ground on which to approach the Hindu who takes Ramanuja's view. Both the Hindu and Christian can state that the universe had a beginning at some point in time and that it was created by some type of creator god/Creator God. This must be the starting point of any type of apologetic to the Hindu. If the Christian can establish this point about origins, he can build upon this foundation.

The Christian can move on to show how God created the universe and, more specifically, the earth as a habitable place for life. He did this *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) and does not manifest the world out of His own substance as Ramanuja taught. The creation by God, as presented in Genesis, is an act that is done, not out of necessity, but out of love. The beginning of the world is not an impersonal necessity or some blind manifestation of Brahman, but it is the product of the free choice of a personal God. Because Hinduism and particularly the *Advaita* branch, believes that the fundamental unity and reality of the universe is Brahman, it follows that they believe that the physical world and humans are manifestations of Brahman. The physical world and humans are simple manifestations of the same primordial essence of Brahman to which they are bound to return. In this way, it can be argued that Brahman, as the ultimate reality, is incomplete without this manifestation of his potentiality in the form of the physical world and humans. The manifestation of Brahman must be, of necessity, derived from his very

188. Genesis 1:1; All Bible verses taken from the New King James Version.

nature. When the pantheistic elements of Sankara's philosophy entered into Hinduism, creation came to be viewed as the manifestation of Brahman. In this way, creation is not a replacement of nothing with something, but simply a manifestation of Brahman as the ultimate reality. It is a change from one ontological condition into another. Brahman, as always existing, simply becomes manifest. However, Christianity paints a very different picture of this. The nothing that God created out of has no ontological state. It is not some primordial essence like Brahman, because prior to creation nothing existed except for God. Therefore, God did not manifest Himself in His creation. He simply created everything out of nothing. The world is a creation of God, not a part of Him; it is wholly and completely separate from any part of God.

The Christian God's Attributes

Once a foundation for the Creator God of Christianity has been laid, the Christian can then compare the attributes of Brahman as a personal god with the attributes of God as Christianity conceives Him. Ramanuja teaches that god possesses all good qualities to an infinite degree. Both Christians and Hindus can agree that god/God is wholly good and possessed of all good qualities to an infinite degree. Indeed, the Bible states, "Great *is* our Lord, and mighty in power; His understanding *is* infinite."¹⁸⁹ Further, Ramanuja goes on to state that god is compassionate, omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent. Likewise, the Christian God is omnipotent, as God states that He is the Almighty God.¹⁹⁰ Further, God is omniscient, as found in various passages of the Bible, including that

189. Psalm 147:5.

190. Gen. 17:1.

statement that "...the LORD *is* the God of knowledge,"¹⁹¹ and that "...His understanding *is* infinite."¹⁹² Moreover, the Christian God is benevolent. In fact, the Bible states that God is love and that He loved humans so much that He came to earth to die for humans; this will be commented on in detail later.¹⁹³ Finally, in this vein of thought, the Svetasvatara Upanishad states that Brahman is the supreme lord of lords, the highest deity of deities, and the master of masters. Likewise, the Bible proclaims that Christ (or God) is the King of kings and the Lord of lords.¹⁹⁴ If this comparison of the attributes of Brahman as Ramanuja teaches and the attributes of the God of the Bible is persuasive, the Christian can further build upon the foundation already established. As will now be shown, the Christian may be able to convince the Hindu that the true God of Christianity may have revealed His essential attributes to the teachers and writers of Hinduism.¹⁹⁵

The Christian God as Incarnate Redeemer and Suffering Servant

The next similarity is, again, particular to Ramanuja's thought. Ramanuja identifies Brahman with *Vishnu*, who is further described as *raksaka*, the redeemer. In this teaching, *Vishnu* comes down from his abode in heaven, enters this world, and helps the struggling individuals who are trying to obtain salvation. He suffers and endures pain with them; he takes them by the hand and leads them. *Vishnu* is further described as the *mukti-data*, the giver of salvation. This whole belief is a type that seemingly God has

191. 1 Sam. 2:3.

192. Psalm 147:5.

193. 1 John 4:16; John 3:16–17.

194. Rev. 19:16.

195. The writer of this paper is in no way implying that the Hindu god *Brahman* is the same God of the Bible. This comparison is simply to show how the concepts are related in order to point out that the true God of the Bible may have revealed certain of His attributes to those outside of Christianity/Judaism.

revealed to Ramanuja and other writers/philosophers in some way so as to emphasize the concept of a suffering redeemer who comes to earth. Key to Christianity is the belief in the incarnation, life, painful and sacrificial death, and finally resurrection of Christ. The incarnation of Christ is most fully described in Philippians 2:6–11:

who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of* death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Christ came to earth as a man, much like Hinduism believes of *Vishnu*. Hindus are already familiar with the idea of a god coming to earth. Therefore, the concept of an incarnation will be much easier to explain to the Hindu who holds to this view. The key concern here is that Hindus do not accept Jesus Christ as just another god to add to their list.

Further, like Hinduism's concept of a suffering incarnate god, Christianity presents Jesus Christ as the Suffering Servant. The most famous passage for the basis of this belief is Isaiah 53, which is referred to as the Suffering Servant Passage. This passage enumerates various aspects of Christ's suffering. A few of these are as follows: He was despised and rejected; He was acquainted with grief; He was afflicted; He was wounded and bruised for our iniquities and transgressions. This similarity can be used as

a basis for showing that Christ did more than just suffer for humans, but He died for them. Although the Hindu belief in karma excludes the need for a sacrificial death of an individual for another, it can be shown that this can naturally and logically follow from the idea of a suffering incarnate god. Indeed, in the passage in Isaiah 53, the passage progresses to a suffering servant to a servant who is a sacrifice or offering for sin. This logical progression can be used to show that God has revealed two aspects of the life of Christ (His incarnation and His suffering), but has not revealed the concept of His sacrificial death. Perhaps this concept can only be gleaned from the pages of the Bible itself. For this, the Christian can go to the Bible to show that Christ is the sacrifice given for all humanity. He is the *mukti-data* and the *raksaka*, the Giver of salvation and the Redeemer. Indeed, the Bible makes it clear that Christ is not just the "salvation giver;" He *is* Salvation. Throughout the book of Psalms the claim is made that "the LORD *is* my strength and song, And He has become my salvation."¹⁹⁶ Moreover, the Bible states, "As *for* our Redeemer, the LORD of hosts *is* His name, The Holy One of Israel."¹⁹⁷ The key idea to expound to the Hindu is that Christ is the only means of salvation. He is not one path among many; He is not one way of salvation. He *is* Salvation, the only Salvation, and the only way to salvation. As Christ states in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

The Christian Concept of the Soul

Since the concept of the atman is generally understood to refer to the essential self of an individual, so the concept of the soul in Christianity is related to that of the

196. Psalm 118:14.

197. Isaiah 47:4; Also see Psalm 19:14; Psalm 78:35.

atman.¹⁹⁸ However, the soul is not eternal, as Hinduism believes the atman is. The soul had a beginning, as shown in Genesis 2:7, "And the LORD God formed man *of* the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." The word for "living being" can also be translated "soul." Although the soul is not eternal, in the sense that it has always existed, it is everlasting in the sense that, once it is created, it will last for ever. As the atman does not die, so the soul will not die. Similar to the thought of Madhva, the Christian does not believe that the soul is the body of God; it is entirely separate from God. As Hinduism teaches that the atman is different from the body, so Christianity teaches that the soul is different from the body. 1 Kings 17:21–22 states, "And he stretched himself out on the child three times, and cried out to the LORD and said, 'O LORD my God, I pray, let this child's soul come back to him.' Then the LORD heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came back to him, and he revived." This shows that the soul is the entity that departs from a person when he/she dies. However, *samsara* is not a Christian concept. When the soul departs, it either goes to heaven or hell. In addition, Madhva teaches that the individual selves are fundamentally different from each other. Likewise, Christianity believes that no two souls are the same. Each person is unique. What must be emphasized here are the similarities of the beliefs. The variances between Hinduism and Christianity in relation to the view of the atman and soul can be dealt with at a later time. The purpose here is to show the Hindu how God has revealed certain aspects and types to the religion of Hinduism.

198. Atman will signify Hinduism, while soul will signify Christianity.

The Fleeting Character of Life

In relation of *samsara*, it can be shown to the Hindu that, much like his/her own belief, Christianity teaches that worldly wealth, pleasures, and all other things gained in this life will ultimately pass away. In fact, the wisest man that ever lived wrote a whole book of the Bible about this very fact. The book of Ecclesiastes begins with these words, "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. 'Vanity of vanities,' says the Preacher; 'Vanity of vanities, all *is* vanity.' What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?"¹⁹⁹ However, Hindus believe that whatever one does in this life, according to *samsara* and karma, will be the basis for one's position in his next life. Christianity does not teach this, although a similar concept can be brought out in this situation. Christianity does teach that there will be consequences according to what one believes about Jesus Christ. The Bible states in Luke 13:27 that what one believes about Christ will affect where he goes after death, whether to heaven or hell.²⁰⁰ Therefore, there are some consequences to what one does while on this earth.

"You Reap What You Sow"

Very much tied to the Hindu concept of *samsara* is the Hindu concept of karma. Christianity cannot be said to endorse the idea of karma, although the concept of "sowing and reaping" is prevalent. The Apostle Paul told the Corinthians that "...He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully."²⁰¹ God is shown to supply all of one's needs by this principle of giving and

199. Ecclesiastes 1:1-3.

200. But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.'

201. 2 Cor. 9:6.

receiving. Jesus reminded His followers that whatever His followers give, it will be given back to them.²⁰² Again, the Apostle Paul reminds the Galatians that "he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life...for in due season we shall reap..."²⁰³ The divine principle of sowing and reaping works both in the positive and negative. The positive is that when one sows spiritually, he/she will reap spiritual rewards. However, negatively, one that sows sin will reap sorrow.²⁰⁴ Finally, in his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul states, "...God...will render to each one according to his deeds."²⁰⁵ This is a cause and effect relationship that is taught throughout the Bible.²⁰⁶ Although it cannot be properly termed karma, this concept is very similar. Indeed, one might say that the concept of karma as found in Hinduism is another *type* for this cause and effect relationship as found in Christianity.

All Guilt Removed

For the Hindu, because of karma, one's past guilt cannot be wiped away by the atoning sacrifice of another or transferred to another person. Although this view is very different from Christianity, it can be shown that Christianity is far superior in its view regarding this situation. Jesus Christ is seen, in theological terms, as the propitiation for one's sins. The Bible states in various places that Christ was the propitiation and the

202. Luke 6:38: "Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you."

203. Gal. 6:8-9.

204. Prov. 22:8: "He who sows iniquity will reap sorrow..."

205. Rom. 2:5-6, a restatement of Psalm 62:12 and Prov. 24:12.

206. What must be remembered is that this concept in the Bible is not the means to or cause of salvation. Salvation is not by works. This concept is in contrast to Hinduism, where karma eventually works itself out so that the individual can experience moksha.

sacrifice for the sins of all mankind.²⁰⁷ In Christian theology, propitiation is the work that Christ did on the cross, by which He fulfilled the wrath of God because of sin. As a result, Christ reconciled the believer to God, who would otherwise be offended by sin and demand that one pay the penalty for it, to the believer. Christ came to earth in order to die for the sins of all humanity. Through Christ's death, the sinner, who turns from his/her sinful ways, asks for forgiveness, and believes that Christ is his sacrifice for sin, can be reconciled with God. This in turn allows this individual to live eternally in heaven after his/her earthly death. This ultimate sacrifice and propitiatory death by Christ is defined by love. 1 John 4:10 states, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins." God loved the world so much that Christ was sent to die for humanity.

On the other hand, the Hindu is forced to suffer the consequences of his/her own actions and must pay for them himself. There is no room for love in this worldview.

Brahman may be thought of as benevolent, but it seems like a limited benevolence.

Although Ramanuja taught that *Vishnu* enters the world to help struggling individuals obtain *moksha*, it seems that this is all that he does. *Vishnu* may suffer and endure pain, but he did not endure the ultimate pain and humility that Christ did while being executed by crucifixion. The Christian view is far superior because Christ is the one who takes all

207. Romans 3:25: "whom God set forth *as* a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed" Hebrews 2:17: "Therefore, in all things He had to be made like *His* brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things *pertaining* to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people."

1 John 2:2: "And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world."

1 Corinthians 5:7: "...Christ...was sacrificed for us."

Ephesians 5:2: "And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma."

Hebrews 9:26: "He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself."

the sin upon Himself. However, this does not mean that there will not be physical or legal consequences for one's actions while on earth. Christians believe that a loving God can and will forgive one of his/her sin if the individual comes to God with a sorrowful and genuinely true sense of remorse for his/her sinful actions. The world does not operate at the hand of some cosmic, impersonal law of karma, but it operates through the loving hand of Almighty God. Hopefully, a Hindu will recognize the fact that God loved him/her so much that God, in the person of Jesus Christ, came to earth to seek and save him/her. It is recognized that a Hindu may argue that his position is more just and a greater motive to perform good works. The purpose here is to show that God loves Hindus. The good works that the Christian does is in response to this love, not as a means of obtaining love or salvation.

Heaven, Not Moksha

For the Hindu, *moksha*, or release from the cycle of rebirths, is the ultimate goal in life. For the Christian, this goal is heaven. Although heaven cannot be at all compared to the *Advaita* idea of *moksha*, it can in a very few respects be compared to Ramanuja's view of *moksha*. Christians believe, like Ramanuja, that the soul, once it reaches heaven, will not be assumed into the body or spirit of God. The soul retains its individuality and is able to enjoy God for eternity. The soul is finally able to comprehend the infinite attributes and glories of God Almighty. Exactly what all of this entails cannot be stated exactly, as no one really knows. Further, Ramanuja taught that the atman, at the time of entering into the presence of Brahman, will receive a new body made of some type of eternal matter. Similar to this is the Christian idea of the mortal, corruptible body of man

being transformed into the immortal, incorruptible body.²⁰⁸ Although the Christian does not receive a whole, totally different body, one's mortal body will be transformed into something immortal. The final parallel is the idea that there will be no more suffering or want in either *moksha* or heaven. The Bible states, "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, no sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."²⁰⁹ Therefore, it is shown that at least the Christian view of heaven has a few points in common with Ramanuja's teachings.

The Hindu's Imperfect Grace

The final point that is going to be made in this section deals with the Hindu concept of bhakti and the Christian concept of grace. The Hindu concept of bhakti has been discussed at length above, so it is summarized here as the teaching that god/Brahman must be involved in some way in helping a Hindu to achieve *moksha*. It invokes the help of a god through loving devotion and worship by the Hindu; this concept of loving devotion will be dealt with in the next section. First, the definition of grace must be determined. In its simplest form, the Christian concept of grace essentially means God's undeserved or unmerited favor. God's grace is seen in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve fell into sin. God was under no obligation to provide a way to restore them to fellowship with Himself. God would have been justified in immediately separating Adam and Eve from Himself and delivering them to immediate and eternal punishment. However, God showed His grace and bestowed on them forgiveness.

208. 1 Cor. 15:35–58.

209. Rev. 21:4.

Likewise, He bestows forgiveness and eternal life on the sinner who sincerely believes that Christ died for him/her and rose from the dead.

Hinduism's similar concept in bhakti is that liberation cannot be achieved by the mere efforts of man alone.²¹⁰ A personal god/goddess is called upon to elicit his/her help in reaching liberation; liberation, therefore, becomes a gift of the divine. This whole concept of salvation as a gift of the divine is very similar to the Christian concept of grace. However, there is a significant difference: a Hindu must express selfless love and devotion to this god. There is still human effort involved in this concept. For the Christian, no human effort can ever reach God for salvation. Repentance, or turning from one's sins and turning to God, is not a work. In fact, it is a renunciation of all work and a surrender to the grace of God. Ephesians 2:8–9 states, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." Mankind must give up in its struggle to reach God, realizing that God has reached down to the human race to provide a way for salvation.²¹¹ In the Hindu concept of bhakti, which can be seen as another *type* within Hinduism, something of God's gracious character is revealed, although it is an imperfect grace.

Concluding Thoughts

In this section what has been attempted is a reexamination of Hindu concepts and beliefs in light of Christianity. In an attempt to witness to the Hindu, apologetic thoughts have been scattered throughout this reexamination. Although the apologetic to the Hindu

210. See McDermott 93, 103, 113 for similar information.

211. Man should still seek God, but this seeking is not the means of salvation. It may lead to salvation, but only Christ can provide salvation. Seeking God in the Christian perspective may involve seeking Him to discern His will for one's life, etc.

has been presented in a somewhat disorganized manner, the writer hopes that this information will help Christians when they approach a Hindu. The writer recognizes that all aspects of Hinduism cannot be covered in a single book or series of books, much less a single paper. However, the writer again hopes that his thoughts will stimulate and encourage the Christian to further study this diverse religion in order to "always be ready to give a *defense* [or *answer*] to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear [emphasis added]."212

Lessons for the Christian Believer

In this final section, a narrow focus will be taken in order to see how Christians can learn from Hinduism. The focus will be the three paths that Hindus believe lead to salvation: *karma marga*, *bhakti marga*, and *jñana marga*. Although the Christian knows that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation and that works are useless in obtaining salvation, much can be learned from the Hindu paths.

Karma Marga: The Path of Service

First, *karma marga* has been renamed as the "Path of Service" in order to bring out the Christian aspect in this Hindu concept. *Karma marga*, with its notion of detached actions, developed into forms of social activity and community service as a means to serve Brahman through detached action. The key for the Christian to understand and learn from here is the idea of service. The Bible speaks of serving the stranger and alien as a way to serve God Himself. The story of the Good Samaritan, found in Luke 10:25-37, teaches that service and goodwill toward a stranger is actually service toward God. This is reinforced in Matthew 25:34-46, where Christ states that whenever one feeds the

212. 1 Peter 3:15.

hunger, quenches the thirst of the thirsty, and takes in the stranger, he/she is really feeding Christ, quenching Christ's thirst, and taking in Christ.²¹³ Likewise, whenever a Christian forsakes this person, he/she is really forsaking Christ. Also, the author of Hebrews states that when strangers are entertained, some have actually unwittingly entertained angels.²¹⁴ The path of service is vital in a Christian's life of service to God, but it must be remembered that service is not a means to one's salvation.

Bhakti Marga: The Path of Devotion

The greatest lesson for the Christian can be learned from *bhakti marga*. This is the path of worship and loving devotion to God. According to Ramanuja, the central act of *bhakti* is *prapatti*, or self-surrender, which is composed of five elements: the intention of submitting to the Lord, the giving up of resistance to the Lord, the belief in protection of the Lord, the prayer that the Lord will save His devotees, and the consciousness of utter helplessness. Each of these aspects is also vital in the Christian's life. The Christian must, through the first element, consider the cost of submitting to Christ. The Christian life is costly. It cost Christ His life, and it can even cost the Christian his/her life. Therefore, the Christian must be intent on submitting to Christ, no matter what the cost. Second, the Christian must give up resisting the Lord. For the Christian to grow in his/her faith, he/she must be able to let the Lord mold and shape him/her into the likeness of Christ. If his/her own motivations and desires are still controlling him/her, he/she cannot wholly

213. "Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'"

214. Heb. 13:2.

submit to the Lord. These things must be given up in order to give up his/her resistance to Christ. Third, the Christian believes that Christ will protect him/her. Fourth, the Christian must be actively involved in praying for the salvation of his/her family members, friends, and other loved ones. Prayer is vital to developing a deeper relationship with Christ, and this prayer should involve an evangelical prayer for salvation of others. Finally, the believer must be conscious of his/her utter helplessness. If the believer realizes this, he/she will then depend on God for his/her every need and support. After this examination of bhakti in light of Christian truths and beliefs, it is seen that the believer can learn much just from these five components of self-surrender.

Another concept within bhakti is the teaching of Ramanuja of *arta-prapatti*, or a feeling of self-surrender in times of extreme distress and need. In Hinduism, this is a state in which the individual finds himself/herself most near to god. Easily translated to the Christian religion, the Christian most deeply relies on God when he/she is in some extreme situation and is forced to trust in God for whatever he/she needs. This is a time in one's life where he/she has nothing to offer God except his/her whole being and soul, which is what God really wants from the believer. Christ wants the Christian to give up trying to be good enough and do enough things to please Him. Christ wants the believer to give himself/herself in service and surrender to Himself. This is the only true way in which Christ can work to mold and shape the believer into what He wants him to be, which is Christ-like. The key to remember from bhakti is that the Christian must be absolutely and totally devoted to Christ.

Jñana Marga: The Path of Intellect

Finally, *jñana marga* emphasizes true knowledge within Hinduism. This knowledge consists in realizing that Brahman pervades everything, or is everything. Although the Christian knows that God is separate from His creation, the key to take from *jñana* is the need for Christians to possess intellectual knowledge. A Christian should never stop learning after his/her salvation. The believer should be studying the Bible, gaining knowledge about his/her own faith. This will help a Christian to defend his/her own faith when he/she is challenged about why he/she believes what he/she believes. After a firm basis is laid in Christianity, the believer is then able to branch out and study the attacks that are made on Christianity, including those from evolution, atheism, agnosticism, and other world religions. By studying these things, as is the intention of this paper, the Christian can understand how these beliefs affect how a person thinks and views the world. Then, the Christian can point out flaws within these systems. Using rationality, the believer can show followers of these other beliefs why the Christian's belief is right and why the other belief is wrong. Christian knowledge is vital in today's world where Christianity is being attacked from all sides. The world perceives Christians as dumb, uneducated, and unscientific. By studying his/her own faith and other worldviews, the Christian can have an answer for the hope that he/she has and show why the other belief system is flawed.

Conclusion

After thoroughly examining the Vedanta branch of Hinduism, a firm understanding of this branch has been gained. Key to understanding Hinduism is the concept of the Supreme Reality, or Brahman. Further, the concept of the atman has been

shown to be very important in explaining the beliefs of karma and *samsara*, the two main problems with life. The causes of these problems are ignorance and illusion about the true nature of the world and the atman. The ultimate aim of life is release, or *moksha*, from the cycle of reincarnation, which is achieved through the various *margas*. All of this was done in order for the Christian to understand the main tenets of Hinduism in hopes that this knowledge will help the Christian in his/her witness to Hindus. The key similarities between Hinduism and Christianity were enumerated using McDermott's method as a pattern to discerning what *types* have been revealed in Hinduism. Hopefully, the Christian reading this paper will be able to learn what Hindus believe, be able to show common ground to provide a door to apologetics and evangelism, and ultimately win souls to the Kingdom of God. Finally, a few thoughts regarding how the Christian can learn from the three Hindu paths to salvation revealed that Christians can learn and benefit from elements found in other religions. The writer of this paper prays that this whole process has been helpful to the reader in gaining a firm understanding of the key concepts within Hinduism with the hope that he/she will then be able to use these in his/her witness for Christ. "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen."²¹⁵

215. 2 Peter 3:18.

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