

# Who is Krishna and Why Should We Care?

Clay Nelson © 6 September 2015

When John Shelby Spong was my bishop, he visited Japan. When he returned he met with clergy in his diocese to discuss what he learned about Shintoism and Taoism. I remember him saying that the best way to understand one's own beliefs is to look at them through the lens of someone else's.

Yesterday, many Hindus around the world celebrated one of their major feasts, Janmashtami, sometimes referred to as the Birth of Krishna. I know this because I spent some time watching them do so through the lenses of webcams in temples dedicated to the god Krishna throughout India, Canada, Italy, the US, Fiji, and Slovenia. What I saw was hard for me to understand. My western lens had trouble comprehending what I was seeing. On one camera I watched an older man, dressed in white pants and shirt come in, get to his knees and then lay himself out prostrate on the marble floor before a statue of Krishna. While he lay there a toddler wandered around, and a woman in a sari was talking animatedly to someone on her cell phone. After a while he got back to his knees, touched his forehead to the ground. He may have said a prayer (there was no sound). He then got up and departed.

There was little I could relate to in the scene to make sense of it. So before looking more closely at this particular festival dedicated to Krishna, I reviewed what I understand Hinduism to be.

There are several challenges for a westerner trying to understand Hinduism. The biggest is trying to understand three not-so-simple words: Hindu, Religion and India.

Hindu is not a word Hindus have historically applied to themselves. The Persians in the 12<sup>th</sup> century called people who lived in the Indus River Valley Hindus. Nor do Hindus practice Hinduism. That is a western idea. They see themselves as devotees of a god or goddess such as Krishna, Shiva, Vishnu or Durga or members of a religious community dedicated to a god or goddess. If you go to India about 80% of the population is a devotee of at least one deva or god. They have 330 million of them to choose from. That's right: 330 MILLION. They indicate to whom they are dedicated by coloured clay or powder markings they put on their foreheads as part of their morning ritual, which they begin by greeting their god when they first wake up and then greeting the rest of their household gods. If anything, Hinduism is a family of religions. However, there are scholars who argue that there is no such thing as Hinduism in a religious sense, for discerning an essence of what we call Hinduism is impossible.

Hindus don't have a word for religion, which is a Western construct. The closest they have is dharma, which is about rules for living. Of course, religion, being a relatively new word from the Latin *ligare* meaning to bind or connect like a ligament does, does not have a comparable word in Greek and Hebrew, so it is not in the Bible either. Westerners call Hinduism a religion because it seems to have features we associate with our less than precise understanding of what religion means. Whatever else we mean by the word, we associate religion with festivals, prayers and meditation, gods and goddesses, places of worship, sacrifices, music, art, and dance, which are all found in abundance in India.

If we think of religion as a department of life or human culture practised in churches, temples, synagogues and institutions on a particular day of the week that does not apply to Hinduism. For a Hindu, their devotion to their gods is not a part of life practised at a particular time, in a particular place. It pervades all of life, in all places, all of the time.

Nor is Hinduism concerned about belief or doctrine like in the West. They believe different and contradictory things and the importance they place on them varies widely.

Westerners interpret Hinduism by western ways of understanding. These are different from Hindu ways of knowing. We use different kinds of logic. For example if I were teaching a course on Hinduism, I would probably organise the class chronologically. That would not even occur to a Hindu who thinks about time differently. If a Brahmin priest were teaching us about Hinduism, he might focus on the Veda, the world's oldest scriptures, which he would know perfectly from memory. If a devotee of Krishna were to teach it, he might focus on the importance of faith in God. If a Sannyasi, a religious ascetic who has renounced the world seeking to realise unity with ultimate reality, were to teach it, he would begin by saying there is nothing to say.

The world's oldest religion has no founder. There is no Moses, Mohammad, Jesus, Confucius or Buddha in its history. Ultimately Hinduism is more than a person, ideas and concepts. It needs to be tasted, smelled, touched, seen, and heard. It also needs to be understood in its context -- India. 90% of all the world's Hindus live in India. Unlike the Abrahamic faiths, Hindus don't proselytise, so Hinduism has not spread throughout the world, except by migration.

India is an idea. Churchill called it an abstraction. It was given its name by outsiders. Hindus call their land Bharata. But giving it a name suggests greater cohesiveness than exist. The only thing Bharats have in common is their diversity. There is not just one of anything and there is at least one of everything. The economist John Kenneth Galbraith described it as functioning anarchy.

There are over 16 major languages and hundreds of dialects. There are 850 languages in daily use, and they do not always come from the same language roots.

While the vast number Bharats are Hindu, 10% are Muslim with whom there is considerable conflict. Then there are Sikhs who blend elements of both Hinduism and Islam. Buddhism, which originated there, makes up only 3% of the population. Christianity makes up 2% of the population. Tradition says the apostle Thomas brought Christianity there. Other traditions say Jesus studied there before beginning his public ministry and after his resurrection went back there with his mother and eventually died there. He has a tomb in Kashmir.

The balance of Bharats practice Jainism, Zoroastrianism and Judaism (There are two synagogues in Mumbai).

All of which goes to explain why Hinduism is the most pluralistic of all religions. There is no theological concept or practice that can't be found. If it once was part of Hinduism, it still is. Nothing is ever lost. Hindus deny the possibility of ever knowing completely the whole truth. There are many valid viewpoints. There is a saying that the truth is one but the sages have different names for it. Hindus honour all who seek the truth. They absorb ideas from different sources without giving up this characteristic.

One of those ideas developed between 800 to 200 BCE, a time known as the Axial Age, when new religious ideas were popping up around the world. Hinduism up to that time focused on the four Vedas brought to the Indus Valley 3000 years earlier by the Aryans from central Asia. The Vedas were concerned with Rita -- proper moral and ritual order. Rita is the Sanskrit root of both r-i-t-e and r-i-g-h-t. Rituals found in the Vedas, which is much like a Book of Common Prayer with a hymnal, maintained Rita. They brought together nature, the gods and humanity. They organised humanity around specific roles, which gave ranking according to purity, not wealth: Priests and teachers, then warriors and administrators, followed by merchants and artisans, and finally, by servants. This would be the precursor of the caste system.

During the Axial Age the Upanishads were written. They questioned Vedic rituals and their portrayal of the structure of reality. In particular the Upanishads were interested in the essence of being human. Vedic tradition saw religion's function as cosmic maintenance like assuring the conditions necessary for bountiful crops occurred, but the Upanishads were interested in religion as an agent of personal transformation. The older understandings were not left behind but incorporated into this greater reality understood today as classical Hinduism.

During this age, the ideas of reincarnation and karma emerged. The Vedic idea was that breath was the soul and that it went to heaven. The Upanishads questioned whether being in heaven was eternal bliss. They came to believe that each soul wandered from life to life. It was a journey of suffering. The only way to achieve liberation from it was to become completely pure. During each lifetime, if one did their duty (called dharma), good karma would be collected and in the next rebirth the person would be born to a more pure caste. If they lived an evil life or failed to do their duty they collected bad karma and would be reborn into a lower caste. It was absolute justice. A person got what he or she deserved. Hindus do not believe "all men (and women) are created equal". For about 2000 years this social, religious and political system has remained very stable with few changes. Men, women, children, Brahmins, Untouchables all know their specific rules for living together. If they perform their duty the world will work perfectly and peacefully.

With this very basic understanding of Hinduism I return to Krishna and the celebration of Jamashtami. His devotees celebrate it by visiting their local temple, chanting rounds of the mantra Hare Krishna on prayer beads, reading about Krishna's past appearances, giving new clothes to the Krishna deity in their home and cooking him a multi-course feast and by fasting until the midnight worship ceremony in the temple.

Who was Krishna? As I related to the children this morning, he had a rather extraordinary birth. The background of the story is that when Mother Earth became

upset by the sin being committed on Earth, she sought help from Lord Vishnu. She went in the form of a cow to visit him and ask for help. He agreed to help her and promised that he would be born on Earth. On Earth a particularly evil prince named Kansa sent his father to prison in order to become king. One day a loud voice from the sky prophesied that the 8th son of Kansa's sister would kill him. Out of affection for his sister, Kansa did not kill her, but he did kill her first seven children. Vishnu himself later appeared to Kansa's sister and husband and told them that he himself would be their eighth son and kill Kansa and destroy sin in the world. In the story of Krishna the deity is both the agent of conception and the offspring.

As a child Krishna was a cowherd and more than a little mischievous, with a deep love of the butter he was constantly stealing. He is often portrayed as a boy with a bowl of it. Krishna appears numerous times in Vedic literature, often as himself and sometimes as an avatar. He comes to free his devotees from the cycle of death and rebirth and to destroy the wicked.

What his devotees hope to achieve by the celebration of Jamashtami is *Krishna consciousness*, an awareness of and affection for Krishna, the Supreme Deity above all other gods. It is the culmination of all forms of yoga, knowledge, meditation, and spirituality.

For them Krishna consciousness is the natural, original, and blissful condition of every individual. They believe that only when we're covered by maya, illusion, do we forget who we are and who the Supreme Person is. We want happiness, but without Krishna consciousness, we don't know who we are or what we're supposed to do. We try to enjoy life through the body and mind, with hit-or-miss results. And we fear death since we don't know what happens afterwards.

The practices of Krishna consciousness are meant to free us from the root cause of all anxiety by reawakening our normal, eternal spiritual happiness. The process is simple—meditation on the name, form, activities, and qualities of Krishna. Krishna is the Vedic name for the Supreme Person, the source of our existence and the source of all pleasure. The goal is to recover our natural sense of connectedness with that one supreme God by serving him with love.

As I look at my faith through the lens of Hinduism and Krishna, I am struck by how much mine has in common with Krishna's devotees. My sense of the divine is that it permeates and is all creation. Our task is to lose our sense of ego and find our oneness with that understanding of the divine. It is not something that just happens but is a life-long task requiring daily discipline. But seeking the goal is to lose sight of it. The future is achieved by being mindful in the moment. Being aware of our connection to one another and the world around us. We then become an incarnation of the divine, like Krishna.

How does viewing your beliefs or understanding of the seven principles through the Krishna lens give you deeper understanding?