

Frequently Asked Questions -- Atlanta Hare Krishna

How does Vaishnavism compare to Christianity?

Externally, Vaishnavism and Christianity appear to be very different, but a closer look will reveal many similarities. One similarity between the two traditions is that both accept a personal God. Another similarity is the concept of love of God. Lord Jesus Christ said that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord with all your heart, mind, and soul. This is the essence of the Vaishnava philosophy. The beauty of the Vaishnava tradition is that it contains detailed information about God, to help us develop our love for Him. Another similarity is the emphasis both traditions place on tolerance and humility. Vaishnava etiquette stresses that one should be more humble than a blade of grass and more tolerant than a tree. A similar stress in humility and tolerance can be found in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Another similarity is that both traditions believe we have to approach God through His representative, although Christians believe that Jesus is the only representative. The concept in Vaishnavism is also that the guru is one, but appears in many forms in order to attract the hearts of different souls. There is also the concept in Vaishnavism that at the time an authorized acharya accepts a disciple he also accepts the karma of that disciple so that they can begin their spiritual life with a clean slate. This is similar to the idea in Christianity that Jesus will remove the sins of people when they accept him as their Lord and savior. A similarity between Christianity and ISKCON is that both are focused on spreading their message for the sake of other souls. One obvious difference between Christianity and Vaishnavism is the fact the Christianity has a specific date of origin, while Vaishnavism claims to be eternal. Another difference between these traditions is the concept of reincarnation and the idea that animals have souls, which is found in Vaishnavism but not in Christianity, although some scholars claim that the teachings of reincarnation were originally part of the Christian tradition too. Another difference is that Christianity is an exclusive tradition, while Vaishnavism is both inclusive and non-sectarian. This is evident from the fact that Vaishnavas accept Lord Jesus Christ as a representative of God.

What practices do we follow?

One of the practices of Vaishnavism, as mentioned previously, is the chanting of the names of God. Vaishnavas chant the name of God both individually on meditation beads and congregationally, accompanied by musical instruments. It is considered that by chanting God's name one directly associates with Him and will become purified and lose the taste for material enjoyment. The mantra which is chanted by Vaishnavas in general and ISKCON devotees in specific is the Hare Krishna maha mantra: Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare. The initiated devotees of ISKCON chant these names 16 times around a string of 108 beads. This takes devotees about 2 hours and is usually performed in the early hours of the morning. Congregational chanting is performed in the association of other devotees. Aside from chanting the names of God, serious devotees also follow four regulative principles: no meat-eating, no illicit sex, no intoxication, and no gambling. It is believed by Vaishnavas that these activities must be regulated because they perpetuate our material condition. Other practices include distributing Vedic literature, which is written by acharyas, or self-realized souls who teach by example. Distributing Vedic literature is considered to be the supreme welfare work because it can help the souls of the people who receive it. Another practice of Vaishnavas is the worship of the authorized form of the Lord in the temple, which has been carved according to descriptions given in scripture and has been installed by an authorized acharya. Vaishnavas consider that Krishna will accept worship and reciprocate with the devotee through the authorized form of the Lord in the temple. Deity worship includes cooking food and offering it to the Deity, preparing clothes for and dressing the Deity, and performing arati, which is a worship ceremony involving the Deity. The concept of Deity worship is based on the idea that God is spiritual and although present everywhere, not visible to our material eyes, so out of His mercy, He appears in a form that we can recognize. This is described by Prabhupada in *The Science of Self Realization*, "You cannot see spirit, and God is the Supreme Spirit. Therefore, to show kindness to you, He appears out of His unbounded mercy in the form of a wooden or stone Deity so that you can see Him" (18).

What is a guru?

Another belief of Vaishnavism is the belief in the acceptance of a guru, who is considered to be Krishna's representative. The guru is often compared to a mediator between two quarreling lovers, the individual soul and God. Serving and surrendering to the will of an authorized spiritual master is a fundamental belief in Vaishnavism. The acceptance of a guru, however, should not be made blindly. One should carefully analyze the character of the guru and make sure it matches up with the descriptions of saintly people, which are available in scripture. As Vedic scholar and practitioner Satsvarupa dasa Goswami states, "The Vedas admonish the prospective disciple to acquaint himself with the qualifications of a bona fide guru" (*Readings in Vedic Literature* 8). An explanation of the character of the guru is given by sixteenth-century Vaishnava saint Rupa Goswami in his work *The Nectar of Instruction*, "Any sober person who can tolerate the urge to speak, the mind's demands, the reactions of anger, and the urges of the tongue, belly, and genitals is qualified to make disciples all over the world." According to Vaishnava philosophy, only by the mercy of the spiritual master, who is the confidential servant of the Lord can one attain Krishna. The idea is that if someone is chained up, they need someone who is free to unchain them.

Similarly, to become free from the material bondage, one needs the mercy of a self-realized soul, who is already free. Krishna Himself stresses the importance of accepting a spiritual master in the Bhagavad-Gita, “Just try to learn the truth by approaching a spiritual master. Inquire from him submissively and render service unto him. The self-realized souls can impart knowledge unto you because they have seen the truth.” Now that the beliefs of Vaishnavism have been discussed, we will look at some of the practices.

Who is God?

A common definition of God, according to Vaishnavas, is He who is full in six opulences. Krishna is the most beautiful, the wealthiest, the strongest, the most famous, the wisest, and the most renounced. Individual souls have differing portions of these qualities according to their karma, but only Krishna or God can be said to be full in all of these. The difference between the spirit soul and God is described, according to the philosophy of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, as being simultaneously one and different. The common analogy used to understand this relationship is the relationship between a drop of water from the ocean and the ocean itself. Qualitatively, there is no difference between a drop of water from the ocean and the entire ocean, but quantitatively there is a huge difference. Similarly, the spirit souls are considered to be equal in quality to Krishna, but infinitesimal in quantity. According to this philosophy, we can understand God by making a thorough examination of ourselves. For example, we all have the desire to enjoy, therefore we can conclude that Krishna or God must have an infinite amount of desire to enjoy. In this way, Krishna is also considered to be the Supreme Enjoyer. Another belief of Vaishnavas is that God is absolute. In the relative world, there is a difference between the name and the named. But according to Vaishnava philosophy God is absolute and His name, form, qualities, and pastimes are non-different from Him. Thus, Vaishnavas believe that by chanting the name of God, they are directly associating with Him.

What is reincarnation?

According to Vaishnavas, Krishna never forces us to serve Him, because when there is force there is no love. When the soul refuses to serve God, it is placed into the material world and has to accept different material bodies according to both its desires and its karma, or activities. An analogy to describe this concept, as given by Bir Krishna Goswami in his book *You are not that Body*, is when someone goes to purchase a car. They have to consider not only what type of car they desire, but also how much money they have in the bank. So, according to Vaishnava philosophy, when the soul leaves the body it is forced by the laws of nature to accept another body, which will be determined by both the desire of the soul and the karma, either good or bad, which the soul has accumulated. This is why Vaishnavas consider it a bad thing to be full of material desires, because if those desires are still there at the time of death the soul will be forced to accept another material body in order to fulfill those desires. The ultimate desire to have, according to Vaishnavas, is the desire to serve the Supreme Lord. When a soul leaves the body with that desire, it will accept an eternal spiritual body fit to serve the Lord in the spiritual world.

What is the soul?

According to Vaishnavas the spirit soul is part and parcel of Krishna or God. Srila Prabhupada describes this in *The Science of Self Realization*, “We understand that not only human beings but all living entities are part and parcels of God. The parts are meant for serving the whole, just as the legs, hands, fingers, and ears are meant for serving the total body. We living entities, being parts and parcels of God, are duty-bound to serve Him” (1). Bhakti yoga, or performing our activities as a service to God, is a basic principle of Vaishnavism. One of the famous verses, which is often cited by Vaishnavas states that, “The supreme occupation [dharma] for all of humanity is that by which men can attain to loving devotional service unto the transcendent Lord. Such service must be unmotivated and uninterrupted to completely satisfy the self.” This verse is often translated to mean that real religion should consist of selflessly serving the Lord without expecting anything in return, even salvation or liberation. It is believed amongst Vaishnavas that approaching God with any desire other than to please Him, is business and not religion. Ironically, the only way the soul can be satisfied, according to the Vaishnava school of thought, is to serve God without expecting anything in return. This is because approaching God in this way is believed to please Him and when the complete whole is satisfied, the parts automatically become satisfied. This is the essence of Bhakti. In this sense, Vaishnavas don’t believe in approaching God for any material reason. The only goal of religion, according to Vaishnavas, should be to develop love for God. Religion that doesn’t have this goal in mind is considered to be a cheating religion because it will not satisfy the soul, which is the purpose of religion. So, according to Vaishnavas the constitutional position of the soul is to selflessly serve God, and this is referred to as Bhakti.

What is the scriptural basis of Vaishnavism?

The scriptural basis of Vaishnavism or Krishna consciousness can be found in the essence of Vedic literature, the Bhagavad-Gita. According to the Hindu-Vaishnava tradition, the Bhagavad-Gita was spoken 5000 years ago on a battlefield by Krishna, who is considered by Vaishnavas to be God Himself. The first teaching Krishna gives in the Bhagavad-Gita is that we are not the body but are eternal spirit souls. The idea that we are not the body, but the soul within the body is a fundamental belief of Vaishnavism. As Prabhupada often states in his writings, it is impossible to attain spiritual realization until we realize our existence as separate from the body. The concept of a soul in Vaishnavism is not limited to human beings. It is stated in the Vedic literature that consciousness is a symptom of the soul. Prabhupada describes this in his commentary on the Bhagavad-Gita. "This current of the spirit soul is felt all over the body as consciousness, and that is the proof of the presence of the soul" (97). Consciousness, as understood by Vaishnavas, can never be produced by matter and anytime we perceive consciousness within matter we have to conclude that there is a soul present. Under this definition it is understood that animals also have souls. The body is compared to a covering over the light of the soul. The less evolved the body, the thicker the covering over the light of the soul, and thus the consciousness comes out differently based on the body. Once the soul attains the human form, there is the necessary intelligence required to understand God and reawaken our relationship with Him. The bodily dress is described by Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita as being composed of both gross material elements and subtle material elements. The gross material elements are earth, water, fire, air, and ether. The subtle material elements are mind, intelligence, and false ego. According to Vaishnavas, the false ego constitutes the basic principle of material existence. An example of false ego is when people say things like, "I am American", "I am Indian", "I am a man", or "I am a woman." According to Vaishnava philosophy, religious designations also fall under the false ego. So statements such as "I am a Christian", or "I am a Muslim", or "I am a Hindu", or "I am an atheist" are also referring to the false ego, which is an element of the material body, rather than the spirit soul. According to Vaishnavas, the soul is neither Christian nor Muslim nor Hindu. This philosophy is what makes Vaishnavism a non-sectarian religious group. It is understood among Vaishnavas that one can be a Christian or Muslim and still be a Vaishnava, because the spirit soul is more subtle than the false ego.

What is the history of Vaishnavism?

The very term Sanatana Dharma implies that the tradition of Hinduism considers itself to be eternal and therefore does not have a starting point in history. The Vedic texts agree with this, insisting that before they were written down, they were transmitted orally. In the presence of the information age, it is difficult to imagine a time when knowledge did not need to be stored anywhere except in our memory but according to the Vedic tradition, in previous times people lived longer and had excellent memories. There was no need to convert the texts into a written form until the present age, in which both our memories and lifespan have decreased. As far as this country is concerned, Hinduism appeared more than a century ago when, as mentioned previously, Swami Vivekananda attended a religious conference in Chicago and presented an impersonal form of Hinduism. Vaishnavism, being a branch of Hinduism, is also considered by its followers to be eternal and thus does not have a beginning. The history of Vaishnavism outside of India was first predicted 500 years ago by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, who is considered among Vaishnavas to be an incarnation of Krishna. He predicted that in every town and village of the world, the names of Krishna would be chanted. This prediction was repeated early in this century by the Vaishnava saint Bhaktivinode Thakur who proclaimed that a time was coming soon when "Russians, Europeans, Americans, and all others will together sing the names of Hari (Krishna)." This prediction began to materialize when Bhaktivinode's son, Srila Bhaktisiddanta Sarasvati Thakur, ordered his disciple Srila A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada to preach Vaishnavism in the Western countries. In 1965, at the age of sixty-nine, Srila Prabhupada set sail from Calcutta, India for America on a cargo ship. At the age of 70, he arrived in America with only forty rupees and an intense desire to carry out the orders of his guru. He soon began to attract interested disciples and in 1966 he founded ISKCON in New York City. In the decade that followed, he established 108 temples in major cities throughout the world and engaged thousands of disciples of all races and ages into the chanting of Krishna's holy name, thus fulfilling the predictions of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and Bhaktivinode Thakur (The Hidden Glory of India).

What is Vaishnavism?

Vaishnavism is the tradition within Hinduism that accepts Vishnu or Krishna as God. According to the 1996 Britannica Book of the Year, Vaishnavas make up 70% of the 800 million Hindus. According to Vaishnavism, the Sanatana Dharma, or eternal occupation of all living entities is to serve the Supreme Lord. It is ironic that although Vaishnavas, who believe in one God, make up the majority of the Hindu population, most outsiders consider Hinduism to be a religion that encourages the worship of many gods. This misconception can be credited to Swami Vivekananda, who presented this view of Hinduism embracing the worship of a multitude of gods at a religious conference in Chicago over a century ago. According to Steven J. Rosen in his book The Hidden Glory of India, "had a Vaishnava been invited to that consequential gathering of religious representatives, we in the West might now have a very different perspective of Hinduism" (7). Vaishnavas believe that God is ultimately personal and that the ultimate goal is to return to our

eternal position as a servant to the Supreme Lord.

What are the Vedas?

According to Yale graduate and religious practitioner Devamrita Swami in his book *Searching for Vedic India*, “The Sanskrit root vid means ‘to know.’ Hence veda means knowledge. The term Vedic refers to the literature and teachings of the Vedas” (24). Some scholars say that only the original four Vedas are genuine Vedic literatures, but according to Vedic scholar and practitioner Satsvarupa dasa Goswami in his book *Readings in Vedic Literature*, “the Vedas themselves do not support this view, nor do the most prominent Vedic teachers, including Sankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva” (1). The standard given by most Vedic guides is that Vedic literature consists not only of the four Vedas, but also of the Vedic histories, the metaphysical textbooks, and the cosmological texts. In addition to these texts, Vedic tradition also accepts any authoritative works that present the essence of the Vedas according to time, place, and circumstance. The closest thing to the Bible in Hinduism is the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which is one chapter in the world’s largest epic, the *Mahabharata*. According to the India’s most renowned Vedic authority, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in the introduction to his *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is*, the *Bhagavad-Gita* is the “essence of Vedic knowledge” (3). The *Bhagavad-Gita* is the closest thing in Hinduism to the Bible and is accepted by authorities as the essence of all Vedic knowledge. It is worth noting that although all the followers of Hinduism accept the authority of the Vedas, their interpretations may vary according to the school of thought they represent.

What is Hinduism?

“Hinduism” is the term used to categorize many different spiritual traditions originating in South Asia, such as Shaivism, Jainism, Shaktism, and Vaishnavism. Combined, these traditions make up the third largest world religion today. Although it may be convenient for us to categorize all of these traditions under one label, it is ultimately inaccurate. As religious scholar Steven J. Rosen notes in his recent work *The Hidden Glory of India*, “using the overarching term ‘Hinduism’ for the many religions of India is comparable to ignoring the different religious orientations within each of the Western traditions” (11). Due to the fact that Hinduism is an external designation and does not appear in the Vedic literature, it is necessary to reference a term from within the tradition that is commonly used to describe it. That term is *Sanatana Dharma*, which can be defined as the eternal occupation of a living entity.

What do we believe?

What is Hinduism? What are the Vedas? What is the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), commonly known as the Hare Krishna movement and how does it relate to Hinduism? What are some differences and similarities between the Hare Krishna movement and the most popular religion of the world, Christianity? This page will attempt to provide answers to these questions.