

I was once asked to sign a petition against East Coast Radio which had featured a pastor who vilified the Hindu religion – probably on the usual grounds of polytheism and pagan rituals. (I hadn't heard the broadcast.) As I do not believe in reacting to criticism with protest action, I did not sign. I was certain that the pastor had spoken in ignorance and what he needed (and probably East Coast Radio too) was education

If the pastor was of Indian descent, he probably felt ashamed, probably feared that he could be connected to polytheism and pagan rituals and needed to distance himself from them. His was an understanding based on his observance of the ritual practices of Hindus. As a child, I too had repudiated the religion on the grounds that it did not make sense to me. As an adult, I embarked on my own study of Hindu philosophy.

This is what I learned. Hinduism recognises that we live in a karmic world, that is, a world in which nothing is as it appears so we do not have complete understanding of our circumstances. Consequently our actions are flawed and it becomes necessary that we strive constantly for understanding – the pursuit of enlightenment.

Hinduism attributes creation to an abstract life-giving principle. It does not posit an anthropomorphic conception of God. Nirguna Brahman, is an abstraction from which worldly existence emanated. It is formless. (Nir - no, Guna – form, attribute i.e. formless). It is the Absolute/Ultimate Reality. I think of it as a matrix, a life force.

Most human beings cannot relate to an abstraction. They have need of a God with whom they can identify and communicate, like a father or mother. So the abstract concept, is reformulated into Saguna Brahman (Sa – with, Guna – form, attributes) and takes on a variety of forms and attributes that are deified. Hence the countless “gods” whose names reflect various human needs: Shakthi, for instance, means strength and power; Shiva, with the third eye, represents omniscience – the power of knowledge. Ganesha, the elephant-headed god represents the power to remove obstacles. As human needs are countless, there are hundreds of representations of “God”.

In other religions, rough equivalences to these deities would be ancestors, saints, angels, etc. It is Saguna Brahman that gives rise to ideas of paganism and polytheism. But the religion is far more than its colourful rituals and its proliferation of deities – these are at the base level of the

religion.

Hinduism operates on different levels to cater to varying capacities to comprehend the meaning of existence. The following are levels that I have identified through my reading:Â

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1. Ritual and sacrifice
2. Devotion to a personal deity
3. Bhakthi worship, devotion to Krishna
4. Study of religious texts: the Vedas, the Â Â Â Â Bhagavad Gita, the writings of Hindu philosophers
5. Guidance from a Guru
6. Study of the Upanishads (Vedanta)
7. Yoga and meditation – the discipline of Â Â Â Â the mind that leads to the union of the athman with Brahman.

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