

Counting Sheep John 10:7-16

Our journey through world religious traditions continues today with Hinduism, which is one of the world's oldest religions. Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a book called *Holy Envy*, in which she shares her journey teaching Religion 101 in a small liberal arts school in Georgia. With her class and a Hindu professor, they travelled to the closest Hindu Temple. Expressing frustration trying to learn the names of the gods and goddesses, a Hindu swami responded with this, "You are thinking of Hinduism as a singular shop, but it is much more like a mall, with shops of every kind under its roof. Some shops are large and popular. Others are small and specialized, yet everyone inside them identifies as Hindu. (28)"

Taylor described how her own senses were on overload, as the smells of incense and food offerings wafted through the air, and candlelight flickered all around. There were songs sung, chants raised, with small groups at different statues honoring different deities in alcoves all around. The priests welcomed the students who were wide eyed and uncertain. The priest blessed this group of anxious students, through ritual actions and words. They were invited to eat almonds that had been offerings to one of the deities, and while many refused Taylor accepted, recalling Paul's words in the New Testament about being able to receive the foods offered to other gods, as long as it didn't cause another to stumble.

As their van pulled away, the images, the smells, gods that with many arms and animal bodies would remain with them, but so too would the gracious acceptance, welcoming with blessing, extended gifts without asking for anything in return – not a statement of belief or understanding, not a financial gift, not even demonstrated respect for this ancient religion.

When I was working in Washington, DC, I got to go along with my boss to a Hindu temple, as they were strong supporters of our work for religious freedom. We went to a prayer service, much of which I didn't understand, though I did my best to stand, sit, and listen. The representations of the deities was strange to my senses, as were the smells of incense and spices. But there was worship, reverence for God, who in the Hindu tradition is Brahman.

Hindus believe in one true God, but that that most High God has appeared to humanity in different forms so they would listen. The statues of deities are not separate gods, but are more like different ways of accessing and relating to Brahman. It seems strange until we realize that the Christian tradition also understands having related to God through different being – the person of Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, which has appeared as tongues of fire or burning bushes, sometimes in quite voices, sometimes as a dove.

The Hindu religion teaches that "God is above all and yet in all. God is unknowable, beyond personality, holding all wisdom. All life emanates from God, and our souls are actually a part of God." Hindus have a strong emphasis on caring for creation, as each creature is connected to God. Hindus practice meditation and striving to listen to God through the third eye. You'll see some Hindus wearing a red dot on their foreheads as a visible third eye to see God. Some

traditions only have married women wearing the bindi, and others have children and all ages wearing it. Hindus strive to exhibit behaviors that are in accord with the universe, or dharma. This Sanskrit word has different meanings in Buddhism and Jainism and Sikhism. Dharma appears in some of the oldest collections of Hindu hymns and verses, with a variety of meanings from order and duty to law and order. Hindus seek to exhibit good dharma, which would revisit a person through karma.

Another key teaching in Hinduism is that of reincarnation, which is related to the care for all of creation. As an individual fulfills their dharma, and cultivates good karma, they are reincarnated as a more evolved being. The goal is to reach a state of being one with God and experiencing nirvana.

Christian teaching differs from Hinduism on several things, but we share some common principles. We, too, understand all of creation to be connected to God. We believe each human being is holy, bearing the image of God. We believe that God instills different gifts and talents in each of us to share with the world through our time, vocations, careers, and volunteer efforts. We strive to treat others with kindness and respect. We bring our offerings to God, which often take the form of financial gifts - though gifts also take the form of food, coffee, clothing, canned goods, and backpacks. These gifts, like in the Hindu tradition, are received, blessed, and sent to bless those who need them.

We diverge on a few key messages too. God's grace allows us to receive forgiveness and mercy without having to fear karma. We don't see bad things as happening as the universe getting payback. The cycle of reincarnation where a soul is reincarnated through the created order until finally reaching nirvana is not our belief; however, we do believe that God works on us, so that while we may reside in the same physical body, God helps to transform our hearts, awaken us to new understanding, and help us to be more holy throughout our lives. The Christian word for that is sanctification, where we become more holy through our living, with a similar goal of Nirvana, that of unification with God. While Hindus believe in One God, there are as many as 330 million gods and goddesses. There are statues and idols to bring in the home or worship in the Temple. We may have crosses that we carry or wear, have nativity sets or even icons of saints, but we don't tend to dress them up or honor them in the way the Hindus do.

I agree with the Hindu teaching that we still have much to learn and that God is a mystery. I think for many of us, not knowing is an uncomfortable place to be. We like to have answers, neat and tidy ones. Having rational, relatable images of God is comforting. Having a figure that challenges us to see past what we project as meaning to hear even more is difficult. We could learn about seeing with our third eye, allowing God to teach us about many ways God is engaging with the world. We could learn about caring for creation as if it were a part of our family and a part of God's physical presence. We could learn about meditation and listening for God's rhythm in our lives, seeking physical, mental and emotional health. We could learn about caring for others first without judging whether someone is worthy of our efforts. These are lessons taught by our Hindu friends.

Not long ago, in Olathe, Kansas a man entered a bar to find two Hindu men sitting at the bar, speaking quietly. He left and came back with a gun, killing the two men and another patron. Hindu men and women are often from India or Pakistan, but not always. Racial and religious profiling have resulted in our friends being refused service, cajoled, threatened, and killed. This

religious tradition, which espouses nonviolence and embodies hospitality, one of the oldest in the world, has much to teach us, and we have much to learn.

Barbara Brown Taylor reflected at the end of her experience in a Hindu Temple, “The most troubling question of all was why my religion seemed so much less gracious than Dr. Acharya’s religion did. She seemed to be an exemplar of it, and her hospitality was impeccable. She welcomed all of us to join her at the high altar in her temple without asking what we believed. She enlisted the priest to offer special prayers for us. She did not distance herself from those who snickered. She opened her arms to us from the beginning to the end. If there was any problem with the visit, they came from the religious worldview of her guests, who had been taught to be very careful about who and what they embraced.(44)”. It would seem we have made ourselves the gatekeepers.

Jesus was a carpenter. He was a fisherman. We do not really think he was a shepherd, but he knew a thing or two about sheep, after all shepherds came to his baby shower, and shepherds on the hillsides would have almost certainly congregated as Jesus was preaching and teaching.

In the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus telling his followers that he is the gatekeeper and the gate. It’s not up to us to decide who is in or out of the gate. Jesus wants the sheep to have life, and have it abundantly...maybe not through reincarnation, but rather resurrection. Jesus promises to not be afraid of the wolves or the bandits, or different images of God. Jesus knows his own. One flock, one shepherd, One day. In the meantime, may we experience the mystery, learn from shared wisdom, and be kind to our fellow sheep. Amen.