

Hindu Religion by Swami Dayanandaji

The name Hindu was given to the people who were following the Vedas and had a unique religious culture. When some Persians from across the Himalayas came to North India where the river Sindhu flows, they saw people living a highly civilized life with a unique religious culture. They called these people Sindhus. The letter s was pronounced in their language as h, so the word became Hindu. We are told that that is how we have come to be known as Hindus. In fact we didn't have a name. The people were following a body of knowledge called Veda. Perhaps you have heard about the Vedas. It is important for you know the names of the Vedas because the Veda is the most ancient body of knowledge. The Vedas are four in number --- Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda. Like the Bible for the Christians, for the Hindus these are the Bibles. All together they form the scriptures.

Veda in Sanskrit means a body of knowledge. These scriptures form the basis of the spiritual life of Hindus. The Hindus may not know the content of the four Vedas because they are voluminous. Your parents may not know them at all. But they have imbibed the essence of the lifestyle based upon these four Vedas, the value structure based upon these four Vedas, and certain attitudes, again, based upon the Vedas. These things are handed over to the children. This is something very unique, which you must know.

In humanity there are lots of things that are ancient, so ancient that they cannot be claimed by any given country. For instance, we have the pyramids in Egypt. Suppose the Egyptian Government chooses to demolish one so that they can create a housing colony. Do you think humanity will allow that? Definitely not. Even though the pyramids happen to be within the borders of Egypt, still, the government of Egypt doesn't have the right to destroy a pyramid, because it is too ancient to be claimed by any nation or group of people. More ancient than the pyramids are the Vedas. Till today, the Veda is handed over by one generation to another generation orally. You must know that there are people even today in India who can repeat the entire Veda, a given Veda, from memory, and it takes them many days. In chanting the Vedas there is a style, based on intonations, which we call svaras. That style is retained even today. It is the same as it has always been. The Vedas are learned from a teacher with whom you sit every day, and learn and commit to memory a given Veda. It takes twelve years to learn one Veda. There are a lot of people, even today, who have family names such as Trivedi, Caturvedi, Dvivedi, that indicate how many Vedas were learned in that family. Somewhere in the history of the family someone knew three Vedas, not one, and was given the title Trivedi. Or someone in the family knew four Vedas so the family name is Caturvedi. Thus the Vedas were committed to memory and handed over to the next generation of students. This forms the body of knowledge called the Vedas.

The Vedas belongs to humanity. They are too ancient to be claimed even by Indians. Most of the religions have beliefs that can be found in the Vedas, as many would accept. And these Vedas form the basis for the Hindu religious life. Since what is known as Hindu religion today is based upon these four Vedas, the religion is a 'Vedic' religion or Sanatana dharma. These Vedas have a view of human destiny, of what exactly one is seeking in life and wants to accomplish, essentially. This is addressed by the

Vedas. They have a clear vision of what is it that is to be discovered in one's life and what it takes to be a mature person. It is a universal vision. It is something that everyone wants to have, whether the person knows it or not. This vision can be called a view of life. The Vedas have a view of life and to achieve the view, the end, they prescribe a way of life. The way and view of life form the Hindu religion.

The view of life concerns: What is life? What is the reality you are seeking? What is God? Is there one? If there is, where is he, or she? What is this world? How it is related to that Lord? How are you related to the world, and what are you all about? Once you have a view, then you must definitely have a way to accomplish that end in view. The view is something that is entirely distinct and different from the views that many religions have about human destiny. For instance, the church has a view of life - it looks upon the individual basically as a helpless person who is a sinner and born of sin because he is born of parents. Therefore, for the birth to be sinless it has to immaculate. People born of sin require to be saved and there are means for that such as confession, etc. If you live your life according to these means, after death you will go to heaven. So heaven-going is their view of the purpose of life. Whether it is any form of Christianity or Islam, going to heaven is the end.

The view of life in Hinduism is entirely different. It is to be accomplished here, while you are alive. That is why it is so important. It is something that is connected to your life here. We are not worried about going to heaven later. We are concerned about making our life here. All that you have to accomplish as a successful individual, to be able to say, "I have made it," is to be done here, and not in the hereafter. It becomes at once different and meaningful to you. We must know that this is something unique. The highest thing that a human being can accomplish is to be accomplished here and now when you are alive and kicking, when your mind is working and when you are not too old. For this, a clean life style is given, a life style that will help you to grow into an adult, a mature adult. That is what we call a religious life. One requires a structure to grow that implies a personal prayerful life, and also, a social structure.

There is a certain structure that governs your interaction with society, and when every member of society follow those rules, you have a societal structure. This is based upon universal moral structures, and within that, you operate, for your self-growth. Once you are grown up, of course you have something to discover -- the view and way of life which is what we call Hindu 'religion'.

There were religions in the world that are non-existent today. In Greece there was a religion. In the whole of Europe and the Arab countries there were a number of religions. All those are totally wiped out. All we have left are monuments and books about them. There are religions today that were non-existent before -- Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. All these were founded by some people, so they have a beginning. If you look at the Vedic religion, you can't determine when it was non-existent. Maybe it grew up with humanity. When did physics not exist? When did it come into being? When you learn to walk it is physics, remember. That you don't fly, and that, if you are not careful, you will fall from a tree, is all physics. It was there even for the cave man. Therefore, physics doesn't have a beginning. It has been existing with humanity. It is important to understand that the Vedic religion was not founded by

anybody. That is its uniqueness. That is why anybody can say, "I am Hindu," and you have no way of saying, "No you are not," because, being a religion that was not founded by anybody, you don't need to subscribe to a particular faith. It is based upon facts that are in the Vedas.

The main vision of Hinduism and the various things advocated by it are for one's self- growth. They are universal and anybody can understand them. That is why I can talk in this country, in Japan, Norway, Brazil etc. and I will pass. In spite of my funny dress I will pass because this vision has relevance to your life, your human life. It is not a religion founded by any one person for a particular group. If at all you call them common founders we have the Rishis, the 'ones who know'. These Rishis were the people to whom this Vedic knowledge was revealed. You can say that it was revealed or it was discovered, but it is considered to be revealed because the nature of the knowledge is such that it has to be revealed. The Rishis form the media through which the Vedic knowledge came to us. That is all we know. It is too ancient and, at the same time, relevant.

Sometimes things that are ancient are not relevant today. Think of a person riding a bullock cart on the freeway! They will arrest him. In this country it is irrelevant. He can't say, "I love this cart." Some things may be relevant in other countries but not here. There are lots of habits that are irrelevant. Thus, we have grown out of a lot of things, which is but proper and natural. The stone-age man had tools made of stones. You can't say, "My forefathers used these stone tools, therefore I am going to use them." They are irrelevant now. They were in a different age. They did not have modern knowledge and technology, therefore they had to make tools with what was available then. We have figured out new things and, therefore, we don't need to follow our forefathers footsteps in this area. Even though we have respect for them, we need not follow them. Thus, a number of things that the forefathers did have become irrelevant today. But a few things survived.

Eating has not become obsolete. It continues to be the same. They also had minds to deal with. Our problems are not all physical, in fact, most of our problems are mental. All complexes, concerns, sorrows, depressions, anger, hatred and jealousy were our forefathers problems and are our problems. They are not ancient and irrelevant. They would always be there. As long as the human mind is there, there will be problems. This mind has to be dealt with. If our forefathers could manage the mind well, those things that helped them to do that would be applicable even today. Even though we may present those things in a language that we can understand, we may change the accent, and perhaps the phrasing, still, the basic principles cannot change. If they cannot be changed, then we retain them, and if they can be changed, then we change them. What is applicable today should not be changed, cannot be changed.

In the Hindu religion as in all other religions there are things that are optional for you. I can come in this dress or in some other dress also. This is optional for me. I am a sannyasi, a Hindu monk, and we have certain traditional colors and robes that we wear. I have respect for the tradition, so I wear them. But I can change, there is no problem. I can give up this dress, and in giving it up my knowledge will not suffer

any loss. Please understand this. There are certain things that are essential, there are some that are important but optional, and there are things that are non-essential. The non essentials we always drop. Even if you ask people to retain them, they won't. You will have this problem at home. Sometimes your parents will say, "Do this," and you don't understand why you should do it. It does not seem relevant at all. Some things may be non-essential in your view, but in their view they may be essential. You need to understand some of these things so that you can make informed choices about what is important to you. When I talk to you, don't think that I am someone who is going to impose ideas on you. Not at all, I am a teacher. So keep an open mind.

At home you have a certain culture, and when you go out, there is a different culture. At home there are certain values, and outside the values are totally different. Therefore, it is always a problem. You can't own up your own parents because you can't understand why they are insisting on some things that seem opposed to the culture in which you are living day to day. You feel that they are imposing some irrelevant ideas upon you. To grow properly, you must understand your parents first. To understand your parents you must go to the roots. The parents themselves do not know much. As I told you, they don't know the Vedas. But, in spite of that, they have received the Vedic vision and view of life, in a small measure, from their parents. Do you know why? It is because this is not a founded religion. It is a view and way of life. There is no pontiff at the top.

In the Hindu religion there is no papacy, diocese, bishops, parish or congregation. We don't have that kind of organization. This may be our weakness, but I say this is our strength. Some think it is a weakness and that is unfortunate, because it means that they don't understand our strength. There is some weakness in the lack of organizational structure, naturally; anything has its own weakness. But what is viewed as a weakness, is, in fact, its strength. Its strength lies in the fact that it is not an organization. If a religion is based on an organization, when the organization is removed, the whole religion will fall apart. Here, in order to destroy the Hindu religion you have to destroy every Hindu. Muslims tried and Christians are still trying, but it is difficult, because Hindu dharma has no organization. Do you know why it has survived? It is because it has an intrinsic worth. What is worthy will always endure, because it is based upon certain facts and realities about life. You have to know this in order to grow up in a society where alternatives are available.

This is a country of choices. When you have too many choices you must have a better understanding so that you can choose appropriately. Having choices means that we have to learn how to choose responsibly and intelligently, and for that we have to be informed.

Everything is open to choice. Two fellows shared a ranch. Each one bought a horse, and they decided that an identification mark was needed to distinguish them. One said, "I will paint my horse with red ink, and you paint yours with blue." It was done, and they could tell which horse belonged to whom. Fine, but the rain came and washed off the paint. So one fellow said, "Why don't I cut the mane off my horse and you leave yours uncut?" After some time, the mane grew and they had the same problem, "Which is

my horse?" Then they cut the hair on the tail of one horse, but that also grew. They got vexed with the problem. So one fellow said, "Why don't we solve the problem this way. Let us say that the brown horse is yours and the white is mine!" This is what was available originally. When you have choices you must know how to choose. When you are driving and come to a crossroad, you have to choose whether to go left or right. When you get onto the freeway, you must know which exit you have to take, otherwise you will be going in the opposite direction. Since you are growing up in a society of choices you are better off, I tell you, but you have to be informed. If you are informed, you are better off than children growing up in India who don't have as many choices. So you have to know what is what. That is what you are trying to do at the gurukulam. You are trying to understand what exactly is the basic structure of the Hindu religion, what are its values, what is universal and special there, and what is its unique vision. All this you must necessarily know; there is no choice in this. Since you happen to be born in a given family, you must know where your parents came from, what their values are, and what their vision is all about. They themselves may not know and may not be able to explain it, because for them it is way of life. For them it is easy; for you it is not. They didn't have any choice, but you have. They just grew up with certain values. Here you have choices, so you have got to know and choose responsibly. That is the difference between a person growing up in India and a person growing up here. That is the reason why in this religion, being not an organized religion, every individual has to know his or her religion. You have to learn by first imbibing it from your parents, and later, you imbibe more from a teacher.

In Hinduism the teachers, called gurus, play an important role because you have to learn only from an individual. There is no organization to fulfill that function. From the rishis, the four Vedas have come down to us. The rishis themselves received the four Vedas from the Lord, they say. This body of knowledge, thus, has come down to us. What we are going to see is nothing but what the Vedas say in essence. The essence you should know.

The four Vedas are supported by a number of other books. The Ramayana and Mahabharata are called itihasa, while the Vedas are scriptures. Itihasa means how it was, iti ha asa; iti thus; ha verily, indeed asa, was. The Ramayana and Mahabharata are based on historical facts, and therefore, they will have a skeletal historical background. Based on those historical facts, a lot of things were poetically expressed, like the rakshasa Ravana in the Ramayana having ten heads. This is imaginary, but it has a meaning. It is not meant to be understood literally. Suppose a thought occurs in one head, like a thought of a mango, and all the other nine heads think of a mango. If this is so, then nine heads are useless. You only need one. You should have surgery to get rid of the extra nine. You can't even walk into a house, so naturally, it is better to get rid of the extra nine heads. Otherwise, you have to have nine shampoos, nine towelings; you'll have nine headaches! It is a problem. But suppose they think different - one head says "Grab Sita," the other says, "No," another says, "You can grab her, or you need not grab her." If you have ten heads, with each one saying one thing or the other, then what will you have? Ravana. That is the meaning there. Valmiki pictured Ravana as a person who had conflicting ideas, good and bad, right and wrong. He constantly had this problem. So who is a Ravana? Anybody who has conflicting ideas all the time, is never able to judge and proceed, is a Ravana. That person is likened to a person with ten heads. That is all what Ravana was. That is purely poetry. But there was a person named Ravana who had that nature. Thus, there is a lot of poetry, and there is a skeletal fact also. Because there are some basic facts

that are historical, it is called itihasa. If it is purely imagination then it is called purana. The Ramayana and Mahabharata are itihasa, historical, but there is a lot of imagination involved to make them poetic works. In these works you will find a lot of stories that you cannot believe, but they are not any different from Star Wars. You have to understand some of them because behind them there is a lot of meaning. They are composed in a language that is meant to make you think. Thus, we have the two supporting scriptures called itihisas and eighteen puranas. They are supporting scriptures to the Vedas, and illustrate and elaborate what the Vedas say. These scriptures form the basis of the Hindu religion.

Though the name Hindu was given by somebody from Persia, as we saw in the beginning, we accept it. We are stuck with a name that is a product of the language limitations of somebody. But then, the Sanskrit language is such a thing that even in this we can find a meaning. The word him (which becomes hin when followed by d according to grammar rules) in Hindu means falsehood, and du is one who condemns. Thus, a Hindu is one who condemns falsehood. Expressed positively, the one who pursues truth is called a Hindu. It is a good word; it is in keeping with what we are talking about. Therefore, for a Hindu truth is important. It is a fact, a truth, that is most important in our religion. What is truth, what is the truth of everything, what is the truth of life? Anyone who condemns untruth, one who wants to discover the truth is a Hindu. It is view and a way of life.