

The Hindu Trinity (*Trimurti*)

Hero Badlani

Abstract: *The article begins with an introduction to basic concepts of Hindu philosophy, especially in reference to true values of life. The homogeneity and essential unity of all religions in regard to these values is noted, as each different religion contributes to the present global interfaith movement. Next the author outlines the ancient search for God, where the supreme power above everything was visualized in different forms in different places. Then, focusing on India, the reader is led through the Aryan Vedic period, when the deities of nature became the gods in all worship, to the Creation Hymn of the Rig Veda, which subtly points to the formless, transcendental principle of pure consciousness, an understanding that has now become a key part of philosophical discussions on religion and God all over the world. And finally, because the common man then, as perhaps now, was not yet ready to understand the abstract God so easily, Hindu seers came forth with the idea of the Trinity of Gods, the Trimurti, each of which was given a human face.*

Before I describe the 'Hindu Trinity,' I wish to acquaint the readers, especially the non-Hindu readers, with the basic concepts of Hindu philosophy, which is anchored on *Dharma*—the true and righteous values of life. I also strongly believe that there is an essential unity and homogeneity of all the religions in regard to these values and spiritual teachings. However, even as all religions are similar, they are not same. There are differences and variations as there are between any two individuals, even if they are twins! The Supreme Lord has assigned each one a unique role to play according to situations and circumstances. At the Parliament of the World's Religions, held at Chicago in 1893, Swāmi Vivekānanda quoted a beautiful verse from an ancient Hindu scripture, Śivā Mahimna Stotra: "As different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their waters in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths, which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee." He concluded his address by summarizing the message of his

master, Sri Ramakrishna: "Criticize no one, for all doctrines and creeds have some good in them. Show by your lives that religion does not mean words, or names, or sects, but that it means spiritual realization."¹

There are two ideologies in the world today: the ideology of one religion or faith, and the ideology of multiple faiths. The believers in one religion feel strongly that their faith is the only one that leads to the spiritual evolution and salvation of man. They would not accept that other religions or faiths could also lead to the same end. The believers in multiple faiths have a more open-minded approach and feel that mankind may attain spiritual wisdom through many different paths. There are many gradations of attitude, however, in this second category. Some practice tolerant exclusiveness; they tolerate other beliefs but do not wish any more closeness. Others believe in interfaith dialogue. They maintain a good communication with other faiths. Yet there are those who go beyond that to practice interfaith enrichment: They have a mutual respect for and an interest in learning from other faiths. Inter-religious tolerance is not enough; inter-religious respect is needed. In modern times, the talk of one religion being superior to other religions is gradually fading. Most don't accept that one religion is right and another is wrong; they are simply different. As all races of the world are considered to be equal and free, so too are the various religions. The world at large is coming to terms with religious pluralism. It is important to realize and accept the fact that for any individual, his or her own faith is the best; there is simply no point for competition or confrontation among various religions.

God created man, and then man created religion. The first proto-human beings walked upright as long as six million years ago; that is, proto-man walked on his two hind limbs instead of on all fours, as his ancestors did. Religion, however, came into being less than ten thousand years ago. Hindu sages (*ṛṣi*) had an ingenious approach toward religion, or *dharma*, as they would call it. They conceived that when a thing or being is created, its *dharma* is imbedded in it. For example, the *dharma* of fire is to burn. Hindu sages then meditated

¹ Swami Srikantananda, *Human Excellence* (Hyderabad, India: Ramakrishna Math, 2001) 29.

long to discover the conceived *dharma* of the cosmos.

Evidence of this, however, probably the first caveman made his cave as early as one million years ago. The homespun attempt to follow much later, such ideas and a cave paintings. The very clear or full

Man's early form of viewing occurrences. His "Who brings the powers to an unconsidered the elements as gods such development each had their own as circumstance many thoughtful of wisdom to racial or ethnic development of new perceptions from one man thoughts started Thinking man cosmos of God sages, much like

² John Bowker, *Cambridge University*

long to discover the *dharma* of man, the *manav dharma*. They conceived *dharma* as the inherent duty in accordance with the laws of the cosmos.

Evidence of proto-religious activity in the form of rituals, however, probably dates back to a much earlier period. In fact, the caveman made his first attempt at healing and guiding others possibly as early as one hundred thousand years ago. These were, of course, homespun attempts toward the more developed features, which would follow much later. Before the written word came into existence, all such ideas and activities were passed on by word of mouth or through cave paintings. As such, the records of the prehistoric period are not very clear or fully authentic.²

Man's earliest encounter with religion would have been in the form of viewing natural phenomena as magical and mystical occurrences. His thinking brain might have posed questions such as, "Who brings the sun in the morning?" Man started to attribute superior powers to an unknown command, beyond his strength and energy. He considered the sun, the sky, the fire, the wind, and other natural elements as gods, the supreme authorities. In the earliest period of time, such developments in human society were tribal in origin. These tribes each had their own set of geographical and cultural conditions, as well as circumstances, to mold and challenge them. Man responded with many thoughtful reactions, and in the process, he built a treasure trove of wisdom to guide him. The tribal groups later merged into larger racial or ethnic divisions. It is also likely that, with the natural development of the structure and function of the human brain, these new perceptions came to man from within himself, rather than solely from one man to another. Around the same time, similar ideas and thoughts started sprouting in various and distant geographical regions. Thinking man gradually understood his humble place in the vast cosmos of God. The Godhood became established. Ancient Hindu sages, much like the saints of other faiths, linked the vast infinite

² John Bowker, *Cambridge Illustrated History of Religions* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 10.

creation of the universe with the Creator. As man was searching for God, the supreme power above everything, he visualized God in different forms in different places. Thus evolved the distinct religions; each with its own set of rules and regulations. In this diversity, however, there would also be a factor of unity. All religions professed faith. All religions (except Early Buddhism) accepted the invisible supreme power of God Almighty. All religions also advocated that man should live a life of virtue and morality, while abandoning vices and selfishness. In several religions there would be God incarnations, messiahs, or simply godly or divine persons, who would lead others on the path of spirituality and divinity. Religion and spirituality would teach man to give more than to take; to help and care for others; to love and nurture the beings and non-beings. These divine qualities would also usher in the progress and prosperity of human civilization. Without these special qualities, there would be no real progress; man would be like an animal.

God also created in man the fountain of inner joy, within his own self. Whenever man did a righteous or virtuous act, he would feel peace and bliss. In the long voyage of religious evolution, this fountain of joy would sustain and inspire him more than any material thing ever could do. Indeed, it would be the search for this bliss, or *ānanda*, as it is described in Hindu philosophy, that would keep people on this path in the face of the most severe obstacles. Religion is the root factor of ethics, connecting others with sympathy and compassion, as children of a divine family. It is the common experience of every man that he feels more happiness or sorrow mentally than physically. God endowed man not only with a physical body, mind, and intellect but also with a higher faculty, the spiritual soul. As man advanced in his evolution, he became gradually more mind-oriented than body-oriented. Later, he would reach for even higher peaks of growth. He would become more spiritual in nature. He would imbibe the spiritual or divine qualities. He would be a loving, nurturing, forgiving, and helping creature. He would do all these things, of which the lower creatures are not capable. He would eventually find the treasure of inner joy, irrespective of whatever the outward conditions of his body might be. He would be beyond the pain and sorrow of the physical and the mental worlds. He

would see God

Dalai Lama
able to gener
religion enhan
process create
religion becom
tradition.⁴

In the Ary
all worship an
were worship
established. In
Veda, the sing
This subtly p
pervading prin
of the ancient
which they p
become a key
all over the wo

However,
ready to under
with the idea
different faces
They were eac

The Trin
Brahma; the I
Śivā, who is
envisages one
of the morning
evening is the

³ Dalai Lama, *Th*

⁴ Swami Tathag
Society of New

would see God in all beings, and he would be blessed with eternal joy!

Dalai Lama said, "Relying on the dharma (religion), we will be able to generate happiness and eliminate suffering."³ Simply put, religion enhances the quality and merit in all our deeds, and in the process creates more success and joy in our lives. In human history, religion became the great unifying force of culture and the guardian of tradition.⁴

In the Aryan Vedic period, the deities of nature became the gods in all worship and rituals. Sun, moon, fire, wind, and other nature entities were worshipped. But soon the idea of one Supreme God became established. In the Creation Hymn, the *Nāsadiya Hymn* of the Rig Veda, the single primordial principle *tat* or "that" has been described. This subtly points to the abstract, formless, transcendental, and all pervading principle of pure consciousness. It is a tribute to the genius of the ancient Hindu sages that this concept of divine consciousness, which they presented more than five thousand years ago, has now become a key part of the philosophical discussions on religion and God all over the world.

However, the common man then, as perhaps now, was not yet ready to understand the abstract God so easily. Hindu seers came forth with the idea of the Trinity of Gods, the *Trimurti*. Three Gods, with different faces, were projected, and each was mythological in origin. They were each given a human face for easy acceptance.

The Trinity of Hindu Gods consists of the Lord of Creation, Brahma; the Lord of Preservation, Viṣṇu; and the Lord of Dissolution, Śivā, who is also called Mahesh. In Hindu philosophy, however, this envisages one continuous chain of events. For example, the destruction of the morning is the creation of the evening, and the destruction of the evening is the creation of the night, and so on. Even death in Hindu

³ Dalai Lama, *The Heart of Compassion* (Wisconsin: Lotus Press, 2002) 2.

⁴ Swami Tathagatananda, *Meditation on Swami Vivekananda*. (n.p.: The Vedanta Society of New York, 1994) 209.

thought is merely an interlude from one event to another. Destruction or death is the dissolution, which is again followed by creation. The three gods of the Hindu Trinity are more of a symbolic nature; behind these the one, transcendental, formless God is visualized and accepted. Even though the three Gods of the Hindu Trinity appear to be assigned different functions, there is no rigid division. Each manifestation in fact represents the Supreme one God in totality; the division is arbitrary and superficial. For the followers, each God of the Trinity is absolute and complete.

Lord Brahma, the Lord of Creation, is also called the Lord of Progeny (Prajāpati). He has four faces and four arms. The four faces represent the four Vedas. The four arms of Lord Brahma are symbolic of the four aspects of his inner personality: the mind (*mana*), the intellect (*buddhi*), the ego (*ahamkāra*), and the divine consciousness (*citta*). Lord Brahma uses the swan as his vehicle. The swan, or *hamsa*, as described in Hindu mythology, has the faculty to separate milk from water (symbolizing moral discernment). Brahma is also considered the source of all knowledge, and as such he is wedded to Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge and wisdom. All these attributes again point toward the symbolic nature of Gods in Hindu philosophy. The role of Lord Brahma, however, has remained limited in Hindu faith.

Lord Viṣṇu is the Lord of Preservation. Literally, Viṣṇu means "all-pervading." Thus, the symbolic significance of the Divine as formless and transcendent is emphasized. Lord Viṣṇu is also projected in many forms. He is portrayed as a dark-blue youth, upright in position. He, too, is a god with four arms, representing omnipresence and omnipotence. One hand holds the conch (*sankha*), signifying creation; the second hand holds the discus (*sudarśan chakra*) to signify the universal mind; the third hand carries the mace (*gada*) to signify life force; and the fourth hand carries the lotus (*padma*) to signify the universe. Lord Viṣṇu is also portrayed in the reclining posture on the coils of the cosmic serpent, the *śeṣa*. A lotus emerges from his navel, from which Lord Brahma appears. Lord Viṣṇu is believed to be the transcendental Lord, who watches the universe in his own calmness and would manifest in the world repeatedly to restore righteousness

(*dharma*) whenever

Lord Viṣṇu's prosperity. Lord originating from the pantheon is emblematic as taking ten incarnations of the world. The totality of the evolutionary

The first incarnation protected the sacred second incarnation when the gods and nectar of immortality boar, he killed the drowning in the ocean the half-lion/half-man the demon's own Nārāyaṇa. In the first gods, who were troubled as Lord Parshurāma incarnation of Parshurāma Brahmins and the incarnation as Lord in the epic of Ram killed the evil and Pāṇḍavas against ninth incarnation being, full of wisdom meditation and sorrow and evil he would be called and the righteous

⁵ Priya Hemenway.

⁶ Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hindu Philosophy*, 120.

(*dharma*) whenever called by his devotees.⁵

Lord Viṣṇu's consort is Lakṣmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. Lord Viṣṇu is also identified as Nārāyana, possibly originating from the pre-Vedic culture.⁶ Lord Viṣṇu in the Hindu pantheon is emblematic of complete evolution. He has been presented as taking ten incarnations. In each incarnation, he has acted as a savior of the world. The ten incarnations of Viṣṇu present an amazing account of the evolutionary phases in the Creation.

The first incarnation of Viṣṇu is in the form of *matsya*, a fish; he protected the sacred Vedas from being lost in the great deluge. In the second incarnation as Kurma, a tortoise, he held the universe in balance when the gods and demons began to churn the ocean to extract the nectar of immortality (*amṛta*). In the third incarnation as Varaha, the boar, he killed the demon Hiranyaksha and saved the Earth from drowning in the ocean. In the fourth incarnation, Lord Viṣṇu came as the half-lion/half-man Narasimha and destroyed Hiranyakasipu to save the demon's own son Prahlāda, who believed in the eternal god Nārāyana. In the fifth incarnation as the dwarf Vāmana, he helped the gods, who were treated unjustly by king Bali. In the sixth incarnation as Lord Parshurāma, he fought with the kings to save the Rishis. The incarnation of Parshurama indicates a caste war between the learned Brahmins and the warrior or *kṣatriya* communities. In the seventh incarnation as Lord Rama, he destroyed wicked Rāvana, as described in the epic of Ramayana. In the eighth incarnation as Lord Kriṣṇā, he killed the evil and atrocious Kamsā and also guided the truthful Pāndavas against unjust Kauravas in the battle of Mahābhārata. In the ninth incarnation, he appeared as a gentle and non-violent human being, full of wisdom, as Lord Buddha. He taught the technique of meditation and inner transformation of the mind to overcome the sorrow and evil of life. In the tenth incarnation, which is yet to come, he would be called Kalki and would again become the savior of the just and the righteous. He would ride on a white horse, representative of the

⁵ Priya Hemenway. *Hindu Gods* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books) 2003.

⁶ Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 120.

indestructible hidden nature of things.⁷ The Kalki legend is familiar and has been repeated in one form or another in most cultures, such as Persian, Jewish, Christian, Tibetan, and many Central Asian cultures. Even Native Americans had their version in the legend of Kukulcan.⁸

The Viṣṇu incarnation as Lord Kṛiṣṇā is the most popular form. It is, in fact, in this form that the Lord gave a pledge to man: "Whenever sins will rise, I shall incarnate and redeem mankind." It is also in this form that the Lord gave mankind the eternal spiritual teachings in the scripture of the Bhagavad Gitā. Some historians believe that Kṛiṣṇā was the hero of the Yadav tribe, which merged with the original Vṛṣṇi tribe in the fifth or sixth century BCE. Lord Viṣṇu first manifested in the Vṛṣṇi tribe and later appeared as Lord Kṛiṣṇā. Subsequently, human incarnations of the god Viṣṇu also became well accepted in Hindu theology.⁹

Such has been the universal approach of Hindus that they even called the gods of the other religions the Viṣṇu incarnations. Lord Buddha and Lord Christ have been considered to be Viṣṇu incarnates. Unlike other faiths, the Hindu religion is rather liberal in assigning godhood to human beings of high spirituality. This is really not so surprising, as Hindu philosophy teaches, *Ekam sad vipra bahudha vadant*—"One alone exists; sages call it by various names." Hindus have, therefore, no rigid and inflexible attitude in this regard.

In the epic scriptures of Rāmāyana and Mahābhārata, God was fully presented for the first time in the real human form as God-incarnate. This archetype has later continued; even in modern times saints like Bhagwan Swaminārāyan and Satya Sāi Babā have been accorded the same status by their respective followers. Thus the Viṣṇu incarnations, which were mythological in the beginning, became more real and historical later. Their characteristics and attributes also

⁷ Hemenway, *Hindu Gods*, 65.

⁸ Linda Johnsen, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Hinduism* (Indianapolis: Alpha Books, 2002) 193.

⁹ Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 119.

changed; this is religion.

In the Hindu Trinity, carving is found seen in his form to be the origin that would be. As such, he is a who have renou

Sivā, or Ś, considered to look. As the Compassion. L (asuras) churn first appeared rushed to Lord save the universe his compassion drinking the milk not swallow the also known as poison became mankind not to Lord Śivā, who became more propitiousness prayers for all also for all violence in the

Lord Śivā agni, is also invoked at the burned desire,

changed; this is much in keeping with the dynamic pattern of Hindu religion.

In the Hindu pantheon Lord Śivā, the third manifestation of the Hindu Trinity, occupies one of the earliest and foremost places. His carving is found in the ancient Indus-Saraswati civilization. There he is seen in his famous yogic pose, meditating. He is, therefore, considered to be the originator of yoga and meditation, two formidable activities that would become most celebrated—after more than five millennia! As such, he is also called the *Ādi Guru*, or the first guru of *sannyāsins*, who have renounced the world to attain the Absolute.

Śivā, or Śivā, also means “auspicious one.” Lord Śivā, who is considered to be the Lord of Death and Dissolution, thus gets a new look. As the auspicious one, Lord Śivā is hailed as the Lord of Compassion. Legend has it that when the gods (*devtās*) and the demons (*asuras*) churned the ocean to extract the nectar of immortality, there first appeared a most noxious poison, harmful to all beings. They all rushed to Lord Śivā who, in his compassion, drank this dark poison to save the universe. Thus the eternal virtue of Śivā became known, and his compassion in protecting those who needed rescue, even if it meant drinking the most deadly poison for their sake. Lord Śivā, however, did not swallow the poison but retained it in his throat. He is, therefore, also known as the god with the blue throat, the *Neelakhaṇṭa*. The poison became the ornamental necklace for Lord Śivā, encouraging mankind not to hesitate to help others and to mitigate their sorrows. Lord Śivā, who earlier was identified with destruction and dissolution, became more established as the god of auspiciousness (favourability or propitiousness) and compassion. In Hindu scriptures there are many prayers for auspiciousness, not just for the devotee who is praying but also for all creation. These prayers would sow the seeds for non-violence in the Hindu religion.

Lord Śivā has three eyes—the sun, moon, and fire. The third eye, *agni*, is also considered the eye of inner vision; hence, it is often invoked at the time of meditation. It is said that with the third eye, he burned desire, or *kāma*. He, therefore, is also named *Trilōchan*, the lord

with three eyes. He has the crescent moon on his forehead, signifying knowledge and mystical vision. His matted hair and ash-smeared body indicate austerity, and around his neck is the serpent energy, *Kundalini Śakti*, moving from the spine upwards. Lord Śivā is completely embedded with symbols and icons and is the essence of the ancient Hindu divinity. In some scriptures, Śivā is identified as the supreme consciousness, the divine wisdom of the cosmos. He is portrayed with a blue complexion, indicating his infinite stature. Lord Śivā has two sons, Ganapati and Skandha. His main consort, the goddess Pārvati, assumes other forms as well, such as Durgā, the bright one; Sati, the devoted wife; Bhairavi, the terror inspiring; or Kālī, the black one. *Nandi*, the white bull, is the vehicle of Lord Śivā and is present at the entrance of all Śivā temples. In scriptures, Nandi represents man (*jeevātman*), who is in eternal search of the Divine.

In the Hindu pantheon gods often interchange their positions, superseding each other variously, ultimately pointing to the union of all into one universal Divine. Viṣṇu becomes *Prajāpati*, encompassing Brahma as the 'Creator', Viṣṇu himself as the 'Preserver' and Śivā as the 'Destroyer.' Viṣṇu literally means all prevalent; he is also known as 'Nārāyana', one who 'moves on water'; in this form he is presented in human form lying on the coiled serpent *Adi-Śeṣa*. From his navel emerges Brahma, the creator God. As Viṣṇu he is more an object of devotion rather than fear, clearly pointing towards a change in Hindu perception; later even the ferocious Śivā too became more known as the kind-hearted god of 'compassion.' Heavens/sky (*Vaikuṇṭha*) is also the abode of Lord Viṣṇu, made entirely of gold with all comforts and luxuries provided for those who have performed good deeds in the world, with the Ganges flowing through it. It is believed that the Ganges originates from the feet of Lord Viṣṇu, and later traverses through the hair-locks of Lord Śivā before coming to earth.¹⁰ This reflects the Hindu mindset of an underlying subtle mythological attitude towards the evolving patterns of humanity at large. Through these sojourns Viṣṇu's omnipotence was established. He became the savior of all who would fall at his feet and seek his protection from the

¹⁰ Ions Veronica. *Indian Mythology* (New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1983) 46–47.

evil-mongers. T
and others, who

Much of the
nature were tra
Brahma, Viṣṇu
never complete
have persisted
Sōma, and Kub
other new gods
Skanda, goddess
Trinity, animal

Hindu relig
tribal origin. A
Asiatic, Tibet
the Austro-Asia
Africa on its v
likely that the t
and sub-sects,
acceptance of t
became the mo
formation of l
relationship of
remained rathe
Many Hindus
devotion. Oth
maintain a re
temples of all
deity, with i
ceremonies.

¹¹ Ibid., 69.

¹² R.S. Sharma. /

evil-mongers. There is thus an amazing similarity in the epics of Christ and others, whom Hindus too adore as Viṣṇu-incarnations.

Much of the divine power and glory from the earlier Vedic gods of nature were transferred to the Divine entities of the Hindu Trinity, Brahma, Viṣṇu and Śivā. However, in the Hindu pantheon the old was never completely annihilated and discarded. Some of the Vedic gods have persisted till today; Indra, Yāma, Varuṇa, Agni, Sûray, Vāyu, Sōma, and Kubēra together were known as 'world-guardians.' Many other new gods apart from the Trinity appeared on the scene; Ganēsha, Skanda, goddesses who became consorts of the Primary gods of the Trinity, animal gods, river gods, etc., came to the forefront.¹¹

Hindu religion, which originated in India, has a vast background of tribal origin. Among them are four important tribal groups: Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman, Dravidian, and Indo-Aryan. The earliest was the Austro-Asian, which group passed by the Indian subcontinent from Africa on its way to Australia about fifty thousand years ago.¹² It is likely that the three mythological Gods, and so too the subsequent sects and sub-sects, owe their origin to different tribal groups. The acceptance of the Vedas as the supreme authority, however, eventually became the melting point of many diverse ethnic cultures toward the formation of Hinduism. In the long history of Hindu religion, the relationship of the followers amongst various sects and sub-sects has remained rather cordial; violence has been conspicuous by its absence. Many Hindus worship all Gods of the Trinity with equal respect and devotion. Others, who have allegiance to a particular God, also maintain a reverent attitude toward the other Gods. Hindus visit temples of all Gods freely. Many temples in modern times are multi-deity, with idols of more than one God installed for worship ceremonies.

¹¹ Ibid., 69.

¹² R.S. Sharma. *India's Ancient Past* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1920) 45.