

SERMON – 10/04/09

CHRISTIANITY & WORLD RELIGIONS – Hinduism

My family and I moved to Hawaii at the start of my sophomore year of high school.

- I still vividly remember the day, early on in that first year of school on the Big Island... sitting in one of my classes... when I found out a shocking piece of information...
 - I was sitting next to my newfound friend, Devin...
 - We were basketball buddies, and hung out together in between classes...
- I don't remember how it came up... but over the course of our conversation, I discovered that Devin was... get ready... A BUDDHIST!
 - Now, for those of you who've grown up in the islands, this is no big deal...
 - But to a kid from Arizona... whose idea of "religious diversity" was knowing a few Hispanic Catholics... THIS WAS MAJOR!
 - I couldn't believe it. A real Buddhist?
 - For some reason, I thought they were only in stories!
 - Seriously, I never ever thought I'd actually meet one face-to-face...
 - And on top of things, HE WAS A NICE GUY...
 - Not the "idol-worshipping heathen" I guess I had in the back of my mind for any non-Christian...
- Friends, we live in a very diverse world... a world that is shrinking every day...
 - And even if we didn't live in Hawaii – a place where religious diversity abounds – we would undoubtedly still come in contact with people who believed differently from us...
 - For there are a number of major world religions whose followers earnestly pursue God...

- And that is why we're starting this new sermon series called, "CHRISTIANITY & WORLD RELIGIONS."
- Over the course of the next two months... we'll be examining a number of different faith communities...
 - NOT because we want to show everyone why "we're right and they're wrong" ... but because we want to better understand where others are coming from...
 - Hopefully it will also help dispel some possible incorrect assumptions & rumors we may have about the various faiths...
 - Some people have commented on how risky or brave it is to do a study like this... but I believe that if Christianity holds truth about God, then it can withstand a serious study of other religions...
- There are approximately 6 billion people in the world today...
 - Of these, 2 billion (or 1/3) are Christian...
 - 1.3 billion (or 1/5) are Muslim...
 - 900 million (or 1/7) are Hindu...
 - 360 million (or 5%) are Buddhist...
 - 14 million follow Judaism (0.2%)...
 - The total of these 5 religions total over 2/3 of the world's population!
 - Add to these 5 the Mormon Church (which is very prominent in Hawaii) as well as Hawaiian Spirituality, and that's where we'll be journeying together these next 2 months!
- And it may go without saying... but I'll say it anyway... by no means will I be able to give you a comprehensive, all-inclusive summary of each faith tradition...
 - This series will be simply a quick overview...
 - Helping us begin to understand where others are coming from.

Our first stop is HINDUISM...

- Of all the world's religions, according to Bruce J. Nichols in the book *The World's Religions*, Hinduism is the most difficult to define.
 - It grew gradually over a period of nearly 5,000 years, absorbing & assimilating all the religious & cultural movements of India...
 - It has many scriptures which are authoritative, but none that is exclusively so...
 - K.M. Sen once said, "Hinduism is more like a tree that has grown gradually, than like a building that has been erected by some great architect at some definite point in time."
- I was surprised to find in my research, that Hindus believe in an all-embracing, all-pervading, omnipresent **One True God**...
 - But they also believe that this one true God manifests God's self in hundreds, perhaps millions, of ways...
 - Each of these ways is sometimes considered a goddess or god... and each is intended to provide an insight into the one true God.
 - These various images of God help the Hindus focus their devotion... and they represent nothing more than imaginative pictures of the infinite aspects of the one all-pervading God.
 - The "Hindu Trinity," as they are referred to... are the gods: Shiva (The Great Lord), Brahma (The Creator), and Vishnu (The Protector)...
 - There are numerous Hindu gods and goddesses... each helping followers connect in some way to the One True God.
 - The god Krishna, in the *Bhagavad-Gita* declares: "However men approach me, even so do I accept them; for on all sides, whatever path they may choose is mine."
- I had the chance to speak with Dr. Ramanath Charma, a Sanskrit professor at UH Manoa, this week...
 - Dr. Charma impressed upon me that at its core, Hinduism is not a **religion**, like we're used to the term...
 - It's not a set of beliefs that one must adhere to...

- Instead, he describes it as a value system (“*dharma*”) that sustains you... that holds your life together... and keeps you from falling apart.
- Some of the key components of the Hindu value system that he mentioned were:
 - TRUTH... (which can be found everywhere!)
 - NON-HARM... (more than simply non-violence... it encompasses one’s thoughts, words & actions...)
 - And RESPECT & COMPASSION for all things... (from humans to animals to nature... all things!)

With that in mind... allow me to share some of the other components of Hindu theology that I discovered in my research this week...

- (Note: I’m especially grateful for UMC Pastor Adam Hamilton’s book, *Christianity & World Religions*)
- The **Human Soul**, in Hinduism... is part of God... “a piece of God inside you,” known as the *Atman Brahman*...
 - Huston Smith, in his seminal work, *The World’s Religions*, writes...
 - “All of us dwell on the brink of the infinite ocean of life’s creative power. We carry it within us: supreme strength, the fullness of wisdom, unquenchable joy. It is never thwarted and cannot be destroyed. But it is hidden deep, which is what makes life a problem...”
 - So life is about (re)discovering that piece of God inside!
- Because the soul is part of God... **the soul is sinless**, according to Hinduism...
 - For the Hindu, it’s a lack of knowledge or understanding of the One True God that causes persons to do that which is not right.
 - It has been said, in Hinduism, that “it’s a sin to call a man a sinner.”
- So “**salvation**” (as we would call it) comes about through right knowledge, deeds, & actions...

- This is what Dr. Charma referred to as ***dharm***, or the ‘value system’...
- In Hindu belief, the accumulation of good works or bad works means the accumulation of good or bad ***karma***...
 - The Hindu’s goal is to end life with more “good karma” than “bad karma”...
 - Salvation requires eliminating ALL bad karma... and possessing only good karma!
- Because accumulating good karma & eliminating bad karma is so difficult... Hindus believe in **reincarnation** (*‘samsara’*)...
 - This is the idea that only the body dies, but one’s soul lives on...
 - So after physical death, the soul returns to life again and again...
 - Hopefully to gain a higher degree of spirituality (good karma) at each return to life...
- Modern experts of the law of karma seek to emphasize both the element of freedom... and of predetermination... in human action.
 - D.S. Sarma compares the SOUL... to a farmer to whom a plot of land has been given...
 - It’s size, the nature of its soil & weather conditions... are predetermined..
 - But the farmer is at liberty either to till the ground and raise crops... or to neglect it and allow it to run to waste...
- The aim of all Hindus is to escape from the wheel of *samsara*... and from karma itself... and to reach **nirvana**.
 - When the soul has eliminated all bad karma, it reaches nirvana...
 - And is reunited with the One True God... in ultimate reality & truth.

One of the aspects of this new series that I’m most excited about, is that each week I’m going to visit with a spiritual leader of each of these great faith traditions...

- When I originally started researching Hinduism, I checked on the internet... and found that there were two main Hindu communities on Oahu...

- One meets just off of the Pali Highway... and is officially called the “Hare Rama Hare Krishna Temple” ...
- They have worship (or ‘*pooja*’) seven days a week...
- The other group meets in Wahiawa... at their “Shiva Temple” ... on the 3rd Sunday of every month for pooja...
- Dr. Charma is involved in the latter group... and so I asked him to tell me about their faith community in Wahiawa...
 - They gather at a place known as “The Healing Stone” ...
 - The Healing Stone is located right next to Wahiawa UMC... and I was quite surprised to find out that it was a native Hawaiian holy place!
 - The 3 stones had been a sacred part of the Hawaiian community for quite some time... and then was moved to this present location in Wahiawa in 1947...
 - But it wasn’t until 1996 that the Hindu community found this place...
- Because Hinduism is an eclectic & syncretistic faith... it’s not really surprising to find them worshipping at this Hawaiian sacred place...
 - Hinduism selects elements from a variety of religious beliefs & customs... and absorbs & adapts them...
 - It looks for the fundamental truths behind all manifestations...
- Dr. Charma said that 15 or 16 years ago, a small group of Hindus came upon the Healing Stone... and had a spiritual experience there!
 - They associated the 3 stone shapes with 3 Hindu gods...
 - Shiva (The Great Lord)... is the highest stone on the right...
 - Ganesha (Lord remover/preventer of obstacles)... is the shorter one in the middle...
 - And Mundi (bull, on whom Ganesha rides)... is represented by the stone on the far left...
- It may be difficult for us to identify stones with gods... but Dr. Charma told me that the shape of Shiva is identical to what is called a **Shiva Lingum**...

- This oval/egg shape... when found in nature... is considered to be extremely holy in the eyes of a Hindu!
 - There are actually 12 holy places like this in India...
- So meanwhile... those first few Hindus who found the Healing Stones, started worshipping there on a regular basis...
 - And soon others joined them... 70-80 at within a few years!
 - Over time, Dr. Charma's wife started coming... so he'd drive her out to Wahiawa... then sit outside until she was finished...
 - While there, he'd sing & chant along with them... but always from a distance...
 - Priests from Kauai would fly over to lead worship...
 - Until one day... they didn't show up.
 - The community looked to Dr. Charma for advice on what to do...
 - He drove back into Honolulu... got his prayer book... and went back to Wahiawa to lead *poojah*...
 - And that continued for about 12 years!
 - Dr. Charma said that the first day he led worship... when he touched the Healing Stone... it was as if thousands of volts rushed through his body... and he felt so happy & tranquil!
- He no longer leads them in worship... but does still get out to Wahiawa from time to time...
 - For you see in Hinduism... there are no set worship schedules, like we have in Christianity...
 - Each individual connects with the One True God on their own time & in their own way...

While Hinduism shares some beliefs in common with Christianity... some of the most basic beliefs of Hinduism are inconsistent with some of the most basic beliefs of our faith...

- For example... Christians believe that our souls are created in the image of God... but are actually separate from God...
- That we struggle with sin... and we need a Savior, Jesus Christ, to save us from our sin...
- That it's through God's gift to us of grace... and not our good works, that salvation is available to us...
- That we have only one earthly life to live... prior to our meeting God face to face...
- And that it's actually possible for ALL of us to have a personal relationship with God...
 - In Hinduism, only those who have been through many reincarnations... and have eliminated almost all bad karma have a personal relationship with the One True God...
 - For others, they can relate to God... but not identify him/herself with God...

Before I left UH, I asked Dr. Charma if he had something he'd like to share with our congregation...

- He thought for a moment, and then mentioned two Hindu prayers...
 - The **first** is rather cryptic...
 - It says: "That is full (pointing up to God), this is full (pointing in to yourself)... if you extract full from full, what remains is full."
 - The **second** is more straight-forward...
 - "May whatever has been created be happy. May all be without any affliction. Let them all see only good. Let not any one share any misery."
- I'd like to close our time together, by listening to Dr. Charma sing these prayers for us... in the Sanskrit language of Hinduism...

Thanks be to God for our Hindu brothers and sisters... AMEN.