

TRANSCRIPT

John Dickson:

Before we enter into a topic as difficult and complicated as the world religions, one of the questions is one I think you'd want to ask me. Another is a question I as speaker want to ask you. The first question that I think you'd probably want to ask me is, "Is it possible for a believer in one religion to be thoroughly fair about another religion? I'm an Anglican priest for goodness's sake, right? How on earth can I be fair and accurate about a belief in Hinduism?" It's a good question and often, we think the more committed you are to one perspective, the less fair you will be to other perspectives. Over the years as I've wrestled with this, particularly back when I used to teach this at Macquarie University, I really came to the view actually that the more genuinely confident you are in your perspective, the freer you are to accurately and fairly describe the views of others.

Some of you may know an analogy I've used in the past of think of yourself as the curator of an art gallery of some beautiful works of art, one piece of which you know to have a unique quality, that just stands out. Now, if you are a truly assured art curator, what are you going to do as you invite people in to view the gallery? Are you going to dim the lights on every other painting and shine the spotlight on your favoured piece? Well, I think that would be a sure sign you weren't confident that the piece that you love had its own value that was spectacularly clear to everyone who came along. That would be a sign of insecurity actually. A truly assured art curator is surely going to turn all the best gallery lights on across the whole collection, confident that as discerning art critics enter into the building and see all the pieces in their best light, only then will this piece be able to be seen for what it is.

So, I'm really of the view that my conviction that Jesus Christ is reality leads to a confident fairness about the other religions. That's my commitment to you anyway. You can be the judge of it. I'm aware though that in a 30 minute talk like tonight, or maybe 33 or four minutes like tonight, the talk is going to be simplistic, isn't it? I mean, a great religion like Hinduism in 34 minutes? Come on. It's going to be a bit lumpy. I'll be dealing with some issues in some detail because they seem to be important and difficult to understand and other details I'll leave behind, but my promise is to do it as accurately and fairly as I can. When we taught this at Macquarie University, we spent four hours on Hinduism. So, we can't possibly give you all that material.

The second question is one that I feel like asking you and that is, are you willing to let the religions of the world be radically different from one another? Are you intellectually open to the idea that they have such profound differences, they can't all be true? I ask this question of you because so many people in our context want the religions to be saying the same thing. And so, you often hear people say, "On the

edges they differ, but the closer you get to them, the more they're exactly the same." When it could be that it's the opposite. Most Australians stand back so far from religion, they do look all the same. They all have funny buildings, right? They all say funny prayers, sort of. But the closer you get, it's very different. I think our Western culture is attracted to this idea of sameness out of a noble motive and they want to stop arguments. They're sick of absolute truth claims leading to disagreement and anger and even violence.

And so, I get that. I understand the motive, but I actually think it's a recipe for misunderstanding if you're always looking for the sameness and not allowing religions to speak on their own terms about their own priorities and truth claims. I think of it a bit like a dodgy marriage counsellor who says to a couple who comes for counselling, "Oh, look, don't worry about your differences. Let's not talk about the differences. Let's just talk about what you agree with. Let's all think happy thoughts." Now, that is a recipe for misunderstanding and in a marriage counselling setting, disaster. And I think the same is true in the world religions. We have to let the differences stand and make our own judgments in a context of civil friendship. That's the key. We don't want a view that says, "They're all the same." We want to say, "They can be whatever they are, but we engage with each other across these truth commitments with civil friendship."

Well, with those two preliminaries in mind, let me give you my best account of the content of Hinduism, and then I'll spend some time at the end on where Hinduism and Christianity part ways. We begin therefore with the origins of Hinduism and the first thing to say about the origins of Hinduism is that traditionally, Indians don't call their religion "Hinduism." Many of you will know that Hindu is just the word from Sanskrit meaning "river" and it's a reference to a region, the great Indus river. I mean, the "river" river, Indus, that runs right down the west coast of India there. And because British colonialists, when confronted with the variety of beliefs in India, couldn't come up with a term to describe this potpourri of ideas, they called it by a generic term that really just means Indian-ism. After all, the word India comes from the same word as Hindu and Indus. They're all the same word.

People in India tend to call their faith perspective "Sanatana Dharma." This is apparently difficult to translate, my Sanskrit is more than a little rusty, but the textbooks tell us it means something like eternal law. And the idea is not so much that this is an eternal religion as a founding principle that is true everywhere eternally. And so, many what we call Hindus don't think of themselves as having a religion. They just have a view about what is the eternal principle of reality. Actually, is I think a good way of thinking about what we in the west call religion. Well, we can't historically say that Santana Dharma is genuinely eternal, but we can say on good historical grounds that it probably begins in around 1500 BC. In 1500 BC, which is roughly the time between Abraham, if you like your biblical posts, and Moses. So Abraham 1800 BC, Moses 1250 BC.

About the time when the Israelites were a slave nation in Egypt, there was a great migration, or we're not exactly sure the motives, but over a period of time, there's a great migration of Persians. People from Iran often called the Aryan race, the noble race, who travelled across the Indus river into the Northwest India and brought with them their religion. And their religion is known by scholars as "Vedism." Vedism just means "wisdom." In fact, the English word wisdom comes from Vedism. Their beliefs were contained in a series of writings known as the "Vedas," from the same word, the wise writings. In this earliest layer of Hinduism, what you basically get is a series of rituals and hymns to a great pantheon of diverse gods, many of whom were worshiped over in Persia were just brought with them, others who were picked up from local deities and incorporated into this same pantheon.

And so, original Hinduism or Santana Dharma was profoundly polytheistic. Some of the more famous gods in the Vedas are Indra, the Great Storm God; Agni, who is actually the first god named in the Vedas, "Agni, to you, we give praise," is the opening line of the whole Hindu scriptures, this is the Fire God in Hinduism; and Vishnu, who becomes really important later on in Hinduism is also featured amongst the thousand or so gods praised and served in this original Vedic religion brought by Persians into Northwest India somewhere around 1500 BC. But the thing that we need to understand is that Hinduism doesn't remain simply polytheistic for very long, because what happens after this earliest period of the Vedas is that Indian philosophers in situ begin to reflect at a profound philosophical level about the meaning of this Vedic faith. What is the inner meaning of there being so many gods? Of there being so many rituals? Of all these hymns? What is the meaning behind the Vedas?

This philosophical reflection led to the most theologically and philosophically profound of the Hindu scriptures known as the "Upanishads." We think from the words, "to sit nearby." The image is of someone sitting at the feet of a guru to hear the philosophical wisdom. It's really in the Upanishads that Hinduism kicks off as a total world perspective and moves out of a simple polytheism into a much more grand vision of all of reality. And so I move to my second point, Hindu theology. The key question of these philosophers who inherited Vedism but in the Upanishads tried to make philosophical sense of it, the key question could probably be put like this, it's a double-barrelled question, what is the reality that stands behind the gods and existence itself? How do human beings relate to that reality? This is a classic example of what I said last week about religion basically being a rational search for explanation. You ask enough questions trying to explain reality and you're going to end up basically here. That's a jolly good rational question. What's the reality?

And the answer to this question unequivocally throughout the Upanishads is this simple but incredible word "Brahman." Brahman as a word appears in that earliest layer of Hindu scriptures, the Vedas, but only as a background force. In the Upanishads, this idea of Brahman is brought to the fore and said to be

not just a background force, but the ultimate unifying reality of everything. Brahman is all. Brahman holds all things together. Here is a quotation, an important one from the Upanishads... By the way, the Upanishads, traditionally, there's 108 different Upanishads. Some people argue there are over 200. Either way, about 500 times the size of the Bible, if you're interested in reading them. But here is a key quote about Brahman, "What is called Brahman? That is what this space outside man is. And what that space outside of a man is, that is what this space within a man is. All works, all desires, all sense, all tastes belong to it. It encompasses all this universe. Does not speak, has no care. This myself, Atman," important word, "within the heart is that Brahman. When I depart from hence, I shall merge into it, into Brahman."

Now, this is a very difficult concept for Westerners to get their heads around because Brahman is not quite God in the classical Western sense, for the simple reason that Brahman is typically not thought of as a personal, relational being, because that would be to divide reality. Brahman is the unifying principle of all reality. All the gods themselves are mere emanations from ultimate reality. If we had time, and we don't for which you'll thank me, we'd explore a debate that has gone on for centuries in Hinduism between the dualist school of Hinduism and the non-dualist or Advaita school in Hinduism. The non-dualist school seems to have been the dominant theological school that basically says Brahman is all, that all notions of personality and relationship are illusions because they divide reality into parts.

Inside you is a piece of Brahman, though that's not quite the right language, and it's this piece that I put up here, the "Atman." The Atman or soul is not the "you" think of as you, the you that is an individual person that relates to other persons. That's a false you. That's part of the problem. There's a you behind you, that is your true soul, that is in fact not just part of Brahman, it is Brahman. That is the ultimate reality, but you are locked away from seeing it, from experiencing it because of all sorts of illusions that make their way into your life. Two great analogies that you find in the Upanishads to describe this is a fire, which has sparks that release, and an ocean, which has a little drop of water that is separated from the ocean. And so, the idea is that your Atman, the soul inside you, is like a spark from the flame, made of the same substance, longing to be drawn back into whence it came, Brahman, or it's a drop of water that needs to be merged back into the ocean.

It's separate. It's lonely. It's in an illusory state, so long as it is separate from ultimate reality. And so, you can see the problem at the core of Hinduism. That is the problem Hinduism sees in the universe, in you. That is you are separate from Brahman, living under the illusion of separateness, of personality, of relationship, of material existence when ultimately, the real you wants to be back, must be back, logically should be back in Brahman itself. This introduces two other key doctrines that explain or describe this problem in humanity. They are these two doctrines of "Karma," which you will have heard before, and "Samsara." Karma doesn't just refer to the kind of payback. Often in the west, we talk about Karma just

being if you stub your toes, a friend might go, "Bad Karma." That's not really what it's about. Karma just means action.

But the way Hindu philosophy thinks about action is that action includes the reactions, the chain of cause and effect. All of that is Karma. And the thing is so long as you act in this world attached to the things of the world, you attract Karma. That is, your actions are bound to have reactions that tie you to the physical world and therefore keep you held in Samsara, the running around that is the endless cycle of reincarnation. Birth, death, rebirth and so on, and separateness from Brahman. This is the theological problem that Hindu philosophy seeks to solve. And it's important to remember that when you read the Upanishads, I can't claim to have read all of them, but I've read a lot of them, reincarnation isn't a good thing. You don't find anyone saying, "I was a princess in a former life. Ah, look at me," like you often hear some Hollywood people say, or the hope that, "Maybe, I'll be a pop star in my next life."

All of that's a bad thing. The whole goal is not to come back, because whether you're a pop star or a princess, you're in Samsara, trapped, when the real you ought to be connected to reality, to Brahman. The Upanishads put both doctrines, Karma and Samsara, beautifully together in this paragraph: "As a man acts, as he behaves, so does he become. Whoever does good becomes good. Whoever does evil becomes evil. By good works, a man becomes holy. By evil, he becomes evil." On this, there is this verse: "To what his mind and character are attached, to that attached a man goes with his works. Whatever deeds he does on earth, their awards he reaps. From the other world, he comes back here to the world of deed and work." Karma locking you into a world where Samsara, the endless cycle, is your experience. And with this theological background, we are all in a beautiful place to understand the all important Hindu doctrine of salvation, which is my third point.

How do Hindus understand salvation? They have a simple word for it. "Moksha" just means release. You can see instantly why it would just be called release. It's release in the sense that it's deliverance from the cycle of birth, death, rebirth. It's the drop returning to the ocean. Release from separateness, from the illusion of attachments to material reality. Again, the Upanishads describe this experience of moksha, this merger with Brahman perfectly as you'd imagine. Now, we come to the man without desire, that is without attachments. "His bodily functions do not depart when he departs this world." In other words, they don't go with him. He's free. "Being very Brahman in his Atman, to Brahman does he go. When all desires which shelter in the heart detach themselves, then does this mortal man become immortal. To Brahman, he wins through. Then is this incorporeal, immortal spirit Brahman indeed. Light indeed."

Salvation. Moksha. Release. The question is, how do you get there? I get it. My Atman's attached. It's locked in here to this cycle of birth and rebirth. How do I merge with Brahman? You got to read a lot of the Upanishads to get the sense of what it means to be saved, but there's one text in Indian literature

that is on all accounts the most widely read Hindu sacred scripture. If you've read any Hindu scripture, I bet it's the Bhagavad Gita because in the Bhagavad Gita, you have the answer to the question, how do I experience salvation? The Bhagavad Gita falls within a much larger epic story, but the Bhagavad Gita is often published separately. In my English copy, it just runs to 70 pages. And the Bhagavad Gita is basically a poem that is a conversation between a certain Prince Arjuna and his charioteer, who turns out to be none other than the God Krishna who is an avatar of the higher deity Vishnu who is an emanation of the preserving qualities of ultimate reality, Brahman.

Okay. Basically, the story goes like this. Prince Arjuna is a warrior and he's on the edge of the battle lines about to work out whether he's going to take the opposing army. He's this kind of guy that goes, "I don't want to fight them. Enough fighting already." His charioteer appears to him and they get into a conversation about how to be saved, how to experience moksha. And then, it turns out that the charioteer is Krishna. So perfect interview with a god who is an avatar of Vishnu, who is an emanation of Brahman, right? Of course, you can ask, "How do I experience release?" The reason this text is so important today is that Krishna very carefully outlines three paths of salvation and you can quite literally take your pick, though Krishna gives some very clear advice as to which is the advisable path.

And so, let me talk about Hindu salvation in its three Margas, three ways or paths of salvation. You'll notice that in Sanskrit, they all have the word "yoga" in them. Don't confuse this with the physical practice of yoga that is so popular in the west, although that's obviously related. Hatha Yoga, the original yoga, comes out of a branch of Hinduism known as Shaivism. But the point is that Yoga means oneness. And so, it's all about oneness with Brahman. That's the whole goal in Hinduism, right? And so, each of them are called something Yoga. This one's called actions Yoga or actions oneness, Karma Yoga. And so, Krishna explains to Prince Arjuna: salvation path number one, do good deeds that will move you toward Brahman by sheer force of your behavior. And if you think that sounds like, "Oh, I'll go for that one," there are two caveats.

The two caveats are, and it's very clear in the Bhagavad Gita, if you want to read the section, that your deeds must be the deeds according to your place in society. Not everyone has the same duty. Depending on your station in life, and Hinduism teaches that there are these Varnas, these places that each person has, each group of people have in society, you have particular duties according to your Varna, your place in society. And so, they have to be those duties and not just like... There's just not one ethic for everyone. That's the first thing. The second caveat is that all your deeds in this world must be done for duty's sake only, not with any mind to the fruits of your deeds. That is, no attachment to your deeds. You're simply driven because this is the duty that I have in the world. I perform them without any intention about the results.

Krishna is quite clear about this in section three. And so, it's section three to section five in the Bhagavad Gita are all about this path and you can read it at your leisure later. But he explains this path in this way, "Without being attached to the fruits of activities, one should act as a matter of duty, for by working without attachment, one attains the Supreme." Salvation path number one, do the deeds according to your station in life and do them without any attachment to the results of the deeds. And after a while, maybe numerous reincarnations, you will experience the Supreme. That is, merge with Brahman. Hindu salvation path number two, knowledge oneness, Jnana Yoga. This is ascetic contemplation of oneness with Brahman. Krishna says to Arjuna, "You can almost think your way back to Brahman because all of these illusions that keep you from Brahman, you can see through them by intense ascetic practice."

Now, if that sounds like the easy path, you need to remember Krishna says it's the most difficult path. It's the path of the serious ascetic who's willing to give up everything to go into a trance to break through. Here is the Bhagavad Gita explaining it in section six and this section goes for many pages. "One should engage oneself in the practice of Jnana Yoga with undeviating determination and faith. One should abandon without exception all material desires. Gradually, step-by-step with full conviction, one should become situated in trance. By virtue of his identity with Brahman, he is liberated being freed from all material contamination." And so, you know the tradition, if you've been to India, of there being yogis, holy men who have chosen the path of ascetic knowledge, knowledge breaking through to Brahman. Once you can fix yourself on being very Brahman, then when your body dies, to Brahman you will go and not come back. But as Krishna says, "I'm warning you, Arjuna, it's really difficult." As it sounds, right?

Third path of salvation, Bhakti Yoga. Devotion oneness. That is, devotional service of gods or a favoured god who can help you merge with Brahman. In other words, you can live your life with such commitments to a god of your family's tradition or several gods. And because of the measure of your devotion, that god will assist you because the gods have extra blessings that can move you toward the goal of merging with Brahman. This is by far the dominant path of salvation pursued by Hindus today. If you live in this world with absolute devotion to Krishna or to one of the other gods along with prayers and meditation and temple worship, then your god will deliver you from Karma and its fruits, from Samsara.

Section 12 of the Bhagavad Gita and for many pages after, puts it like this. "He whose mind is fixed on my personal form, always engaged in worshiping me with great and supernatural faith is considered by me to be most perfect." Krishna is actually recommending this path of salvation. "For one who worships me, giving up all his activities to me and being devoted to me without deviation, engaged in devotional service and always meditating on me, for him, I am the swift deliverer from the ocean of birth and death, from Samsara." So, devotion to your favored god can win through to the ultimate reality.

Well, in too brief a time, there's an account of the core Hindu beliefs. Let me spend our remaining minutes talking about some of the places where Hinduism and Christianity part ways. I want to make clear that my goal here is to be as fair as I can. In fact, don't think of what I'm about to do as describing what Christians think is wrong with Hinduism. I'd like to turn it around and say, actually, think of this as what Orthodox Hinduism would say is wrong with Christianity. I have four things that are wrong with Christianity from the perspective of Hinduism and really, this is just a way for us to see the differences. Number one is of course, personal monotheism. The Bible is absolutely unwaveringly committed to the idea that there's one god, monotheism, and that is personal, relational.

But in Hinduism, Brahman is typically thought of as an absolute, impersonal reality which cannot be known, not directly. And so, Hindus don't tend to pray to Brahman because to do that would threaten the notion of Brahman's unified reality, that he is the principle in which there is no division, no personality, no relationalism. Hindus, of course, pray to their favoured gods like Krishna, who is an avatar or manifestation of Vishnu, who is an emanation of ultimate reality. So, there's a chain of being and that's where this personal devotion comes. But Christianity makes the error, and I'll put it like that, of insisting not only that there are no gods in any sense, but that the one god who is ultimate reality is inherently personal. In fact, Christians go way out on a limb, from the perspective of Orthodox Hinduism, by saying god is in fact a trinity, that god is in his inner core, father, son, and holy spirit, that at the very being of god, the one god, is a relationship.

That's how radically committed Christianity is to this notion that relationship is the core of the universe. But from a Hindu perspective, this so threatens the unity principle, the oneness of being that it is highly problematic. Orthodox Hindus find this a real problem, personal monotheism, but when they investigate this second doctrine, they find this equally problematic: the incarnation of Jesus. That is the notion that Jesus is fully god, fully man, and took on actual flesh. Incarnation actually comes from Latin. In meaning "in," and caro meaning "flesh." "In flesh." So, it's kind of like putting it in your face the doctrine of the incarnation, the in-fleshness of god. Now, in Hinduism, the gods only ever embody, and I use the word body in inverted commas because they are appearances rather than flesh, they embody only ever aspects of ultimate reality.

I've already said we'll stick with Krishna. Krishna is an avatar, an appearance, a manifestation, or literally a descent from Vishnu. But Vishnu being the higher god, the closer to Brahman, only represents the preserving qualities of Brahman. Whereas, Shiva, who is another god on the same level as Vishnu, who has his own avatars like Hanuman, the Great Monkey King God, doesn't represent the preserving qualities of Brahman but the controlling and destroying aspects of Brahman. That's very important to Hindu theology. Here's the mistake that Christianity makes, viewed from the perspective of Orthodox Hinduism. Jesus is fully god in the flesh. And the scriptures almost rub this in our face. There are many

texts we could look at here, but Colossians 1:19, the Apostle Paul in the first century says, "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Jesus."

And then, you just turn over the page in Colossians and he says pretty much the same thing, "For in Christ, all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form." Now, Paul wasn't aware of Hinduism, even though it looks like he's so stressing this, but he was aware of Greek philosophy. And the Greeks had a real problem getting their heads around how anything, any bodily reality, any finite manifestation can represent infinity. And so, they thought Christianity was mad, but Paul didn't care. He rubs it in. All of the fullness of the deity is in Jesus. Jesus himself said, "If you've seen me, you've seen the father." Jesus isn't just god on a good day. He's god on every day, according to Christianity.

The third problem with Christianity from a classical Hindu perspective is its teaching of the goodness of creation and the body. We've already seen that in Hinduism, the goal is to escape material illusions and enter into Brahman's immaterial reality. Bodiliness is part of the problem. It traps you in this world of illusion, of Samsara. By contrast, as those of you who read the Bible well know, the Bible is on a mission to convince you that stuff is good. And the reason you know it's on a mission is because it's the main topic of the first page of the Bible. You open up the first page of the Bible and it basically runs like this: god made the light and it was good and he made the land and that was good too. He made the veggies and they were good. He made the two great lights, the sun and the moon. They were good too. God created the creatures, including the human beings, and they were good and the wild animals and they were good too.

And at the very end of the chapter one, so their first page of the Bible, it ends by saying, "And God saw all that he'd made and it was very good." I mean, the Bible's first theme actually against the context, give you a little parenthetical history here, of many ancient, near-Eastern, including Persian, views of the body and of material reality which denigrated material reality as not the real stuff. The Bible bends over backwards to say, "No, it's good. It's really good." And more than that in Christianity, ultimate salvation is of the body and of creation. Unlike the idea of your soul leaving bodiliness behind and merging with the immaterial reality of Brahman, Christianity has the audacity to say, "Actually, we believe the creation itself and the body will be redeemed." There are so many passages that I could look at here, but here's just one from the first century. Romans 8 from the New Testament. Look at the language. It's very deliberate.

"The creation itself will be liberated." And notice it doesn't say, "We will be liberated from the creation." It says, "The creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay." In other words, that decay and that groaning in creation, that's what's going. Creation isn't going anywhere. It's enjoying new life. It goes on

to say, "And brought into the freedom of the glory of the children of God." In other words, what's going to happen to the children of god is going to happen to the creation. Okay, so what's happening to the children of god? They're going to get new bodies. Look what it says. "The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for the redemption of our bodies." This is why The Apostle's Creed, that statement of faith, that all Christians throughout the centuries and across the denominations have said, in its final stanza remarks, "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."

This isn't a reference to Jesus' bodily resurrection, which was talked about in stanza two of the creed. This is our bodily resurrection and eternal life in a new creation, in a new body. Redemption in Christianity is redemption of the whole person, the whole creation. And I guess my point is, from a Hindu perspective, that is too this worldly, that doesn't account enough for the fact, that material reality is the problem and must be removed. It's an illusion after all. My fourth and final distinctive about Christianity that is problematic to all religions, including Hinduism, is the notion of salvation through faith alone. It is already clear that in the three paths of salvation that Krishna explains to Prince Arjuna, you're heavily involved in your own release. You perform the works, you bear the responsibility.

And so we read this Upanishad, "Whoever does good becomes good. Whoever does evil becomes evil. By good works, a man becomes holy. By evil, he becomes evil." But Christianity teaches something very different, that there is nothing humans can do to become good. Christianity has such a radically negative view of humans' ability to be good, combined with a radically positive view of god's free willingness to lift us and to support us and to free us. And so, we've already read tonight the passage that was just read to us, Jesus telling the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the religious person and the immoral person. Jesus says, "The religious person speaks about how good he is and the sinner just says, 'God have mercy on me, a sinner.'" And Jesus says, "I tell you, that man, the sinner, simply by asking God for forgiveness, went home right with God."

But the New Testament is full of this kind of statement. Here are two passages, one from Ephesians and one from Romans. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." Not by works, so that no one can boast. I don't know how Paul could have made that point more clearly. Or in Romans 3:23, this majestic, if slightly dense, passage: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and all are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith."

Christianity teaches that we can't do enough to reach god. So, god came and reached us. Christ lived the perfect life none of us could live and then offered up that perfect life on a cross, bearing our penalty in

himself, so that he received our punishment and we received his perfection to be received through faith. Not deeds, not knowledge, not even devotion. Trust. Now, Christians view this positively. I can see some smiley faces when I talk about this stuff. This is the stuff that lights you up. It's the reason you're a Christian. And so, it's hard for Christians to get their head around that most of the world religions think this is illogical and ignoble. If you contributed to the problem, logic demands that you ought to contribute to the solution. You got to admit there's something deeply illogical about that. It's a cop out.

Why don't you woman up and bear responsibility? I've had people of other faiths and of no faith say, "That's a problem for me." And so, I realize this teaching of Christianity, of salvation through faith alone, is a reason to reject Christianity in the eyes of some. Of course, in the eyes of others, it is a reason to embrace Christianity. I'm not sure if I've told you before about a friend of [inaudible 00:44:29] in Darwin, Shashi and [DiDi 00:56:37]. Shashi was born in India in the Brahman Varna, the highest states that you can have in India. This is not to be confused with Brahman as in "Brahman." If I use Brahman, that's the ultimate unifying principle behind the world. Brahmins are the Varna or place in society, the people group who are most in touch with Brahman. They're the priestly class of India.

Like many high-born Indians, Shashi was sent to a posh school. And in that period, most posh schools in India were Christian schools. And unhappily, from her parents' perspective, Shashi came to love Jesus Christ and embraced Jesus Christ fully. When she came back, it caused incredible problems in the family home because her father was a figurehead of Hinduism in their town. In fact, Shashi remembers growing up, whenever a Yogi or a famous guru would come in for teaching sessions, they would always stay in Shashi's home. And so her father, very devout Hindu, decided the best thing would be to marry her off. And so, he married her off to a very devout, Orthodox Hindu thinking that this would keep her on the right path.

Unfortunately, Shashi's husband was also a violent man and beat her mercilessly. I must add, this has nothing to do with Hinduism, because of course, the principle of nonviolence is very important in Hinduism as you know. But this man beat her mercilessly. She fled. Since there's no way she could go back home being from such a prominent family, she fled to Australia. And to cut a long story short, that's where she met [DiDi 00:56:37], who was also a former Hindu, was a Christian and they married and live up in Darwin still. Her relationship with her father was very problematic. The shame she brought on them and the departure from the family tradition was unbearable and it took many years before Shashi could pluck up the courage to write letters. And it took years before her father would return letters.

John Dickson

But slowly, he softened back to Shashi and they developed a warm relationship. Then they started to have phone calls and the relationship really did begin to blossom and her father promised that he would

start to investigate Christianity. Shashi said, "Read the gospels." So he, beautiful father, decided to start reading the gospels and they would have conversations about this. When I was in Darwin, I had the great privilege of having Shashi get out a tape of an audio recording of her father in India telling his own story in about 15 minutes of audio. It goes like this, the point of it anyway. He said what struck him as he read the gospels was that the chief apostle Peter was such a failure all the way through the gospels, including at the very most important point of the gospel where people have arrested Jesus and Peter follows but from a distance and Peter is asked, "Aren't you with Jesus?" And Peter said, "No, I don't know him."

And then he's asked again, "No, I don't know him," three times. Shashi's dad said, "I read that and I thought how amazing that this is meant to be the leader of Christianity?" And then he said, "I reflected on the fact that the most well-known monument in all of Christian history is St. Peter's Basilica." He said, "What religion has its main monument dedicated to such a faithless man?" And he said it dawned on him, at its heart, Christianity is about the faithless being freely forgiven. That thought got so plugged into his mind that this man, amidst great controversy in their town, openly embraced Jesus Christ.

And he said in the conclusion of this tape that I heard, so I'm telling you his words, he said, "As a Hindu, Hinduism knows all about gods of glory, gods of power, gods of wisdom, gods of judgment and there is nothing in our tradition about the lord who embodied all of god's glory and gave himself up on a cross for a faithless man like the Apostle Peter. For a faithless man," he said, "like me." My point in ending this way is not to say, therefore, Christianity is true. Therefore, Christianity is good. I'm just saying Christianity is different and as I said last week, the profound differences between the faiths cannot tell you which one is true. Those differences certainly do not tell you that none of them is true, but these differences probably tell us they are not all true. And with that, though it's late, I'm going to force my way through to question time.

Speaker 2:

I just want to congratulate you for your wonderful discussion on Hinduism. You have studied Hinduism very well, so I congratulate you. Thank you very much.

John Dickson

Thank you.

Speaker 2:

And wonderful discussion.

John Dickson

Thank you very much. That means a lot to me.

Speaker 3:

John, I just want to say the same. Good, true, and beautiful. And I just found that inspiring. So, thanks for that. If I was hunting for grace in Hinduism, are you saying that I wouldn't find it?

John Dickson

All I can say is I've read a ton of Hindu scriptures, lots of the Vedas, lots of the Upanishads, all of the Bhagavad Gita and I've never come across this idea of free forgiveness through simple trust. So even the easy path of salvation in the Bhagavad Gita, the Bhakti, rather devotion, I mean, read it for yourself. From section 12 on, there's lots of Krishna loves you, Krishna will help you. Lots of that, but it's conditional. It's conditional on your devotion. I mean, I read the text. "Unswerving devotion in all your activities, meditating on me always, engaged in devotional service," which means temple worship and worship in the home. "Then, son of Pritha," he says, "I will be your swift deliverer from the ocean of birth and death." To my mind, that's as close as you get to the Christian doctrine of salvation.

Speaker 4:

When you talked about the goodness of creation in the body mentioned in scripture and the verses that showed that really clearly, why are there big sections of Christian history which have this pie in the sky when you die sort of heavenly, how did that become so dominant?

John Dickson

There are multiple answers to this question. One is it only did so really recently. Prudish Christianity is actually pretty new on the planet. Really? It's only because, no offense, you guys don't know much about Christianity before 30 years ago, right? Do you know what in the 12th century they thought about the body? Well, I can introduce you to Thomas Aquinas waxing lyrical about the beauty of creation and the importance of bodiliness and how wonderful alcohol was. And you'd think, "Oh, it wasn't at the period where [inaudible 00:54:03]." Part of my answer is they weren't. It's just that some really interesting Christians of recent Christian history have become quite negative about the body. And probably, as they saw culture become more and more permissive, Christians overreacted by becoming more and more prudish. That's one explanation.

John Dickson

The other is that Greek thought did have an enduring influence in some sections of Christianity. Christianity was always at fight with its Greek heritage and Greek thought was very much like Hindu thought, partly because Persia's right in the middle of both of them and Persia went east and it went west. This idea of the illusion of the body and the capricious nature of physical creation entered into the Greek mindset as well. And so, the Church did wrestle with this and it was one of the real problems the Church had convincing Greeks to become Christians because they kept on saying, "Oh, we believe the creation's good and that you'll be raised with a body." A what? In fact, do you remember last week's



passage, Act 17? It says when they heard about the resurrection of the dead, they scoffed because every Greek knew death means entry into immateriality, not to material reality.

So, it's those Greek heritages playing havoc with Christianity that have also played a little bit of a part. But I basically think medieval Christianity and early Christianity was far better than some sections of Christianity today on this issue of the body. And you only have to walk through... Oh, I'm going on and on. You only have to walk through graveyards of say, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16th, 17th centuries churches and they all say stuff like, "Until the resurrection," "Sleeping until God makes all things new." You don't find, "Oh, Uncle Jim's just happily in heaven playing a harp." You don't find this spirit view. In that era of Christianity, they knew resurrection of the body and a new creation was the thing, partly because it's in the creed. The whole great thing about saying the creed every week is that you have to say, "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." Anyway, now, I will sit down. Thanks.