

World Religions *and* Ethical Systems

Hinduism



Hinduism, one of the world's oldest surviving religions, is the major religion of India. It also has followers in Indonesia, as well as in parts of Africa, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere. Hinduism is a collection of religious beliefs that developed over thousands of years. Hindus worship several gods, which represent different forms of Brahman. Brahman is the most divine spirit in the Hindu religion. Hinduism, like Buddhism, stresses that persons reach true enlightenment and happiness only after they free themselves from their earthly desires. Followers of Hinduism achieve this goal through worship, the attainment of knowledge, and a lifetime of virtuous acts. The sound “Om,” or “Aum,” shown above, is the most sacred syllable for Hindus. It often is used in prayers.

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RESEARCH WEB LINKS Go online for more on Hinduism.

▼ Ritual

Each year, thousands of Hindus make a pilgrimage to India's Ganges River. The Ganges is considered a sacred site in the Hindu religion. Most Hindus come to bathe in the water, an act they believe will cleanse and purify them. The sick and disabled come in the belief that the holy water might cure their ailments.





▲ Leadership

Gurus, or spiritual teachers, play a major role in spreading Hindu beliefs. These holy men are believed to have had the gods' words revealed to them. Brahmin priests, like the one shown here, are also religious leaders. They take care of the divine images in the temples and read from the sacred books.



▲ Celebration

Each spring, Hindus in India celebrate the festival of Holi. Originally a harvest festival, Holi also symbolizes the triumph of good over evil. The festival recalls the story of Prince Prahlada, who faced death rather than cease worshipping Vishnu. During this joyous celebration, people dance in the streets and shower each other with colored powder and dyed water.

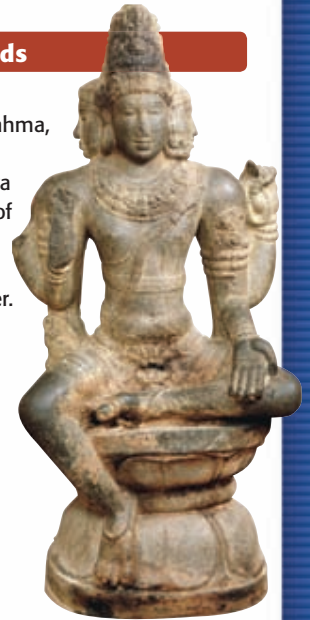
Learn More About Hinduism

Major Hindu Sects



Three Main Gods

This statue represents Brahma, creator of the universe. Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are the three main gods of Hinduism. Vishnu is the preserver of the universe, while Shiva is its destroyer.



Rig Veda

PRIMARY SOURCE

The Vedas are the oldest Hindu scriptures—and they are older than the sacred writings of any other major religion. The following is a verse from the Rig Veda, the oldest of the four Vedas:

*He who gives liberally goes
straight to the gods; on the
high ridge of heaven he stands
exalted.*

Rig Veda 1.125.5

Chapter Connection

For a closer look at the origins and beliefs of Hinduism, see pages 66–67 of Chapter 3, and pages 193–194 of Chapter 7.