**Hinduism**

### А. General Information

Hinduism is one of the most influential religions in the world today, including its modern form “New Age.” Hindus make up 15 percent of the world’s population (1.1 billion people). Eighty seven percent of Hindus live in India. The vast majority of India’s population is Hindu – up to 80 percent. Proportionally, Nepal, whose state religion is Hinduism, has even a higher percentage – 81 percent.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Hindus themselves call their religion *Sanātana* *Dharma*, which means “eternal law” or “eternal way.” The term “Hindu” itself has an interesting history.[[2]](#footnote-2) It comes from Sanskrit and originally served as the name of the Indus River. During the Persian Empire, it designated the region beyond the Indus and its inhabitants. Greeks, Romans and Moslems used it in the same sense. Finally, when India was under British rule, the term designated all non-Moslem inhabitants of India. So then, the term “Hindu” had more of an ethnic than a religious connotation.

Since the term “Hindu” came to designate all non-Moslem inhabitants of India, it became associated with no single, but all indigenous faiths of India. Nigosian comments, “Hinduism is not a single or unified, coherent religion, but a system of many religions that are tolerated within the social framework of Hindu society.”[[3]](#footnote-3) However, there exist enough common features between the indigenous religions of India to group them, for purposes of study, under one designation: “Hinduism.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The variety present in Hinduism allows its adherents a certain freedom in their philosophical views and personal religious devotion. The emphasis on devotion to a certain manifestation of the Ultimate results in the majority of Hindus worshipping only one god. In practice, then, Hinduism often resembles monotheistic faiths. We may also note that Hinduism lacks both a founder and a concrete system of administration.[[5]](#footnote-5) Nonetheless, in modern times we observe an effort to unify Hindu thought. For example, national Hindu Councils represent the Hindu faith in various countries of the world. In addition, the World Hindu Conference has assembled since 1975.[[6]](#footnote-6)

### B. History of Hinduism

**1. Beginnings**

How did Hinduism begin?[[7]](#footnote-7) Hinduism traces its history to the second millennium BC, when the polytheistic inhabitants of the Indus River valley, the Dravidians, succumbed to the invading Arians in 1500 BC.[[8]](#footnote-8) The Arians were a warlike people, whose religion supported their warlike agenda. For example, although their priests brought sacrifices to various gods (Arians, too, were polytheistic), they honored most of all Indra, the god of war and storm. Another of their primary gods, Agni, the god of fire, received these sacrifices.

“Soma” is one of the most interesting gods of Arian worship. He is associated with the moon, and also with a plant by the same name. The extract of that plant is hallucinogenic and is considered useful for receiving divine inspiration. We also note that in the early Arian literature (i.e. Vedas), Vishnu and Shiva, leading figures in later Hindu cosmology, occupy an insignificant position.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Another of the primary gods, Varuna, was responsible for moral and natural laws. In theory, Varuna held the highest position in the Arian pantheon, since he belonged to the class of gods “*asura*,” among whom he was chief. In practice, though, priests paid more honor to the lower class of gods, “*deva*,” headed by Indra. Also notable is the conviction, held by Arians, that above all the gods stood the “cosmic order,” that is, impersonal forces, among whom Rta was head.

Arian priests authored a collection of scriptures called Vedas, which describe the order for sacrifices, recount victories in battle, and preserve hymns sung by priests for worship. Initially the hymns were called *brahman.* More specifically, *brahman* was the power inherent in holy speech. Later, this term denoted the priests, who read them. Finally, the term *brahman* designated the priests, who brought sacrifices. These sacrificial priests eventually surpassed in dignity the priests who read the hymns.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**2. Classical Hinduism**

In the eight and seventh centuries BC, a revolt occurred among the Arians against the priests, who had been dominating the people. Consequently, instead of appealing to the gods by means of rituals performed by the priests, people began putting more emphasis on personal contact with the gods through meditation. Development of this new form of Hinduism, now called “classical Hinduism,” continued up to the fourth century AD.[[11]](#footnote-11)

With the appearing of new sacred writings, namely the *Upanishads*, arose also a new religious consciousness – that reality, in essence, is one, and that all elements of reality are manifestations of a single all-encompassing Unity. People referred to this Unity using the already well-known designation “Brahman.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Yet, this Unity manifested itself in the many “lower” gods that the people worshipped.

As time went on, several factors led to the weakening of Hindu faith among the inhabitants of India. First was the Moslem conquest of India, followed by its occupation by Great Britain and British missionary activity. In recent centuries, however, Hinduism has experienced a “rebirth” in India, due to the efforts of Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), who worked to restore (with some modifications) classical Hinduism, and Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), who worked toward liberation of India from British rule and the caste system in Indian society. In addition, the meditation techniques of Ramakrishna (1836-1886) have spread worldwide.[[13]](#footnote-13)

From the fourth to the sixth centuries AD, a new and unique form of Hinduism arose: Tantric Hinduism.[[14]](#footnote-14) Its distinguishing mark is the employment of physical stimuli, namely sexual, for attaining higher levels of enlightenment. Adherents feel that sexual activity is “a way of reenacting creation, bringing the practitioner in harmony with the forces of the cosmos.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Correspondingly, the main god (more precisely, “goddess”) in this system is Shakti, a cohort of Shiva. She represents to her devotees the source of cosmic energy.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Along with sexual activity, adherents of Tantric Hinduism seek enlightenment through a special diet of fish, meat, wine and grains. This form of Hinduism enjoyed great popularity during the Moslem occupation of India, but its popularity has waned since.[[17]](#footnote-17) At the present time, the most popular form of Hinduism is *bhakti*, which we will discuss later.[[18]](#footnote-18)

### C. Scriptures of Hinduism

**1. *Śruti***

The sacred scriptures of Hinduism exist in two groupings. The first, *Śruti*, which means “things heard,” carry authority for defining Hindu faith. Narayanan, though, makes this qualification: “While some texts and some deities are accepted by many, there is no single text, single deity, or single teacher that all Hindus would deem authoritative or supreme.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Untaught Hindus, in fact, may not know these writings at all.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The *Śruti* include the Vedas, which translates as “knowledge.” Davis comments, “This entire corpus of sacred literature came to be portrayed by its proponents as revelation, something that was only ‘heard’ and not composed by human beings.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Hindus also consider them “eternal sacred knowledge,” received by wise men from Brahman in antiquity.[[22]](#footnote-22) They also consider that the “hearing” of the Vedas by those who received them did not result in the corruption of their truth. Consequently, the Vedas have no human author, but are the “self-revelation of the impersonal Brahman.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

The Vedas consist in four parts, each of which expounds on the same four themes. The four parts are the *Rigveda*, the *Yajurveda*, the *Samaveda* and the *Atharvaveda.* The four themes repeated in these four parts are as follows: (1) *Samhitas*, hymns for rituals, (2) *Brahmanas*, explanations of the “sacred power” of the hymns, (3) *Aranyakas* (Book of the Forest), more reflections on the hymns, and (4) the later-added *Upanishads*, revelations of the mystical meaning of the hymns.[[24]](#footnote-24) The first section of the Vedas, the *Samhitas*, dates (in written form) from the 12th to the 11th centuries BC, and the final section, the *Upanishads*, – from the eighth to the fifth centuries BC.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The *Upanishads* are considered the “highest teaching” of the Vedas. In them, we first encounter the teachings on *karma*, *moksha*, *samsara*, *Atman* and Brahman (as an all-encompassing reality).[[26]](#footnote-26) Narayanan writes concerning them, “The quest for a unifying truth is a distinctive feature of the *Upanishads*.”[[27]](#footnote-27) In them, we observe the transition from sacrificial ritual, emphasized in the early parts of the Vedas, to personal religious experience through meditation, or as Hiltebeitel writes, “an experimental knowledge of the self as one with ultimate reality.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

**2. *Smriti***

A second group of writing is the so-called *Smriti*, which translates as “things remembered.” Hindus recognize human authors for these books, but consider them inspired nonetheless, yet not on the same level as the *Śruti.* Even though they are less authoritative than the *Śruti*, the *Smriti* enjoy great popularity, even more than the *Śruti.* Although Hindu scholars may not contradict the *Smriti*, they nonetheless exercise great freedom in their interpretations of it.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Among the *Smriti,* enjoy greatest popularity: *Ramayana* (written sometime between the fifth and first centuries BC) and *Mahabharata* (written sequentially between the fourth century BC and the fourth century AD). The latter contains myths about the *avatars*, that is, various incarnations of Vishnu. It also contains the highly popular myth *Bhagavad Gita*, i.e. the myth of Krishna, in which Krishna reveals himself as the chief god and promises liberation to his devotees. *Ramayana* tells the story of another incarnation of Vishnu, Rama, and how he recovers his captive wife Sita.[[30]](#footnote-30)

From the third century BC to the 10th century AD, a voluminous work developed called the *Puranas*. In these pages, we find numerous topics: theology, cosmology, rituals for Shiva and Vishnu, legends, myths and stories of creation. They are considered “the scriptures of the common folk, since they are available to everyone – including women.”[[31]](#footnote-31) In distinction from the Vedas, in which Vishnu and Shiva play less important roles, in the *Puranas* they are central. There we also learn the teaching about Brahma, the god of creation, and of the cohorts of Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The *Smriti* also contain the work *Manusmriti*, or the “Laws of Manu,” certain sacred laws. They were penned in the second century BC, allegedly by Manu, the father of humanity. Here we discover the Hindu teachings regarding the caste system and the retributive system *karma.*[[33]](#footnote-33)

Other writings highly regarded in Hinduism include the *Sutra*, which describe offerings for sacrifice and rules for society in the form of aphorisms. Famous commentators on the *Sutra* include Adi Shankara (788-820 AD), Ramanuja (1017-1137 AD) and Madhva (1197-1276 AD). These three belong to the *Vedata* school of thought, one of the six philosophical movements in Hinduism (see below).[[34]](#footnote-34)

### D. Beliefs of Hinduism

**1. The Concept of Brahman and Its Manifestations**

Hinduism, in its classical form, is a pantheistic worldview that teaches the existence of a unified reality – Brahman, which encompasses all things in itself. All that exists is an expression or a manifestation of this one reality. The apparent variation in the universe is, in fact, only an illusion, or *maya*. We must, supposedly, break out of this illusion, in order to perceive the inherent oneness of reality. Brahman is beyond all distinctions. It is not good or evil. It simple exists.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Furthermore, Hindu cosmology makes a distinction between the concepts of “nirguna-Brahman” and “saguna-Brahman.” The first makes up the essence of reality and exists in an impersonal form. It is beyond understanding and defies description in words.[[36]](#footnote-36) Brahman on a more “superficial” level manifests itself as saguna-Brahman, also known as Ishvara, who does possess personal qualities.

In addition, saguna-Brahman, or Ishvara, manifests itself in three specific ways, the so-called *Trimurti*, which correspond to various forces of nature: Brahma is saguna-Brahman as creator, Vishnu is saguna*-*Brahman as guardian, and Shiva is saguna*-*Brahman as destroyer. This triad replaces the earlier Hindu triad of Varuna, Indra and Agni.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Vishnu, in turn, manifests himself in various *avatars*, that is incarnations: Fish, Tortoise, Boar, Man-Lion, Dwarf, Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, and the eschatological figure Kalki. Supposedly, Vishnu commissions an *avatar* for each age to restore true *dharma* (teaching).[[38]](#footnote-38) Braswell describes it thus: “Vishnu resides in heaven, rules over the earth as preserver, champions all good causes, and at times assumes human form.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Davis gives this description of Shiva:

In contrast to the sociable Vishnu, Shiva is an outsider. Residing typically in the highest Himalayan Mountains, he is the lord and role model for yogis, less concerned with instituting *dharma* on earth than with leading souls toward *moksha*. Second, Shiva has a dual nature, conjoining what are to us antithetical attributes. Not only is he both malevolent and benevolent, he is also both ascetic and erotic, hermit and family man, an immobile mediator and an unruly dancer.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Unlike Vishnu, Shiva has no *avatars*. He is famous for his iconic representation, the “dancing Shiva,” and is considered the lord of the dance. The cohorts of Shiva include Shakti and the infamous Kali.[[41]](#footnote-41)

In the subsequent development of *Sanātana* *Dharma* (Hinduism), its adherents devoted more and more attention to individual manifestations of Brahman, considering this or that manifestation the primary one.[[42]](#footnote-42) The most prominent among these movements is Vaishnavism (or Vishnuism), which recognizes Vishnu as the primary manifestation of Brahman. Other movements give pride of place to other gods: ShaivismorShivaism (Shiva), Shaktism (Shakti), and Smartism, where five gods are worshipped equally: Vishnu, Shiva, Surya, Ganesh, and Devi (Shakti).

The “goddess” concept in Hinduism is confusing. Sometimes the term “goddess” (who is also considered “Mother Earth”) denotes all the individual Hindu goddess grouped together as one. At other times, the term denotes only one of them: Devi, Kali, Shakti, Durga, etc. The designation Devi is also variable. Sometimes she is the unifying goddess herself, and sometimes she is just one of the individual goddesses.[[43]](#footnote-43)

**2. Salvation in Hinduism**

For what should a Hindu strive? In short, the attainment of unification with Brahman. More precisely, the Hindu must discover his/her already existing unity with Brahman, since Brahman encompasses all of reality. Halverson describes this condition thus: ‘The goal of *enlightenment is for the individual self to lose its separate identity* in the universal Self.”[[44]](#footnote-44) So then, salvation, that is *moksha*, involves liberation from the illusionary world (*maya*), and unification with Brahman. Latter Hindu literature also employs the Buddhist term for salvation – *nirvana*.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Three “paths” supposedly lead to salvation: *jnana-marga*, or “the path of knowledge,” *bhakti-marga*, or “the path of devotion,” and *karma-marga*, or “the path of action.”[[46]](#footnote-46) By means of any one of these paths, the Hindu hopes to attain *moksha* (salvation).

Two other concepts, *karma* and *samsara*, are important elements in this system. *Samsara* is the cycle of reincarnations the Hindu expects to undergo. People’s *karma*, that is, the quality of their behavior,determines their status and condition in the next reincarnation. Depending on the *karma* from their previous life, they will find themselves in a position either closer to, or farther away from *moksha*.

In summary, salvation (*moksha*) consists of liberation from the cycle of reincarnation (*samsara*) and the illusionary world with the perception of individual existence (*maya*), and unification with Brahman. In the words of Corduan, “The nature of salvation consists of release from the bondage of phenomenal existence.”[[47]](#footnote-47) *Moksha* is even reflected on the flag of India, which displays a wheel, the symbol of the cycle of reincarnation (*samsara*), from which the Hindu seeks release.

Attainment of *moksha* is possible only for Indian males. Foreigners or Indian women must be reincarnated as Indian men in order to progress on to salvation. Correspondingly, women tend to hold a lower status in Indian culture.[[48]](#footnote-48)

In addition, traditional Indian culture practices the caste system, which determines both one’s status in society and one’s nearness to attaining *moksha*. The lowest caste, the *shudras*, consist of slaves and various common workers. The next higher class, the *vaishyas*, consists of merchants, herdsmen and farmers. The *kshatriyas* are warriors and administrators. The highest class are the *brahmins* – priests and the intelligentsia. Only the highest caste can attain *moksha* in the subsequent reincarnation.

**3. The Great Tradition (The Path of Action and the Path of Knowledge)**

**a. The Path of Action**

Of the three above-mentioned paths to *moksha*, two of them make up the “Great Tradition”: *karma-marga*, “the path of action*,*”and *jnana-marga*, “the path of knowledge.”[[49]](#footnote-49) *Karma-marga* (the path of action) involves fulfilling various societal obligations, observing rituals and ceremonies for certain gods, and doing good works.[[50]](#footnote-50) These activities lead to liberation from *samsara* in that for his/her good behavior the practitioner receives good *karma*. Proper behavior is defined by *dharma*, or “teaching.” Yet, these standards vary depending on which caste a person belongs to, and in which stage of life one is in (see below).

**b. The Path of Knowledge**

The “path of knowledge” teaches that a person is alienated from Brahman because of ignorance. He/she simply does not understand that he/she is already one with Brahman and is an expression of its being. In this “path,” the practitioner’s goal is to perceive that everything except Brahman is *maya*, that is, an illusion.[[51]](#footnote-51)

A key factor in the “path of knowledge” is *Atman*, an inner aspect of human nature that has direct contact with Brahman. By means of this internal *Atman*, a person has access to the ultimate reality. More precisely, *Atman* is Brahman itself, dwelling in the human constitution in a special way. In one’s *Atman*, a person does not relate to Brahman as subject to object, but identifies fully with it.[[52]](#footnote-52) Through meditative techniques, a person can supposedly increase awareness of his/her oneness with Brahman.

The path of knowledge enjoyed great popularity from the sixth century BC until the tenth century AD. In modern times, Ramana Maharshi has inspired interest in it again, having spend his life on a mountaintop meditating on Brahman. He followed a strict ascetic regime and continually asked himself the question, “Who am I?” He claims to have attained awareness of his oneness with Brahman.

Among adherents of *jnana-marga* exists a long-standing dispute about the nature of Brahman and reality itself. The six schools of thought are *Nyaya*, *Vaisesika*, *Samkhya*, *Yoga* and two others, still practiced today: *Mimamas* and *Venanta*. The latter translates “the end of the *Vedas*” in honor of the *Upanishads*, from which its teachings come.[[53]](#footnote-53)

The *Venanta* school of thought hosts three distinct views concerning the nature of *maya*. The classical view is *advaita* (non-dualistic) *venanta*, which states that Brahman is the only component of reality, and all else is illusion. A second view, *vishishadvaita venanta*,holds that the material world is also real, but only as an expression of Brahman. The last view, *dvaita* (dualistic) *venanta,* is closer to theism in that it teaches that the universe is real and distinct in essence from Brahman.[[54]](#footnote-54)

The leading teacher of the classical view, *advaita venanta*, was Adi Shankara (788-820 AD), who championed absolute, non-dualistic pantheism.[[55]](#footnote-55) The term “non-dualistic” means that Brahman and the world are not contrasting realities that exist separate from one another, but are in essence a unity. Shankara distinguishes nirguna-Brahman from saguna-Brahman, ascribing concrete personality traits only to the latter. Clark describes Shankara’s belief concerning the essential Brahman, i.e. nirguna-Brahman:

The best that can be done is to deny every attribute of Brahman… Language cannot touch Brahman… The Self of all possesses the character of intelligence, but it lacks any distinctions and transcends all language. Thus, it can be described only negatively, by the denial of attributes.[[56]](#footnote-56)

This contrasts with saguna-Brahman, which Tennent describes: “Nothing that is characterized as saguna has any ultimate or certain reality, since it serves as a mere pointer or indicator of the one Brahman who remains beyond any description.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

According to Shankara, people may contact Brahman through their *Atman* and by cultivating the awareness that they are already one with ultimate reality. Awareness of one’s *Atman*, in turn, is developed intuitively in the realm of feeling. The Hindu can also contact Brahman by reading the Vedas, of which Brahman is allegedly the source.

*Moksha*, then, occurs when a person reaches full awareness that he/she is one with Brahman. In the words of Shankara: “Once the soul realizes that it is and always has been Brahman, this life passes away like a dream.”[[58]](#footnote-58) Nigosian describes it this way: *Moksha* is realized by “total identification of one’s individual self with the universal Self (Brahman-Atman).”[[59]](#footnote-59) Therefore, in Shankara’s system meditation is key. Good works do not merit *moksha*, yet they may provide good *karma* for the next reincarnation. Rituals have little value.

Although, similar to *advaita venanta*, *vishishadvaita venanta* also recognizes Brahman as the ultimate reality, it differs in recognizing the reality of the world as well, as an expression of Brahman. The world is not illusionary (*maya*). Tennent describes it thus: “Brahman is one, but contains within himself all of the plurality and differentiation of the universe.”[[60]](#footnote-60) Ramanuja (1017-1137 AD) was the leading teacher of this view, also known as “modified non-dualism.”[[61]](#footnote-61)

Ramanuja did not recognize the distinction between nirguna-Brahman and saguna-Brahman, but considered Brahman a personal god, whom one can describe, and with whom one may have personal contact. Another key feature of this system is the complete identification of Brahman with Vishnu. Consequently, Vishnu is the chief god. Also in distinction from classical Hinduism, Ramanuja taught that, although Brahman (that is, Vishnu) contained the universe in himself, he exists in part separate from the universe as well. So then, Vishnu has a transcendent aspect to his nature.[[62]](#footnote-62)

In summary, the goal for the Hindu in Ramanuja’s teaching is personal fellowship with Vishnu, characterized by total consecration to him and simple trust in him.[[63]](#footnote-63) In the words of Narayanan, a Hindu strives to attain “the intuitive, total and joyful realization of the soul’s relationship with the lord.”[[64]](#footnote-64)

The third and least influential movement in *Vendata* is *dvaita venanta*, founded in the 13th century by the philosopher Madhva. Similar to Ramanuja, he embraced *Vaishnavism*, i.e. faith in Vishnu as the ultimate god. His views differed from those of other branches of *Vendata*, however, in teaching dualism – that Brahman, people and the world are different and distinct aspects of reality.[[65]](#footnote-65)

**4. The Little Tradition (The Path of Devotion)**

At present, the most popular branch of Hinduism is *bhakti-marga,* the “path of devotion.” The term *bhakti* means “devotion,” and its adherents devote themselves to and worship one god, that is, one of the manifestations of Brahman. Popular objects of worship include Vishnu, Shiva, Indra, Brahma, the Goddess and others. In addition, some worship so-called “impure gods,” such as one’s family, caste or village. These “impure gods” cannot supply *moksha*, but are thought to bring earthly blessings. Some even feel that Jesus Christ is one of the manifestations of saguna-Brahman.[[66]](#footnote-66)

Worshippers seek to relate to their “patron” god or goddess in different ways: (1) as lower being to higher, (2) as slave to master, (3) as child to mother, (4) as friend to friend, (5) as beloved to lover.[[67]](#footnote-67) Some regard their god’s idol as the god himself/herself, while others simply see it as his/her habitation. Renou states, “For some, perhaps for the majority, the idol is the god himself… for others… the sacred incarnate in some concrete form.”[[68]](#footnote-68) Worshippers also express devotion by practicing *puja* (see below).

Unlike the paths of knowledge and action, where success depends totally on personal effort, *bhakti-marga* offers “grace,” especially among adherents of *Vaishnavism.* The devotee’s patron god/goddess, it is supposed, may reward devotion with the removal of bad *karma* and accelerate the process of attaining *moksha*.[[69]](#footnote-69)

This “grace” is understood in two ways. The first is the “school of the cat,” since the patron god “carries” the worshipper in his/her mouth, much as a cat carries her kitten. Hammer writes, “Salvation is not the result of human striving, but is seen as a gift from God.”[[70]](#footnote-70) The recipient of grace does good works to express gratitude to the god. The second is the “school of the monkey.” Although the mother monkey also carries her young, at the same time the young must hold onto her. Therefore, the devotee is an active participant in his/her salvation.

Several other features of *bhakti-marga* merit attention. Since one of the characteristics of Shiva is madness, his worshippers may consider madness a sign of spiritual attainment. Some devotees claim to have visions of their “patron” god/goddess. Sometime they value intimacy with their patron god/goddess more than the attainment of *moksha*.[[71]](#footnote-71)

**5. The Origin and Fate of the World**

In the *Rigveda*, the story is told of a certain god, Purusa, who was sacrificed at the dawn of this world, and from whom all humans came in accordance with their caste distinctions. The *brahmins* (priests and the intelligentsia) arose from his mouth, the *kshatriyas* (warriors and administrators)derived from his arms, the *vaishyas* (merchants, herdsmen and farmers) – from his legs, and the *shudras* (slaves and various common workers) – from his feet.[[72]](#footnote-72)

Furthermore, from Purusa, supposedly, came the inanimate world as well. The sun is from his eyes, the moon came from his mind, the wind is his breath, the atmosphere – his naval, heaven – his head. Some believe that certain gods arose from Purusa as well: Vishnu, Brahma, Indra and Agni.[[73]](#footnote-73) At the same time, the world has no beginning. An eternal cycle of creations and destructions mark history. The present universe is just one epoch in this history, which has no beginning or end.

Hindus measure time in a unique way.[[74]](#footnote-74) The world proceeds through four periods of time, called *yugas*. The four *yugas* together take 12,000 years to complete. Yet, these units are not human, but divine. A divine year equals 360 human years. So then, these four *yugas* take over 4 million human years to complete.

Each successive *yuga* is shorter than the previous one, and hosts greater disorder and evil. We now allegedly live in a final (evil) *yuga*, which began in 3000 BC. At the end of this period, the tenth and final incarnation of Vishnu, Kalki, is said to appear to restore *dharma* (teaching), convert people to its truths, destroy the world, eliminate death and begin a new cycle of *yugas*, at which time a new Manu (the prototypical human) appears to repopulate the world.

Moreover, 1000 cycles of *yugas* makes up one *kalpa*, which equals 4.32 million years. A *kalpa* makes up one day in the lifespan of Brahma, i.e. Brahman as creator. The subsequent *kalpa* is his night. Thus, two *kalpas* equals 24 hours in Brahma’s lifespan. Brahma lives 100 such years, or 72,000 *kaplas*, then he dies. Another god (Vishnu, the Goddess, or Shiva) destroys the universe, creates a new Brahma, and the cycle begins anew. So then, the lifespan of Brahma is 311 trillion, 40 million human years. Supposedly, he lives and acts within an “egg,” prepared for him by Vishnu or Shiva. The universe and all it contains are within Brahma’s “egg.”

**6. Summary**

Mark Albrecht provides this fine summary of the main elements of Hindu faith:[[75]](#footnote-75)

1. God – God is usually perceived in an impersonal sense, as law, energy, or creative force.
2. Humanity – People are regarded as part of the Divine, or essentially God. Since the universe itself is divine, as pantheism and monism presume, each person is also a spark of the universal fire, or a wave in the divine ocean. The body is usually seen as a separate reality, a temporal dwelling.
3. The world – The world is often viewed as illusory, a temporary playground which one must not become attached to, since worlds and universes are continually recycled. Matter is but a gross manifestation or emanation from pure spirit, and will dissolve and reappear again an infinite number of times.
4. Salvation – Salvation (in the spiritual sense) is accomplished via enlightenment, or being liberated from attachment to the world and the mind. In other words, realizing that you are really God – or a part of God – and then experiencing that unity through specific techniques and rituals. Some form of reincarnation is usually adhered to, and the process of achieving salvation is dependent upon self-effort and usually takes many incarnations.
5. Good and evil – Goodness is usually synonymous with the aforementioned enlightenment, and evil is associated with ignorance

In conclusion, it is important to note a final aspect of Hindu thought. It does not disturb the practitioner of Hinduism if we observe in his/her faith inconsistencies or logical contradictions. Hindus do not expect that one can describe the Indescribable or know the Unknowable without encountering some logically irreconcilable aspects of its nature. Nigosian explains, “Inconsistency or contradiction is not an issue in Hindu theology, so long as one understands the ineffability of infinity.”[[76]](#footnote-76)

Concerning other religions, Hindus are ready to acknowledge them, since they understand them to be other expressions of the universal reality, i.e. Brahman. Nonetheless, they qualify this acknowledgement by saying that other religions are inferior to Hinduism in regard to the proper view of reality and in true worship.[[77]](#footnote-77)

### E. The Hindus’ Life

**1. Meditation and Guidance of the Gury**

The guidance of a guru, also called a swami or mahariji, is vitally important in the life of a Hindu, especially those seeking *moksha* by way of the path of knowledge.[[78]](#footnote-78) Hindus regard the personal guidance of a guru more vital than the teachings of the Vedas, since the guru supposedly already knows the way to enlightenment by experience.

As a rule, a new guru will study under a more experienced one. The teaching passed on is known as *parampara*. Yet, training in not obligatory. Anyone can declare himself a guru. More progressive gurus will utilize mass-media and travel extensively to propagate their teaching.[[79]](#footnote-79)

Pupils devote themselves totally to their gurus with complete submission. A pupil must “meditate ceaselessly on the form of the guru… always repeat his name. Carry out his orders. Think not of anything except the guru… through service at the feet of the guru the embodied (i.e. the pupil) should become purified.”[[80]](#footnote-80) The pupil considers the guru to possess supernatural power. Matrisciana writes,

Anything which has touched the body of the guru is holy, from the dust of his feet to his dirty dishes. Drinking the guru’s bathwater is said to be enlightening. Should the guru desire sex, the disciple (whether male or female) is to look upon this act as step us his spiritual ladder.[[81]](#footnote-81)

A guru will sometimes draw his pupils away to form communities called *ashrams*, where they practice meditation with the goal of unification with Brahman. The practitioners will sometimes employ narcotics to obtain higher levels of “divine awareness.”[[82]](#footnote-82)

During meditation, the practitioners will repeat a mantra, which is a “single or multisyllable phrase (usually in Sanskrit) on which one meditates. Each mantra is identified with a particular deity to the extent that the correctly pronounced mantra embodies that deity. The point of repeating the mantra is to provoke the powers of that deity and to invite it to enter you.”[[83]](#footnote-83) Maharishi Mahesh Yogi stated that the purpose of the mantra was “to produce an effect in some other world, to draw the attention of those higher beings or gods living there. The entire knowledge of the mantra… is devoted to man’s connection, to man’s communication with the higher beings in a different strata of creation.”[[84]](#footnote-84) The “sacred syllable” *om* is considered to have special power.[[85]](#footnote-85)

Along with repetition of the mantra, the practice of meditation also involves *yoga*. Practitioners of *yoga* observe a strict bodily regime for attaining greater spiritual heights. In the words of Davis, *yoga* involves “restraining one’s unruly inclinations in order to attain a higher state of consciousness.”[[86]](#footnote-86) It involves “withdrawal of the senses from the outer world, and culminating in fixed meditative awareness.”[[87]](#footnote-87) Devotees to *yoga* limit their intake of food and practice celibacy. During meditation, they occupy a special bodily posture and control their breathing.[[88]](#footnote-88)

**2. Worship (*puja*)**

In relation to one’s “patron” god, worshippers, especially in the “Little Tradition” (Way of Devotion), practice *puja*. They perform various acts to please the idol, namely singing to the idol, bathing the idol, dressing it, offering food, “dining” with it, bringing flowers, etc. One can observe *puja* in a temple, where priests perform the rituals, or at home, where devotees perform them themselves for the household idols.[[89]](#footnote-89)

Along with the temple practice of *puja*, Hindu priests offer sacrifices in the temple according to a religious calendar. There are five “great sacrifices”: for Brahman, departed relatives, gods, other beings and people. Every family has its own priest, who presents sacrifices on behalf of the family and provides instruction.[[90]](#footnote-90)

**3. Sacred Objects and Places**

One of the most well known practices among Hindus is honoring cows. They do this for several reasons. First, a deity may dwell in them. Second, the cow is a symbol of Mother-Earth, and, as Hammer states, “of the bounty she bestows upon humanity.”[[91]](#footnote-91) Hiltebeitel relates the conviction that the cow is an “animal that symbolizes everything good in nature.”[[92]](#footnote-92) It provides humanity with more than any other animal.[[93]](#footnote-93)

Hindus show respect not only for the cow, but also for nature in general, because the universe is thought to be part of a single reality, that is, Brahman. Therefore, one’s attitude toward nature is the same as one’s attitude toward Brahman. Correspondingly, most Hindus are vegetarians or partial vegetarians. They are also pacifists.[[94]](#footnote-94)

Although it is not imperative, many Hindus make a pilgrimage to places where, reportedly, special spiritual manifestations have occurred. The most famous destination is the river Ganges, whose waters are thought to possess supernatural qualities valuable for cleansing from bad *karma*, bodily healing, protection from evil spirits and infertility, and preparation for the afterlife. After a pilgrimage to the Ganges, Hindus may take home some of its waters, or bring back flowers for their idols. Hindus desire to die along the Ganges in the sacred city of Varanasi, so that their ashes can be sprinkled in the river.[[95]](#footnote-95)

In conclusion, we may mention several other sacred practices.[[96]](#footnote-96) By tradition, when a person enters a house or temple he/she removes his/her shoes. As a rule, Hindus refrain from alcohol. Touching a corpse or human excretions makes a person ceremonially unclean. Burial is by cremation. Certainly, the most shocking practice observed in traditional Hindu culture is *sati*, where the widow is cremated with her departed husband. Although this practice is now illegal, rare instances of its practice are still reported.[[97]](#footnote-97)

Hindus observe various social events connected with the life cycle: the birth of a boy, his connection with a guru, weddings, and deaths.[[98]](#footnote-98) The religious calendar marks off a feast day complete with processions for every major god. On that day, it is thought that the god is more kindly disposed. The feast of *Diwali* coincides with Christmas.[[99]](#footnote-99) The most popular feast day is *Holi*, done in honor of Krishna. During this feast, Hindus permit themselves more “loose” behavior in search of pleasure. In Hinduism, we also observe, at least on the popular level, superstition, magic, astrology, and the worship of snakes and genies.[[100]](#footnote-100)

**4. The Caste System (*Varna*) and Stages of Life (*Asrama*)**

Another interesting aspect of Hindu life is the caste system.[[101]](#footnote-101) It dates back to the Arians, who justified the system by appealing to the “sacrifice of Purusa” mentioned earlier. As we also learned, four caste distinctions divide Hindu society. The lowest caste, the *shudras*, consist of slaves and various common workers. The next higher class, the *vaishyas*, consists of merchants, herdsmen and farmers. The *kshatriyas* are warriors and administrators. The highest class are the *brahmins* – priests and the intelligentsia. Usually people marry within their castes, but convention allows women to marry men of superior castes.[[102]](#footnote-102)

The members of the three higher castes are consider “reborn,” and men belonging to these castes wear a distinguishing mark – a “sacred thread,” which they receive during their ceremony of initiation into adult life. Three times a day members of the higher castes are expected to perform ritual singing, meditation and bathing. Only the highest caste has opportunity to attain *moksha* in the next life. Elevation in the castes takes place through reincarnation. A person’s *karma* determines the outcome of the reincarnation.

The observance of *dharma* (teaching, or rules of life) differs among castes depending on the requirements defined for each one.[[103]](#footnote-103) From the Laws of Manu, Braswell summarizes the *dharma* for each caste:

To *Brahmanas* he assigned teaching and studying (the *Veda*), sacrificing for their own benefit and for others, giving and accepting (of alms). The *Kshatriya* he commanded to protect the people, to bestow gifts, to offer sacrifices, to study (the *Veda*), and to abstain from attaching himself to sensual pleasure; the *Vaisya* – to tend cattle, to bestow gifts, to offer sacrifices, to study (the *Veda*), to trade, to lend money, and to cultivate land. One occupation only the lord prescribed to the *Sudra*, to serve meekly even these (other) three castes.[[104]](#footnote-104)

We should make mention of a fifth group, which arose in the history of Hindu society – the “untouchables.” They are subject to many restrictions. For example, they may not participate in ritual worship, fellowship or even drink from a common well. The class of “untouchables” includes foreigners. Yet, in recent times, the caste system in general is not so strictly observed.[[105]](#footnote-105)

Finally, Hindu society recognizes four stages of life, the so-called *ashrama*, through which every Hindu male passes: student, family man, retiree and recluse. In the first stage, a person leans a trade and prepares for adult life. In the second, he works and contributes to society. In the third, he focuses more on spiritual disciplines under the guidance of a guru. In the fourth, he leads an ascetic life, restraining from the necessities of life, even from normal breathing, in order to draw near to Brahman. Yet, in practice, most Hindu men never attain to the demands even of the third stage.[[106]](#footnote-106)

### F. Evaluation of Hinduism

Besides a concern for life and respect for nature, it is difficulty to find many other positive aspects of the Hindu faith and worldview. Instead, we observe in this religious system numerous serious defects. First, Hindu faith contradicts human consciousness and awareness. With rare exception, when people view the outside world, they perceive a clear distinction between themselves and other entities. Human consciousness has no tendency to view oneself as a manifestation of an all-encompassing, impersonal force. We affirm with Copan, “The best procedure is to believe what is apparently true unless there is some known reason to believe that it is not.”[[107]](#footnote-107)

Second, people have no recollection of having experienced a previous life, which seems strange, if they have already passed through multiple reincarnations. Third, this system goes against human judgment. Unlike Hinduism, which does not recognize the difference between good and evil as fundamental to reality, all people, by nature, recognize this distinction.

Furthermore, Hinduism claims that variety in the world is an illusion and that we should seek out the inherent unity of all things. Yet, we know from experience that people prefer variety to unvarying monotony, which quickly becomes dull and uninteresting. According to the teaching of theism, God created the world with variety for people to enjoy. Yet, Hindu thought reduces everything to a lifeless monotone.

In addition, classical Hinduism claims that ultimate reality is impersonal. This means that the impersonal exceeds the personal, which contradicts universal human judgment. All people consider the personal more highly developed than the impersonal. In this vein, Groothuis writes, “The impersonal, then, would be viewed as somehow higher than the personal… We do not normally think or live this way.”[[108]](#footnote-108) Preference for the impersonal (*nirvana*) “robs humans of any individual significance, value and purpose as real persons.”[[109]](#footnote-109) This is likely the reason that Hinduism at times has birthed different movements that view ultimate reality as personal. It is also difficult to image that an impersonal force (Brahman) can somehow reveal itself in sacred writings (Vedas).

So then, if the Highest Being is impersonal, as classical Hindu cosmology proposes, then people occupy a position of higher development and capability than Brahman does. Here Groothuis reminds us of the axiom, “A cause must be equal to or greater than its effects.”[[110]](#footnote-110) Similarly, Lewis writes, “If God is the ultimate source of all concrete, individual things and events, then God Himself must be concrete, and individual in the highest degree.”[[111]](#footnote-111) This means that in every respect God must be higher and greater than what He has created.

Lewis also regards that pantheists exchange “the image of a fatherly and royal looking man for the image of some widely extended gas or fluid.”[[112]](#footnote-112) He feels it more appropriate to compare God with a person: “Man, after all, is the highest of the things we meet in sensuous experience.… If God exists at all it is not unreasonable to suppose that we are less unlike Him than anything else we know.”[[113]](#footnote-113)

Moreover, with another personal being one can have fellowship, spend time, and share affection, all of which is impossible with an impersonal force.[[114]](#footnote-114) Groothuis correctly notes that Hinduism “is ultimately unsatisfying for real human needs because it provides no ultimate grounds for worship, adoration, fellowship or obedience in relation to a personal God.”[[115]](#footnote-115) Tennent adds the thought that in this system true worship is impossible, since the worshipper, being himself/herself in essence one with Brahman, in reality is worshipping himself/herself.[[116]](#footnote-116)

Another approach in evaluating Hinduism is considering its basis or foundation. Where did the Hindu faith come from, and how did it originate? Who, in fact, authored the Vedas? We usually rate the quality of a religion claiming Divine revelation by the qualifications of those who supposedly received that revelation. Yet with Hinduism, this is impossible to trace. In addition, there is no historical evidence of the real existence of the mythological *avatars*, i.e. incarnations of Vishnu, or that Buddha, who did exist, was one of them. This means that the entire Hindu faith likely arose from human imagination.

We also note in Hinduism a curious inconsistency in the use of terminology. For example, as we discussed previously, at first the term “brahman” referred to hymns recorded in the Vedas. Then it denoted the priest who read them. Next, the term referred to priests who offered sacrifices. Only later, during the writing of the *Upanishads*, did Brahman become an all-encompassing, ultimate reality. A similar phenomenon occurs in relation to the Hindu “pantheon.” As noted before, in the Vedas, Vishnu and Shiva are secondary gods, yet in classical Hinduism, they are now the primary manifestations of Brahman. Such inconsistencies render the plausibility of Hindu faith suspect.

Hinduism suffers from other serious defects. For example, Hindus sense a separation between themselves and God, that is, Brahman, yet have a hard time explaining this separation. If people are all manifestations of a single reality, then why do they sense this separation from Brahman and the need to reunite with it? Furthermore, how can a Hindu experience fellowship with Brahman or enjoy intimacy with it, if Brahman and the devotee are a single entity? Therefore, in Hinduism, true religious experience is unattainable.[[117]](#footnote-117)

Moreover, in Hindu thought the concepts of good and evil have no relation to ultimate reality, since Brahman is supposedly above such concepts. Such an assumption, though, creates a contradiction. If good and evil are not foundational to the real order of things, then the related concepts of “better” and “worse” also have no meaning. If the concept of “better” has no meaning, then what motivates a person to seek unity with Brahman? On what basis can Hindus claim that unity with Brahman is “better” than separation from it?

Concerning the idea of *maya*, we may ask where this illusionary world came from? In addition, if in reality all things are one, then the subject-object distinction breaks down. If, then, the subject-object distinction is removed, then how can someone (as a subject) claim that they *discovered* that reality (as an object) is one? Who is this “subject” that looks on reality as an “object” distinct from himself/herself?[[118]](#footnote-118) Moreover, if ultimate reality is unknowable and indescribable, then how can Hindu teachers claim to know that the Brahman is unknowable, or describe Brahman as indescribable?[[119]](#footnote-119)

Here we recall that proponents of Hinduism allow logical inconsistencies in their system, since the Ultimate Reality is assumedly above logical categories. Yet, those who deny that the rules of logic apply to reality, in reality, are contradicting themselves. Let us explain.

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that reality is illogical, that is, that the laws of logic do not apply to reality. Yet, claiming that reality is *illogical* is the same as claiming that reality is *not logical*. It is unlikely that one would claim that reality is both *logical* and *illogical* at the same time and in the same sense. A person will hold to either one position or the other. Making one of those claims automatically excludes the other.

So then, when a Hindu seeks to explain logical inconsistencies in his/her faith by claiming that ultimate reality is illogical, they are, paradoxically, actually confirming the logical nature of reality. In rejecting the logical nature of reality by claiming that it is illogical (and thereby claiming that it *cannot* be logical), they employ a rule of logic in their defense, namely, the law of non-contradiction: something cannot be A and not-A at the same time and in the same sense. In fact, whenever Hindus uses any argumentation in defense of their faith, they rely on logical consistency.[[120]](#footnote-120)

Groothuis affirms the absurdity of rejecting logic in theological discussion: “God is either personal or impersonal, not both; God is either moral or amoral, not both; people are either nondivine or divine, not both; there is either resurrection or reincarnation, not both.”[[121]](#footnote-121)

In regard to ethics, Hinduism encounters more problems. First, if the concepts of good and evil are part of the illusionary world of *maya*, then on what can we base our standards and moral principles? Second, if good is not essentially “better” that evil, then why does Hinduism urge the practice of good works?[[122]](#footnote-122) The result is, as Lewis states, “The Pantheist’s God does nothing, demands nothing.”[[123]](#footnote-123)

Clark and Geisler object that pantheism operates on the epistemological system “mysticism,” that is, verification of truth by inner intuition.[[124]](#footnote-124) Obviously, a Hindu cannot rely on empirical data or logical deduction to verify truth claims, since those systems confirm the reality of the material world and the individuality of creatures and objects in it. As we demonstrated earlier, mysticism is an inadequate epistemological system, since the claims of mysticism defy objective confirmation. Actually, if pantheists seek to defend the legitimacy of mysticism, they must do so by appealing to empirical or logical proofs. Yet, by seeking confirmation from these other epistemological systems, they thereby undermine their claim of mysticism’s superiority.

Finally, every event or experience requires an accurate interpretation. Events do not interpret themselves. Correspondingly, every mystic interprets his/her mystical experience in accordance with his/her present worldview. The Muslim mystic claims to contact Allah, the Christian mystic – the Holy Spirit, and the Hindu mystic – Brahman. In other words, mystical experience defies objective analysis and interpretation, but instead is simply employed to confirm the already accepted religious position of the mystic.

### G. Conclusions

So then, in spite of the popularity and pervasiveness of the pantheistic worldview, especially represented in Hinduism, it encounters many serious logical, epistemological, ethical and practical difficulties. In addition, Hinduism has no historical basis. Even the authors of its sacred books are unknown. In summary, it seems that there is little that might compel a person to embrace Hinduism.

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4. Clark relates that the nature of Hinduism is under discussion. “Centralists” feel that Hinduism is, in essence, one religion, united by a common priesthood and scripture. “Pluralists,” on the other hand, accentuate the variety in Hinduism (see Clark D. K., Geisler N. L. Apologetics in the new age: A Christian critique of pantheism. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990. – P. 10-11). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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8. There are other views, namely, that the Dravidians died out before the Arians arrived (Baumann, v. 3, p. 1323; Hexham, p. 123), or that the Arians were the original inhabitants of India (Hammer, p. 763). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Davis, p. 14-15; Narayanan, v. 1, p. 765; Hiltebeitel, v. 6, p. 3990. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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21. Davis, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Nigosian, p. 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Hiltebeitel, v. 6, p. 3994. Also see Hammer, p. 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The term *Upanishads* means “sit alongside” (Hiltebeitel, v. 6, p. 3993). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Baumann, v. 3, p. 1323-1324; Hiltebeitel, v. 6, p. 3989-3993. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Davis, p. 16-17; Clark, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Narayanan, v. 1, p. 765. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
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29. Narayanan, v. 1, p. 765; Corduan, p. 67; Hiltebeitel, v. 6, p. 3995. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
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60. Tennent, p. 44, also see Nigosian, p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Tennent, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Tennent, p. 39; Narayanan, v. 1, p. 772. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Tennent, p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Narayanan, v. 1, p. 772. The teachings of the contemporary Hindu philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) in many ways correspond with the views of *vishishadvaita venanta*. He taught that Brahman manifests itself in the material world, yet the world is real as well. More specifically, he proposed four levels of reality: Brahman, Ishvara (the personal Brahman), Hiranya-garbha (the World Soul) and Viraj (the material world). Yet, Radhakrishnan (along with Sankara) differs from Ramanuja in that he recognizes the distinction between nirguna-Brahman and saguna-Brahman and rejects *Vaishnavism* (Clark, р. 57-73). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Hiltebeitel, v. 6, p. 4005; Baumann, v. 3, p. 1330. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Narayanan, v. 1, p. 766; Hiltebeitel, v. 6, p. 3998-3999, 4006; Davis, p. 33; Tennent, p. 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Davis, p. 43-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Renou, p. 30-31. Also see Hammer, p. 195; Braswell, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Hammer, p. 189; Corduan, p. 97, 121-122. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Hammer, p. 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
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93. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Hexham, p. 140; Hiltebeitel, v. 6, p. 3996. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Nigosian, p. 103; Esposito, p. 333-334; Matrisciana, p. 159; Hexham, p. 140; Hammer, p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Hexham, p. 140-143; Hammer, p. 195; Esposito, p. 320. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
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99. Esposito, p. 328-329. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Renou, p. 34; Nigosian, p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. There exists another system for defining status in Hindu society – distinction by *Jati*. These systems overlap each other. See Hiltebeitel, v. 6, p. 3996. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Nigosian, p. 76; Hiltebeitel, v. 6, p. 3996. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
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123. Lewis, р. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
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