

29 Hinduism: Not “All Paths Lead to God”

Here I would like to quote the Beatles from their “Maharishi” “Hindu” phase but may not. Listen to songs such as “Fool on the Hill” and “Within You, Without You”. Listen to “Penny Lane”, particularly the verse about the nurse who feels as if she’s in a play.

PART 1: Introduction

First Words.

This chapter is not as long as it seems. A lot of material is optional and is marked as such.

Hinduism is beautiful. It fosters huge imagination and feels like a grand adventure. It has profound ideas such as we are all alike and we should feel compassion for everyone. Yet Hinduism also is a big system; eats the world; combines moral relativism, class society, and traditionalism; uses bad relativism (“all paths lead to God”); asserts it is superior to other religions; encompasses other religions; sees most people as tokens in a game rather than as persons; and subverts its own ideals. Indian society is cut into rigid classes, has a gap between rich and poor, and is sexist. Indian culture and Hinduism foster people who are legalistic, argumentative, haughty, superior, and pushy. In the past, Hinduism served Indian society well. Now, it needs to be re-thought to remain viable in the pluralistic democracy and capitalism of the present and future.

I am uneasy with Hinduism. It uses a beautiful vision to support ideas, acts, and relations that I don’t like. Hinduism is like Romanticism, and Romanticism already has too much bad influence. Americans already have an attitude that enables faults similar to those of Hindu Indian society. Ideologies like Hinduism appeal to Americans. Americans likely won’t adopt Hinduism but Americans could adopt a doctrine like Hinduism and so overlook Jesus and Western values. To do justice to issues, this chapter is long. To get a feel for how a belief system like Hinduism can merge with Western culture, read: Herman Hesse: “Steppenwolf”, “The Glass Bead Game”, “Siddhartha”, and “Narcissus and Goldmund”; Aldus Huxley’s “Brave New World”; and stories by Jorge Luis Borges.

Disclaimers.

This chapter assesses what a thoughtful Hindu might believe, not widespread popular religion. Much of what I say also applies to: Mahayana, Romanticism, Gnosticism, Descent, Emanation, levels of reality, God sleeping, the world as a dream, dreams within dreams, and good and evil need each other; but I can’t go into those topics. For Arjuna, Krishna, and the Bhagavad Gita, see the chapter here on Codes. The term “system” is used loosely and does not refer to Western formal ideas from after about 1930. See the chapters on Issues for more about systems that eat the world.

I omit aspects of Hinduism that Hindus might consider important, such as the stages of life, the Code of Manu, purity, ascetics, world renunciation, world conquering, and Hindu deities. I do not discuss the roots of ideas except for brief mention of some documents such as the Vedas and Upanishads. For some of this material, see the Bibliography.

If all French Roman Catholics converted to Hinduism, they would still act like French Roman Catholics for generations. If all Indian Hindus converted to Lutheranism, they would still act like Indian Hindus for generations. Religion is not only some beliefs, acts, and attitudes. Religion is more a product of culture than of dogma, and it shapes culture. Hinduism is more an aspect of Indian culture than the product of dogma. Here I can only describe ideas and attitudes. I can't settle relations of culture to religion.

Contrary to what Americans think, Indian culture is closer to Russian culture than Chinese or Arab culture. Indian culture is one branch in Indo-European culture, which includes American culture. Most features of Hinduism are true of other Indo-European cultures. I can't definitely separate Hinduism from other Indo-European cultures. Other groups in South Asia share a version of Indo-European culture that is related to Indian culture but the people are not Hindu, such as in Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Some groups in South Asia are not Indo-European but did contribute to Indian culture and Hinduism, such as Bengalis and Dravidians. I can't sort out all this either.

I do not describe Hinduism so much as an ideological system that is like Hinduism. I use American pop culture to describe Hinduism. What I do is like using "Bollywood" (the Indian film industry) to explain the MSNBC or FOX view of American politics. Even so, I think I don't distort too much.

Just as I can't untangle culture and religion, so I can't see Hinduism apart from the fact that it is a big system etc. I report on what I know from my reading and from having known Hindus.

Young Hindus will change Hinduism as it goes around the world.

People live in both ideal and real systems at the same time: the ideal American Constitution versus the bizarre political reality that Americans have lived in since about 1980; or ideal Christianity versus the real lived Christianity of a particular community church. The real system is most important but we have to get at it from the ideal. For many reasons, people insist wrongly that, in their case, the ideal is the real. To overcome their objections requires mountains of evidence. This book is not that kind. I mix the ideal and real, using the ideal to catch glimpses of the real, and without justifying what I say.

Every criticism of Hinduism also can be aimed at all major religions except maybe for Taoism, Zen, and simple moral teachings such as of Jesus. I don't point out where we also should criticize other religions except in a few places. Why I pick on Hinduism should be clear. I consistently defend the teachings of Jesus combined with practicality and Western values. I stress Western ideas of the person against Hindu ideas of Dharma, karma, and system.

Hindus argue about whether the world is all-one, dual, plural, dual in single, single in dual, plural in single, or plural in dual. The dominant philosophical trend in Hinduism for centuries has been "Advaita Vedanta" ("non-dualism after the Vedas"). It says the world is not dual (not "subject and object", "this and that", or "me and you"), the world is single but shows as dual (mind and body) or plural (mind, body, process, self,

other, quality, quantity, etc.) to most humans. Other schools offer alternatives. These issues are not relevant to most Hindus, including intellectuals. I don't address them here. What I have to say does not require a stance on these issues.

India is a big diverse place, many Hindus now live outside India, and Hinduism is a big diverse religion. For more on India and Hinduism, see the Internet.

Although Americans live in a big bureaucratic society, still we see ourselves as individualistic crusaders against the system and for cosmic freedom, and we have biases as a result. We used to think we were all John Wayne or James Dean and now we think we are all Frodo, Neo, Luke Skywalker or Trinity. I do not escape the biases of my culture and society but what I say here is more true than false even so.

I repeat not to harangue you into agreeing but because I want people to be clear about my intended meaning. Please be patient.

Synopsis of Hinduism.

Hinduism is like a well-thought-out long-running version of Western Romanticism in which God plays by forgetting himself so as to dream the world. Reality is a dream to God but real to us. The dream of God is the only reality there is; it sets the rules to live by; and we need to accept the situation. God dreams a system in which people have many lives and the system as a whole is joyous even if some particular lives are hard. The core idea is "Dharma". "Dharma" can refer to God as origin, God in action, sacredness, the power of sacredness, the big system, rules in general, rules for one element such as an occupation (warrior) or gender (proper behavior for men or women), rules for society as a whole, and rules for any particular individual because of his-her position society and the Dharma system. "Dharma" can mean "the identity, logic, basic character, and operation of a distinct thing" as in "the Dharma of farming". Hindus called Christianity "the Dharma of Christians" or "the Dharma of Westerners".

The Dharma system is a big system and a system that eats the world. It is relativistic, and uses hierarchy (superior and inferior) and encompassing. It uses a "hole in the center", the vagueness in the idea of Dharma. The Dharma system uses "everything in its place" to rationalize roles. People in a Dharma system have attitudes typical of people in big systems that eat the world etc. The vagueness of the idea of "Dharma" allows some people to interpret so as to control the system and control behavior. The big system of Dharma and traditional Indian Hindu stratified society mutually support each other; that mutual support is part of the control.

The elements in the Dharma system include individual persons; groups made by gender, age, socio-economic class, occupation, ethnicity, and religion; whole societies; and "callings" such as holy person or priest. A combination of class-occupation-ethnicity is a "Varna" ("color") or "caste" as in the light-skinned warrior-and-ruler caste. The socio-economic-class-caste-occupation groups are ranked. Each person has a self. Each person also has a social-personal Dharma such as priest, scholar, rebel, man, woman, wife, householder, husband, child, elder, student, teacher, holy person, etc. The self Dharma and the social-personal Dharma of a person should be the same. Social-personal Dharma ties a person to the Dharma of society. The Dharma of society ties society and people to the big system of Dharma. Society mirrors the big Dharma system and society supports the big Dharma system.

People are not so much persons as they are players in the big Dharma system. People respond to each other as roles in the big Dharma system. Acts of goodness and badness are done toward other roles in the big Dharma system rather than directly toward other particular persons.

Nearly all elements are hierarchical and support each other. Higher is better and encompasses lower. The highest two elements are Hindu holy persons who know the Dharma as well as any human can, and Hindu traditional stratified society. Intellectually, a holy person encompasses everything while socially Hindu society encompasses all relations. Despite superficially seeming apart, in their way, holy people have a place in society even if not in the middle of it.

The one-and-only society closest to the Dharma is Indian Hindu traditional stratified society. All social-economic-class-occupation-caste groups ("castes") arrange by higher and lower. Lower castes support upper castes. Upper castes guide lower castes and guide the whole system. Lower castes cannot fully know upper castes. Upper castes can fully know lower castes. What lower do castes know is a distorted lesser reflection of the greater deeper better knowing of upper castes. Every person must do his-her part, including that each person should believe what is right for his-her caste, so as to keep the whole mutually beneficial system going, both society and the big Dharma system of the world. Every person has a role. Upper castes have a duty to guide lower castes, and the lower castes have a duty to obey. Every person has the ability to know the duties (Dharma) of his-her position.

Hindu society makes all social groups relative by finding them a place in this system, including non-Hindu groups and religions. Any social, ethnic, religious, or occupation group can belong, if the group causes little trouble, and it can keep up relations with other Hindu groups. Even groups that do not fully know the Dharma can find a secure satisfying place. Eventually every group and its ideas is modified, absorbed, and becomes Hindu in its way. If Christian computer nerds lived in India, and formed their own society, eventually they would be a caste in practice, even if they did not know it and did not accept it. Their children would know it and accept it.

Hinduism goes along with this kind of society because this kind is the most realistic arrangement given human nature and human social nature, that is, human Dharma; and because the Dharma made humans on Earth. No other kind of society blends human individuality and desire for success with needs for other people and for proper order. This society is the essential expression of Dharma on Earth. This society enacts Hinduism and Hinduism explains this kind of society.

Who you are, what you do, and how you live are a service to the system; but do not mistake your role for full truth. Only some Hindu holy people are fully aware of God playing and of the many forms he-she takes in play.

One ideal of Hinduism is to understand the whole system but few people can achieve the ideal. That is as it should be. The complete system, with its joy, depends on the persistence of many people who don't fully understand. The people who don't fully understand are the part of God that is still asleep and still at play. They are as much God as the people who are awake.

Rather than see the full system, the vast majority of people find spiritual success in devotion (bhakti) to a particular aspect of the system such as a god (Vishnu), avatar (Krishna), or a principle (non-violent good action, or “ahimsa”). Devotion can unite you with the system as well as can knowing. You can play out your role in the family-social-spiritual system by devotion. Devotion leads you to right conduct and spiritual success. The idea that devotion was a fully legitimate way to participate in the system likely was the key idea that brought Hinduism together and led to victory over other religious ideas, in particular over Buddhism. I think some Hindus see Christianity and Islam in terms of devotion.

Once you get the idea of the system, you can dispense with the idea that God created it; you can think entirely in terms of the Dharma making itself and making the system together all at once. The Dharma system is something that works as it does, and sustains itself, for its own reasons, like the self-creating universe of some physics and some atheism. If you want to keep the idea of God, and think there is a relation between God and the Dharma, that thinking is alright too.

Hinduism can encompass all other systems; no other system can encompass it. Hinduism explains itself, other religions cannot fully explain themselves, and Hinduism always explains other religions better than they can explain themselves. Hinduism is the big dream while other religions are sub-dreams within it. The only true full outlook is Hinduism. All religions are sub-plots in the big plot of Dharma playing - even when they do not know it or deny it. Other religions have interesting valuable insights. All their insights can be understood as an aspect of Hinduism even when Hindus did not think of the idea first. Non-Hindu religions are like lower classes (castes) while Hinduism is like the one highest class (caste). Non-Hindu religions sometimes are admirable as a warrior (Islam), ruler (Confucius), or teacher (Jesus) is admirable; but other religions are never like Hindu holy people, who know the full system and always rank above warriors, rulers, and teachers. People in other religions are less aware than Hindus-in-general even when a Hindu is not a holy person. Hinduism is to other religions as Hindu holy people are to other good natured but mere commoners. Most other religions can be seen as kinds of devotion to particular gods (Yahweh or Allah) or to particular ideals (Chinese humanism). Religious relativism arises naturally in Hinduism. Hinduism can say naturally “all paths lead to God” because other religions are minor variations of it and all lead back to it. Other religions are not false but not full either. Hinduism is better, superior, and encompasses other religions.

To a Westerner yearning for adventure, Hinduism makes sense of the feeling that what matters is not the destination but the road. The idea of a destination is just another method to make the road interesting and important, and to keep us going when we might get temporarily discouraged. “The road goes ever on and on”. Hinduism is not like “and miles to go before I sleep” because it is the “miles to go” that matters rather than the “I sleep”; the “miles to go” never ends; Hinduism is already the “I sleep (and dream)” if we only knew it; and, if we did know it, we would never want it to end.

Hinduism might be the most complete and successful ever religious “system that eats the world”.

Synopsis of My Assessment.

Although Hinduism tells us that we are all alike and we should feel compassion toward all sentient beings, Hinduism does not produce people who act like that. Hinduism does not develop the ideas that people are all persons and we should work hard to make the world better. Hinduism does not develop the ideas

of persons and a better world that are latent in the ideas of likeness and compassion. Instead, Hinduism uses the idea of Dharma to develop a system in which a person fulfills his-her role in the system and uses the system to his-her advantage. By relying on a Dharma system instead of persons and a better world, Hinduism undermines compassion and “we are all alike”. It enables conniving, striving, class, relativism, secret disdain for other religions, etc.

My view: Act according to simple decency, goodness, the Golden Rule, and “applies equally” first without regard to any system. Treat everybody as a person regardless of social status, gender, age, ethnicity, religion, etc. Work hard to make a better world. If you act on this basis first, without regard to system, then you are alright as a human, you will help others, and do little harm; and, if there is a system, you will do well enough too. If you try to act in accord with a system first, likely you will forget simple decency, betray your humanity, hurt people, hurt nature, rationalize bad behavior, and do badly in the system. If you act without regard to a system, and there is a system, you might miss out on glory, wealth, or power that comes by knowing the system, but, so what? If you try to please the system, you will hurt yourself and decent people. “What does it profit a person if he-she gains the whole world but loses his-her soul?” This assessment seems like my version of Pascal’s Wager (see chapter on codes) applied to Hinduism but it is more than that. Unlike Pascal, I do not offer this scenario to trick you through personal gain into believing what I want. You can gain more by putting the system first. I believe in simple good people and simple good acts, and do not believe in system. I want you to act well and to help others. On that basis, you can build good institutions that do not suffer too much from the evils of a system.

My view is American. The criticisms I give of Hinduism are not new. They have been given so often they are now trite. The only difference is how I say them. Even so, my criticism is not invalid or worthless. It is still accurate and might have some value.

I disagree with Hinduism. I disagree with its version of Indo-European culture. I disagree with its mythical cosmic metaphysical Dharma system. I disagree that we must do our Dharma duty or the whole system falls apart. I disagree with using imagination and adventure to keep people engaged. We are not part of an adventure within an adventure, and so on. The road is interesting but there is a point to life besides going on-and-on down the road. The point is good action and good thought now. The point is doing the right thing for the right reasons. The point is connecting with others.

Other religious stances fail and fall into hypocrisy despite good ideals as when Christians fail to live up to the Golden Rule. Hinduism fails for that reason and, in addition, because it does not rest on an intuitive but correct view of persons but instead it rests on an abstraction, Dharma, and its ideals are abstract, such as Compassion; even high minded abstractions indirectly encourage the worst faults of big systems that eat the world and are relativistic. Abstraction, even high ideals, enables bad behavior. Religious stances need enough specificity to stay grounded even if they are idealistic, such as the Golden Rule, the idea that we are all persons, “applies equally”, and rule of law.

I agree with the mix of Judaism with Indo-European culture that resulted in following Jesus and in Christianity. I agree with the mix of Jesus’ teachings, practicality, and Western values. Rather than an impersonal Dharma system, I see a personal God. Rather than other roles in the big Dharma system, I see particular individual persons. Rather than a hierarchical society made by the Dharma and for the Dharma, I see institutions made by tradition and by people, that should serve us all. We are all selves

too. We are what God made us and are only what God made us: "I am what I am and that's all that I am". "Made by God" differs from our karma identity or how Dharma makes us. We are not merely our Dharma. We are not in a Dharma system. We do not have to support the Dharma system.

Dharma can be a useful idea, like chi, Tao, yin, yang, Li, the Force, Destiny, calling, mission, justification, grace, or Spirit; but Dharma is not the supreme idea. We do not live in relativism, superior and inferior, hierarchy, encompassing, and encompassed.

The Dharma system should promote some specific good acts, seeing people as persons, compassion, sympathy, responsibility, and good institutions. Instead, it promotes bad traditionalism, making excuses, rationalization, separation, vying for position, hierarchy, selfishness, bad relativism, cliques, using other people as things, arrogance, legalism, argumentative character, bad institutions, social injustice, and bad attitudes toward other religions. It supports high ranking people using other people, and it supports high ranking people getting other people to go along by saying we all need to play a part. It did not support the development of good institutions such as rule of law, "applies equally", schools, hospitals, science, and social mobility. Hinduism does have good features, and I do mention them.

Other religions are not encompassed by Hinduism as lesser versions. The teachings of Jesus are not a lesser included version of Hinduism any more than Hinduism is a lesser included version of the ideas of Jesus, Mahayana, or Taoism. I reject Hinduism as Taoists and Confucians rejected Mahayana, Islam and Christianity rejected Gnosticism, and Judaism and Islam reject Christian polytheism. Hindu ideas add to the world stock of ideas but, more so, Hinduism decreases overall interesting diversity by jamming everyone into a single system with itself at the top.

Do not think about any system, and do not find yourself primarily by finding a place in a system. Follow the suggestions given above. Enjoy this world now. After you are comfortable with all the suggestions above, you can think about a system if you feel you still need one.

When Hinduism has ideas that are wrong, true, good, or bad then Hinduism is false, true, good, or bad. When Hinduism promotes good people, principles, acts, and institutions, it is good. When it does not promote them, it is not enough. When Hinduism thwarts them, or promotes bad ones, Hinduism is bad. The same is so for all religions.

Think how Hindu ideas, especially Dharma, might be re-interpreted so as not to support a big ideological system, stratified society, bad relativism, and rationalization. Does a major religion need a big system to eat the world? Does a big system necessarily support bad relativism and stratified unfair society? Think how Hindu ideas can be re-interpreted to support good people and good institutions in the modern world of pluralistic democracy. How does Hinduism have to acknowledge Jesus' teachings and Western values to succeed at re-interpretation? These questions apply to all religions.

All religions suffer from arrogance and the same faults as Hinduism. Many Christian churches and large institutions are as stratified and as stultifying to persons as Hinduism and traditional Indian society. The difference is that Hinduism institutionalizes and validates this arrangement.

As far as I can see, young Hindus are adapting well to a single world, and are easing up on the features of the caste and belief system that I don't like. They are assimilating widespread middle class values based on the teachings of Jesus, practicality, and Western ideas. They take occupations in which they use their sharp minds, skills in argument, and desire for learning, such as doctor and politician. When they do, they promote Western values for the most part, without looking down too much on the people that they serve. Even Hindus who come from successful families adopt a variety of roles and occupations that require humility and require assimilating widespread middle class values. I would not advise young Hindus to take as a role model the character Kumar from the movies "Harold and Kumar" (you could do much worse), but, from those movies, we see that young Hindus are using Hindu imagination to enter society in many ways, without looking down on other people. I hope young Hindus keep the sharp minds and wonderful imagination of Hinduism.

In an episode of the TV show "The Big Bang Theory" from early 2015, Raj, a Hindu, expressed the ideal of good Hinduism beautifully. Raj is an astrophysicist (star scientist). He was anxious about a probe that he had helped send into space. He and his friend Howard, a Jew, drove to a Hindu Temple. Raj said going there made him feel better because it gave him better context for his own life. He felt that a greater something – call it Dharma, mind, consciousness, or God – was working through the world to the ultimate good ends of the greater something. It works through us, and uses us, to achieve its good ends. We do the work of the spirit in our work. It made Raj feel good to be part of that. Howard was impressed and said he felt likewise. These feelings are typical of some high-minded Hinduism. If Hinduism stopped there, and worked out the implications of these feelings for relations with other persons and with nature, then I would appreciate it more. But Hinduism went on to interpret those feelings as part of a system-and-society that also subverted those feelings. As modern Hindus go away from the original society and system to a new bigger world and hopefully better society, they still carry those noble feelings with them. I hope they can reinterpret the feelings to do the feelings full justice, can find how young Hindus must include persons and nature, and can teach us what they find. Below I describe how Hinduism subverted its beauty away from the vision of Raj.

Useful Images.

If a huge Christian church, with internal diversity and hierarchy, such as the Roman Catholic Church, had no central leadership, that church would be like Hinduism. If all the Christian churches of Europe and the Americas, including all centralized hierarchical Churches, felt they were one church in spirit, and gave up central leadership, that would be like Hinduism. If Protestantism saw itself as one movement and formed a big informal league without one strong authority, that would be like Hinduism. If Hinduism evolved a clear strong central leadership, Hinduism would be like a large diverse single Christian church such as Roman Catholicism or Orthodoxy. Vishnu-Krishna is like Jesus; and Christian saints, especially Mary, are like Hindu avatars. People who convert to Roman Catholicism from another Christian smaller Church, such as Presbyterians, are like Hindus who have worshipped only Shiva all their lives but now see the full range, depth, and beauty of Hinduism as a whole. I am not surprised that smart Westerners convert to an intellectual version of Hinduism, or Hindu immigrants such as ex-Governor Bobby Jindal of Louisiana, can convert to a large Christian church such as Roman Catholicism.

Hinduism and Romanticism.

This section gives a made-up response of a Hindu to a Romantic. As far as I know, no real person other than me said this. Still, I think the remarks fairly represent Romanticism and Hinduism.

In Romanticism, the Spirit takes various dominant forms in different eras and through different societies. In the old Middle East, it was Jewish ethical monotheism. In the Classical age, the dominant Spirit was Greek Rationalism first and then Roman Order. As a strongly relativistic system, Romanticism seems to encompass Hinduism. Hinduism is merely one form that the Spirit takes in one part of the world for one time, albeit an important form for a long time in a big part of the world.

In the Hindu view, the Romantic view is backwards. First, the Spirit is not the Dharma. Dharma is bigger than Spirit. The Spirit is too personal and human-like. It is too much small individual people writ large, too much like an individual dream of being big and cosmic. It is a holdover of pre-Christian and Christian ideas about a spirits; it is almost still animism. Some people have to think like this but good thinkers get over it. The Dharma is not impersonal in the way that a rock is impersonal and is less than an animal. The Dharma is impersonal because it includes everything personal and is more-than-merely-personal as well. It includes the Spirit. It is super-personal and super-rational. What the Dharma is, you learn from living it and from Hindu holy people.

Second, the Dharma does show up in various forms in different times and places, and can assert itself most in one dominant form; but, deep down, the Dharma is always one; it shows up in all things, not just in one form; you can find it everywhere if you know how to look; and the Dharma makes sure Hindu holy people can find it because being found out is part of its basic character and part of its graceful plan for all sentient beings. If the Dharma were not one thing, it could not show up in variations in different places; there would be nothing similar to see behind appearances; there would be only distinct places, eras, and societies. You could not compare and could not see the Dharma shining through. It would be like seeing only Fords, Hondas, Toyotas, or GMs without seeing cars. You could not tell what a car was, and so you could not say which was the best car at the time.

Third, even while the Dharma is universal, the Dharma also is particular and it endures as particular. The one Dharma has one best representative, gives people an anchor to hold, and gives one view by which to see others. The fact that the Dharma presents itself as one is how the West could come up with the idea that Western Romanticism is the Culmination; but the Western idea of its Romanticism as Culmination is a mistaken view of the correct bigger idea that the Dharma has one best representative. This mistake is a typical Western misunderstanding of Dharma. If you know how to look, the Dharma culminates all the time everywhere. To help us understand this, the Dharma gives us one true best form of itself. The one true best form of Dharma, the true Culmination, is Hinduism, both in religious-intellectual-spiritual form and in social form as Indian Hindu society. Other forms are lesser versions of Hinduism. Hindus know this because only Hinduism has the idea of Dharma instead of "Spirit"; only Hinduism naturally developed the idea of many paths to the one Dharma; only Hinduism accepts human nature, human social nature, and human society as the Dharma created it; and only Hinduism did this long ago. Hinduism adopted the one form of society suited to the continuing realization of the one Dharma among sentient beings.

Evidence for Western confusion about the Dharma and the Spirit is the development out of Romanticism of bad social, culture, and political forms such as European fascism of the late 1800s through the middle 1900s, Communism in all its styles, Western nature worship, and Western leftist political movements in

the 1960s and afterwards. Even American and British rightist movements are a bad form of Romanticism and nationalism that could be avoided if Westerners properly understood the Dharma. Even the Western romantic view of Hinduism and India in the 1960s shows that Westerners cannot understand Hinduism as long as they see it from the outside as a form of Romanticism. While Hindu society is not perfect, it can avoid such catastrophes by taking the Dharma as its foundation.

Romantics insist Hindus wrongly claim they know the core of being and it is the Dharma. That is true only for them in their time. Hindu supposed superiority through encompassing others is only an over-extended deluded continuation of what the Spirit did for a limited time in India long ago.

Romanticism does have one leg up on Hinduism, at least for self-promoting people. Whatever your own group, you can say your group is the current most important form of the Spirit. You can justify what your group does and your participation. Whether Hindu Brahman, American Lefty, Christian Rightist, Muslim fundamentalist, Jewish zealot, or academic with a cause, then your group is the spearhead of the Spirit, everything your group does is right, and everything you personally do is right. You and your group are the best right now.

PART 2: Some Basic Hindu Ideas.

Some Useful Dates.

“CE” means “Common Era”, which began in “1” AD, so “CE” is equivalent to “AD”. “BCE” means “Before the Common Era” and is equivalent to “BC”.

From before 2000 BCE to perhaps 800 BCE, an advanced agrarian-and-urban civilization, equivalent to Babylon, flourished in the Indus Valley, what is now Pakistan and eastern India. Its cities were “Mohenjo-Daro” and “Harappa”, so it is called the “Harappa(n)” or “Indus Valley” civilization. This civilization was made by people who were native to the Indus valley before Indo-Europeans; it was not Indo-European; it was not “Bharat”. I do not know its relation to other cultural groups in South Asia.

By 2000 BCE, likely earlier, and until about 500 BCE, people speaking Indo-European languages moved from the west to the east, into what are now Iran, Pakistan, and India. Their original home is not clear but might have been from around the Black Sea. They were cattle herding people, with horses, and they likely knew wheat cultivation. These people invaded the Indus Valley civilization. It is not clear if these people contributed to the decline of that civilization or if it was already in decline. As these people moved into the Indus valley, they took up ideas from the Indus Valley civilization but I do not guess which motifs in South Asian culture were from the natives and which from Indo-European invaders.

The invading Indo-European peoples used in their rituals “liturgical words” that were called “Vedas”. The Vedas are like chants, as in a formal Christian liturgy. For a long time, the Vedas were memorized only and deliberately were not written. Later the Vedas were written; I am not sure when but I think before 1 CE. All “orthodox” Hindus consider the Vedas the foundation documents of the religion even if other later texts and ideas supersede the Vedas.

The Ganges River Valley is east of the Indus Valley. It is lower, swampier, humid, and does not support wheat farming or horse raising but does support rice farming. Rice farming supports centralized state societies - kingdoms. As the Indo-Europeans moved into the Ganges valley, they began rice farming and let off horse rearing and wheat farming. They developed stratified societies based on rice farming. Some of the societies became large kingdoms. That is the context in which Hinduism formed and solidified.

Bangladesh is yet further east while the arid Deccan Plateau is further south. I do not consider the cases of Bangladesh and the Deccan.

After 1000 BCE, a set of ideas about life was present from Italy to India; see below and see chapters on Buddhism.

About 500 BCE, Buddhism arose, largely in response to those ideas.

About the same time that Buddhism arose, the ideas in the Upanishads were current; see below.

About 200 BCE, the Upanishads were written down.

Between 200 BCE and 200 CE, poets contributed to the epics the "Ramayana" and "Mahabharata". By about 200 CE, the poems were written down.

By no later than 200 CE, the main ideas of Hinduism arose.

After 200 CE, ideas of Hinduism were formalized in a long series of written documents called "Shastras" and "Puranas". The documents do not all agree but they are largely compatible.

By no later than 500 CE, bhakti (devotion) became a strong trend in Hinduism. It might have arisen in the areas of Bangladesh or of Southern India but quickly spread throughout India.

Likely by 500 CE, certainly by 1000 CE, Hinduism as it is now was well-defined.

Some Basic Texts and Ideas.

A set of ideas was found from (what are now) Italy through India by about 800 BCE, including karma and many lives. See the chapters on Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Hinduism, as a version of these ideas, was evident from about the time of Jesus. Hinduism distinct from Mahayana, and competing with Mahayana, was evident from before 500 CE (AD). Complete Hinduism was evident after the rise of ideas about "bhakti" ("devotion" or "worship"; see below) after 500 CE.

The idea of "Dharma" developed in India and is common to Buddhism and Hinduism. Originally Dharma meant something like "ritual efficacy" but it came to mean the system of the world and how it works. The world is like an ongoing successful ritual by the Dharma for the Dharma.

The idea of "Dharma", especially "personal Dharma" and "social Dharma", came to mean doing your role in life and society as a priest does his-her role in ritual. Each kind of person (farmer, priest, ruler, warrior,

doctor, mechanic, yogi, ascetic, etc.) sustained the whole society and the whole society supported each kind of person in it. When you do your duty, you make society, family, and the whole system efficacious. You got your appointed role by karma and reincarnation.

Hinduism accepts that ordinary life is misleading, and might be an illusion or delusion. We need to wake up from ordinary life, and waking up is a big theme in Hinduism. The technical term is “moksha”. Unlike Theravada but like Mahayana, Hinduism stresses that the system of many lives is worthwhile, and can be quite joyous, even if any particular life is hard. You need to see past the details, including the details of the one illusory life you now live, to see the system in full glory. Once you see that, you can put ordinary life into the proper context, and it is not quite an illusion.

Hinduism officially begins with instructions for ritual, and explanations of ritual, called the “Vedas”, which are also about gods, relations to nature, relations to the gods through ritual, and social relations. At first they were only memorized and recited. They received “standardized” form between about 2000 BCE and 1000 BCE. Later they were written but I am not sure when. Seekers and scholars still read them but I do not consider them here because they are not used anymore in practiced Hinduism.

The Upanishads originally were oral essays about spiritual life apart from the rituals. The ideas in them were current at the time of the Buddha, about 500 BCE. They were written down from about 300 BCE to about 200 BCE. The term “Upanishad” means “private teachings given apart, in the forest, (out of normal society)”. The ideas in the Upanishads are not unique but they are well said there and they have been important in Hinduism. Different ideas were developed in different Upanishads but I summarize the ideas as if they come from one source. All educated Hindus revere the Upanishads but it is not clear how much Hindus actually read the Upanishads; like the “Federalist Papers” in the United States.

The most famous saying from the Upanishads is “you are that”, which means we are all quite similar, and should treat each other accordingly. It means “there through the grace of God do go I; and here through the grace of God do go you; we are not really different”. The Upanishads do not quite say we are all a spark of God and so really we are the same person, but that idea is close to the feeling of “you are that”. They do not say we are all manifestations of God and so really we are all God in disguise but that view is latent in “you are that”. Later Hinduism developed the feeling into the idea that we are all sparks from one God and-or we are all God in disguise. We are all pieces of God. We literally are all the same thing. We differ only in minor externals. (The physicist John Wheeler once teased his student Richard Feynman that all apparently distinct electrons are really the same one electron; that idea is close to the feeling in the Upanishads.) Originally the idea meant that all humans are similar but was extended to the idea that all sentient beings are similar, then all animals including all sentient beings, all life, and then all the world. Eventually these views of the Upanishads reinforced the big Dharma system in which particular lives might be hard but the whole system is joyous.

The right way to express “we are the same” is compassion. Compassion is a big policy in the big system of Hinduism. The forms that compassion takes are discussed below. In Christian terms, the blend of “you are that” with compassion is: “love your neighbor as yourself” and act accordingly. We are all equal children of God.

At the time of the Upanishads, as in Theravada Buddhism, having many lives and being subject to karma was not necessarily a good thing, and could be a bad thing. Being born over and over again to a harsh world where you were deluded, and where society forces you to commit immoral acts for its sake, was bad. In trying to deal with the situation, the Upanishads began to systematize many lives and karma. In making a system out of many lives and karma, they paved the way for later interpretations of the system as a good thing. I am not sure how particular writers of particular Upanishads felt about the system.

The Upanishads feared the ability of normal life to “suck you in” and put you to sleep, so the Upanishads advised avoiding normal life. The name “Upanishads” not only means “discussions in the forest” but implied a life apart from normal life. Exactly what the Upanishads recommended by “being apart” varied by particular Upanishad. “Being apart” was interpreted later to suit ideas that belong more to times after than to the Upanishads. “Being apart” could mean renouncing the world, being a forest ascetic (ryshi), and conquering the world through your spirit. It could mean waiting until after you have had a family, in old age, before going into the forest. It could mean being an awakened person in the middle of sleeping people. It could mean renouncing the fruits (karma) of your involvement in the world even if you accepted that you had to act in the world. It could mean going about your social obligations aloofly. It could mean going about your social obligations aloofly and without much concern for people other than to whom you are directly obliged. The latter interpretations eventually prevailed for most Hindus.

Buddhism, and maybe Siddhartha Gautama himself, developed the idea of the self as a bundle partly to forestall mistaken interpretations of the Upanishad idea that selves are quite similar, are eternal, and are ultimately the same as the system itself (each self is a version of God). I am not sure that the Upanishads promoted these mistaken ideas of self, but later interpreters did, so it is still worth seeing what the fuss was about. If all selves are identical (or nearly identical), it is possible to see all selves as eternal “stuff”, nearly-identical bits of eternal God, or, really, as small local versions of God. In that case, selves have to be part of a big eternal joyous system in which life is worthwhile. Otherwise, the different life situations of selves don’t make sense. Yet the Buddha argued that life is not worthwhile. If life is not worthwhile, then we cannot be in a big eternal joyous system and selves cannot be a minor version of the big eternal system. Selves cannot be simple eternal things, largely identical. The best way to shock yourself out of seeing selves, and yourself, as simple eternal things is to see the self as a bundle; which it really is. If the self is a bundle, then it hardly makes sense to think of life as deeply worthwhile in the same way that life might be worthwhile if the self were an eternal part of an eternal joyous system. So we have no eternal self, no self as part of God, no identity of different selves, no eternal joyous system, and life is not worthwhile. Get over yourself, and get used to it. The Buddhist view of the self does not undermine the idea of compassion, and, in fact, I think, supports it.

Hinduism stressed the alternative that the Buddha rejected. If you do want to think of selves as eternal simple things quite similar to each other, much as Christians and Muslims think of the soul, then you are led toward three things. First, selves are so similar that they are identical. Second, if they are identical, they are really local versions of one God. We are all God, but don’t know it until we wake up. Third, to make sense of the variety of the world, we have to see (nearly) identical selves as part of one eternal joyous system. You don’t have to know all this to participate in the system. If you want an eternal joyous system with selves as parts, then you have to think of the self as a simple eternal thing that is identical to God (the system) or nearly identical. Westerners tend to this option when they read the Upanishads or about Hinduism. It is the option that, I think, invaded Mahayana, but which Mahayana did not develop as

well as Hinduism did. Eventually this option allowed Mahayana to defeat Theravada, and Hinduism to defeat Mahayana.

The Upanishads are mystical in that they say: how we see this obvious life is not accurate, and a big system might be behind all obvious life. But the Upanishads are not “airy fairy”. They are not hard to read, and they make sense. They can support “airy fairy” conjectures but that way lies as much in the reader as in the texts.

Hinduism Goes Many Steps Further.

“It’s all in the game of love”

In the chapter on Codes of this book, in the section on the Bhagavad Gita, I already mentioned the ideas described in this section. The best way to make these points would require quoting major parts of Hindu epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, which I can’t do here. To get across the ideas, I use Western popular epic drama, especially what appears often on TV. Mahayana takes many of the same steps but not as fully or adeptly as Hinduism. Earlier points help with later points but you can accept a later without an earlier. Each point can be accepted or denied by itself but they do tend to come in a set. The point about devotion (“bhakti”) is supported by previous points but can stand on its own. Few Hindus could state all these points without prompting but many could state them with prompting. See chapter on Mahayana for the dialog between two advanced Mahayanists.

(1) Not only heroes (including heroines) are important but so are all the “little” people. They are needed mostly to move the plot forward but they often have key roles. They are not only sidekicks. In “Lord of the Rings”, Gandalf is not the main character. He is not the Lord of the Rings. The two real combatants for Lord are Frodo and Sauron. Sam is “only” a sidekick yet where would the story be without Sam? Tolkien makes this point about the importance of little people with the character “Gollum” (Smeagol) when Gandalf tells Frodo that Gollum deserved to die but it was good that the elves did not kill Gollum because Gollum might yet have some important unforeseen role to play. He did. Gandalf is the ultimate helper character to both Frodo and Aragorn. Read LOTR or see the first part of the “Hobbit” movie trilogy, “An Unexpected Journey” for an eloquent speech by Gandalf on the importance of little people.

With all their greatness, do Peter, Paul, John, and Mary compare to Jesus? Yet where would Christianity be without Peter, Paul, John, and Mary? Where would Roman Catholicism be without the small army of good Popes who have led it for two thousand years?

Where would the Lone Ranger be without Tonto, Dr. Evil be without Number Two and all the henchmen, and Bond without the “Bond girls”? Where would warriors be without their charioteers and armor makers? Not only do we need Luke, Vader, and the Emperor, we also need Obiwan Kenobe, Yoda, Hans Solo, Leia, R2D2, Count Dookoo, Grievous, Commander Cody, the bounty hunter and his son, many clones, and a host of characters to kick-start adventure such as Jar Jar Binks. Besides needing the Joker, Batman also needed Alfred, Police Commissioner Gordon, Robin, and many villains. Peter Pan needs Tinker Bell, Captain Hook, Wendy, and some Lost Boys. Where would we be without poets to retell all adventure in a way to make it interesting, as in Scott’s novel “Waverley”? The animated movie, “Rango”,

shows how a literal host of characters literally supports the hero, and how the “legendary” hero (Rango) and a “legendary” villain (Snake) respect each other.

Even in ordinary life, where would anybody be without farmers to grow food and merchants to distribute food, without the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker? Where would we be without busybodies and gossips to stir things up on so-called “reality” TV? Now we can see all people not just as accidentally there but as necessary parts of the whole system of joyous Dharma and many lives. They might not play as large a part as the heroes and villains but their part is important. In Hinduism, people of all ranks and all abilities can feel they are part of something important and joyful even if they do not feel it fully now in this life. God falls asleep to continually dream the world, the whole world with all its small players; and his creation is good.

The importance of little people goes beyond their roles in a story. Hinduism says through its stories that all the various kinds of people are needed in society too. Even if you are not a big glamorous person, still your role is essential to the integrity and continuity of society, just as modern society needs farmers, butchers, bakers, computer programmers, and advertisers. Hinduism was brought together as a religion when the old cow herding society of India had been completely taken over by wheat and rice farmers, and society was organized into a structure with kings, aristocracy, priests, farmers, merchants, crafts people, and workers. Hinduism was brought together as a religion when Hindu society became like Medieval Europe. People needed an ideology, a rationale, for this new society, the people in it, and their relations. Hinduism and its epics provided this rationale, and did so by making people feel good about the whole thing. When Hinduism first did this job, around the time of Jesus, likely it was a powerful good integrating force for a powerful vibrant new way of life. This sense of belonging to a good society by doing our jobs well is just what Americans, and most of the modern world, now lacks. For a Western version of what Hinduism makes of the idea of little guys supporting society, read “Brave New World” by Aldus Huxley, especially the passages where various castes explain how they are the true foundations of society while other castes only think they are.

(2) Not only are minor characters needed for a good story and good society but so are bad guys. It is easy to see that drama is based on conflict, and usually there is no conflict without a bad guy – think of Iago in “Othello” by Shakespeare. But the Hindu idea is stronger than that. Bad guys and good guys are tied together, often are mirror images, often bring out each other’s character, and often are not completely good or bad. Hinduism has good guys that are a bit bad, and bad guys that are a lot good, not unlike modern Western, especially American, fiction with anti-heroes and flawed heroes. Bollywood movies are as much “white hat versus black hat” as TV shows such as “Walker, Texas Ranger” but Hindu literature and Hindu feel for character are more like good film noir such as “The Maltese Falcon”.

Sith need Jedi; Jedi need Sith; the Chosen One will unite the light side and dark side of the Force, at least for a while until we start again. We could not have had Theodore Roosevelt breaking up the big trusts without McKinley kissing up to the big trusts; we could not have had Ronald Reagan without the chaos of the 1970s; and we would not have Barack Obama without the errors and collapses of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. Where would Batman be without the Joker, and the Joker without Batman? They mutually made each other and continue to need each other. Where is Superman without Lex Luthor, or Spiderman without Doc Oc? Where ware modern TV detectives without their arch-enemy serial killer

crazy counterparts? A wonderful recent example of mutual determination of the hero and would-be villain is the animated movie “Puss in Boots” (Puss and Egg).

In the Mahabharata (“Great Poem about India [Bharat]”), the epic poem of which the Bhagavad Gita is a small part, the good guys are the Five Brothers while the bad guys are their cousins. The good guys are not thoroughly good while the bad guys are not thoroughly bad. All the good guys have some serious character flaws, which is how the whole problem began. The bad guys have some great traits, which is how they get genuine heroes to join their side. The Five Brothers are a bit better than the Americans were during the Cold War while the bad cousins are no worse than the Russians. The good brothers are like the “A Team” while their bad cousins are like Two Face Harvey Dent or the Sandman in “Batman” and “Spiderman”. The Five Brothers are like the brothers in the movies “The Sons of Katie Elder” with John Wayne or “Four Brothers” with Mark Wahlberg. Both sides are needed to make a good story, keep action moving, and reach the proper moral conclusion. In part, this portrayal of good guys and bad guys reflects the Indian ability to assess human nature accurately. It also shows the Hindu attitude toward good guys and bad guys, and their relations, in the joyous system of many lives.

For good to feel truly good, for good to be as good as can be, goodness has to contrast with badness; just as to fully appreciate beauty we have to see the contrast with ugly and with plain. For good guys to be fully good, to reach the full potential of past karma, to reach the full potential of their Dharma as good guys, and to support the entire joyous Dharma system of many lives, they need bad guys as their foils. Likewise, bad guys can be truly bad only when they despoil innocent good people such as children or despoil innocent animals.

(3) The mutual dependence of little people and big people, of good guys and bad guys, makes sense in a Dharma system of many lives. We can only see how people could be so good, or so bad, if we see their present goodness or badness as an accumulation over lives. People cannot be so bad as to slaughter whole villages if they have not built to such badness over many lives. People cannot be so good as to offer themselves to be ravaged by bandits, so as to save a village, if they have not built to such goodness over many lives. The Dharma system helps to explain the extremes of goodness and badness while extremes of goodness and badness lend evidence to the Dharma system.

Goodness, badness, and the Dharma system support each other in another way, more important in the long run. Except for a few people at the height of the Dharma system, few of us are overwhelmingly good or bad. Most of us are a mix in this life, and have been a mix in past lives. Most of us will be more overall good in some lives and more overall bad in other lives. Good people need bad people; bad people need good people. For some of us to be good in this life, we need other people to be bad in this life. For some people to be bad in this life, it helps if other people are good in this life. If the system is to remain in balance, if we are good in this life while others are bad in the next life, then we can expect that we will be bad in other lives while they are good in other lives. We need each other, as good and bad, not only in this drama right here right now but for the whole drama to keep going. This is what Krishna told Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, or at least what Krishna implied.

If you find yourself in a bad role, and you don’t play your role, then you not only betray yourself and your personal Dharma, you thwart the current roles and future roles of many other people and you endanger the whole system. The same is true if you are in a good role, or a mixed role, and you don’t live up to

your character. You must play out what role you have been given for the sake of yourself and others, for now and all the future.

(4) This step might be two half steps. (A) Most people have felt that everything really is just as it should be, even bad stuff. Nothing is wrong. Everything is right. (B) Everything contributes in its own way. If we took away anything, the whole world would suffer and might not come out alright. Another way to say this is “everything is beautiful in its own way”, and, in fact, “everything is ugly in its own way too”. Nothing is really only ugly and nothing is so beautiful that it is incomparable. All is connected, so all share in the great beauty of the whole system.

We should not be too quick to judge anything is useless or bad; we should not be too quick to judge at all. A weed is a flower for which nobody has yet discovered a use. A flower is a weed that is easy to grow.

In the West, this feeling contributes to the idea that, in nature, everything plays a role and everything is needed, including mosquitoes, malaria, bacteria, fungus, and disease. “It takes all kinds to make a world”. This is the same feeling as that God has a plan, and everything and event has a place in God’s plan including you and your obnoxious neighbor and the fight you just had.

Hinduism makes sense of this feeling. If you think you have a good life now, and your bravery is needed, while some peasant has a bad life, and his crops are not needed, likely you are wrong. Even if you can argue your point, you are not thinking long term. You and the peasant will exchange lives someday, and his life now is needed to sustain yours then.

This feeling played a role in Mahayana and some Zen. I described it in the chapter on Zen but did not explain how it fit into a system. In Hinduism, it more obviously fits into a system.

One of my big steps in spirituality was to realize that this attitude is not true. It is generally true, and it is useful as a support for tolerance; but it is not true in all cases. Some bad things are just bad and we can do without them. We don’t need slavers and rapists. Some good things are more useful than other things, and we do right to extol them. We do right to praise people who help neighbors in a hurricane. It is not clear to me how this view goes along with the Hindu innate strong sense of morality. See below.

(5) If everything is needed in its own way, and everything is beautiful in its own way, then we should let everything play out in its own way. Even if a thing, act, belief, or person seems to do some harm, as long as the harm is not catastrophic, then let it go on to its natural end. Live and let live. Live and let die. Die and let live. Let everybody listen to the kind of music he-she likes, Bach, Mozart, kitsch, or sexist racist crap – as long as they don’t hurt people. Let people worship whatever gods they like. Let people follow holidays and perform ceremonies as they like. Let people use what drugs they like. This attitude leads to the plethora of festivals and gods that we see in India.

In practice, Hinduism is not as tolerant as this statement sounds. Some things undermine the Dharma system itself, such as, sometimes, Islam, Christianity, and naïve materialistic determinism. Those cannot be tolerated. Those must be controlled. Even the worship of some Hindu gods, such as Kali Durga (bad mother) cannot be allowed in full but must be controlled so they do no great harm. Thugs might be allowed in theory but they cannot be allowed in fact. This is the same dilemma faced by democracies in

which we want to allow fully free speech but cannot allow people to yell “fire” in a theater when there is no fire and cannot allow people to advocate violent un-democratic overthrow of our democracy. Democracy protects one set of values while Hinduism protects organized Indian society and the Dharma system.

(6) What matters is not the ending, not winning or losing, but the game. A well-played game is better than a game won badly. What matters is not the destination but the journey. Every moment, every place, in all ways, we have already arrived. In the movie version of the novel “Kim” we literally see this when the searching old monk sees his magic river in a dried up old stream bed in the dry high hills.

(7) Everybody is saved all the time but most of us just don’t know it. It might be better to be saved and to know it than to be saved and not know, but that is not necessarily so and certainly not clear. If you know it, you surrender to the game with gusto. If you surrender to the game with gusto, then you don’t need to know if you are saved or not.

(8) We should say “Yes” to the Dharma and its game. In Western terms, we should say “Yes” to LIFE and its game. I (Mike Polioudakis) say “enjoy life as much as you can” but, I think, Hindus mean more than this when they say “Yes” to Dharma and Westerners mean more when they say “Yes” to LIFE. Hindus mean to surrender to the Dharma LIFE game much as Muslims surrender to Allah and Christians give themselves to Jesus. Devote yourself.

(9) Everyday life is not much different than life after you are awake. It is still the same life. You still do the same things. You are kinder and gentler. You are not as driven. You help more than you hurt unless it is your Dharma duty to hurt righteously, as with Arjuna. You still eat and sleep, marry, and have children.

(10) Illusion fills everyday life for people who are not aware. After you are aware, the illusion is still there but you are master of the illusion, as was Vimalakirti in Mahayana and as Kim was in his training to be a spy. You can use illusion to help you or others. You do not let it drag you into bad clingy situations.

(11) We should allow people to believe and do as they wish as long as they don’t hurt people. To allow people in this way is part of surrender to the Dharma game. It is part of the diversity and fascination of the Dharma. It leads to different kinds of social groups, different religions, and different societies. Of course, without necessarily knowing it, just as not all people know they are saved, so groups and their ways of life are part of Dharma’s variety. They are part of the Dharma game whether they know it or not, and likely especially if they don’t know it.

(12) The Dharma game encourages a wide variety of social ways of life but not every social life is equally valid or expresses the Dharma best. Traditional Hindu society takes account of the Dharma game and it takes account of basic facts about humans as (evolved) sentient beings between the gods and animals. People are not all the same. They have different capacities. Often their capacities are inherited. Men and women should be matched to each other. Children should be taught the ways of a good society. Society needs specific stations. The stations should help each other; they should be complementary. At the same time, not all stations are equal in ability or power. Some stations are for governing and some are for carrying out tasks. Traditional Hindu society accepts channels of the Dharma and flows through them, so it is the best society. Other societies have their merits, but they can be seen as variations on

Hindu society just as other religions can be seen as variations on knowing the Dharma and other ways of life can be seen as variations on the Dharma game.

(13) Nobody except a few very unusual and wise Hindu holy people see the whole Dharma system and the place of various beings in it. The best most people can do is to know their role and to carry out their role as the Dharma appointed it. (The best people can do is carry out God's Will as they know it.) This view is just restating the lesson of the Bhagavad Gita.

(14) If you cannot expect people to act on the basis of full understanding, different people have different roles, and different people see differently, then what is reasonable to expect? When is it reasonable to say that a person "does God's work"? When is it reasonable to say that a person goes against God or does not do God's work? People do as they are taught. We hope that people get good teachers. We should not rush to judgment. We should give people the benefit of the doubt. As long as people carry out their role in society, worship as they were taught, do little harm, do some good, and do more good than harm, then we should not judge. Jesus taught us not to rush to judgment. In fact, people might be doing God's work even if we cannot see so and even if what they do is different than what we do. Allow every Hindu to worship his-her particular deities as he-she sees fit, as long as he-she does no obvious harm. What harm can come of letting people worship God each in his-her own way? Isn't this the accord that Protestants and Roman Catholics extend toward each other? Isn't this the accord that the many Protestants extend toward each other? Isn't this what the Constitution of the United States of America insists upon as a high right? We should never say a person goes against God's Will unless that person does harm. If we follow this "live and let live" idea then all of us will get along much better and society will work much better.

This view is one large basis for the idea that "all paths lead to God". It is not easy to reconcile this view with the idea that Hinduism is best after all. Hindus reconcile this view with Hindu superiority by saying that Hinduism develops this view naturally while other religions have to be taught this view, often by a Hindu. The religion which develops this view naturally is best even when it teaches that all paths do lead to God. Roman Catholics take much the same view toward Protestants, and large Protestant divisions take much the same view toward every religion but their own.

This contradiction is not confined to Hinduism or even to religion. It lies at the heart of democracy. What does a republican democracy do with people in it who disbelieve in democracy and want to overthrow the republic to institute their idea of a religious or ideological totalitarian state? Do they have an equal right to their opinion? Do unjust thugs have an equal right to due process of law?

(15) All of this leads to a combination of moral relativity and social determinism, which I, as a Westerner, find distressing. This subsection describes the moral relativity while sections below describe how it is embedded in social relations. "Moral relativity" includes moral ambiguity.

Contrary to modern religious confusion, moral relativity was not invented in 1776 (American Revolution), 1789 (French Revolution), 1848 (Paris socialism), 1890 (Gilded age), 1917 (Bolsheviks), 1920 (jazz age), 1932 (Roosevelt and the New Deal), 1954 (rock and roll), or 1980 (hip-hop or rap). People have always known of it and used it to their gain. It has always confused us and led some of us astray. The relevant questions are what roles it plays in this life now, and why it plays those roles at a particular time and

place. I can't tell if the kind of moral relativity that developed with Hinduism is similar to what the West has now, and if the role of moral relativity is similar. I can't tell if the West now is growing the kind of moral relativity and social relations that Hinduism set up about 500 CE (AD). It might help to read how John Milton depicts Lucifer (Satan) in "Paradise Lost", as a confused super-hero. If you can find episodes, it might help to look at the TV show "Lucifer" from 2016.

Think of life as a Dharma drama. Small characters in life can be both good and bad. Big characters can be both good and bad. Bad characters are needed for good characters to develop their full goodness. No matter how bad it seems, it always turns out well in the end. It would not turn out as good as it could possibly get if it did not get really bad along the way. Good (God) can turn evil into even better good. Good (God) could not turn evil into the best good if evil was not really evil first. Everyone is a mix of both good and bad. Even the worst bad guy has a good side. Good needs bad. Good needs bad to turn out as good as good could be. Good and bad depend on each other. To be bad really is to advance good. There is no absolute bad because good always subsumes bad and good needs bad. You do what you have to do given who you are. If you don't do what you have to do given who you are, then you are not being better or worse, you are being stubborn and selfish. Even if you are bad by nature, you are being even worse and more selfish if you refuse to do the bad that you are by nature. You hinder the normal relations that need to go on so that everybody else can do his-her job and the whole drama can move on toward the perfect ending, and then do it all over again. Everyone has a place that includes both good and bad, and everyone should act out his-her place as indicated in his-her character.

To have real fun and to feel fully alive, we must have real risk. God (Dharma) is immune to real risk. For God to have something like real risk, God must first fool himself. God fools himself by falling asleep. When asleep, he dreams he is real particular human beings who are susceptible to (pretend) real risk and so can feel fully alive. Human beings are a way in which God fools himself so as to have fun. Bad guys are part of falling asleep, (pretend) real risk, and having fun. Without bad guys as obstacles, there would be no fun. Without bad guys, we can't fool ourselves into thinking we are in true jeopardy so we can get the full feeling of being alive. God is both good guys and bad guys, both good and bad.

Badness is not really bad. Badness is an indirect way of contributing good. The system is able to turn badness into greater good. You really do good when you do bad. You can do bad with the consolation that you really are doing good. The system needs someone to do bad. Bad guys provide the turmoil out of which new creation and new goodness arise. Good and bad make each other, and so make each other better. So, if you feel like doing bad because it is part of your character, or just because feel like doing bad right now, go ahead. It is your Dharma.

By this point, we have full-fledged moral relativism including a lot of ambiguity.

How much bad is too much? How much bad can be mixed in with good before the good turns bad? Do we have to suspect some characters who want to good or all characters who want to do good? We can't answer these questions if we accept the point of view given above.

(16) Somewhat as in Mahayana, in Hinduism, almost all people should be making spiritual progress. You should work to be a better Hindu, a better player in the Dharma game. You should work to understand the Dharma system. People are assessed not only by how well they carry out their obvious current role

now but also by how well the progress toward greater understanding and compassion. Of course, only holy people fully succeed, but that does not mean you should not work and it does not mean you cannot be assessed also by your progress. This attitude allows Hindus to make sense of the greater insight that most of us have as we get older, and the fact that some of us progress faster than others.

If we take the idea of spiritual progress seriously, it means that, someday, all Hindus will understand the Dharma game. In that case, will the game end? In some versions of Hinduism, as in Mahayana, it does. But in most workaday versions, it does not. There seems to be no end to the supply of un-enlightened people, and no end to the progress that most people need to make just to carry out their current role let alone to get more adept at the system as a whole. So, in practice, people don't worry about everybody reaching enlightenment and the system ending but do take spiritual progress as evidence of a system.

If everybody should be making steady progress, albeit slowly, where do all the un-enlightened people come from, and what is their role? As far as I know, there is no clear answer as to where they all come from because there doesn't have to be. The Dharma at play can produce an infinite supply of not-fully-awake players to keep the Dharma game going.

Their role depends on their place in the Dharma system. Usually, their place is to support other players in the Dharma system. Sometimes other players support them. In particular, people who are making only slow progress (or none) provide a means for other people, who are making clear fast progress, to show their spiritual advance by doing good deeds, helping others, helping society, and so helping the Dharma game along. As heroes need small people, as heroes and villains need each other, so fast learners need slow learners so fast learners can put into practice what they have learned.

In acting primarily to let fast learners show their advanced Dharma level, are slow learners still fully persons? Can we still really think of "you are that" between fast learners and slow learners? Ideally in Hinduism, slow learners are still persons and everybody is still the same. In practice, and so in another deeper form of theory, slow learners are not fully persons. They become mere tokens in the Dharma game. They are means to the ends of other better persons. The ideal theory allows us to overlook this demotion. You can treat "other people" as mere means to ends and still feel good about it. See below where I discuss the movie "Groundhog Day".

(17) By the time of Jesus, Hindus had developed the idea of "bhakti" or "devotion"; see below. Few people can understand the full Dharma system, and the gap made many people feel lost, just as earlier many people felt lost when Brahmins controlled the ritual and cosmological system. Bhakti states that anyone can be fully in contact with the system, fully realized, and successful. All you need do is devote yourself to one large coherent part of the system. You need to make sure you devote yourself along moral lines and act morally; I do not consider odd devotion such as Thugs. I think most people become devoted to a god such as Vishnu, one of the forms of a god, avatars of a god such as Krishna. Some people devote themselves to a calling such as education. Bhakti is the religious feeling that people have when they cannot know the depth of ideas such as Dharma and Salvation-through-Grace yet they still feel religious, want to belong, and want to feel "plugged in". It is similar to Christian devotion toward Mary, the saints, and Jesus. Bhakti is what monks and nuns do who pray constantly. It is what Christians do when they perform the liturgy and make offerings of all kinds. Bhakti likely is the single most important way in which Hinduism overcame rivals such as Mahayana Buddhism.

Although devotion is the way by which most people are in the Hindu system, and bhakti plays a huge role in practicing Hinduism, it does not add much to the ideas given above, for example, to Dharma and its implications. So for now I overlook the practical importance of bhakti. I take it up again at the end of the chapter when I assess Hinduism more.

(18) In the view accumulated so far, what does another religion such as Christianity, or an ideology such as democracy, look like? Hinduism is like the Army Rangers while other religions and ideologies are like the Boy Scouts. Other religions and ideologies are for children while Hinduism is for adults. Sometimes other religions and ideologies are for children who are impetuous, petulant, “in a mood”, and stuck on one idea while Hinduism is for adults who have gained from their own experience and from the wisdom of many wise people and who can nobly graciously assess the whole. Other religions and ideologies are serious and to be taken seriously in their world, but are a mere reflection of something better in Hinduism; and adults in the big world should seek something better. Hinduism sees other religions and ideologies much the same way that large Christian Churches see other churches, in particular see small Protestant sects, and more particularly how the Roman Catholic Church sees the many Protestant Churches large and small. Other idea systems are only approximations to Hinduism. They do not come up to the mark because they were made by people who did not appreciate the Dharma. Another religion or ideology is the product of people who might be fast learners in their own societies but are slow learners compared to Hindu holy people. (Smart people in other societies might have had the native talent to be a holy person in Hinduism but had the bad luck to be born elsewhere.)

For example, Jesus taught us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Some early Church members took that idea to mean there were no social distinctions at all - rich and poor are alike - a logical implication within the early movement but a wrong strategic move anyhow. Other members had to correct them and had to place compassion in the context of social order – even though there is no basis for placing compassion in the social order if we follow the strict logic of Jesus’ teachings and there is much basis for crossing proper social lines. While a Christian might love his-her neighbor as him-herself, he-she had better not treat the neighbor as him-herself, and had better not expect such treatment even from other Christians. This tension in Christianity was never fully resolved. This mistake comes easily in Christianity and other non-Hindu systems because they do not base compassion (love your neighbor) on correct ideas of “distinct and same within Dharma”. Hinduism already did this, and so Hinduism did not need the corrections of early Christianity, and Hinduism does not lead to mistakes about social order and proper behavior.

Islam means that we have to submit to God and to the Will of God. This view is correct when it means to accept the reality of the Dharma system. Islam is a version of bhakti (devotion). However, submission to Allah is not up to the mark if it means to accept arbitrary commands from an unknowable deity, especially as those commands are conveyed and interpreted by people. The Dharma system has reliable knowable logical regularities. Nobody need accept the ideas of other people just because other people claim they speak for God or even just because the ideas are written in a book. Study the Dharma.

Western democracy tries to institutionalize, in a political way, the idea that we are all the same (“you are that”) by pretending we are all equal in rights, power, abilities, and responsibilities. It pretends that all cultural, social, gender, ethnic, religious, and occupational groups can quickly learn self-government and can fully succeed at self-government. It mistakes a spiritual truth for a political principle. This mistake

promotes an unworkable bad system in which the masses are easily misled by rich and powerful people and-or the masses lead the whole nation astray. For us to see that we are similar, and to know what to do because we are similar, first we must see that we differ, and must see that differences persist even after we know we are similar. We have to understand that both similarity and difference are important, and have to place both in a single social-political system. We need a political system that respects both similarities and differences, and puts each in its own proper arena. Hinduism does that but Western style democracy does not.

Fascism is the parallel mistake to democracy, where power is used as a substitute for compassion, and where the idea of “you are that” is completely overlooked rather than overstressed. Fascism does not care much about similarity but it pretends a lot of compassion. It builds institutions in which, ideally, able people should extend compassion so as to knit together the entire social order but in fact fascism gives power to wealthy people so their power and the whole social order are one power. Precisely because Hinduism accepts both similarities and differences, it can provide real compassion and the one set of true institutions based on real compassion.

Many Christians believe God can turn everything bad into something even better. God is good and God is stronger than evil, so God must overcome all evil in the end. God even overcomes all evil as we go along, as when God-as-Jesus came into the world to lead us to salvation even before the end of the world. A bad illness can bring people together, make us value each other more, and make us value life more. In fact, though: nothing necessarily in Christianity leads to the belief that God can turn all evil into something even better as we go along, and pure Christianity is pessimistic about how the world turns out until the bitter end – read the Book of Revelations. In Christianity, the world is fallen, and that means evil wins most of the time until the end. In contrast, for example from the movie “Marigold Hotel”, Hindus say, “it is not over until the happy ending”. The Dharma does lead good to win even as we go along. The Dharma does turn evil into something even better. This Hindu idea includes the Christian idea that God can turn bad into better. This happy result is a necessary part of Hinduism. No matter how bad it is now, that is all part of a bigger plan in which everything turns out for the best. For example, the struggles for independence and self-government in India made the long oppression of the “British Raj” into something even better than if there had been no British conquerors. World War Two was horrible but did lead to the United Nations, one world economy, the spread of democratic ideals, and freedom and comfort for billions of people in the world. Global climate change might lead people to see that we must act soon. In the Mahabharata, the victory of the good brothers over their bad (in context) cousins led to greater good even at the cost of great carnage. As long as the wheel of Dharma turns, it produces good that necessarily overcomes bad. Behind every black cloud there really is a silver lining. It is the Dharma.

The information that follows won't make full sense until the material below on avatars, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva but it is well to mention some of the information here: Except perhaps for Buddhism, no other religion can account for the holy people, heroes (including heroines), gods, and avatars of Hinduism, at least in a good way. In contrast, Hinduism can account for ALL the religious people, and many religious fantasy figures, in ALL other religions. Hinduism can do this gracefully without straining its basic ideas. ALL figures in ALL religions are manifestations of the Dharma. ALL serve the Dharma, each in his-her own way, suitable for the time, place, and people. There is nothing odd in this, nothing to be surprised at. This result is part of the Dharma turning all situations to goodness. It is part of the ultimate happy ending that happens all the time. For example, most positive religious figures are best seen as manifestations

(avatars) of Vishnu, a god who sustains the world and keeps goodness obviously in control. Moses, the Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, and Mohammad are Vishnu at work making the world better, safer, and saner. When other religions claim that their figure is a god, that claim does not offend Hindus, and makes much sense. Jesus is both a great yogi (holy person) because he was human and a great god because he did the work of God. In Hinduism, there is nothing odd about that status at all, and even to be expected if we rely on the Dharma. Even bad people who seem to make the world worse for a while really only make the world better in the long run. They shake up the world so that agents of goodness can make it better. Bad figures include Napoleon, Hitler, Tamurlane, Stalin, and Mao. They are manifestations of Shiva. Creative people such as David, Michelangelo, Leonard Da Vinci, Steve Jobs, and the Beatles are manifestations of Brahma, especially when they are also a little amoral and adventurous (not immoral).

To put this Hindu view in perspective, most other religions, especially Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, see the figures of other religions as demons out to conquer the world and-or subvert it for humans, they think of other religions as evil ideologies out to enslave souls to evil demons, and they necessarily see all other religions as exclusive rivals – you either believe us or them. In comparison, the Hindu idea is a breath of fresh air and a ray of cleansing sunlight. For the non-Hindu, all other religions are a great evil to be fought at all cost while for the Hindu other religions are gateways to a greater truth and are to be nurtured until people find the greater truth. Other religions naturally teach hate amid love, as we can see in radical Christians and Muslims in the year 2016 while Hinduism naturally teaches open tolerance. This Hindu view is a strong force behind “all paths lead to God”.

Again, the following information makes more sense in light of the seven paths explained below but it is well to mention the ideas here: Most religions offer only one real path to only one real kind of salvation. In Christianity, you must accept Jesus as God. In Islam, you must accept Allah as the one and only God and accept Mohammad as the greatest, last, and most authoritative prophet. In Taoism, you need to find the Way and act accordingly. In Confucianism, you must make Heaven your model so you can be a model to others. In theory, in Hinduism, there is only one salvation and that is to see the Dharma system fully. In practice, and in accord with theory better understood, there are four official paths and seven unofficial paths. The four official paths are: (1) withdrawal, contemplation, and yoga; (2) intellect; (3) moral action; and (4) devotion (bhakti) to a god or avatar. ALL the salvation plans of ALL other religions can be seen in terms of these plans of Hinduism. NO other religion gives all four (seven) plans equal weight as does Hinduism. ALL other religions stress only one or two plans, usually devotion and small moral acts. Even when another religion sees that other plans are part of the natural “spiritual” life of some people, it gives those other ways weight only as they lead to devotion, as when Christian monks meditate to better worship Jesus and Sufis meditate to better worship Allah. ALL other religions and ideologies can be seen as incomplete and frustrating approximations to the full spiritual options of Hinduism. A Hindu who practices one way does not look down on Hindus who practice any other way. A Hindu who practices one way does not want to look down on other religions and ideologies that practice other ways, and is surprised when they look down on him-her.

Hinduism promotes “live and let live”, accepts that people need not have full knowledge of dogma to be religiously valid, accepts that people can differ and still be religiously valid, and accepts that people can approach religion in many ways. When combined with the Hindu ability to explain a huge variety of religious figures as servants of the Dharma, we can understand why Hinduism fosters amazing variety,

even open contradiction, without anxiety. Hinduism has a hundred thousand compatible sects. If you can find a way to get along, then you can find a way to God and the Dharma.

Pretty much any slogan or any feature of any religion can be found in an idea, attitude, social relation, or ceremony of Hinduism. Christian sacraments can be subsumed as Dharma acting on people to change them more in accord with the Dharma.

Because Hinduism can look at all other religions and ideologies this way, Hinduism can see them all as lesser versions of itself. It can encompass them and make them relative.

Because Hinduism can encompass and make relative all other ways of thought, Hinduism can look down on other ways as I described in the chapter on Relativism. It can say that other ways do lead to a god but other ways are inferior paths to a lesser god. Hinduism can encompass other ways in its ideas of society and human social life, including the aspects that I dislike.

The ideal, when stated as above, is appealing. When stated to bring out Hindu smug self-superiority, is not appealing and is usually annoying. The actual practice is far short of the ideal, and it is even more annoying. All religions are annoying in practice but not all religions have the tools for understanding that Hinduism has and yet still abuse them. When we see such big gaps between good ideal, bad ideal, and actual practice, then we have to suspect the founding ideas, that is, the impersonal Dharma system. So, I deny the impersonal Dharma system. I prefer the personal Judeo-Christian-Western system even with its faults and its gap between ideal and real. I work not to let it lapse into its own stupid errors, such as blaming other religions and religious figures on demonic cunning.

The antidote is to not accept the starting point of the impersonal Dharma system. Insist on some moral relations and personal relations, and insist they are not relative as described above. Find a clear set of principles about specific actions and relations, such as the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, equality under the law, and decency without prudery.

While resisting the impersonal Dharma system, don't fall back into narrow-minded bigotry. Keep the open-minded tolerance that the best Hinduism preaches even if practiced Hinduism does not follow it.

(19) Above I said the idea of “you are that” (“we are the same”) from the Upanishads can be pushed to the idea that we are all sparks of God, and even that we are God himself (Dharma itself). I am God and you are God. We are both God because we are all the same, and we are both the same because we are all God. If we all play a part in the drama, then we are the drama, and are all equally the drama. In terms that start from the Gospel of John and go beyond the Gospel: Jesus is the Child of God and is God; and so we are God too only we might not know it yet; that reason is why we can all become Children of God through Jesus; we borrow his knowledge of this truth.

In the 1950s through 1970s, some Westerners pushed this idea to silliness. This idea fueled the claim of religious charlatans. Although Alan Watts was part of a movement called “California Taoism”, in fact, to me, his ideas were more Hindu than Taoist. He wrote that Westerners, Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all appalled at a claim of “I am God”, but, to an enlightened person such as Watts or a Hindu, the idea is almost trivial. To a Hindu, we are all part of the Dharma game, and, at heart, are all the core of the

Dharma expressing itself temporarily in a particularity. It is about time we realized it and we started acting accordingly.

While this idea is an implication of Hinduism, I don't think smart Hindus make much of it. Smart Hindus who do get it don't push it the same way that confused Westerners and religious charlatans do. If you really know it and feel it, you don't make a point of it.

I don't agree with it. At the same time, I don't think other all people who feel it are crazy although some might be. It comes naturally with the "Grand Canyon" feeling of something bigger than me of which I am a part. We have to keep in mind that we are still only a part even when we do sense the bigger than me and do sense that it sometimes works through us. I do think some people who say "I am God" are selfish connivers. Some Westerners overstress the idea of "I am God" to use against Hinduism by saying that Hinduism is self-delusional self-indulgent self-idolatry. I don't agree with their extreme reaction either. The idea "I am God" is easily abused by non-Hindus, it does not play a big part in Hinduism, and it is not needed for other points here, so I don't go into it further.

Other Ways to Look at the Whole System.

A handy way to look at this system is through gender. Like good guys and bad guys, heroes and helpers, we have two basic genders of women and men. They need each other. By splitting, the world (Dharma) can play a never-ending drama about getting back together again. By getting together occasionally, the genders create more men and women to repeat. The new men and women are not exactly like the old. The new are similar enough to keep things going but different enough to keep it interesting. The new create more new, and so on, for a long time. Each generation thinks it invented the whole game. To a more enlightened person, the world splits not into two genders only but several genders. Most genders are needed in their own way. All gender interactions are always interesting even if annoying too often. Gender is only one of the many ways in which the system diversifies and unites at the same time.

The varieties of gender can blur the lines of gender – although in "rom coms" the basic fact of two distinct mutually-needed and mutually-attractive genders is never at risk despite blurring. We also have genders that are not best seen as varieties of a major gender, or due to blending, and are best seen in their own right. We have metrosexual men, tomboy women, dandies, girls who like softball, girls who study martial arts, men who bake, etc. All these are needed for the full richness of the story.

In the 1920s, vampires, zombies, and werewolves were bad. Beginning with Lon Chaney for the original werewolf movie, by the early 2000s, they all gradually developed a mixed character, and many are good. They stimulate good guys to be better, do good deeds themselves, the better ones fight the worse ones, and they all provide plot movement. In the 1950s, all space aliens were horrible. By the time of the movie "ET", they were good. In the 1960s and through the movie "2001: A Space Odyssey" and the first "Terminator" movie, all super machines were also super bad. By the time of "2010", the sequel to "2001", through all the sequels to the "Terminator" movies, and through movies like "Johnny Seven" and "Chappie", most machines had become friends. In the 1950s cowboy movies, there were "white hats" versus "black hats", and never the twain shall meet. By the 1970s, good guys were often worse than bad guys. In the 1930s, gangsters were bad while cops were good. By the 1970s, too many cops were corrupt. In the 1950s, everybody wanted a high-paid secure job in the modern business corporations that

were shaping the world of the future. By the 1990s, corporations were behind the corruption of government at the highest level and they were the spear point ripping apart the heart of nature; yet people still want jobs with them. What happened to all these creatures and people over a hundred years in America is what happened to bad guys and good guys in Hindu literature and ideology. Good guys need bad guys, and vice versa. In all good guys, there is a bit of bad, just as in all bad guys there is a bit of good.

In Christian terms: God has a plan. God has a plan for everybody and everything, no matter how big or small. We all play a part in God's plan. Everything that happens is a result of God's plan. It all works out well in the end because of God's plan. God foresaw everything and made allowances for it, including the bad results of free will. God foresaw the revolt of the Devil, and arranged so everything would turn out all right anyway. God turns evil into greater good, such as the killing of Jesus. That is one meaning of the Resurrection. We all do best when we go along with God's plan for us and for the world. Even when we go against God's plan in the short run, we cannot do so in the long run. We can take great joy in God's plan and in whatever small role we play in God's plan.

In terms of "Star Wars": the Light and Dark side of the Force came from one source and are destined to be reunited. What looks like separation of the two sides of the Force is really only a temporary situation, and the temporary division leads to a greater and happier reunification in the end. The Force has a plan. Quigon Jinn and Obiwan Kenobe thought Anikin Skywalker was the One who would reunite the force, and they were correct, but indirectly. It was necessary first that Anikin Skywalker first go over to the Dark side of the Force so his son, Luke, could reunite the two sides of the Force in an even greater, stronger, and longer way. Even small creatures such as "droids" serve the greater plan and can be crucial to the plan, as when R2D2 delivered Leia's message to Obiwan. Even apparent bad serves the greater good. Even when the Emperor thought he was carrying out his own amazing plan, really the Emperor was carrying out the deeper and more subtle plan of the Force.

In terms of "Lord of the Rings": God foresaw the revolt of Morgoth (the Devil) against him; foresaw the revolt of the Elves against Morgoth and, indirectly, against God; and foresaw that Sauron would return to Middle Earth to carry on the war. God has a plan. Even the littlest creatures such as Hobbits and Gollum play a big role in the overall plan. Even the smallest events, such as the chance finding of a plain ring, play a big role in the overall plan. God can turn evil against itself and for good. The making of the Ring was not the triumph of evil but the final undoing of evil. What looks like evil might be good in disguise, as when Strider the Ranger turns out to be Aragorn the King. Sometimes the worm turns as when the Ents finally rise up to destroy Saruman and his evil Orc army. The real story is not any one story in the saga but the fact that the story goes on forever: "the road goes ever on and on", and "not all who wander are lost". We all have a home in God's plan just as Sam had a home in the Shire, and we do what we do as part of God's plan just as Sam did it all for home in the Shire.

In terms of Mahayana: Good and evil are real but also illusions. They support each other. We should not come down too strong on one side or the other. Everyday life and enlightenment are the same, they only look different. Enlightened people and un-enlightened people are the same, they only look different. All enlightened people are also un-enlightened. All un-enlightened people are also enlightened; they just don't know it yet. They will in the end. When they do know it, they will return to the everyday world to keep the system going. A bodhisattva will come repeatedly to remind us and to save us by getting us to

accept the system and our role in the system. You might be him-her. The system supports, comforts, and guides you. What matters is the great system and that we accept our role in it. That is what enlightenment really means. What looks like the normal world is really a burning house of desperation while what looks like a burning house is really the normal world of plan and home. Both are the same, and both lead equally back to joy in the system. The system has a plan.

Hinduism can subsume and make relative all these views. None of these views can subsume and make relative Hinduism.

Cosmic Place Becomes Social Duty.

See Part 3. Bhakti (devotion) and the Hindu view of social life were two reasons why Hinduism replaced Mahayana Buddhism in India. All societies hold ideas about human nature, social life, human-nonhuman relations, the universe, and the supernatural. The issue here is not just that there is a relation. The issue is how the two shape each other into a particularly Hindu style.

The Dharma plays by becoming many qualitatively different things. If the Dharma was many copies of exactly the same thing, no matter how all are beautiful, adept, and wonderful; even if the Dharma world was millions of the same thing; then there could be no game, no drama, no advance, and no fun. If every ant were exactly the same, there could be no colony and no ant life. A beach is fun only partly because it has trillions of sand grains all nearly exactly alike. If a beach did not also have water, sun, surf, fish, cliffs, boats, and even sometimes some humans showing off, seagulls, and vendors, it would not be a beach we could enjoy. If every flower were a rose, there might as well not be flowers. If every plant in a forest were the same plant, really there could be no forest. If there were no inherited differences between very similar organisms in a species, there could be no evolution. If there were no sex or genders, life would be more boring. If beings did not differ, we could not feel the bridge between us, we could not feel “you are that”. Great compassion between beings would make little sense.

All different things might be equally God (Dharma) or might be equally “sparks of God (Dharma)” yet, still, within the game, and for the game, they are not the same; they differ. The game within which they differ is, for us, reality. It is the only relevant reality, as long as we recall that it comes from the Dharma.

The Dharma reality game has rules. Rules, reality, and difference-in-similarity imply each other. Reality comes from the rules of the Dharma dream game. There is no relevant reality apart from the rules of the game. Rules are needed because things differ. If things did not differ, we would need no rules and could not have useful rules. When things differ, we must have rules for interaction. Whenever we have rules, we also must have differences, reality, and a game.

It is good to see commonality (“you are that”) but equally good and equally needed to respect differences (“great compassion”). You must do both. You must see both ways. You are both one and different. Both ways are equally important and equally valid. To stress one or the other is to fall into one of the doctrinal disputes of Hinduism, and I avoid doing so. To stress that we need to see both also is to fall into a view but this view is benign enough for this book and does not require me to take sides in any of the endless debates of Hinduism.

For the Dharma to play an ongoing drama game, things must differ yet relate. In relating, things are not always equal; difference and relating imply some inequality; inequality is part of difference; inequality is part of relating; inequality is good. At any time, some things have to be more important than others. We can't all be Arjuna or Krishna. Some things have to be higher while others are lower. If every character in a play were the hero (heroine), even if they were all somewhat different heroes but still heroes, then there could be no play. If every character were the good woman, even if all were good women but each with her own good character (like a really perky clean version of "Little Women"), there could be no play. The cast of characters need at least as much diversity as the sisters in "Pride and Prejudice" and their different lovers.

"Different" necessarily includes "more adept" and "less adept". If all the characters in "Romeo and Juliet" were as adept at running the city, and running their families, as the Prince, then there would be no family conflict and no play. If every tough in the Montague and Capulet families were an equally good fighter, then there could be no fights. If every police officer were as adept as Sherlock Holmes, there would be no mysteries for Holmes to solve.

Diversity also implies "better and worse" in the moral sense, as noted above about moral relativity.

Multi-celled organisms work because not every cell is exactly alike although all carry the same DNA. Multi-celled organisms work because cells differ and they interact to support each other. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts even if the whole needs all the parts. The parts need to be part of the whole. The parts have to help each other. Until recently, biologists liked to think of ecosystems in the same way, and this view is still largely true.

The terms for variation and functional mutual dependence in organisms, societies, and ecosystems are "functional integration" or "organic solidarity". These types of organization differ from the "mechanical integration" or "mechanical solidarity" of a stack of wood. Organic functional integration is more interesting and more fun.

Diversity, and "better and worse", in morality and in abilities, are natural because they are needed in a Dharma system. Diversity, and "better and worse", in both senses, are a natural part of Dharma life.

Among animals and people, those who have greater than average ability are naturally less common than those of average ability. Animals and people who have lesser ability likely are less common than those with average ability too but they are less of an issue. Animal societies work best when they channel their members of particular ability, and-or greater ability, into tasks that need the ability, and when the societies have just the right tasks into which they can channel the kinds of abilities that recur often. Ant colonies work best when workers work, soldiers fight, and drones impregnate queens. The queen in a bee colony can make many eggs, some of different kinds, and there is a need for a bee that can make many eggs, and only one bee of that kind, so the queen fits the task and the task fits the queen.

Abilities tend to be inherited. The fit is not perfect, but, generally, animals and people of high intelligence tend to produce smart children while animals and people of modest intelligence tend to produce average children and animals and people of low intelligence tend to produce children of low intelligence. Musical parents tend to have musical children, as in the Bach family. Being a police officer tends to run in families

as in the TV show “Blue Bloods” although this tendency is as much due to situation as to genes. If Arjuna had children, we would expect them to be smart, good-looking, and good at war. The fact of inherited ability does not go with the modern politically correct “all children are above average” (Lake Woebegone) but it is true and it is part of the natural Dharma game.

What kind of society best goes along with Dharma naturalness and would support Dharma-ness over the longest time?

To see, it is easiest first to rule out some societies that do not serve this role well although they might play a role in a bigger Dharma game as inferior reflections of best Dharma society, as encompassed lesser versions of the best Dharma society. We do not want societies in which:

- There is no gender or sex and-or no recognition of distinct gender and sex, and their roles.
- Gender is rigidly split into two and only two.
- Everybody could do everybody else’s job equally well.
- Every job made just the same difference so that every plumber made just as much of a difference as the mayor of the city.
- Everybody could learn the job of everybody else.
- Everybody has the same power.
- Radical populist democracy prevails.
- Everybody has the right opinion about religion.
- The opinion of everybody counts equally in religion, politics, economics, etc.
- The opinion of only one person or one group counts.
- Rigid stratification prevails without any change over time.

We want ONE society in which:

- People recognize, accept, and enjoy natural differences (differences given by the Dharma).
- Natural differences include differences in ability and in moral stature.
- Different roles, and different people, mutually support each other.
- People naturally tend toward the roles that suit their natural abilities.
- Society takes account of natural abilities by providing tasks for the natural abilities.
- There are fewer tasks that require great ability and many tasks that require average ability.
- Ability is very largely inherited but not entirely inherited.
- People accept that characteristics and abilities are largely inherited.
- Social place is very largely inherited but not entirely inherited.

The only society that fulfills our needs is Hindu traditional stratified society. Hindu society is the only truly Dharma-based society. It is the only society that accords with Dharma-based (evolved) human nature.

All other societies are lesser variations of Hindu traditional society, and other societies make some of the mistakes listed above. All other societies can be encompassed in Hindu traditional society.

In Hinduism, everybody has a place in the cosmic system. There is room for everybody, everybody plays a role, and everybody is needed. As Jesus said, "My father's house has many rooms". In the early days of Hindu religion and Indian society, this thought likely was a comfort.

But this thought necessarily also has "flip sides" that are discomfoting. If you have a place, you must keep that place. If you do not keep your place, the system falls apart. You are now responsible not only for your own little role but for the entire system. Dereliction of role is not only a betrayal of self but of every particular player and the whole as well. You have to find your role and carry out its duties fully. Once you have found your role, that role is your role; you may not change roles. That role is you. You are your role. You become your role and not anything else. You find your spiritual cosmic place by your role in society and, with few exceptions, in no other way.

This way of thinking helps rich and powerful people excuse their position and excuse what they do in their position such as exploit the poor. They have a cosmic duty to act that way. They have a cosmic duty to act rich and powerful. This way of thinking is a way to keep poor and weak people in place by stressing that they deserve their place and their place is needed, no matter how humble or painful. This way of thinking reinforces the subordination of women. Women and poor people have a cosmic and social duty to act like women and poor people. Downtrodden pained people have a cosmic and social duty to take what the rich give them, and to act like downtrodden subservient people. This way of thinking reinforces the subordination of non-Hindus, non-Indians, and other relations.

It might seem as if seeing cosmic duty in terms of social station would foster stable good relations both between socio-economic-cosmic classes and among members of each class, but this is not usually so. What happens in real life is that people who have an advantage use the system to keep and-or augment their advantage and to keep down rivals. Their intrinsic ability does not matter. What matters is that they have a privileged position from which they can maneuver to keep privilege. Privilege takes the place of native ability. People with privileged station make sure subordinates stay subordinate. People accept a place not so much because they feel that is the place Dharma gives them but because that is a secure base from which to connive to be richer, more powerful, have more powerful families, and get more sex, or because it is secure. In using their station as a base from which to connive, people indirectly reinforce the whole system and, at the same time, make it a bad system. When people find themselves in a bad system, they use their place as a base from which to connive etc. It is self-reinforcing. In a system like this, people develop personalities that go along with the system, like the nasty people that developed in Nazi Germany, Russia and its colonies under Stalin, and China under the worst times of Mao. They are much like the system and the type of people ("the establishment") that have been a favorite whipping boy of American literature at least since "The Scarlet Letter"; yet they are still real and still bad. And so the bad system perpetuates itself in a bad way.

Westerners romanticize the Hindu ideal of diversity, everybody has a role, everybody is needed, and everybody helps everybody else, and Westerners make it seem fun, by taking for granted more freedom than is allowed for them personally in the real system, and by seeing their personal role not as a social role but as a cosmic hero who bursts all boundaries and re-defines everything as it should be. They see play rather than a rigid unfair system that fosters bad feelings. Westerners are wrong.

Whether, overall, this way of thinking leads to more good than bad depends on history, economics, social relations, and other forces that go along with it such as degree of personal choice. Since the population of India got dense, and certainly since India moved into industrialized capitalism, this way of thinking does more harm than good. Whether this thinking can be interpreted to help people in the modern world is one of the tasks for young Hindus. To appreciate this situation, it helps to look at how the train of thought was interpreted in Indian Hindu society, as in Part 3.

We went from pleasing ideas about diversity and mutual help to scary ideas about tight roles in a system. It is hard to start down this path without going all the way to that end, a “slippery slope”. Try to think how you would keep the best parts while dumping the worst parts. It is easier to keep the best parts if we think in terms of persons and a personal God rather than in terms of roles and Dharma. I find it very hard to stop along this path if I start from impersonal Dharma and roles in a Dharma system.

In America, we say we are all equal but we know we are not really all equal, we praise the idea of wealth according to merit yet we fiercely fight any inheritance tax, and we know we could not have diversity and mutual help if we really were all equal. We try to use “equality under the law” to balance ideal equality with ideal diversity and mutual help. In reality, we do not succeed well. In Hinduism, everyone accepts difference and so should mutually help but in fact difference leads to entrenched inequality and only token mutual help. Hindus accept diversity that feeds the system but not some important natural diversity such as homosexuality and non-traditional roles for women. In totalitarian systems such as Stalinism, in contrast to Hinduism, everybody should be treated the same but in fact are treated differently – the end result too is entrenched inequality. How can we see similarity, difference, equality, inequality, diversity, individual effort and reward, mutual help, and compassion so as to develop a good working realistic system? How do we avoid hypocrisy serving a bad system? While the current Western solutions are far from ideal, and far from what I can imagine as a real workable practical system, still they are better than alternatives in India, China, Africa, and to most of the rest of the world.

Young Hindus in modern democracies are in a bind. Modern plural democracy is not compatible with the ideas of Hindu traditional society given above. Yet young Hindus are learning to live in modern plural democracies. To merge Hinduism with modern diverse semi-populist democracy would require rejecting and losing many of the ideas given above. Most core ideas of Hinduism and a Dharma society can be made compatible with ideas of modern plural democracies but to explain how here would take too much space. Besides, young Hindus should solve this problem for themselves. Please see my other essays apart from this book.

Culture, Society, Religion, and Concordance.

Usually people are happiest when these aspects of life all line up: (1) our culture apart from our religion, that is, what we think (believe) in general apart from religion; (2) society, that is, the groups in our society and how they relate to each other; and (3) religion. Desire for harmony is true not only of Hinduism and Indian society but of almost all societies. Individuals seek social concordance as individuals and as part of societies. Even thugs, punks, rebels, and Satanists want the world to line up with their view, if only so they know what to be mad at and what to covet.

How, then, are Hinduism, Indian society, and Indian culture distinct? That is what this chapter is about. I can't explain any more succinctly than through this whole chapter.

I can say a few things briefly. Hunter-gatherer-foragers do not expect, and do not seek, the degree of concordance sought in Hinduism. (Except maybe for the Australian indigenous people (aborigines), who were not originally hunter-gatherer-foragers, in my opinion.) I doubt that an evolved basis to seek and expect Hindu-style concordance is a big part of our nature. We did evolve the desire to expect, and to seek, some concordance, but not nearly to the extent imagined in Hinduism.

Except for a few tribal societies, tribal societies do not seek or expect such concordance. Except for some brief times and places in European, Chinese, and Japanese feudalism, most peasant societies didn't do so. This desire for tremendous concordance makes the Hindu system odd and strident.

The most interesting way to see the concordance is how Hinduism is able to turn most ideas and most other thought systems into parts of itself, and-or into versions of itself. Again, how Hinduism does this is the subject of the whole chapter and cannot be summarized any better in this section.

Americans naturally, and correctly, resist strong concordance, at least in myth, as when the crew of the Star Ship Enterprise in the original TV show overthrew computer-based societies. Yet Americans overdo the case the other way, and we extol false chaos while actually being about as conformist as most other cultures-and-societies. This hypocrisy makes it hard for Americans to be objective and fair about how Hinduism does the job, and this hypocrisy would lengthen my task of explaining.

I had a hard time in graduate school because, at that time, anthropologists emphasized the concordance between culture, society, and religion. They apparently assumed that we could explain all if we could get at one. Usually anthropologists fixed on religion as a symbol system and used religion to explain culture and society. This view would please Hindus. It is not a true view of how human nature, culture, society, and religion work, or of how the basis for them evolved.

Societies and-or religions, other than Hinduism, that try to force concordance on human life, also worry me. Puritans were not nearly the prudes that modern myth makes them out but I still fear falling into such a society. Academia, with modern political correctness, seems that way to me. The great failed collective systems of the world, such as Russian and Chinese Communism, are also examples, and they failed for good reasons rooted in human nature. When a large Christian church – I will not name any, and there are more than one – tries to organize all life and politics, I fear it too.

We do need some order and some correspondence in human life. It is worth thinking about what kinds, and how much, and where to draw the lines.

“You Are That”, Compassion, the Upanishads, and Hinduism.

The Upanishads teach that we are all “in” each other, we are all connected. The proper response to this insight is compassion for other beings, especially sentient beings. Who would hurt even a bird when we know that, to a large extent, we are that bird? This feeling has the same root as the idea from Judaism, and Jesus, that the second of the two supreme bases for the Law is to love neighbors as ourselves. (The

first basis of Jewish Law is to love God, as he loves us.) The same feeling lies behind the Golden Rule and behind Kant's idea that all rules apply equally to everyone including ourselves and others. Achilles feels it when he sees Priam as a father and he gives Priam what is needed and right. We see ourselves as persons and see others as persons too; when we do, we can act only in accord with our feeling that we are alike. Of course, not all these views are exactly the same, and differences can be important. I do not disentangle any differences here.

In the numbered points above, when I began picturing Hinduism by showing the importance of all the little people and even the villains, I seemed to follow a logical extension of the Upanishads. When I continued by showing how bad guys and good guys depend on each other, I seemed to continue the logic and to move toward the inherent social endpoint. We can see the link from the Upanishads to Hinduism in this way but I think this way is wrong.

A change occurred between the Upanishads and Hinduism. The change is one possible development of the Upanishads but not the only possible development and, I think, not the best. The same change could be done in the teachings of Jews and Jesus if their teachings were taken along the direction of the points above. Their teachings did not go that way because of Jewish character and because Judaism merged with Greek and Latin thought in Christianity. Some versions of Christianity, such as Gnosticism, did try to take the feelings that way, but, luckily, formal Christianity defeated them.

The change in Hinduism comes when thinkers embed "you are that" and "compassion" within a Dharma system and social system. In the full-blown system, we don't feel the link to others and the compassion that the Upanishads and Jewish teachers wanted. We don't feel like one fully sentient person connected to a lot of other similar beings, some of which are partly sentient such as dogs, and some of which are also fully sentient such as humans. We don't feel person to person. We don't feel that the importance of life arises out of what we do on the basis of God's love for us and our love for others.

Instead, importance in Hinduism arises because I, you, he, she, it, them, and everything, are parts of a system. We are persons only in the system. Our identity as persons depends on our role in the system. Our sense that we are all the same arises because we are all roles-parts in the system. Our feeling that we should love each comes because we and others are parts of the system. To love others is to love the system and to love the system is to love others. There is no love of others apart from love of the system. In my view, to love the system is not the same as to love God or your neighbors. This difference in going from the Upanishads to Hinduism is similar to the difference between loving someone because he-she is a person versus loving someone because he-she is a citizen of your town. It is the difference between loving your country because it is good (or you wish it was a good country) versus loving it because it is your own country, right or wrong. It is like loving Big Brother in the novel "1984".

Of course, in real life apart from formal religions, many real Hindu people do feel the togetherness and compassion taught by the Upanishads, Jews, Jesus, and Homer. The difference is that one feeling makes sense in the context of simple human action (Upanishads, etc.) while the other feeling (Hinduism) does not.

When Hindus feel this feeling, they can refer back to the Upanishads to make sense of it and justify it, at least in the way that Hinduism interprets the Upanishads. In giving an approved context to this feeling,

they reinforce Hinduism and the change from the Upanishads to Hinduism even if they don't know they do so. They convert the feeling of togetherness and compassion to Hinduism even when, in fact, Hinduism does not make sense of the feeling in its original Upanishad form. Hindus who feel connection and compassion in the original sense of the Upanishads have a feeling apart from a Hindu Dharma system even if, after, they make sense of it in terms of a Hindu Dharma system. Hinduism pre-empted the feeling to serve its system. This is what Hinduism, and other systems that eat the world, do. Christianity does this when a well-dressed person on the street flips a dollar into the hat of a homeless person and the well-dressed person thinks he-she loves his-her neighbor as him-herself. (Please don't stop giving money to poor people on the street or anywhere.) The shift to Hinduism is much like what happens in the novel "Animal Farm". The ideas "You are that" and "Compassion" become slogans much as "We are all equal – but some are more equal than others".

Humans have a hard time acting on the basis of "you are that", "compassion", "love your neighbor", "you are like your neighbor", and "applies equally". People have a hard time simply treating other people as persons like themselves and treating nature as full of beings similar to themselves. People have a hard time acting in simple decency as did Achilles. I doubt any real society could run on this basis. People prefer roles and social systems; and societies have to have roles and systems. That is one reason why, after Achilles gave Priam the body of Hector, Achilles led the Greeks in funeral games to honor his dead friend Patroclus. Society restored itself, hopefully better now that Achilles has felt simple decency. Christianity developed roles and social systems out of Jesus' simple teachings. Hinduism developed roles and social systems that could refer back to insights from the Upanishads. Hinduism did a good job. Hinduism satisfies the great majority of Hindus. Hinduism meets human needs, including the need to recall "you are that" and "compassion" from time to time. Yet just because Hinduism is one very effective way to make a human system using versions of "you are that" and "compassion" does not mean it is the way I prefer or think best. In its success, Hinduism undermined "you are that" and "compassion".

Ideally in Judaism and Christianity, people should feel connected to other people and feel compassion for them not only because we are similar as people but despite that we differ in age, gender, wealth, power, social station, etc. People should feel connected and compassion because of the differences, not only despite the differences. We cannot simply ignore differences but we can overcome them often enough to see common personhood. We feel both similarity and difference, and sometimes we can overcome difference. Sometimes we revel in difference when we can see both commonality and difference at the same time. In practice, Christians are not able to bridge differences to feel love for all neighbors. In contrast to the Judeo-Christian ideal, Hindus do not feel connection or compassion despite differences or because of differences. Differences are acceptable walls. Differences are an indirect way to other kinds of connection through the Dharma system because they give us roles in the Dharma system. While a Hindu might feel something for a peasant or a beggar, he-she feels it because that thing is a peasant or beggar playing a role in the Dharma system and not because that thing is a person like him-herself who happens to be in different conditions.

I am not sure how the writers of the Upanishads wanted us to feel connection and compassion when we are distinct in situation. The Upanishads were mystical lessons for people who lived in the forest apart from society. Normal differences were not relevant. A Christian would read the Upanishads to say we should overcome differences to see our commonness underneath. A Hindu would read the Upanishads as pertaining only to a mystic link in the deeper Dharma system, irrelevant to social differences, and so as

really supporting differences because differences are natural in the Dharma system and the Upanishads support the Dharma system. It is worth reading the Upanishads to decide for yourself.

I don't know if a full Dharma system can be re-interpreted to re-capture the feeling of the Upanishads, Jewish teachers, Jesus, and Homer. I doubt it. I think we have to get beyond impersonal Dharma to an idea of God as a person too. We will see, as adept caring young Hindus move around the world.

PART 3: More on Embedding Cosmic Duty in Indian-Hindu Society.

See above about Hindu society in the section "Cosmic Place Becomes Social Duty".

Entrenched Rank, and Relativism.

Hinduism is pervaded by a sense of higher and lower that is hard to get across to Americans. The Hindu feel for rank is like the gender system in the Romance languages where every noun is either masculine or feminine regardless of common sense; Americans don't get that either; I struggle with it. In Hinduism, of two people or groups, one always is higher and the other lower: occupations, genders, classes, castes, siblings, families, callings, schools, skills, etc. Of two women, one is higher and the other lower. Of two doctors, one is higher and the other lower. Of two cities, one is higher and the other lower, like rivalries between two high schools in America in athletics.

The bare roots of ranking are fixed. Men always outrank women, within castes. Age outranks youth. Major caste categories are always ranked in the same order: holy people, priests, rulers and soldiers, peasants, merchants, and then others that I don't go into.

Rank and system go together. Anything has some a character in itself and gets some character from its relations to everything else. Each individual robin is the common worm-hunting friendly neighborhood bird but what it fully is, what it eats, who it fights, when it leaves for the south, and when it returns to the north, all depend also on where it lives and if its neighbors are jays, cardinals, other robins, or hawks. A yellow star is a yellow star but we don't fully understand stars unless we also know about red stars, blue stars, neutron stars, super novae ("novas"), galaxies, planets, and interstellar dust. The character of a whole house changes when a new baby comes or a parent dies. Who the child becomes depends on who it grows up with.

Rank is an important way that anything finds a place in a system and makes the system. Households, schools, and communities in which children outrank parents, teachers, and adults are far different from those in which parents, teachers, and adults outrank children. Cities are usually better to live in when neighborhoods are divided by socio-economic level and work type, such as middle class from upper class. Much as Americans hate to admit it, cities usually are better to live in when some ethnic groups form their own neighborhoods, as when Italians and Jews have neighborhoods. Ecosystems in which people are the top predator differ from those in which tigers, elephants, and king cobras are. Ecosystems in which people are the top herbivore (farmers) differ from those in which elephants are. Every year, popularity rankings drastically change network programming, usually for the better.

In Hinduism, rank carries over somewhat. Holy people rank higher than military people who rank higher than peasants, so holy people rank higher than peasants even though peasants feed and support holy people and when holy people depend on peasants.

Although the general idea of rank is clear, specifics can be complicated. Context and relativity support the system even when situations get fuzzy. A family can rank high within its caste but low compared to families in higher castes. Families focus on arenas in which they rank highly.

Rank does not always transfer perfectly. Rank does not always extend neatly across groups. Where comparisons might cause a problem, they are adeptly avoided. Family A is highest rank in city A while family B is highest rank in city B. When the two families do business, they avoid arguing about which is highest overall. In old India, warriors ranked above doctors while now doctors rank highly. Modern police officers are like the old warrior aristocracy. Now doctors rank above most officers but not necessarily above high ranking officers. So doctors and high ranking police officers avoid pushing questions of comparative rank. Still, the idea of rank remains.

As all over the world, power, wealth, prestige, and history can confute ideal ranks, while context and relativity help to preserve the ideal of ranking. All professional men are above all professional women. Yet a professional woman might be above a man merchant unless the merchant were rich and powerful, and his family had a long history.

Rank is not like an idealized chicken linear pecking order, and it is not necessarily the stuffy rigid horrible oppressive system of nasty higher-eats-lower that Americans dislike. Rank is more like the concern of a bride that everybody sits in the right place for all ceremonies. Rank is as much about peace and order as about asserting dominance. You don't want people who squabble to sit next to each other; and you do want people to sit next to each other so they have a good time, enjoy events, and the whole wedding is a success. Business firms need rank to run well.

In the Hindu view, the idea of rank, coupled with relativity, is a good compromise between the need for individual expression and the need for group life. Rank-with-relativism is the right blend of individuality and useful tradition that old-fashioned conservatives such as Edmund Burke praised. It is what Aristotle had in mind when he said people are "political (city) animals" and he supported aristocratic government. Hindu religion and Indian society take account both of individual differences and the fact that abilities are inherited. Hindu religion and Indian society allow people to go along with the history of their group yet to find themselves within the context of their group. In all societies, most group relations arose out of good practical use. Indian Hindu society allows good group relations to persist, and allows an individual to find him-herself in the context of historically good group relations. Indian Hindu society is natural. As natural society, it is the best expression of the Dharma on Earth.

I do not like Hindu, Asian, European, American, and other formal systems of rank but my dislike is due as much to how I grew up as to anything intrinsic in ranking or anti-ranking. American dislike of rank often is hypocritical. American attitude toward rank pretends an individual is what he-she is without consideration for what is around. The Hindu attitude goes to the other extreme but the Hindu attitude likely is more in tune with evolved human nature than is my egalitarianism. I find most people, even Americans, can get happy with the idea of rank and with how rank plays out. Americans love housekeepers.

Different Indo-European societies stress rank or equality, relativism or absolutism, and individual (part) or system (whole), and do so in different ways in different times in their history under different conditions. I don't know if Indo-European culture is unusual among world cultures. Why ranking, relativism, equality, absolutism, individual, or system wins in a particular case is not clear to me. How they all relate to each other is not always clear.

Why Dharma.

During the time of the Vedas, some Indian thinkers noticed that rituals worked on their own. A ritual did not work because a god made the ritual work. In fact, rituals compelled the gods somewhat. You acted out a ritual to invoke the god of luck because the ritual had power to make the god of luck work for you; likewise with gods of health, wealth, success, etc. Otherwise, why bother with a difficult ritual? Rituals had their own power. This is the basic idea of ritual efficacy. It is like magic.

Thus technique has its own power without necessarily needing the will of a god behind the technique. The world works through technique. If you understand the technique, you know how the world works. If you can get along with the technique, you can get along with the world and you can use the technique to do better. The technique of the world, how it works, is Dharma.

At the time, the Indian idea of technique was an advance on the idea of the will of the gods. It is like the idea of science in ancient Greece or like Tao, chi, yin, yang, and Li ("humanism") in China.

As the idea of technique developed into the idea of Dharma, it mixed in with ideas of rank and relativism, and became integral to ideas of how society works. To know rank and relativism, especially in a social context, was to know how the world works and so to know how to get along well with the world, especially the social world. Ideas of Dharma and society became mixed early in the development of the idea of the Dharma, and they have stayed mixed since.

The same thing did not happen in India as in the Greek development of science. China had ideas similar to technique (Dharma) and science in "Tao" ("way", chi, and yin and yang) and "Li" ("humanism"). I don't know why similar ideas went in different directions in the different cultures.

The Dharma is impersonal. It is not a personal god even though it leads to individual deities and leads to the creation of individual selves in human beings. The idea of Dharma establishes an impersonal force at the heart of Hindu ideas about how the world works, humans work, and society works. So Hinduism has to stress system. A solid system is based on a structured society that makes a place for the individual and keeps the individual in his-her place. This view differs from the Judaic-Christian-Muslim view of a personal God, and, I think, differs from the Taoist-Zen idea of the Tao and nature. I return to the effects of this difference later after I have said more about the Hindu system.

The idea of Dharma has a duality-and-vagueness that both allows people to feel subject to the system and prompts them to maneuver in the system. It is like Christian issues with faith and works, or salvation through grace alone versus what we contribute. It is like Christian and Muslim issues with the Will of God, or modern problems with free will (including legal responsibility) versus strict causality (determinism). On

the one hand, we have to be responsible for our own salvation and our submission to God; not even God can do this for us. On the other, we can only be saved by God's grace; ultimately we cannot earn our salvation, and, really, can do little toward it. In reverse order: On the one hand, only God can send us to heaven. On the other, we feel we can compel the Will of God if only we believe, believe strongly enough, follow all his rules, pray enough times a day, act well enough, Justify ourselves, Justify ourselves with a crusade, know the correct dogma well enough, or kill enough of God's enemies.

With Dharma, on the one hand we are subject to our inherited Dharma, and must find a place within the social-cosmic Dharma system. On the other hand, we can make our own Dharma-karma and we can improve our lot in this life and the next. If we can make our situation better in the next life, then we can also make our situation better in this life. We might not be able to change our station much unless we are a great king or a Buddhist, but we can maneuver within our situation to be better off and make our family members better off. We can hand off the benefits of our maneuvering to descendants. If we do better by maneuvering, that is the result of both our personal efforts and our past karma-Dharma, so even quite a bit of maneuvering and selfishness ultimately reinforces the system.

Such vague and contradictory ideas are the "meat and potatoes" of systems that eat the world, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, or Buddhist.

Actors in the Dharma Social System.

Here is the logical place to write how the Dharma system sees individuals not as person but as roles in a big system, and how people see themselves within the Dharma system. I cannot do this task fairly here. I would have to compare Hinduism with other big systems, and that would take up much too much space. Instead, I give a few comments and examples.

You can learn about Indian society and Hinduism from classic texts such as the Mahabharata but they tell more about idealized Hindu life at the time of Jesus than about how Hinduism turned out as an enduring system. At the end of the chapter, I offer a discussion of the movie "Groundhog Day" with Bill Murray and Andie McDowell to show how even a well-meaning best use of a system like Hinduism, with a strong emphasis on treating people well, still can lead us to overlook people as individual persons. A fairly good way to learn about Indian society and Hindu culture is to read Indian writers even when they were not born in India, such as V.S. Naipaul. You can learn from Westerners who lived in India such as Rudyard Kipling or E.M. Forster but they tend to romanticize India even when they describe the harshness of life there. If you are adept at looking back into movies to get at their presuppositions, you can get a lot from watching Bollywood, but it takes patience. I know nothing of other sources such as Indian television. You can learn from reading anthropological work on India but it takes a while to see through the conventions of that work as well so I offer none of it in the Bibliography.

The gist of my assessment: In Hinduism, people are not individuals but roles. People do not treat each other as individual persons with intrinsic value but as "stuff" in the stratified social Dharma system. Perversely, confinement frees people to be selfish as long as they fulfill the letter of their role. As long as people do not compromise their karma fate in the Dharma system, people feel free to use other people for their benefit. People do have a duty to carry out their role to other roles in the Dharma system, as a servant must serve a master and a master look after his-her subjects, but that is not the same as treating

people as persons even when the interaction is nice in particular cases. People are good at subverting duty even when the original intention was founded on good principles and the duties spelled out so as to promote humanity. This is like the proverbial nasty bureaucrat, such as a teacher, who uses the power of his-her position to “lord it over” the people who come under his-her sway, and proves that he-she has the power by hurting his-her subjects even without cause. Any system based primarily on roles alone, without also a big allowance for individual persons, is bound to fall regardless of the other good principles on which it was founded. People have to feel and internalize the idea of a person so that they avoid corrupting a system based on roles alone.

Even systems based on the idea of individual persons and the Golden Rule can fall when they lapse back into mere roles. I grew up in a big Greek Orthodox Church, and have seen other big Churches such as Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Methodist, Buddhist, and Muslim. There is a common way that big people in churches treat small people, and it has little to do with the teachings of Jesus and everything to do with the reality of human nature in a big system. American academia is supposed to be about equal individuals working for the benefit of all, about persons meeting persons, collegiality; yet it is not that. Hypocrisy in the West makes inequality in the middle of supposed equality worse. In some ways, Hindu churches are better than Christian and Muslim churches because they accept inequality and make the best of it that they can. But even that is not good enough, and, over the long run, it is not better than Christian and Muslim churches.

Krishna and Arjuna Again.

Return again to the classic story of Krishna and Arjuna from the Bhagavad Gita. Arjuna starts out feeling bad for all the people who will die as a result of the great battle looming. He feels especially bad for the little people, farmers and merchants, who will be killed without knowing what the war is about and without feeling that participating in a great battle leads to glory. Krishna tells Arjuna, basically, to look out for his place in the Dharma system and to let them look out for theirs. You have to do what you have to do, and let the chips fall where they might, including on the heads of the little people. Krishna rationalizes and he dresses up his rationalization by saying the Dharma system ultimately benefits them, if not in this life then in future lives. If Arjuna does not do his part, he hurts the little people more in the long run than if he does his part now and some of them suffer now. It is not hard to use this view to convince yourself of what you want to do, and to convince yourself of anything that works to your benefit. But it is a rationalization. I am not saying we should never go to war, but we have to think along the lines that worry Arjuna at the start of the poem. We cannot accept Krishna’s answer no matter how beautiful, cosmic, mythic, and useful for talking ourselves into something. We have to think better and do better. We might still end up in battle but we have to have better reasons than this, and have to consider the little people as persons more than Krishna really does.

Mohandas Gandhi.

The great Mohandas (“Mahatma”) Gandhi offers a surprising instance of how the stratified rigid Dharma system enters the minds even of people that we thought escaped it. I do not explain who Gandhi was; see the excellent movie about him starring Ben Kingsley. As with many “baby boomers”, for me, Gandhi is a hero. Martin Luther King took him as a role model, the biggest role model after Jesus. Gandhi did much that was right, into which I cannot go here. He did one thing wrong. (As I say elsewhere, “Maha

atma” means “great soul”, and it is a title rather than a name. “Gandhi” is a fairly common Indian family name, and it means something like “grocer” or “shopkeeper”.)

Gandhi usually fought non-violently against the caste (“Varna” or “color”) system of India. He met with members of the lowest group in India, the “outcastes”, when to do so could result in total ostracism for him and his family for life. He insisted that members of all castes, including lower castes and outcastes, should join equally in Indian democracy. So it seems he should fight for the abolition of all caste. Yet he did not. In fact, toward the end of his life, he urged people to follow most of the traditional caste rules, including that a child should take the occupation of his-her parents. In particular, a son should follow the occupation of his father, and a daughter should follow the occupation of her mother; the son of a baker should bake, and the daughter of a homemaker should care for a home. He urged his wife to act a traditional role. So that we don't misjudge Gandhi harshly, I speculate on his motives, although I cannot say I am clear about his motives.

(1) Gandhi correctly saw that modernization would upset society, and that Indian society needed stability to grow and to compete on the world stage. Sticking to the caste system could provide the stability that India needed until India could figure out how to change gracefully. (2) Gandhi knew India needed well-educated clear-thinking objective leaders who knew the issues. Some people like that might come from the lower castes, but not many. Most of those men – and they would be mostly men – would come from the upper castes. Upper caste people must take up their duties as upper caste members to guide the country well. They could not be allowed to abandon their duty to the nation and to the other castes. Upper caste members could be expected to do their duty well, and to put the country ahead of their own gain, only if other caste members did likewise. (3) Gandhi deeply felt the power of goodness. Goodness had to win because it was goodness and not through force. The power of goodness was part of the power of Dharma. Only if Dharma reigned could goodness defeat evil through intrinsic goodness alone. Social order is part of Dharma. The caste system is part of social order. To uphold caste is to uphold Dharma and to prepare for the victory of goodness. To upturn caste is to upturn the social order, deny the salience of Dharma, and undermine the path of goodness to eventual victory. Dharma filled Gandhi's heart and mind, as a good Hindu.

The links between the self, social duty, the greater stratified society, and the big Dharma system are at the core identity of Hinduism. Gandhi showed he was a true Hindu in the full sense. Even Gandhi could not accept Hinduism apart from this context.

I understand the reasoning but I cannot agree. This thinking allows Indians to excuse rape, oppression of women, and class oppression. It stops good institutions. The fight for goodness should not depend on a total social order and on the caste system. It should not depend on a stratified society. If Dharma is to be a useful idea in the future, Hindus have to think of Dharma in other terms. Hindus cannot support caste, bad traditional roles, and bad social ranking no matter how much they can rationalize in terms of Dharma. If the link between Dharma and social stratification is an intrinsic part of Hindu ideas, then Hindu ideas of Dharma and goodness are not viable in modern life and have to be rejected. Not even Gandhi can make such thinking acceptable. Modern Hindus have to re-think Dharma, goodness, and social relations in a way that is acceptable to modern life and modern values. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have to do the same with some of their ideas such as the Will of God.

Example of Ideal Personhood: Yudhisthira at the Gates of Heaven.

Here I use an example from literature to say that Hindus don't, and cannot, live up to their ideals. If they don't live up to their ideals, then what they really do is maneuver within the system. Hindu literature is a good place to read about Hindu ideals but not to find what Hindus really do. For that, you have to refer to history and social science.

Reminder: "Mahabharata" means "Great Story of 'Bharat' [India]". The heroes of the Mahabharata were the Five Brothers. They had to fight the villains, their cousins. The story of Arjuna and Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita is one small part of the Mahabharata. Eventually, after many long hard struggles, the Five Brothers won. The leader of the Brothers was named "Yudhisthira" ("You-DEES-thee-ruh"), which means roughly "victorious in battle" (it might also be related to the root for "justice"). Yudhisthira was Arjuna's older brother and his leader. Yudhisthira was grand but not perfect – he had a serious gambling problem - and he was partly to blame for the war.

Yudhisthira had adventures after the war, and then it came time to die. He hoped he would go to heaven after death, so he took along his faithful dog. When he and the dog got to the gates, the guardian, what looked like an angel, would not let in the dog. The guardian said heaven did not allow dogs. Yudhisthira could choose to go to heaven without his dog or to hell with his dog. Yudhisthira did not want any heaven that did not allow dogs, so he chose hell. While in hell, Yudhisthira was surprised to find members of his close family, and was not-so-surprised to find his cousins, his former enemies. Yudhisthira could get them all out, and up to heaven, if he wanted to, if he forgave them. Yudhisthira was happy to do so, and they all went to heaven. Yudhisthira learned that, earlier, the supposed guardian of heaven was really a devil trying to trick Yudhisthira, and the gate then was not the gate to heaven but the gate to hell. Any place that kept out sentient beings, including dogs, could not be true heaven. Any place that practiced exclusion on the basis of superior and inferior was hell. Any place that gave free rein to selfishness had to be hell. If Yudhisthira chose heaven without the dog, it meant he was not truly selfless, and so did not deserve the highest heaven. The highest heaven is the chance to forgive your enemies and for you all to continue on in life.

This story shows how the ideal system works in Hinduism and shows Hinduism's goodness and appeal. Compassion and forgiveness are important and always lead to good results. In the right context, people see other people as persons. In fact, people even see other sentient beings (dogs) as persons. The view of goodness is much the same as what Sartre offers in "No Exit" through showing us what happens when we don't hold this view.

The story of the man (or woman) taking his dog to heaven likely is more widespread and older in Indo-European culture than the Mahabharata. The idea was the basis for an episode of the TV series "The Twilight Zone", set in the Appalachian Mountains, starring Buddy Ebsen. A mountaineer chose his dog over false heaven, and then went to real heaven as a result. In the episode, the story was not about keeping the whole system going, or saving an extended family. It was about the simple decent act of a man to his friend, a dog. In the West, that is all, and it is enough. This is the core contrast of my beliefs versus Hinduism. I don't know if the writer(s) of the "Twilight Zone" episode were influenced by the Mahabharata.

Recall that Yudhisthira was not spotless; he had a serious gambling problem; his cousins took advantage of his serious gambling problem; and that is what started the war. None of the five brothers was spotless; each had his own vices that cause problems. As official enemies, the cousins had to have flaws greater than the Five Brothers, including standard greed, lust, lying, envy, and desire for power. But good guys share those flaws too, to a lesser extent, and the cousins had good qualities too including the qualities of the upper class: bravery, generosity, and loyalty to proven comrades.

As with Arjuna's act of going to war, Yudhisthira's acts of choosing his dog over heaven, and choosing to forgive his family and cousins, are in a system. Yudhisthira's gambling symbolizes the never-ending play of forms in nature, the variety of Dharma's dreaming. Yudhisthira's gambling problem symbolizes both the pretend real risk of the apparent world and the irrational commitment that we make to the world when we live in it as normal humans and are not fully awake. We think we play dice with our lives and souls but really we don't. The fact that Yudhisthira's gambling problem eventually leads to a good end symbolizes that the risk is only apparently real on one level, and that, at a deeper level, it turns out alright. Really, it is all play; serious deep play, but play. Everybody is related and linked, good cousins and bad, people and dogs. Nobody is entirely good or bad. Good and bad depend on each other. By interacting in the right ways, good and bad keep the whole joyous system going and so serve everybody. Everybody does his-her Dharma duty. The idea of Dharma can serve all needs and all other ideas. Compassion is the natural expression of Dharma. We are all saved in the long run even if only a few are saved now. We all have good lives in the run even if only some of us have good lives right now. By choosing connection and compassion, Yudhisthira saves family, friends, enemies, himself, and the system. With compassion, all good beings go to heaven and bring bad beings to heaven too. Heaven is not a steady state but is the continuing playful system even with its apparent good and apparent bad.

Raj, Preeya, and Leonard.

Recall the TV show "Big Bang Theory" in which one character is Raj, a young Hindu physicist. One of Raj's best friends is Leonard, a star of the show. Raj has a younger sister, Preeya, who just graduated from law school and is now a lawyer with an Indian firm that builds cars. The father of Raj and Preeya is a doctor in India. The family of Raj and Preeya is wealthy and upper caste. Preeya and Leonard had been having an on-again-off-again affair before Preeya moved back to India. Leonard tried to keep up a long distance affair. Preeya seemed to go along until she finally admitted that she had sex with an old boyfriend, and the affair ended. Raj's father and mother did not mind that Raj had sex with local women in America but they did not want Raj to marry an American or anybody but a high class Indian Hindu. While the parents likely knew of Preeya's dalliances in America and India, nobody ever spoke of her behavior in front of the parents.

Preeya and Raj are contrasts. Raj is like an ideal Hindu, including even a sexually ambivalent sensuous personality. He is kind, sweet, thoughtful, and usually considers the feelings of other people before his own. He puts up with bad behavior from other people. He is a social facilitator, and goes out of his way to consider the personal needs of other people and to make them feel welcome.

Preeya is a real Hindu. Preeya plays around with the power that she has as an educated woman with a profession and a job. Preeya maneuvers within her sexual, social, and job positions to get what she can. She does not want to hurt people but doesn't mind hurting people. The affair with Leonard had hurt Raj,

not because Leonard was a White American but because Raj objected to any man violating the supposed purity of his sister. Yet, while Preeya was in America, she got what she could from the local people even if it hurt her brother. Raj's objections were silly but that does not explain how brusquely Preeya handled Raj. Preeya knew all along she would not stay with Leonard but strung Leonard along because Leonard was easy to be with and he was the kind of person that a woman could string along to suit her needs. When it "got down to brass tacks" back in India, Preeya solidified relations that she needed there, until Leonard was a liability, then Preeya dumped Leonard and settled into her destined high class position and eventual marriage to an Indian Hindu. Preeya is good at using the system and using people.

When talking to educated or high class Hindu Indians, I have found their character oscillates between Raj, Preeya, and the parents, without being quite sure what to do.

Sad Example One.

The next two examples are a bit unfair, for which I apologize. Yet they are useful and not so inaccurate as to be false. I know that all other countries show these same bad behaviors.

As I was first writing this chapter, India was trying to prosecute a case against six men who gang raped a woman in a bus, beat up her boyfriend, and threw them both off the bus – while everyone else on the bus pretended nothing was happening. The woman died two weeks later. I don't know what happened to her boyfriend. At least a dozen such cases occur in India every year. This case was prosecuted only because of publicity and because the woman died in the public eye. Usually the police and society blame the victim, the woman. Even here where it is clear that the rapists are guilty and the woman did nothing wrong, spiritual and community leaders blamed her. They said: if she had adhered to traditional values by not getting educated, not working, not wearing dresses, and not using public transportation, she would have been safe. One guru said she would not have been raped if she had stressed to her attackers that she was a woman, weaker, and thus in need of their help; any real Hindu would have helped her then rather than hurt her. Other Hindus on the bus knew she was a woman but did nothing. Traditionalists say, "Rape never happened in traditional India, and it still does not happen in rural Bharat (idealized old India) where village counsels control women's lives. Rape only happens in cities in India (not Bharat) where modern life has corrupted true Hinduism." Of course, this case should not represent all of India, and stupid people from all religions have said the same when women were abused in their societies. Yet this situation is too easy to rationalize under simple relativistic Hinduism.

Sad Example Two.

As I revised this chapter, a woman associate of the diplomatic staff of India in New York was arrested for mistreating her Indian maid and for misfiling a visa. The diplomat said she paid her maid at least \$10 per hour and limited the maid's work hours, but, in fact, the diplomat paid her maid only about \$1 per hour and she forced the maid to work at least 60 hours per week with no days off. Not all diplomats get full immunity, and this one did not. When arrested, the diplomat was detained at an American police office. The police followed procedure, and did nothing wrong. The diplomat was not "strip searched" but, when Indian media reported the affair, the media said she was. Small riots broke out around India because of the supposed mistreatment of the diplomat and the reported strip search. As far as I could tell, no Indian media tried to find the truth of the case or arrest. As far as I could tell, no Indian media showed interest in

the welfare of the maid although she was exploited even by Indian standards, and she was exploited far worse than the diplomat. Compassion does not extend to foreigners or to lower class-caste people. The idea that people are persons (“you are that”) does not extend to lower class-caste people or women. This view goes against the spirit of the Upanishads but this view is allowed by the vagueness in the idea of Dharma and this view is required by the link between Dharma and stratified society.

PART 4: Some Implications of Hindu Ideas.

Waking Up and the System.

People who wake up in Hinduism are not necessarily “out of the system” as in Theravada Buddhism. Awakened people represent the world most aware of itself. People who wake up are part of the greater system, and are as needed for the system as sleeping people. Awakened people are like the small part of our brains that is conscious while asleep people are like the big part of our brains that is unconscious. Awakened people are more adept, often smarter, and often morally better, but are not categorically better than other people. Truly awakened people know this. That is why they know “you are that” and stress compassion. Awakened people teach sleeping people what the sleeping people need to know to carry out their role in the world well, as when Krishna teaches Arjuna.

You do not have to fully wake up to have a worthwhile life. Even people who only partially wake up, even full sleepers, can have a worthwhile life if they carry out their personal-social Dharma, if they are true to their role. You can support the joyous system even if you do not know it fully. Sleeping people might not be blissfully happy but they are usually moderately happy and fairly satisfied. Even if you do not fully feel the great system of joyous Dharma, you can partially feel the joy, and even that small amount of joy is still a great joy. Truly awakened people teach these facts to sleeping people as part of their social-personal Dharma as the mind of the system.

Looking at truly awakened people as the self-awareness of the system, looking at other people as asleep but still leading worthwhile lives, and looking at everybody as necessary parts of a total joyous Dharma stem, reinforces rationalization in the Dharma system, and reinforces the control that high caste people have over the system and over lower caste people.

I am not sure how people act and feel after they have fully awakened because, as far as I know, I have never met any such people. I have met people who claimed to be fully awakened but I doubt it. I might have met people who are fully awakened but had the good sense not to make a point of it.

Among people who accept the Hindu view, and among other people who accept a system of many lives, including Westerners, I have seen this attitude: They know they should feel charity, sympathy, empathy, compassion, and connection to all other life; but they don't really. They secretly feel better than others, and they struggle to generate some compassion. They try to “fake it”. Whether a person has awakened yet or not, it is a sign of superiority to be born in a culture, religion, social class, or nation that teaches true ideas and that prepares its members to wake up. They feel sorry for people who are not born in a religion etc. with correct ideas, and they look down on all the other ignorant underprivileged people. People who are born in another religion etc. have no chance of waking up. People who have no real chance of waking up are not interesting. For people in a superior religion to show much compassion to others can

be dangerous. People who know true ideas and are partially awake should maintain a correct haughty distance from others. They know a powerful secret and they should guard the secret so others do not learn distorted versions of the secret and thus dilute and pollute the secret. I have seen the same haughty bad attitude among Christians who start from a base of “love thy neighbor” and “Christian duty”, and among Muslims who start with the Will of a Compassionate and Great Allah.

Mahayana suffers from a clash between standard Buddhist dogma that life is not worthwhile versus the opposed idea that life is worthwhile as long as it is lived in the system. In theory, Hinduism might suffer from the same conflict but the conflict does not seem to have haunted Hinduism as it did Mahayana. In Hinduism, this conflict is the concern only of really smart people and really holy people. Ordinary people are content to live in the system and to take instruction from holy people, especially after the rise of the helper ideas described below. This attitude serves Hinduism as a system and helps Hinduism rationalize roles and serve society. This change might be one reason why Hinduism replaced Mahayana in India.

Everybody is Saved.

From the viewpoint of particular lives, not everybody does well and not everybody is saved. But that is a limited view. From the viewpoint of the whole system, where it does not matter if everybody eventually knows the whole system, everybody does well and everybody is saved. One possibility is that everybody lives long enough until he-she finds salvation, either by seeing the system as a whole or by finding the right devotion. Another more useful possibility is that you are saved even if you don't know it, and even if you never find the right devotion, but it is easier to think of people being saved in terms of knowing and devotion. You are saved because, as part of the system, you are the whole system. In Christian terms, people already have Grace whether they know it or not but if they know it, or feel it through devotion to Jesus or Mary, then they Grace is even more so.

This Hindu idea of salvation is similar to the Universalist idea of salvation in the Unitarian-Universalist Church and similar to some ideas in Mahayana. You are reborn until you get it right. You are reborn until you wake up, see how valuable everything is, see how beautiful everything is, become a useful person, stop hurting others, and “get with it”. This idea appeals to many Westerners and to many thoughtful kind people from all over.

I disagree with this idea in the Hindu, Universalist, or Mahayana forms. It is just not true that everybody wakes up sooner or later. It is just not true that everybody is reborn until he-she gets it right. One of the hardest lessons I had to learn in my own progress was that some people are just not saved. That does not mean that they are damned, but they are not saved.

In my view, there is no cosmic system so it makes no sense to ask if people are still integral to the system if they are not saved. It makes no sense to ask if saved people disappear from the system or are above the system. It makes no sense to ask if not-saved people keep it all going, and whether the system would disappear if everyone woke up at once. This is not my way of making everybody feel welcome. Some people do understand more than other people but that little additional knowledge does not automatically save them and it does not automatically damn the others. I applaud early Hindus for trying to make all people feel welcome by saying all people will be saved eventually, or saying all people are saved already but do not know it. But I disagree with the idea and results. It is better to accept that none of us knows all

the truth, almost all of us know enough to do a decent job, and we should just do what we can. My way of making people feel welcome is to say that most of us get a tolerable shot at life, and God is pretty good about the situation when he assesses us at the end.

Other Religions as Players in the Drama.

See point 18 above. Not everybody has to be awake and know he-she is awake to be a valuable player. People can be spiritual successes although they are not consciously awake. You only need to carry out your role (social-personal Dharma) properly. Even high-ranking Hindus other than holy people do not fully know the Dharma. Krishna had to explain the Dharma to Arjuna. The ideas of normal people are incomplete. The ideas of Hindu holy people encompass the ideas of other people.

Religions outside Hinduism are like the fully sleeping people and not-fully-awake people in Hinduism. Religions other than Hinduism do not need to see the full truth to be useful and to be largely true. Other religions lead people mostly to act well. When believers in other religions act well, they serve the Dharma regardless of what they believe. Sometimes people in other religions act badly despite the religion and sometimes they act badly because of the religion such as when they persecute people or destroy the art of other religions. Even in this case, the people might serve the Dharma system indirectly. They might spur Hindus to greater compassion or to develop arguments against bad beliefs. Just as Hindu holy people know all people are saved already simply by being in the big Dharma system, even if other people don't know it consciously, so Hindus in general know other religions serve the Dharma even if other religions don't know it. In serving Dharma, other religions are aspects of Hinduism. The dogmas of non-Hindu religions are only an approach to Hindu ideas. Hinduism encompasses the ideas of other religions. Hinduism is better, superior, and encompasses all other religions.

In Hinduism, everybody will get saved or is already saved even if they don't know it yet. I don't know if some Hindus consider other religions in the same light but I think so. Eventually other religions will come to see the truth of Hinduism and come to see that Hindu Dharma encompasses their ideas, and so will convert to Hinduism. That does not mean they will convert over entirely to Hinduism but only reinterpret their ideas in Hindu terms and come to accept Hindu analyses. For example, Hindus see Jesus as a great teacher, like a yogi, and perhaps an avatar of Vishnu like Krishna. To see Jesus that way hardly makes him less a son of God and less God than in Hindu eyes than he is in Christian eyes (Jesus cannot be the one and only begotten son of God in Hinduism). To see him that way would make him more acceptable to most people in the world and so more effective. When Christians come to see Jesus that way then they will in effect become Hindus, and Hinduism will encompass Christianity. In the long run, this subsuming is inevitable.

Dharma and Old Indian Society.

The ideas of Dharma, "you are that", and compassion are all vague. The vagueness serves Hinduism. But too much vagueness can be a bad thing. If Hindu mythical bad guys are also good, then why aren't revolting peasants and Muslim conquerors also good? The ideas need enough context so the system is stable enough to eat the world, and so the people who benefit from the system are secure. That is what traditional stratified Indian society did. By merging traditional Indian stratified society and the Dharma system, Indian thinkers came up with the right mix for their time of security and vagueness. If you grow

rice and give a proper share to the lords, then society keeps going and the whole world keeps going. If you don't sweep the streets well, and you don't marry the boy that your parents picked for you, then your family is disgraced, your caste is disgraced, all Indian society tumbles down, and the entire cosmos with all its joy comes to an end.

When the merger first arose around 500 CE, India was not the nation we see now of overpopulation with extreme rich and poor. India was about like the Roman Empire or Chinese Empire. Being a peasant, soldier, or merchant was not so bad. It was easy to accept that your role was given by your karma and social-personal Dharma in the system. Of course, now the situation is much different, and Indians have to rethink social relations and their economic system. The close ties between Dharma, "you are that", compassion, and Indian traditional stratified society have to break down. Young Hindus likely will salvage Dharma, "you are that", and compassion in some form acceptable in the modern world.

Heaven on Earth.

"Heaven on Earth" is the idea that this world is actually heaven but we just don't see it until we have our eyes opened. The apparent badness and ugliness of this world are assimilated to a greater beauty-and-rightness. What appear as mistakes are really helpful indirect ways to make the world more beautiful and more right. The obvious bad and ugly things of the world, such as disease and crime, are not here simply to contrast with the obvious good and beautiful things so we can better appreciate the obvious good and beautiful, but are really beautiful and good in their own ways once we see the whole rightly. It is easier to support a feeling for "heaven on Earth" in the context of a system of many lives. The two support each other. The feeling of "heaven on Earth" is part of the joy of a big system of many lives.

Without giving evidence, I said the mysticism in Mahayana shares this view. I think the same is true of Hinduism, and I also do not offer evidence for my opinion because that would take us too far off track. Hindus can feel this world is really the best world, is really alright. With that feeling, Hindus can pursue their apparent destiny in this world with vigor. For Hindus that find this feeling, it is one of the rewards of Hinduism. Of course, most Hindus don't find this feeling, any more than most Hindus fully wake up. But the idea is there, and the feeling is available for some Hindus.

I also said the feeling of "heaven on Earth" is not fully true no matter how true it seems to people who have the feeling. The feeling of "heaven on Earth" undermines the Real Risk of life, and I think the risk of life is real, not just pretending, and not just a game. The fact that the feeling is not true undermines to some extent both Mahayana and Hinduism. I don't say how much it undermines them, in particular I don't claim that it invalidates them. That is an assessment you have to make.

Regardless of what you think about "heaven on Earth", if you have ever had a feeling for the goodness-and-rightness of this world as it is with all its faults, use your feeling to better assess ideal Hinduism. Use it to understand the goals of the ideal system, how other people fit in, and, in the Hindu view, how bad and good persist in the real world. In its ideal form, apart from its real form, Hinduism appeals to a large good part of human nature.

Raj's Beautiful Idea Again.

Recall that Raj, from the TV show “Big Bang Theory”, said the Spirit (God, Dharma) works its will in the world through us. Here, we are the instruments by which Dharma does good. This idea is beautiful and I would agree with it if it were properly interpreted. I now take this beautiful idea and turn it into something ugly. I use a pseudo-Christian tone but the view easily could be put in a Hindu tone.

The Spirit cannot work its will equally through all of us. It might be that some badness serves the ends of the Spirit but not all badness is needed and not all badness works the will of the Spirit. It cannot be true that all child molesters and war criminals work the will of the Spirit. So we have to choose some people as more likely to be working the will of the Spirit and some people as not working the will of the Spirit or even as fighting the will of the Spirit.

A good society goes along with the will of the Spirit. A good society promotes those people who do the work of the Spirit and hinders those people who oppose the will of the Spirit. A good society has to be organized so it reflects the will of the Spirit and thwarts what is against the Spirit. A good society has to recognize that some people are more of the Spirit than other people. A good society has to make sure that people acting on their socially-given natures promote the will of the Spirit. A good society has to make sure that people who do some kinds of bad actually indirectly support the good society and the will of the Spirit. A good society has to accept that it will cultivate bad feelings in some people and has to turn those bad feelings into the service of the Spirit.

The best society to do all this, and serve the Spirit, is stratified society in which people get their character from their society, and their character serves their station, society, and the Spirit. Other societies might approximate what the Spirit wants but only Hindu society fully achieves it.

It is not hard here to recognize the rationale of Hindu society and the rationale used by a lot of societies in justifying themselves, people within them fixated on power, the bad acts of leaders, and predations on other societies. Bad Western nations and bad Eastern nations have used similar lines of reasoning too. The difference might be that this line of reasoning is endemic to Hinduism and turns a beautiful vision like that of Raj into a bad vision similar to fascism at its worst.

We might not see that this tendency is common not only in Hinduism but arises even when we think we accord people the most freedom from determination by a system. One of the common rationales for an unbridled capitalist market is the market automatically turns the greed of capitalists into the greater good of consumers and the whole society, no matter how much bad the capitalists seem to do along the way. The bad capitalists are really the good heroes of society who secretly do the will of the Spirit as the Spirit manages to turn even apparent badness into secret goodness.

No society automatically does the will of the Spirit and automatically instills in most of its people the traits that promote the will of the Spirit. We do not automatically do the work of the Spirit. Not all of us are the way the Spirit does its work in this world. We have to think in other terms to have the best society we can in the real world. It is good to try to do the work of the Spirit. It is good to dedicate yourself to doing the work of the Spirit. But you should never think you, your society, or your religion, has a lock on that.

PART 5: Helper Ideas.

The ideas described in this part are more important in practiced Hinduism than the abstract ideas from above, but, ultimately, these ideas depend on the ideas above. These ideas are what most Westerners learn about Hinduism. I say nothing about sacred cows.

The ideas here are among the most effective tools by which Hinduism is a big system that eats the world, is superior, and encompasses other systems. Hinduism uses these ideas to explain everything. These ideas allow the idea of Dharma to be a vague policy and they allow rationalizing. These ideas are how higher Hindus convince other people that we are all in one joyous system together, everybody has to do his-her duty, everybody has to sacrifice, and we all benefit from the system. These ideas are how the ideas of Dharma, "you are that", and compassion become just definite enough to combine with traditional Indian Hindu society and to solidify a big system.

Various Gods.

Like the Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Germans, and pre-Muslim Arabs, the Hindus always had many gods. The idea of one system came later, and the many gods were fit into the system as best as could be done. The Hindu gods coalesce, merge, and split in bewildering ways. I do not sort it out. There are always gods with which a person can identify, to which a person can devote him-herself, and that can serve as the patron deity of particular groups.

At first, all the various gods were not considered aspects of the one main god. That idea developed after intellectuals, such as the writers of the Upanishads, unified the religious system. At first, individual people were not considered aspects of one basic god, as being a manifestation of the one basic god, as having a little bit of the basic god in them, or as being full-blown god. Those ideas also came afterwards, in all of their alternative forms.

Three Main Gods: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.

For people who like to think of one system, it is confusing to have many gods. Hindus eventually settled on three main gods as the most important aspects of the one main god-system. These three gods taken together are, in effect, the one main god. Each represents an aspect of how the Dharma mostly works, as the three persons of the Christian Trinity represent how God works. The three aspects can be applied to almost any phenomenon, including non-human life, human social life, and physics. With these ideas-and-gods, Hindus can offer a valid explanation for almost any social group, religious system, and social-historical event.

The three gods are an outstanding example of raising someone to a cosmic principle, whether that one is a real person such as Jesus or an imagined deity such as a bodhisattva or god. This tendency is a trait of Hinduism, almost forced on Hinduism by having an abstraction such as Dharma at its core. That is why Hinduism lives so well with many gods.

Brahma the Creator.

"Brahma" the god is not the same as a "Brahmin" or a "Brahman"; I am not sure of the relation between the three words and the things they designate.

Things happen. Suddenly, something new arrives. Something changes. Change is “in the wind”. Somebody invents something. We are waiting for “the next big thing”. Brahma is the force behind all this, the force of innovation. Brahma is a never-ending bottomless fountain of change. Americans think all change is good but Brahma is more like nature; Brahma is amoral. Brahma just causes new things to appear. New things can be good or bad, and they can be good or bad depending on who uses them. Brahma is like evolution when a new group of species arises, multiplies, changes constantly, and takes over the world. Brahma is like the power behind the radiation of the flowering plants, mammals, and of made-up realities in computer minds. In case you are misled by the Romanticized idea of creativity to think he is all beautiful and you forget that Hinduism is relativistic, Brahma makes all the weapons that Shiva and Vishnu use.

Vishnu the Sustainer.

The world would be confusing if it changed at a furious pace constantly. Without some stability, there would be no morality, no joy, and no point to it all. Some situations have to last a while so denizens can “get their bearings” and make something of the situation. Historical-social-cultural-political-economic eras have to last long enough, and be steady enough, so sentient beings can assess the world, find morality, and act appropriately. People in Hinduism understand “Dharma” as doing your duty as a human, social being, parent, child, and citizen. All these duties sustain the world. The biggest manifestation of Dharma is to sustain the world. The world has to be steady enough long enough so that people can do their duty and make the world go on enjoying itself. Dharma and continuity depend on each other. Vishnu is the force behind all this. Vishnu puts to good use what Brahma creates. Vishnu guides sentient beings. Vishnu makes sure people find their way in the swamp of Brahma’s creativity. In practice, Vishnu is the friendliest god and usually the most important god. If Americans were Hindus, Superman, Abe Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, and Franklin Roosevelt would be avatars of Vishnu. If Republicans were Hindus, Ronald Reagan would be an avatar of Vishnu.

Shiva the Changer.

“I am Shiva, Destroyer of Worlds”

The line is from the Bhagavad Gita. Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the project to create the atomic bomb in America, famously quoted it when the first bomb went off.

The usual title of Shiva is “The Destroyer” but I think that title misrepresents Shiva. Shiva is the disorder that allows creativity and allows new order to arise. All things must pass. All good things come to an end. Even all bad things come to an end. The rain falling on the mountain eventually wears down even the highest mountain. If people did not die, the world would have filled up with hungry zombies long ago. If bacteria did not eat corpses, the world would have filled up with corpses long ago, and there would be no fertilizer for new plants, trees, and people. Shiva brings change. Shiva opens the spaces for Brahma to fill with new creation. Shiva often is the first user of new creation. Shiva makes change by ending old forms. Destruction of old forms is an important ingredient in change. Shiva brings about change by rearranging things, as when the mountain erodes to become the new plain, the rain falls to become new flowers, and the mind gets rid of garbage to see true new ideas. Shiva is the headache before a creative

burst. Shiva brings weapons to warriors and to holy people on a crusade. We can see Shiva in all the toys both of Batman and his enemies. Physics teaches us that the total amount of matter-energy in the world cannot change but can only re-arrange into new forms. Shiva does not destroy absolutely. Shiva less often destroys old forms as rearranges old forms to allow new forms. Shiva increases the joy of the world by allowing for the creation of new forms. Shiva allows the multiple diverse world to go on in joy.

As you will see, one main way to God in Hinduism is through asceticism or renouncing the normal world. Asceticism and renouncing the world usually go together but don't have to. This way is like the path of a monk in the West. Shiva is the patron both of people who renounce the world and of ascetics. Shiva is usually the patron of yogis both male and female. I cannot spend much space on this aspect of Shiva and on the topics of renouncing and asceticism because they are too big. Also, for most Hindus, these paths remain as ideals but are not very important except as some Hindus adopt mild ascetic practices in the same way Westerners now adopt mild yoga. A person who renounces the world successfully is said to "conquer" the world.

Brahma and Vishnu have sinister aspects as well as their usually joyous comforting aspects but the bad faces of these gods are usually well in the background and come out only on special occasions. Much more than Brahma or Vishnu, Shiva is sinister and marauding. Shiva uses weapons that Brahma dreams up, and Shiva does real damage with them. Asceticism can give a person great powers, and the powers do not always come out in good ways. To renounce the world, essentially you have to defeat the world, and defeating the world spiritually is symbolized by literally beating the world. The bad guys in the movie "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom" likely are Shiva devotees. The good guy villagers and local holy man also are devotees of Shiva, so aspects of Shiva usually are mixed. When Westerners learn about Hinduism, they can be fascinated with sinister aspects but they do not usually pursue them. To work our way through them would take a lot of space. Although Shiva sometimes apparently does evil and he apparently destroys large parts of the world, in the end, the evil leads to even better good, and this world returns or another takes its place. Shiva reminds us the system is greater than its apparent parts, and is really joyous even in destruction.

Asceticism and renouncing the world can go together in a different way than the stereotype sweet good forest-dwelling holy person. When asceticism and renouncing the world do not go together as they should, effectively they do not really go together at all; instead, power uses asceticism in its service so as to conquer the world. A person, demon, or god studies ascetic technique to gain power to conquer the world. Hindu versions of this alternative are too ornate to relate here, and Westerners usually have few examples for reference to make the task simple, not even from Indian "Bollywood" movies. Some villains in Bollywood movies do develop special powers through asceticism. Hindu myths and stories are full of people who take this path. The opponents of good guys in classic Hindu stories, including demons and misguided gods, usually study asceticism to gain power. These bad guys usually are devoted to Shiva. Westerners might have seen a parallel related example in a different venue. The Mahayana Buddhist version of asceticism-for-power can be found in Chinese movies in which a kung fu master retreats to the forest to develop a bizarre form of kung fu so as to defeat enemies and conquer the kingdom. Western comic book super villains are a version of the same idea as when Lex Luthor uses his time in prison to perfect a plot to develop some horrible weapon to defeat Superman and take over the world. In all traditions, West and East, the bad guy always fails because, after all, the world is intrinsically moral and good conquers all just because it is good. See the Bibliography for more.

Westerners now think of modest bad guys, some gangsters, and hard kick-ass avengers as the chaos of the world that brings down the older order so that the new order can arise. We glamorize and romanticize our bad boys and bad girls. We are wrong; but we do it anyway. The movies about the “Avengers” and “Shield” groups are more than enough evidence. About one-third of the movies starring Mark Wahlberg are on these themes. When we do that, we are much like Hindus who worship and admire Shiva in all his variations.

All Three Mutually Together.

Despite the famous line from Shiva, in fact Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva do not really destroy and remake whole worlds. They destroy particular worlds, or particular eras, within the greater system that itself remains through all changes. They never destroy the whole system of many worlds. There is only one system and there has ever been only one. Shiva sometimes lays waste to this Earth for a while, but this Earth comes back with the help of Brahma and Vishnu. Brahma never creates entirely new systems because he is within the one forever system that created him. The worst Brahma ever does is to create amazing new weapons for Shiva and Vishnu with which they battle to stalemate. The battle to stalemate does the destroying and is all the fun. In this way, Vishnu represents the main spirit behind it all because the system as a whole always is sustained.

Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva represent the total mutual dependence of parts that keeps the system going. They are a small model of Hindu society except that Hindu society is stratified while the three main gods are supposedly equal. Even then, most Hindus seem to prefer Vishnu. Think of any movie starring Mark Wahlberg in which he uses a lot of weapons to get vengeance and tear down an evil system so a good system can grow and be preserved. In creating mayhem, Wahlberg is like Shiva while in helping a new better world to grow, Wahlberg is like Vishnu. In “Ted”, Wahlberg is like Vishnu. In “Blue Bloods” the various members of the Reagan family take on various aspects of the three gods with Donnie Wahlberg most often like Shiva and Frank most often like Vishnu.

Brahma is like the appearance of life out of the primordial ooze of Earth. Shiva is like the tremendous destruction of life during the half-a-dozen times that life nearly died off on Earth. When the destruction was caused by a physical event such as the meteor that ended the great dinosaurs, a great ice age, or the release of oxygen from the spread of plants, Shiva is the physical cause. Shiva is the competition, natural selection, and “survival of (only) the fittest” that allow evolution. Brahma is like the flowering of life that takes place after great destructions. Brahma is like plants slowly adapting to mud and air for the first time, and like mud fish slowly crawling out of the water, from pond to pond,. Shiva is the first plants flooding the Earth with oxygen – then a caustic poison. Brahma is animals using the sudden availability of oxygen to proliferate. Brahma is the many types of life and many individuals in each type. Brahma is the huge proliferation of forms in nature. Vishnu is like the long winnowing out of the best forms and the long periods of particular lifestyles after a flowering. Vishnu is the “equilibrium” between “punctuations”. Vishnu is the long reign of bacteria, flowering plants, trilobites, dinosaurs, birds, ants, and cockroaches. Vishnu is the solid base of a particular lifestyle that allows variation and the development of higher forms. Vishnu is the long reign of mammals that allowed the development of sloths, monkeys, elephants, horses, tigers, and whales. Vishnu gave the ape base from which humans evolved. If we see God making the universe, the Earth, and the evolution of sentient-moral-aesthetic beings through the Big Bang, natural

selection, and cataclysms, then we see God as a mix of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, and we see God as working through them. We see God as the Dharma working through Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Well-educated Hindus sometimes see the “godhead” this way.

As all this, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva also are a logic-like contradiction from which you can derive sense, nonsense, and any relativism. They are an indicator of the powerful relativism at the heart of Hinduism.

Rebel, Rebel, Creative Chaos.

We can get a sense of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva from American ideas of rebels after about 1880 and especially after 1950 and the rise of rock and roll. Right or wrong, Americans feel something is amiss with this world now, and we need to change. The changers are rebels, and, as such, are instruments of Shiva. To make change, they use art and especially they use new art forms such as rock and roll and hip-hop. They get their tools from Brahma. Yet the ultimate goal of rebels is not to end all order. Rebels want to overturn bad old order and to replace it with good new order. The good new order is based on the same morals that have always prevailed and that run through all life and the universe – but modified to suit the times. As such, rebels are instruments of Vishnu.

Thanks to American culture, Romanticism, and the media, the whole world now sees chaos as creative and sees true creativity as coming only from chaos. Without disorder, we can have no better future order. Rebels, the mass people as a whole, the populace, the lower classes, fringes of society, underbelly of society, entrepreneurs, investment bankers, inventors, risk takers, ethnic groups that are not dominant in a society such as Blacks in America or Kurds in Iraq, political refugees, oppressed tribal groups in Africa, victims of the supposed war on Islam, victims of the supposed war on Christianity and Christmas, and artists, are all human instruments of creative chaos. Good social order can only come from them, and certainly will come from them if we turn them loose. Shiva is creative chaos. In our times, the face of Shiva is creative chaos. He is the instrument of beneficial change. He is the face of outcast creators and they are the face of Shiva. Together, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are the faces of the Romantic Spirit when the Spirit is both creative order and creative disorder, its own force forward and its own resistance, and its own art and its resistant medium. Together they are the advance of the Spirit, self-resistance of the Spirit to its own advance, and the Spirit overcoming its own self-resistance.

When we look at things this way, we are blind to the real work that must be done. I return to these topics in essays apart from this book. This use of Hindu-like ideas helps explain why they appeal.

Avatar.

Today, an “avatar” is a character that we assume in a computer game, or is the name of a hit movie, but originally the Hindu idea “avatar” meant an identity that a god took, usually on Earth, for a purpose. The avatar embodied one aspect of the total person of the god, and the avatar took care of the god’s business here. The term “avatar” means “passing over, into, or through” as a god passes from one realm (Heaven) to another (Earth) or from one state (incorporeal) to another (corporeal). A famous Buddhist sutra is the “Lankavatara” Sutra or “Lanka Avatar-a sutra”: “Lanka” is a great mountain, a backbone of the world;

here it means the island of “Sri Lanka” or “Ceylon”; and the sutra is about how Buddha Mind passes down through Sri Lanka; how Buddha Mind makes the world and makes itself known.

In the Mahabharata, Krishna has come to tell Arjuna to “man up” and do his duty by going to war against his cousins. Krishna is an avatar of Vishnu. If Arjuna did not do his duty, the victory of enemy cousins would have been a triumph of bad over good, and it would have upset the world order. For the world order to continue, heroes like Arjuna must do their duty. By doing your duty, you affirm that the world runs according to the Dharma, and runs best by going along with the Dharma. By getting Arjuna to do his duty, Krishna-Vishnu sustains the world.

In our modern capitalist world, if Brahma had an avatar, it might be great inventors such Nikola Tesla and the people who developed the silicon chip. Shiva’s avatar might be great marketers, such as Steve Jobs, who get us to discard old things in favor of new things. Thomas Edison would be an avatar of both. If Vishnu had an avatar now, it might be Superman or Abe Lincoln. Some Hindus think of the Buddha and Jesus as avatars of Vishnu; Buddhists and Christians don’t like that.

In the movie “Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom”, shortly after Jones and friends arrive in a grief-stricken Indian village, an old man tells Jones that Shiva has sent Jones to destroy the bad guys and to save the village from evil. Jones insists that Shiva did not send him. The old man insists Shiva did send Jones even if Jones doesn’t know it. Jones can be an avatar of Shiva even if he doesn’t know it. In my understanding, more likely Jones would be an avatar of Vishnu. Sometimes in particular local traditions, the gods switch roles and take on each other’s roles. That does not change the idea framework behind the system of gods.

All other Hindu gods can be seen as versions or avatars of one of the “Big Three” although I don’t think most Hindus think of “their” god mostly in these terms, and I don’t think most Hindus seek one complete non-contradictory system that assigns all secondary and minor gods as versions of one, and one only, of the Big Three. The idea that all gods can be aspects of the Big Three is an instance of encompassing and of how encompassing depends on a little vagueness.

In the Hindu big system that encompasses small local Indian systems, the major gods of local groups and of various castes are avatars. Sometimes they are not avatars directly of Brahma, Vishnu, or Shiva but are avatars of other gods such as the clever monkey god Hanuman or the lucky bird god Garuda. I have seen Hindu depictions of Jesus and the Buddha as yogis and as avatars of Vishnu. I don’t know how Jesus rates as an avatar compared to the Buddha or Krishna. I don’t know if other great figures such as Mohammad and Confucius are also depicted as avatars; if so, they also likely would be avatars of Vishnu. I don’t know if Karl Marx (in a good way) or Adolph Hitler (in a bad way) would be avatars of Shiva. Atom bombs are weapons that Brahma provides to avatars of both Vishnu and Shiva.

The Avatar as Agent of the System.

In the chapter on Mahayana, I compared Jesus in Christianity, the Mahayana bodhisattva, and the Hindu avatar. I pick up the comparison again here. Common to all is that people in states need a mediator figure between the highest divine with ordinary life here on this world. The mediator is both divine and human. The mediator helps people succeed in this life and in spirituality, and makes them feel better.

In Christianity, Jesus understands human life because he was human. Jesus came here to save people, that is, to get them to heaven. He loves each person individually and helps each person individually. He has a plan for each person individually. In original formal Christianity, when Jesus had done his job long enough, the world ended. In popular Christianity now, the world does not end; people just keep going to heaven or hell; and Christians don't think much about a change in the system.

In Mahayana, the bodhisattvas ideally began as real human beings but that does not much matter now, and most bodhisattvas are purely mythical beings. Still, they know human life, and they love each person individually. They hear complaints about life on Earth, and often help out, such as by granting health and wealth. Their ultimate task is to awaken each person. In theory, people awaken to a joyous system of many lives, but the system is less important than that people simply awaken. In theory, if everyone really did wake up, the system would end, but that end does not seem to be much to fear in Mahayana. The system keeps going on, and bodhisattvas keep helping people individually. To awake is to be saved and to succeed spiritually.

In Hinduism, the avatar appears human but likely is not human as we understand it, and not human as was Jesus, the Buddha, or a historic bodhisattva. An avatar might have a human history, but that is more a story to make the entrance of a god into the world more interesting and more plausible; Hinduism is full of bright stories of the early life of Krishna as a child and young man. The task of the avatar is to help along the joyous system of many lives. The task of the avatar is not to awaken any person or to save any person in the Christian sense or Mahayana sense. To help along the system, usually the avatar gets people to do what they have to do as part of the system (or to not do what they should not do). Krishna explains a lot about the system to Arjuna but that is mostly to get Arjuna to do what he has to do; Krishna does not try to enlighten Arjuna in the sense that a bodhisattva tries to enlighten. Enlightenment would be relevant only if it helped the system, and enlightenment usually does not help the system except for special holy people who count little. When a Hindu person does his-her duty, then the whole system benefits and all the beings in the system benefit. To do what you have to do is as good as being awake and as good as being saved in the Christian sense. To do what you have to do for the system is success both in terms of common life and in terms of being a secret actor in a grand system. The fact that the avatar is most concerned with getting people to support the system does not mean the avatar does not feel compassion for the system and for individual people, and does not help people with their needs; the true avatar often gives great comfort.

In Mahayana, the bodhisattva changes human lives; the bodhisattva saves people almost in the Christian sense. In Hinduism, the avatar helps people with particular tasks and problems but the avatar does not usually save people in the Mahayana sense or Christian sense. The avatar saves the system. Krishna helped Arjuna with Arjuna's problem over going to battle but Krishna did not have to save Arjuna's soul in order to help him with that problem. Krishna did help Arjuna to a partial awakening (partial saving) but only enough to get Arjuna to fight with a full heart and so save the system. The Mahayana bodhisattva is like the hero in the TV show "Quantum Leap" who really did save lives and souls. The Hindu avatar is like the President of the United States who has to care for the country as a whole even if he-she has to send some soldiers to die and even if he-she has to accept some damage to nature or some damage to an industry.

Because Shiva is called “The Destroyer”, it might seem as if an avatar of Shiva does not perpetuate the system but instead brings it down. In fact, this is not true. This is why I prefer to think of Shiva as “The Transformer”. Shiva and his avatars keep the system going. Shiva keeps the wheel of Dharma turning. If the system did not change, it would get stale and uninteresting, and end. Shiva and his avatars keep the system interesting by shaking things up. Shiva and his avatars are the “bad boys” who actually make things work. No matter how much damage Shiva does or his avatar does, the system always reforms, and keeps going. The system reforms and it keeps going because of the damage that Shiva does rather than despite him.

So far, it seems Christianity and Mahayana are warm personal religions which value each individual while Hinduism is a mind-crunching totalitarian system led by avatars who act like North Korean commissars. In fact, Christianity often is systematic and totalitarian, and official Jesus is a ferocious champion of a rigid system rather than a loving friend. I think, for most Hindus, the avatar is a loving friend who guides them through the complexities of life and of religious ideas rather than an Inquisitor who makes them do what the system says, as did Krishna for Arjuna. “You’ve got a friend in Krishna”. Still, there is a difference, and this difference makes a difference.

If avatars were only stern cosmic spiritual teachers like Krishna to Arjuna, Hindus would get bored with Hinduism. That is what Shiva is for, and that is what bad guys are for – to relieve the boredom of pretty goodness. Even good guy avatars have many varied personalities, and they help Hindus with many kinds of problems. Avatars are risqué sexual adventurers more like Indiana Jones than his father. The adventures of Krishna alone fill volumes, and Krishna wears more disguises than Sherlock Holmes. In one appearance, Krishna is a young man who tends dozens of semi-divine girl cowherds while they tend cows. Krishna invents lots of games for fun, including sexual games. The stories of young Krishna are like stories of young Buddha or young Jesus but more fun, risqué, and rebellious. If you want to feel the adventurous spirit of Hinduism rather than suffer through argument such as you find in this chapter, read stories about Krishna and other avatars, and stories about the gods.

Seven Major Paths to God and to Success.

Ultimate religious success (moksha) in Hinduism is seeing that this world as ordinarily lived is not the real world or the best world, seeing how this world is a projection of the best world (pure Dharma), and seeing how this world is really good when taken as an expression of the true Dharma. You see the same world but in a new better way with a new better attitude. Ultimate religious success is not needed for most people, and only a few achieve it. After ultimate realization, for the few people who do achieve it, life can consist of living beside the daily world as a yogi, monk, hermit, or holy person, nowadays in an urban apartment, rather than living in the world such as by being a parent, teacher, or theologian. It is not clear if people like Mohandas “Mahatma” Gandhi are closer to a holy person living-in-but-beside-the-world or closer a normal person living within the world.

Hinduism teaches four large paths to success. I prefer to think of the seven numbered paths below. The original four are (A) 1 Intellect-Mind-Wisdom, (B) 2 Action, (C) 4 Asceticism-Yoga-Renunciation, and (D) 6 Devotion. 3 and 5 below are mixes, chiefly of 2 with tinges of the others. Because most people do not reach full awakening, the paths are also ways to spiritual growth and to modest spiritual success rather than only paths to full realization. You do not fail if you do not achieve full realization, and, in fact, you

gain much by any steps along any path. That is how most people understand the paths. Most people adopt a modified version of the paths as a way to feel spiritually successful now and as a way to mix spiritual success with worldly success. Most people mix a modified version of the paths with normal family life and with their occupations.

These paths were the original paths in the idea behind the slogan “all paths lead to god”. Hinduism sees other religions as manifestations of one-or-more of the paths in an intellectual-cultural context other than Hinduism. By extending the idea of these paths to other religions, Hindus can say “all paths lead to god” and thereby include all other religions as well. Hinduism can make other religions aspects of Hinduism.

(1) Intellect-Mind-Wisdom: A smart person, or observant person, can use his-her intellect to understand the world. This does not mean you sit on your porch until you figure out the world from first principles. Usually it means you read the great Hindu texts and study with good teachers. You use your intellect-mind to gain wisdom. You need wisdom go guide your intellect-mind and need your intellect-mind to see how wisdom works in the world and in your life. To a Westerner, “mind” tends to mean “rational thought” somewhat along the lines of logic; but in Buddhism and Hinduism, mind is more than that. The nearest equivalent to what Westerner’s think of as mind might be intellect. Mind guides intellect just as wisdom guides mind. When wisdom guides mind-intellect, the three almost fuse. When wisdom does not guide mind and mind does not guide intellect, the three can become enemies of each other and of the sanity and health of a person. People far from the Dharma suffer mental problems.

(2) Action, Moral Action, as Saint: A person can live morally and perform moral acts. Saints teach about the Dharma system in many ways, by words and example. In Hinduism, all sentient being share affinity. Hinduism requires devout people to care about other beings, give alms, help other beings both in bodily need and in their spiritual quest, and to sacrifice yourself if need be.

(3) Action as Moral Duty, as with Arjuna: A person has to perform his-her duty as part of his-her karma in the whole system of Dharma. In theory, this kind of action is a variation of the moral action of item (2) but the categories differ because a person who does his-her duty might have to perform acts that seem unkind. That was the dilemma of Arjuna in the Mahabharata. If all acts done in accord with your karma actually sustain the world and help perpetuate the system of Dharma, even if on the surface the acts seem unkind and immoral, then really they are kind and moral. This too is part of the relativism of Hinduism. Sometimes this relativism is truly dangerous. If the acts are really kind and moral, then there is no sin in doing them, and categories two and three merge.

(4) Yoga and other Asceticism: A person can advance through yoga and other similar practices. A person can practice yoga and other asceticism while not living apart from society but usually it is hard to really “get into” yoga and similar practices if a person lives a normal life otherwise. Therefore yoga often goes together with some renunciation (see below).

(5) Action through Compassion: A person can advance spiritually through great compassion for people, other sentient beings, animals, and nature. This is a particular manifestation of path (2), moral action, in which morality is manifested as compassion. Or, path (2) is a particular manifestation of this path (5) in which morality originates from compassion. Christians call this “the path of love”.

(6) Devotion: A person can advance through devotion (bhakti) aimed at a deity, avatar, or even a great human person. Devotion and worship hardly differ. The idea that devotion was a path to god equal to other paths likely began as early as ideas about the other paths but was not accepted by Hindu thinkers until about 500 CE. Literary works such as the Bhagavad Gita were important in gaining acceptance for bhakti because, in the Gita, Arjuna and his brothers are devoted to Krishna-Vishnu. As far as I can tell, devotion-bhakti is now by far the path that most Hindus follow, just as simple worship of Jesus, Mary, and the saints is by far the most common relation that Christians have to their gods.

(7) Renunciation: A person can advance by denying nearly all aspects of the normal life and living apart from normal society. Such a person does not necessarily condemn normal society, at least for other normal people. In my reading, in fact, such people seem to appreciate normal society for normal people. Such people live apart so they are not distracted and so they can concentrate on getting in touch directly with the great Dharma system. In traditional Hindu understanding, these people lived in the forest. Now, not much forest is left, so these people live in other ways, sometimes in cities or in places set aside for spiritual study and spiritual life. These people often combine their seeking with asceticism and yoga, but, strictly speaking, they need not.

You do not have to be adept in all paths to reach God well enough. You only have to be accomplished in one path to reach God well enough. There is nothing wrong with being skillful in more than one path. The paths do not exclude each other, and, in fact, help each other. Intellectuals like to believe they are also adept at yoga and have great moral sensitivity. Yogis like to think they are mentally acute, can see all that a mere intellectual can see, and can see things that mere intellectuals cannot. Gods and avatars were depicted as skilled in multiple paths. In the past, intellectuals and yogis often studied together. All seekers valued the forest dwelling monk and his-her insights.

If it was necessary to be skilled in all paths to reach God, then nearly all people would be excluded, and Hinduism would have died. For Hinduism to remain appealing, it had to develop the ideas that a person need be skilled in only one path, and a person needs to be only moderately skilled without necessarily being a master. The idea of many paths greatly aids relativism. Hinduism did not develop many paths so that it could be relativistic and expand. Hinduism developed the idea of several paths first, and, because of the idea, then became relativistic and expanded. The two come together closely.

More on Bhakti.

This section does not consider incorrect variations on bhakti that sanction criminal acts, such as the Thug movement in India.

Focusing on Dharma alone can be impersonal. Most people can't relate to Dharma alone any more than they can relate to gravity. Bhakti puts person back into Dharma, and into Hinduism. Whether it succeeds at making Hinduism personal without also making it merely devotion, I think not, but you have to decide for yourself, and you have to decide the same question for other religions too.

See earlier chapters on common ideas and mistaken ideas. Especially Christian Protestants tend to think of "devotion" as simple emotion-based idolatry to local idols such as "Baal", fat laughing Buddha figures, blue-skinned Krishna, or the Virgin Mary; but that view is simplistic and unfair. "Bhakti" is a version of the

personal relation that all evolved sentient persons can feel toward spirits as persons. It is a natural relation because it is rooted in evolved feelings. Sometimes bhakti is only idol worship in that devotees take idol-gods for granted; must worship their gods; and expect to be repaid for worship. Most Christians have the same attitude toward Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit. Most Muslims have the same attitude toward Allah. Some even worship Mohammad in this sense even when they insist on not using the word “worship” with Mohammad. Changing the name from “Krishna” to “Jesus” or vice versa does not change the character of the relation.

On a higher level, bhakti is like the personal relation that Christians have toward Mary and the saints. It gives people comfort to know that somebody like them, but more powerful, knows of them individually, takes interest in them, and will help them. In return, they are happy to feel devoted. This relation is just as much worship and devotion as bhakti.

Bhakti can be like what some Protestants feel when they have a “personal relation with Jesus”. They can pray to Jesus. Jesus listens. Jesus helps them see correctly. Jesus helps them out of jams. Jesus makes sure they go to heaven when they die. They feel an indescribable sense of peace, security, and surety. They know Jesus is not interested in such token gifts as incense or sweets, although they would be happy to offer them as symbols. They know Jesus is interested in their service, in the devotion of their minds, bodies, energy, attention, and time. Jesus has selected us in particular to carry out his activity on Earth, and even has selected us in particular to be a “little Jesus” in the sense that we are like a finger on his hand doing his work. People are happy to offer that. Hindus feel this same way just as honestly and just as fully toward Krishna, Shiva, or even Ganesh.

Hindus who know some theology say bhakti unites the devotee with the god, never in any bad way, but as a way for a finite human to “tap into” the ultimate, the only way that is available to most finite humans. Devotion helps us transcend ourselves to see where we came from, what we really are, how we are tied to other sentient beings and to all creation, and, hopefully, where we are going. We accept that we are part of God’s activity, and so God accepts us as a participant in his activity, including his good acts and his joy. Rather than devotion being pretentious, emotional, or a dodge to avoid intellectual effort, rather than an emotional indulgence, devotion is a way to know our own personal real place and real worth in relation to everything else. The world is god’s projection. By accepting god, we accept our place in the projection of god. We become the vehicle for god to carry out his-her identity and activity fully. In being the vehicle for the god to become him-herself fully, we also become god. We unite with god in a way the both loses our identity in the god and preserves us as an individual. There can be no higher realization.

Bhakti is like the union that Christian and Muslim saints feel with God. It is not necessary that most people who follow the bhakti path feel as much or as deeply as famous mystics. They do not have to feel they have access to the whole truth and the whole god. They only need to feel that they have access, and their access is enough to guide them.

It is not fully accurate but still useful to frame bhakti in terms of an argument within Christianity and Islam. In the famous conflict between works and faith, bhakti is on the side of faith. Bhakti is trusting that God will respond to faith, and that faith alone is enough for God. Bhakti realistically accepts there is nothing a real finite human can do to make him-herself worthy of God and the whole Dharma system. Still, thanks

to the merciful joy of God (the Dharma system), a normal person can succeed. There is little difference between a devoted Hindu and a devoted worshipper of Yahweh-God-Allah.

In my view, faith must combine with works, and must combine with the correct works. The correct works are based on the ideals of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values. While some Christians, Muslims, and Hindus also advocate the need to combine faith and works, it is not clear to me that they actually carry out the combination of faith and works, let alone the combination of faith and correct works. Most Christians seek the minimum they can to get into the heaven of their imagination; I don't think most Muslims differ. I do not see any stress in Hindu bhakti on combining faith and works. More importantly, I do not see in Hindu bhakti any consistent recognizing of the correct works. Devotion is enough. Before you jump to condemn Hinduism, I point out there is no real difference between people who see the need to combine faith and correct works (most Christians, some Muslims and Jews) but don't actually do it (almost everybody) versus people who think devotion alone is enough (Hindus, and some Christians and Muslims). Both groups don't do enough of what needs to be done.

More than any other aspect of Hinduism, bhakti allowed Hinduism to triumph over Mahayana and other rivals to Hinduism. You did not have to try to be a bodhisattva or any other spiritual hero. You did not have to do great deeds. You did not have to starve yourself in the forest. You did not have to deal with the problems of whether this life is worthwhile or illusory. You did not have to deal with the annoying "aids" such as Buddha Mind or Storehouse mind. You just have to trust God and do what the right people tell you to do. Everybody can do that, and that is what most people want to do. Later Mahayana devotion to a particular bodhisattva was a similar development in a different place (Tibet and the Far East) but it did not come in time to save Buddhism in India, and the "flavor" of the devotion in it differs.

If devotion was all, Hinduism would differ little from most common religion. Hindu theorists had the sense to accept all six (four) paths along with bhakti, and to make sure that all paths were given equal status. Everybody fits in. There is no rift between intellectuals, mystics, ascetics, rulers, do-gooders, activists, and common people. Everybody gets an equal shot. Hindus can ignore the annoying arguments among intellectuals and mystics. If that is how those people want to get to heaven, then let them try. Hindus can do a bit of good, such as by giving alms or supporting the temple, without worrying about saints who let themselves be eaten by tigers. Mystics can have ecstasy without worrying about leaving out or putting down common people. Zealots can crusade, confident they succeed even if the common people are lazy and amoral. The combination of paths, with bhakti as the biggest and central path, is far more powerful than any particular path alone. No other religion besides Hinduism has managed the mix as graceful or as successfully. That does not mean it is true; you have to decide; but it is something to think about as you wonder what to do with the diverse kinds of people and with human limitations.

Bhakti presents an interesting challenge to evolutionary theory. Bhakti is widespread enough so that it seems to be a part of human nature. What is the evolved basis for bhakti? Could a feeling of bhakti have been sustained in our evolutionary history? What would be the benefits and costs of a feeling of bhakti? Even if full-blown bhakti was not present in our evolutionary past, but only develops after we settled down into agriculture and states, still the basis for it must have been laid in our evolutionary past.

Atman.

“Atman” is the soul-self. It is not exactly like the Christian-Muslim soul-self but it is not nearly as different as Christians, Muslims, and Hindus might think. It is like the philosophical idea of the self that developed in Greek philosophy, especially like the idea of the soul that developed in Roman times in Neo-Platonism and that serves as the model of the soul-self in Christianity. It is something like a combination of the “true you” in modern America, the soul-self in Christianity, the self of social-personal Dharma, and the self of social role. This idea is related to, but distinct from, the idea of the self in Theravada Buddhism; see that chapter. The Hindu self is a strong entity as long as it is part of the Dharma system and it does its social and cosmic duties. Then, the atman is as strong and as eternal as the system. The atman is not eternal in the sense the soul is necessarily eternal in Christianity and Islam where God promised eternity whether in heaven or hell. This Hindu idea of the atman is descended from the idea of the self in the Upanishads, although likely through many ancestors rather than only the Upanishads.

The Buddha argued against strong ideas of the self including the Muslim-Christian idea, the common idea held by many people regardless of religion, the idea in the Upanishads, and what later became the Hindu idea of the self.

“Maha” means “great” and is cognate with English “major”. “Mahatma” is from “maha” plus “atman”. It means “great soul”. It is an honorific way to address someone as in the name-plus-title “Mohandas ‘Mahatma’ Gandhi”.

Many Gods.

Jews, Christians, Muslims, and irreligious Westerners look down on Hinduism for having many gods, which they consider idols. This view of Hinduism is superficially correct but a bit hypocritical even if we set aside that the Christian Trinity is polytheistic. Hindu gods are much like Christian angels and saints, especially Mary. Hindu gods and Christians saints are a major way by which the religions raise heroes to cosmic principles. Christians worship Mary and the saints, and act toward angels, as if they were gods. Each saint, Mary, and each angel, has a specialty, special powers, and special clientele. Even Protestants revere founders more than is appropriate for mere humans. The “Reformed Church” attitude toward John Calvin frightens me. The Marxist attitude toward Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Mao was idolatry pure-and-simple. The Jewish attitude toward Abraham, Moses, and David is much more than I expect toward mere humans. Despite denials, Muslims basically worship Mohammad much as Christians worship Jesus. I do not dwell on Muslim Jinns (genies) and similar spirits. Muslim attitudes toward the early patriarchs, especially the Sunni and Shiite attitudes toward founders, are not less idolatrous than Hindu worship of gods. Muslims think of archangels as gods, especially Gabriel. American boys used to idolize sports heroes before being a selfish lout became part of the necessary persona of an athlete. I don’t even go into the subject of media stars. It seems part of human nature to deify important people and to look for good relations with friendly spirits. Buddhists accept this tendency as natural, and only hope to avoid the bad effects.

Hindus theoretically can recognize many gods but in practice don’t. In practice, each person has a few important household deities, and a few important deities for their larger clan, village, or occupation (metal workers, computer programmers). A few avatars and deities are common, such as Krishna, the monkey god (Hanuman), Phoenix or Eagle (Garuda), and elephant head (Ganesh). These deities are somewhat like archangels. They are more powerful than the average deity, have distinct personalities and abilities,

and everybody recognizes them in addition to his-her own deities. Thus the real “deity count” for Hindus likely does not exceed the count for many Christians and some Muslims.

Using deities can be a useful way to organize your thinking and social world. It is like seeing the world in terms of the players in a video game or the characters in an epic. Hindus believe in deities as much for the usefulness of the deity in organizing life as because Hindus hold the deity to be a transcendent god for all time and in all places. To understand how this attitude works requires going into the kind of details that I can't go into here.

Protestants accuse Roman Catholics of worshipping Mary and the saints while Roman Catholics counter that they do not worship Mary and the saints as they worship God including Jesus. Roman Catholics revere Mary and the saints, and they ask for intercession from Mary and the saints. I don't go into the details of the doctrine of intercession other than to say it is reasonable if we recall that human nature leads us to ask for help and if we think of God as the big busy patriarch of a clan who listens only to the appeals of his wife and children, and to the appeals of others that are passed on by his wife and children. While clever erudite priests might be able to explain the doctrine of veneration-and-intercession and skirt the issue of worshipping Mary and the saints, most lay people are not that clever, and, by all obvious standards, most lay people and lay Roman Catholics do worship Mary and the saints. “If it quacks like a duck and walks like a duck...”

Many Hindus find their attitude toward gods much like the Roman Catholic attitude toward Mary and the saints. An educated Hindu says Hindus do not worship all the little gods as they worship the Big Three. Hindus do not even worship the Big Three in the same sense they respect the One for which the Big Three stand, that is, the Dharma. Rather, little gods are merely aspects of the Big Three. A Hindu does not worship little gods so much as ask for help in dealing with the Big Three and the Big System of which we are all part. Not-fully-educated Hindus who do not know the Dharma system and the Big Three in effect worship small gods but that is not so bad and not such a big price to pay. Fully educated Hindus don't have to follow them anymore than smart Roman Catholic priests have to follow common people. The alternative is to fight human nature. I suspect Protestants tacitly ask for help from their founders and heroes in the same way. All this is variation on the doctrine of veneration-and-intercession. I find it hard to accuse Hindus of craven multiple idolatry when I don't want to accuse Roman Catholics of the same based on ideas of veneration-and-intercession and I don't want to accuse Protestants in their respect for spiritual heroes. If we say Hindus worship many little gods then, by the same standards, we have to say Roman Catholics do so too, and we have to suspect Protestants. If we want to absolve Roman Catholics and Protestants, we have to be open-minded about Hindus. I don't know how to get people to stop wrongly worshipping Mary, saints, little gods, and heroes without fighting a battle against human nature that would take more than it gave.

Modern Samsara, Maia, and Moksha.

Modern Hindus continue to hold vague notions that the obvious present world is not all there is, it is not satisfying, and there is a deeper spiritual reality to which we need to wake up. They hold ideas that are related to the ideas in the terms Samsara, Maia (Maya), and Moksha. I doubt most Hindus take these ideas really seriously or really understand what they mean but educated Hindus do.

Most Hindus have the same attitude that many diffident Buddhists and some Christians have: We know something that you don't know and that makes us better than you. We are not quite sure what it is that we know, but we know it is important, and know you can't get it. "Awakening" is awakening to the fact that we are smart Hindus; it is not awakening to any particular universal spiritual truth. Most Hindus that know of the traditional role of samsara, maia, and moksha in Hinduism are fairly well educated, so their attitude shows up more in how they relate to lower class and lower middle class members of their own Hindu-Indian society than in how they relate to people of other religions.

The historical development of Hinduism minimized the importance of samsara, maia, and moksha. It replaced moksha with bhakti (devotion). It seems traditional people who think the world is a dangerous illusion (samsara and maia) would have little place, and that the traditional idea of moksha (awakening) as release would not make sense as an important goal. Yet some Hindus do see the world as samsara and maia, and do seek moksha. These are the stereotyped Hindu "holy people". Some of them live in cities and hold regular jobs now. I do not know much about them. I do not know how they think of awakening. I do not know how they feel about other religions and about modern democratic capitalist life in comparison to traditional Hindu life. I do not know how the two strains of Hinduism see each other.

Subtle Point.

Hinduism is powerful partly because it explains itself and so more easily encompasses other religions. Turn Hindu relativism back on Hinduism. Doing so is another version of asking if the Dharma is relative or absolute. On the one hand, if the Dharma is absolute, then something absolute is outside the regular Dharma system of Hinduism because Hinduism is only one manifestation of the Dharma even if it is the best manifestation for humans. If something absolute is outside the Dharma system of Hinduism, then maybe other religions actually know this absolute better than Hinduism. On the other hand, if Dharma is relative, then it is not fully true. If Dharma is not fully true, then Hinduism is not fully true and other religions might be truer. If Non-Hindu religions are lesser versions of God playing by forgetting himself, then what if Hinduism too is God forgetting himself? In that case, Hinduism doesn't get it all exactly right either. No system of ideas can get it exactly right although some systems come closer than others. Not even the Hindu high holy people can get it exactly. In a different book, this point would be a good place to launch imagination.

PART 6: Hindu Appeal.

Here I show the appeal of Hinduism to a Westerner. Not all these ideas are bad. Most are good, at least in their own ways. That is part of the point. The ideas become bad when out of context, Romanticized, or taken in context as part of a full-blown system that eats the world.

Although we are all part of one single total system, the situation of each person is explained by his-her past and present behavior. Everybody is responsible for him-herself.

People are mutually dependent. Events are mutually dependent. There is no high without low. High people should not simply benefit from lower people; high people should guide lower people and improve them. It is a system based on idealized "noblesse oblige".

There is a place for everybody. Everybody can find a place. In theory, nobody is left out.

The system takes care of you. You feel safe, warm, and wanted. The system answers your questions as when Jesus said "Seek and you will find, knock and the door will open for you". The system loves you as when Christians think God and Jesus love us all. The system comforts you and takes care of you as in Robert Thurman's experiences with the Mahayana great system.

You don't have to be a complete spiritual success to be enough of a success. As long as you do your job then you contribute, and you can advance in later lives. It is like the American ideal of working for a large business corporation but in this case a spiritual corporation. You can be spiritually successful as a plumber, banker, world leader, community organizer, piano teacher, or whatever, as long as you do your Dharma sincerely and fully. You don't have to worry about being a saint. Of course, you can still be a saint if you are so inclined.

Nobody is irretrievable bad. You can be forgiven whatever you do. Eventually everybody is saved.

Even if you don't understand all Hindu ideas and aids, and your religion is not high Hinduism, it doesn't matter. You can continue following the religion of your ancestors (or your chosen religion) and still be a valued part of the whole spiritual system.

The highest spiritual success consists of doing the Dharma, which is pretty close to doing good. The highest spiritual success does not consist of rules, laws, righteousness, or self-justification. Hinduism is an intrinsically moral system based on goodness.

Life is a constant game of hide-and-seek. Life is a constant game. Even when one version of the game might be painful, the game overall is fun. The joyous game goes on forever without boredom.

Life has enough risk and pain to be interesting but not so much that you ever really fail.

You can "say 'yes' to LIFE" with a whole heart. You can throw yourself into LIFE without feeling guilty. If you want, you can gamble and have sex, play the stock market, have a homosexual fling (or heterosexual fling in case you are gay), or be a gangster.

It is always darkest before the dawn but the dawn inevitably comes. Good wins out. Evil is defeated. The world comes right again. The King returns. The postman always comes. The victory of good comes from unexpected places and characters, often not from the high and mighty but from the small and weak. Even the wisest people cannot foresee this cleverness of the God-and-the-Dharma.

Hinduism is logical. Hindus are adept at analysis and at laying out arguments. Hinduism can mesh with modern science and math. Hinduism appeals to intellectuals, who can use its tools to explain everything, and use its tools to show how everything is an aspect of the whole system. It is like "Thomism" in Roman Catholicism or like any comprehensive system. It can even take in seemingly different systems such as the "natural language" school.

Hinduism has a place not only for logical scientific people but for people of almost all tempers including artists, mystics, monks, and yogis. It is like large comprehensive Christian Churches such as Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. If you are prepared to (pretend to) ignore your social duty (Dharma), then Hinduism even has a place for adventurers, rascals, and bad guys.

When you do your social duty, family duty, and professional duty, you also do a religious duty. You help yourself and help the whole world at the same time. When you are who you are, you also do a religious service. As long as can you ignore your tremendous social duty, even if you are a rascal or bad guy, you also do a religious service.

When you individually succeed in your profession, or at your job, you also succeed in the Dharma and you help the whole world at the same time. It is like the feeling that market-worship capitalists want to cultivate in business people and in workers. When you are a pretty successful woman or a handsome successful man, you are also a good Hindu.

Hinduism captures the feeling of the sayings “the destination is the journey” and “the road goes ever on and on”. There is no intrinsic goal. We make up goals. The goal is what happens right now again and again in constant variation. Hinduism captures the best sense of the idea of living fully in the now, in the present moment.

God has a great thing going on. He finds himself, loses himself, finds himself, loses himself, and so on over and over. He plays wonderful amazing games. He plays out each game to the end, and then begins again. He is trillions of different people all at the same time. He loves the world and himself. It would be wonderful to be like God. Guess what? Good news! You are like God. In fact, you are God. You just have to realize it. Now you can do whatever you wish. Enjoy yourself.

The world is a dream but the dream is important. Dream away.

It is easy to let loose your imagination. Hinduism is full of amazing literature, visual art, and music. It is a font of ideas.

Many people really do feel love for the world. They would like to love the world but feel that the command to love the world from Christianity is self-contradictory and silly. Christian love is supposed to change the world but it doesn't. In Hinduism, love doesn't have to change the world. It is alright to feel love for other humans and for nature even if humans don't love you back and nature sends mosquitoes. Love is not a quixotic self-sacrifice but a part of your personality and a good habit. Superior people feel love without expecting it from other people or the world. You can feel love and feel good about it.

On the one hand, moral absolutes don't work. It takes a lot of work to be moral and to get other people to act as they should. On the other hand, moral relativism often is a tool for bad people. We need a system so we can be relativistic without feeling we are dupes or we add to the badness of the world. Hinduism lets us play around with morality while feeling not that we are doing anything bad but that we are helping the world to get along.

Human life is a great tedium of constant practical and moral issues. They are never fully solved. They never end. When Americans beat the Fascists and so thought they made the world safe for decency forever, Communism and the Cold War arose. When the Cold War ended, religious terrorists arose. When Putin replaced Yeltsin, Russia acted like an imperial power again. Americans thought we had made much progress against racism; then, after about 2013, Blacks showed how much more we had to do; and some Whites showed how much more Blacks still had to do. Financial institutions never stop finding ways to screw up the financial system and so undercut basic needs such as housing. We went from prosperity to huge national debt. Hackers are always able to get around any fix. When we thought nuclear war between the super powers was over, China started hacker attacks instead.

In Hinduism, fussing is an opportunity rather than tedium, a positive rather than a negative. Humans are moral animals. They love moral issues. They love moral disputes. They love figuring out what to do and implementing solutions. If they did not have moral issues, they would go crazy. The Dharma arranged it all so that we never run out of moral issues of about the right size to keep us always engaged and always feeling as if we are inching forward. Whether we really are inching forward does not matter as much as we feel we have to keep struggling. Even if we make real progress, we will not run out of problems and steps forward. This is a great boon to humans. No other religion shows how this all makes sense in the context of a system.

Never-ending moral issues at the right level for humans is what it means to be part of a never-ending story in which God (the Dharma) forgets himself to have fun.

If you are smart enough to see through all this business of never-ending moral issues, it doesn't matter. You can continue to work on moral issues or you can shrug them off. Either way, you contribute to the Dharma system.

Once you see that Hinduism allows for many paths within it and it encompasses other religions, then you can practice relativism – what I see as bad relativism. You can feel smug about your superior knowledge and stance, and still feel good toward other lesser people and other lesser religions. You can allow that Christianity is one path to the same God although poor Christians do not see the situation clearly as you do from your great Hindu height. Although Christians are still wandering a bit lost with blurred vision, still, the Dharma in its great compassion leads them back to itself as God. In fact, morally, Christians might even be a bit better than you are, so your intellectual insight and their simple morality all even out. As Hinduism promised, it all works out in the end. I have met Western Hindus who act like this, convert and born.

Some Westerners feel they connect with God. Hinduism gives them an explanation in that they are an important valued part of God, guaranteed. Some Westerners do not feel they have a close tie to God in any Western religion while in Hinduism they can find that. You do not have to be a saint to be a part of God and an important part of God. Some Westerners feel important to God. In Hinduism, these people can feel good about actually being God. If you have trouble figuring out your exact connection to God, Hinduism tells you that you are God, and so explains it to you and makes you feel important too. People can feel they are God without feeling guilty that they are God, without feeling that they fall into the sin of pride, and without feeling insane. It explains their feeling of centrality, without stress.

Some literature that Christians consider Christian, especially recent fantasy and science fiction, seems to me more like Hinduism than like the simple teachings of Jesus. Christians do not expect this literature to follow rigid dogmatic lines but they do expect this literature to promote the spirit of Christianity. It seems to me the spirit is more Hindu than Christian even when the authors were Christian. This is an example of the power of culture, here Indo-European culture. I do not say it is bad literature; it is good literature. All the fiction of C.S. Lewis, in particular the Narnia series, and the novels of J.R.R. Tolkien, including “The Hobbit” and “The Lord of the Rings”, seem more like Hinduism than the simple teachings of Jesus. The mutual development of Frodo, Sam, and Gollum is more Hindu than Christian. Gandalf is an avatar of Vishnu in everything but explicit name. Boromir and Faramir are like Hindu brothers from the epic Mahabharata. The feeling that you are doing work of God when you think you are doing your own work, when you don’t even know about the work of God, and especially if you are a little person only doing your small bit, is more Hindu than Christian. Even the Christian classic “Pilgrim’s Progress” is more about growing into the Dharma, finding your Dharma role, and purging confusion, than about simply acting well along the lines of Jesus’ teachings. The Christian literature does retain the idea of clear (absolute) evil and clear good. Sauron, the Ice Queen, and Orcs are bad; and that is that. Aslan is absolutely good Jesus; and that is that. But the absolute good and bad are only vague extremes between which a lot of Hindu-like mixing happens; and the absolute good and bad depend on each other in a way that is not really Christian but is acceptable in Hinduism. The little mouse “Reepacheep” in the Narnia books is less like a Christian saint than like the monkey god Hanuman. So much recent non-Christian science fiction seems like Hinduism that I don’t even go into the topic.

Westerners get infatuated with Hinduism because Westerners don’t see how Hinduism takes over your “true you” in personal-social Dharma, and how personal-social Dharma serves Hindu Indian stratified society in the big system of Dharma. Westerners don’t see problems. Westerners see a charming world where everybody can do what he-she wants and feel good about it yet there is a big cozy system with a place for everybody. The world is a big adventure that seems serious at the time but is not really serious. It is Peter Pan grown up but still Pan. The situation is like a Medieval Fair with rogues, wizards, wenches, bards, honor, duty, and crazy holy people but without the tight social Dharma (rigid Feudal system), starving peasants, bad sanitation, sexism, ageism, lack of schools or hospitals, and without the need personally to reinforce stratified Hindu society and the big system of Dharma. Hinduism is a theme park, like the Disney World of religions, while other religions are like particular rides in the theme park. To some modern Hindus, it seems this way too now. In reality, it is not.

PART 7: Further Assessment.

Most assessment was done above. This part picks out aspects of Hinduism that are relevant to it as a big idea system that eats the world, is relativistic, and feels superior to other ideas even when granting them credit. The points reinforce my idea that adhering closely to any system thwarts acting simply according to the teachings of Jesus, decency, and Western values. We can build institutions on the teachings of Jesus and the West well enough without falling into a bad system. The ideas also show my appreciation for some good aspects of Hinduism. I repeat that I say nothing new and many points have been offered so often they are trite.

I know that Christians and other non-Hindus can be obnoxious. I know that many Hindus are wonderful people. I know that Hindus have a sense of personhood and that non-Hindus treat people as things even

when non-Hindus have a clear dogma of personhood in their religion, as in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These facts are only partly the issue here. All of us live in a big political and ideological system, of which religion is a part. So the real issue is what leads some systems to stress persons and build good institutions while other systems lead people to treat other people as things and keep them from building good institutions. What leads some people in some systems to mutual respect, acting good for the sake of goodness, rule of law, equality under law, schools, hospitals, voluntary local sports, love of learning, and the Scouts while other systems with great ideas and great books do not build good institutions? What leads some systems to find the right balance of authority and creativity while others become rigid or diffuse? There is no easy answer. All I do is to offer a few observations.

Briefly, to repeat from the start of the chapter, the West had ideas of persons and of working hard to build a better world both from Jesus and from thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Hume, and Kant. Hinduism had “you are that” and great compassion. While fine in their own ways, “you are that” and compassion did not lead to ideas of persons and of working hard to build a better world, and so could not lead to building good institutions. Instead, they combined with the idea of Dharma to form a system that led to social involution, relativism, conniving, and the other bad features I have already listed too often. To get out of this trap, Hindus need to reinvent Dharma to stress ideas from Jesus and the West, that is, to stress persons, working hard to make the whole world better (not just your family, caste, city, etc.), and building the good institutions that go along.

We should not do good (act well) so as to please God to be saved and get into heaven. We should do good because it is good. That pleases God. To do good as it should be done, we need to see other people as persons. We need to offer and receive respect. We cannot do good as it should be done unless we see other people as persons and act rightly. Christians undermine the teachings of Jesus, and undermine good, when they do good to get in good with God, get saved, and go to heaven. In Hinduism, people should see that they are like other people and other people are like them, “you are that” from the Upanishads. The response to seeing that others are like us is great compassion. Hindus should do good because it is good and they see other people as persons. As with Christians, Hindus do not live up to the ideal. They do good not because it is good and other people are persons but as a way to earn karma-Dharma points, to have a better life now, and a better life in the future. That is the Hindu equivalent of getting saved and going to heaven. Hindus act well so as to support the Dharma system and themselves in the Dharma system.

It might seem that the two second-rate responses are about equally bad but that is not the case. While most Christians are mired in confusion about doing good, getting saved, and going to heaven, at least sometimes some Christians do leap over the barrier, manage to see other people as persons, and do good on that basis. They do this because they have the teachings of the Bible, the teachings of Jesus, and the example of Jesus. Some Christians know they should do good because it is good, and see that Jesus taught them how to do good in that light. Even when the mass of Christians do not do good on that basis, but do good to be saved and go to heaven, the mass of Christians are still guided by the few who do make the leap and tell others what to do. Christianity has managed to support Western civilization on this meager base. In contrast, Hindus do not make this leap often enough to build a similar civilization. They do not manage to get over the Dharma system often enough to see people as persons. Although both Christianity and Hinduism are Indo-European civilizations that stress persons and compassion, only one managed to build the best practical civilization. The differences were the teachings of the Bible, the

teachings of Jesus, and the example of the real person Jesus. I say these ideas many times in this part of the chapter.

At the root of Hinduism are the abstractions “Dharma” and “general compassion”. Hinduism is both too abstract and too detailed – a fault typical of big relativistic systems that eat the world large state agencies, big business firms, the American legal system, and the Indian legal system. Hindu abstractions are lovely but they enable the worst faults of a big system that eats the world and is relativistic in bad ways. They allow people too easily to treat each other not as persons but as ciphers in a game. Abstraction, even with high ideals, enables bad acts. The abstractions of high Hinduism paradoxically encourage people to cling to tiny details of stratified sexist caste-and-or-class life. The abstractions paradoxically drive ever-expanding tiny details of particular worship such as many gods, avatars, rituals, temples, and particular beliefs. The abstractions leave too much space for, and encourage, conniving in your Dharma position for power, wealth, prestige, sex, glory, success, and other goals that the idealistic abstractions formally warn against. Abstractions make a great playground for religious virtuosos but confuse normal people. For high ideals to succeed, they must be specific enough while still remaining ideals, such as the Golden Rule, the idea that we are all persons, “applies equally”, and rule of law.

In the right situation, Hinduism is a better alternative than rigid religions that lead people to act badly and to oppress others, even when the non-Hindu religion officially teaches compassion and good acts. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are too often bad in practice. Likely Hinduism was a terrific idea and terrific advance when it first formed in India in the centuries around the time of Jesus. Hinduism would be a good alternative to the rigid religion of America before about 1950, the “religion” of the racist classist Religious Right in America now, the “religion” of the racist classist Black in America now, or bad Muslim fundamentalism. In Hindu society of the 1800s and 1900s, Hinduism was about the same as those bad religions are in their times. Hinduism seems like a better general option only to a befuddled desperate seeking unrealistic Westerner who does not see Hinduism clearly and sees only idealized adventurous dreaming of God. Hinduism is never a better general option than following Jesus if we hear Jesus with an open mind, figure out what he really taught, mix his ideas with practicality and Western values, and then act in accord.

“I am Krishna-Vishnu-Godhead” versus “I am not Jesus”.

Here is a simple brief way to think about the situation according to how Hindus and the followers of Jesus think of people (persons) and their place in the world (the system):

If I think of me as a person among other persons, all of whom will meet God, then I tend to act according to the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, and rule of law, and to build good institutions. If I think of me as trying to excel in Dharma standing, and think of other people as cogs in the big Dharma system, I tend to treat them as an ATM machine and I do not build good institutions. When Christians think along similar lines as do stereotyped Hindus, when Christians do good to get to heaven and encourage other people to do the same, they act likewise and do not to build good institutions either.

Although Alan Watts styled himself a Taoist, he was more a Hindu. Watts noted that, if a Westerner were to say “I am God”, he-she would be shunned, burned, put in a home, ridiculed, or ignored. We need to see the God in us to love our neighbors as God loves us. By blocking natural insight that we are God-

Jesus, we also cannot see ourselves in others, see others in us, and love them as we love ourselves. By not being able to see ourselves as Jesus, we fail as Christians. Yet when a Hindu says "I am God", no Hindu gets upset. Wise Hindus say: "Good. Congratulations. I am glad your eyes are finally open. Now you can see where you come from, where you are going, and your duties along the way. I am glad you can join our band. Now do your Dharma job". By seeing that each Hindu is part of God, and so is God, each Hindu can act up to the ideals that Christians should work for. As a shock tactic against wrong rigid uptight moralistic do-good-to-go-to heaven Christianity, Watts makes sense. He does not make sense if instead we talk with any moderate person who does not need urgent rescue but rather simply needs a good way to think about who he-she is, what the world is like, and what to do.

A Hindu can see himself as Krishna, avatar of Vishnu, one of the three high gods, the divine hero of the Bhagavad Gita and Mahabharata. Hindus do not only emulate or learn from Krishna-Vishnu, they can become just like Krishna or become the actual Krishna-Vishnu. Especially through bhakti (devotion), but not only through bhakti, a Hindu does not only emulate, he becomes Krishna-Vishnu. In fact, usually he-she merges with a lesser god rather than one of the three highest gods such as Krishna-Vishnu, but the feeling is the same. (Feeling you merge with a deity goes along with traditional Hindu gender ideas and pronouns; the sexism is not in me; similar sexism was found in all major religions until recently.)

A Western person could not see him-herself as God, and a Christian could not see him-herself as God or Jesus. The ideas should be unthinkable. Both ideas are wrong and lead to bad results. It is against this idolatry, with its bad results, that Jews and Muslims warn Christians; and it is a good reason why Jews and Muslims don't like to make Jesus into God.

The difference between being able to see yourself as Krishna-Vishnu versus not being able to imagine yourself as God-or-Jesus, might not seem big but it is big enough to be qualitative. It is not a matter of degree but of kind. It makes a difference. When you do see yourself as God, the result is not mostly good as Watts thought.

To get a feel for the difference and its results, think of those Christians who are sure they have a personal relation with Jesus, are saved, see how it all works, see what to do, see what all other people should do, have the right to tell others what to do, feel others cannot be saved unless others are the same as they are, feel they deserve their high position, and feel others should accept their position. Imagine such a person who is rich, in the upper class, or an entrenched government official. Imagine how he-she can use the feeling to rationalize power, wealth, and the system. Imagine how he-she and the whole family look down on everybody else, especially not-our-sect-group and not-Christian. Imagine what happens when this person gets power, as with Cromwell in England or Communists in Russia (listen to "Oliver's Army" by Elvis Costello and see the movie "Doctor Zhivago").

Such exalted people can evade real issues of morality, society, and ecology while forcing other people to face the world for them - one privilege of a god. In effect, Krishna does that to Arjuna. Recall science fiction stories about people who get god-like powers and then act like demons. Recall smug people from your life. Recall bureaucrats and professors who think they are the system. Even when smug powerful people are gracious and help the downtrodden, they condescend and put up with inferiors more than they reach out to human persons. Their acts are not "I am like others" and "compassion". In Hinduism, this

holier-than-thou feeling and its bad results is raised to a qualitative higher level. That is how the feeling of being a god in disguise affects people and reinforces the system.

Even when any particular Hindu does not feel that he-she has merged with a god, the attitude pervades Hinduism and shapes ideas of who you are, personal relations, group relations, and the system. You can take on the attitude of a god anytime, and persist in it. You can act “high and mighty” to anyone below you in rank or in power. You identify with others as it suits your Dharma role, that is, your convenience. You feel for others only as expedient.

In Hindu mythology, often demons are beings that take the power(s) of a god, often by stealing, and act badly. Think of Magneto’s disdain toward mere humans or Jean’s fury. People who think they are the system do not often become Professor Xavier. Hindus feel the tendency of their system to make demons of people that aspire to more; and Hindus warn against the tendency. But the tendency cannot be ended as long as people can merge with god. In their mythology, Christians say that the key fault of the Devil is, in his pride, to think he is God. They try to stop that train too, but Christians can never fully succeed as long as human nature is what it is.

Most Westerners know something is wrong with this wish to become god even if they cannot say what, and even if, supposedly, it leads to seeing yourself in others and compassion. For Christians who do fall into this mistake, hopefully friends and fellows straighten them out. At least Christians have clear doctrine and clear tradition to help them tell smug over-godly people to “clean up you act”.

Most Hindus who identify with their god do not become full-on demons anymore than most Christians who have a relation with Jesus lord over their fellows. That is not the issue. The issue is the mindset and the system that is led to by the different potentials to feel like god, or not feel like god.

I dislike the idea of feeling that you are god, even the good god of a good system, both because it is wrong and leads to bad results personally and in a system. It is inaccurate. It feels wrong. It is a wrongheaded if powerful way to think.

If you are not god, then what are you? What does that mean for thinking, doing, and relating?

If you let yourself be merely human, you will be better off and your fellows will be better off. As a mere human, you have to deal with real moral issues, real problems, and stinky people. You cannot assume godlike above-it-all-ness while others do the work. You might even become more god-like by being more merely human but that is not the reason you should do so.

Because I do not worry whether Jesus was (is) God, I have to accept that it is theoretically possible for a person to think of him-herself as like Jesus, fully equal to Jesus, or better than Jesus, without thinking of him-herself as God. This case does not matter much to me and it is not important in what I say here. It is only possible for a person to think of him-herself as like Jesus if he-she does not think Jesus is God. A person cannot think of him-herself as God; and that is what matters. I discourage people from thinking they are equal to, or better than, Jesus. To feel the message of this section, try thinking of yourself as like Jesus, fully equal to Jesus, or better than Jesus; or think why you cannot, and wish not, to think of yourself as like Jesus, fully equal to Jesus, or better than Jesus.

Jews cannot feel as if they are God. Muslims cannot feel as if they are God. Muslims feel they cannot be Mohammad because he is so holy, that is, in the same way that Christians feel they cannot be Jesus. The relation of Christians to Jesus and Muslims to Mohammad raises problems along the lines described above but I do not go into them here.

Mahayanists do not feel as if they can become one with any particular bodhisattva but they do feel they could become a bodhisattva in their own right. They can return to Dharma, Mind, or Emptiness, and can act from that matrix for the good of all. What result that view leads to, I don't take up here. Theravada Buddhists can use religion to justify pride, power, and aloof disdain but not in the same way as a Hindu who identifies directly with a god. While Taoists feel they can merge with the Tao, their idea does not seem to lead to the same overbearing personality and bad system as in Hinduism, some Christianity, and some Islam. I do not go into why the difference for Taoists. They have faults. Zen is like Taoism and Theravada. In true Zen, the idea that, "I am a Buddha, a bodhisattva", leads not to vanity but to junking the whole system and to appreciating everyday life.

(A) The Golden Rule and "Applies Equally" versus (B) Great Compassion.

According to Jewish teachers around the time of Jesus, including Jesus, the two greatest points of Jewish Law, on which all other commands rest, are: (1) (1A) Love God, which implies (1B) knowing that God loves you; and (2) Love your neighbor. If you can: (2A) love your neighbor as you wish God to love you, (2B) love your neighbor as you wish to love god, and (2C) love your neighbor as if he-she were yourself. The Golden Rule is another way to say this. This Jewish idea seems to differ little from the ideas in the Upanishads, Buddhism, and Hinduism about compassion and about being the same as the other. Yet the West, based on Jesus' Jewish ideas, developed good institutions while India did not.

In theory, compassion sounds much like "love your neighbor" and the Golden Rule but practice does not work out that way. It seems I should contrast compassion with "love your neighbor" but workable practice is more along the lines of the Golden Rule than "love your neighbor". So I contrast compassion with the Golden Rule. A feeling of diffuse compassion lets us treat people as tokens in a game, as a way to make us feel spiritually successful while, in contrast, the Golden Rule leads us to think of people as persons and to act as they need rather than do what makes us feel successful. "Love your neighbor" either leads people to freeze because they can't live up to it, and so don't help others and do harm themselves; or it leads to treating people as tokens to prove our worthiness through love, much as does compassion.

It might be odd to think of it this way, but the idea of great compassion does not require that the object of our love be a person or even like a person. Of course, being people, we tend to think of it that way but it doesn't have to be that way. We can love a person without thinking of him-her as a person. These days, when people love animals, they tend to think of them as almost-human, but, in fact, they are not, and we can love them even if they are not. Many people in the past did that. We can love nature, the cosmos, ideas, ideals, and art but do not have to think of it as a person. We can support the arts without thinking of the artists as persons and without thinking that art is made by persons for persons. Many do-gooders, and many conservatives, love society, love a nation, or love a social group, without really feeling it is made up of persons and should serve persons. If they claim to love humanity, they love it in this abstract way rather than as persons. This is what Charles Schulz meant when he had Lucy say something like "I

love humanity, its people I hate". This is the way that great compassion tends to play out in places where it comes along with ideas of Dharma.

Christians make this mistake when they feel compassion in a cause or toward a group but do not see that the cause and the group are made of persons and do not see that their simple broad diffuse compassion might not be the best response for them or us – especially when expressed through a state program or in a crusade such as against abortion or for political correctness. We slip into a bad version of this attitude with “Oh, look at that poor unwed pregnant girl not of our ethnic group, religion, or socio-economic class”, “We have to do something about all these poor kids”, “Farm families are the bedrock of our past and the farming way of life must go on”, or “Small business is the bedrock of our capitalist spirit and we have to help them in their fight against big bad corporations”.

In contrast to Hinduism, hopefully in the Judeo-Christian-Western tradition, and in the Muslim tradition, we are told not just to love some abstractions or groups, not just to show compassion generally, but to love all particular individual real persons (people). We are told to love them even when they are not nice. Of course, real people have limits to how much we can love. If only for the sake of families and society, at some point it is wrong to love a bad person. But at least we have the ideal of person-to-person relations. Again, this is the point of the classic book by Martin Buber “I and Thou”.

I am not saying it is bad to love something that is not a person. I think it is good to love nature, art, some groups, some ideas, your dog, and your cat. But we have to remember the importance of persons too. Do not reduce people to non-persons so you can love them or when you love them.

I am not saying we should never think of people in terms of groups, never work through agencies such as churches or the United Way, and never use the state as an instrument of compassion and welfare. We have to do all this. But every so often we need to engage a real individual person out of the group and we have to think of the group as made up of individual persons.

As real limited human creatures, we need guidance for the idea of loving real flawed persons. While still an ideal, the “Golden Rule” gives guidance that is better than vague love. If we act toward other people (persons) as we want them to act to us as a person, then we have pretty good ideas what to do. The Golden Rule suggests institutional guidelines such as giving charity and accepting charity. Likewise, the idea “applies equally” is an excellent guide for how to put in practice the Golden Rule and “love your neighbor”. “Applies equally” gives strong guidelines for building good institutions such as the rule of law, fairness, and sportsmanship.

I am not saying we should not feel compassion, and even feel diffuse compassion. I am saying we have to be more specific through the Golden Rule and “applies equally”. We have to be more specific if we get trapped in the ideal of loving everybody as we love ourselves when we just can’t do, and we have to be more specific so we don’t use compassion as a means to personal justification and success. Sometimes it helps to think not of loving everybody as we love ourselves or as God loves us but love everybody as if he-she were our brother, sister, good parent, or great teacher.

A lot of people feel big diffuse compassion sometimes and a few people feel intense compassion in big long doses. In those cases, go with it. Let the compassion infuse your life and make you a better person.

Likely, then, you do not feel compassion as a roundabout selfish means to justification and success. Use the energy that you get during your “high” to power being a better person when you get back to acting in the normal world. Then, likely you will find that you use your energy along the lines of the Golden Rule and “applies equally”.

In versions of meditation, including yoga, and in versions of some systems of thought, Hindus seek to go beyond simple compassion and even deep compassion. Compassion can impede full understanding of the Dharma. This view is rooted in the common experience of the need to get beyond a “bleeding heart” to have a clear head and to do greater good. In the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, God can be stern, and God does not let compassion get in the way of chastising his people and making them better. “Going beyond simple compassion” does not mean no morality. Even a Hindu who is beyond simple compassion still has to act morally. Only schools of Hinduism that are aberrant act amorally or immorally. Westerners often know of Chakras. Compassion is rooted in one chakra, the heart chakra, which is about midway on the line of ascent. A seeker must get above the midway heart chakra to higher levels and higher chakras. I do not describe them. While true of esoteric ways, this view about getting beyond compassion is not true of most Hinduism and most Hindus would only dimly get it even if most have heard of it. This way of thinking does not change my view about compassion anymore than similar thinking in the West changes my assessment of Hinduism, such as in the Neo-Conservative school. I get this view about compassion. Still, I do not go along with this view nor do I think that getting beyond compassion gets us out of the need for principles. While rooted in the need for a clear head, this view goes too far and it can be misleading. I suspect all schools that claim to lead above compassion without giving us guidelines, principles, for good acts and good relations once we get there, and without telling us how to rightly mix superiority with proper empathy, sympathy, compassion, and principles. Compassion is part of us, or should be, and it has to be guided by principles such as the Golden Rule even if sometimes we are also objective or stern. Even if a person is above compassion, he-she still needs to act, and needs some principles on which to act. This result leads back to Jesus and the Golden Rule. Even a stern God follows some rules most of the time – or should.

“You are That”; and “We are All Sparks of One God”.

In theory, it seems the idea that we are all the same deep down would ignite good feelings of connection to each other and compassion for each other. When we see ourselves as all sparks off the same God, as all really God himself at play through us, it seems we would be good to each other, at least so we can be good to ourselves. In practice, the idea that we are all similar often produces bad feelings. Whether good or bad win depends on context. I think bad feelings win out in systems like Hinduism despite the ideal of Compassion.

Here are three ways in which sentient beings are the same or different. The ways are not usually fully achieved in real life but they are thinkable and they affect how a system works out.

(1) Each person is qualitatively different, so different that it is hard to imagine what other persons are like and hard to communicate with them. Everybody is “on his-her own”. Everybody tries to shape the world to suit what he-she thinks is important and what he-she likes. Even when many individuals are good, or mean well, the situation turns out badly. It becomes a contest of wills. Recall meetings where everyone talks past everyone else. Because people cannot relate, each individual finds it hard to assess his-her

own desires and to limit his-her own desires to what makes sense. Even when individuals start out well, they often turn bad out of frustration and out of unlimited desire. This is what Sartre had in mind when he described Hell as “other people” in “No Exit”, and how C.S. Lewis described Hell in “The Great Divorce”. This is how theologians paint Hell, as ultimate isolation from other persons and God. This is why Jewish teachers around the time of Jesus, and Jesus too, said the two greatest commandments, on which all others rest, are “love God” and “love others as yourself”. This is what the writers of the Upanishads tried to prevent when they urged people to see others as like themselves and to feel compassion for others. This is how critics of economic individualism see economics, capitalism, and Darwinism, not only as ways to analyze human life but as ways to promote this hellish version of human life. Anti-abortion activists, pro-life groups, see widespread abortion as an inevitable result of this stance and as clear evidence that this stance prevails in society.

(2) This option is the happy middle. This option makes more sense if you read option (3) first. Both similarity and difference matter. Every person differs but still we are all essentially equal and each of us is valuable in his-her way. Equality is not sameness nor is sameness equality. Not everybody is equally valuable except maybe in the eyes of God. Equality is more important than value. People respect both the difference and sameness of everybody. Seeing the commonality of each person allows each person to develop his-her own way and promotes beneficial manageable diversity, that is, difference. Accepting difference allows us to see beside (beyond, behind) the difference to what makes us equal. Unlike God, people are not necessarily good judges of what makes us valuable and equal. We value wealth, power, artistic ability, prowess in sports, appearance, and trendiness more than decency and a good heart. The middle position reminds us that we are not good judges, to think both of common equality and particular distinction, and to think more deeply about human value and natural value.

(3) Every person might be different but that doesn't matter. Everyone is the same. Everyone is equally a spark of the one God, equally the Dharma at play with itself. Sameness totally dominates difference and individuality. A strong personification of this attitude is Agent (Mr.) Smith in the movie trilogy “The Matrix”, who could make everyone exactly like him no matter what they began as and how powerful they were. It is a theme of the Chaplin movie “Modern Times” where everyone is a cog in the machine. People might be different cogs, they might have distinct duties, they might all need each other, and some people might have command functions while other people might be only simple cogs. Still, neither the differences nor mutual dependence matter because all are still only cogs. We are all in the Great Communion. We might have different roles but still we are all part of the same society. Aldus Huxley satirized this view in “Brave New World”. Some anthropologists have (had) this view of society.

Most people know the idea that things turn into their opposites when pursued quite strongly, as Justice becomes Tyranny. Usually the idea is surrounded with Romantic and metaphysical claptrap. Forget all that because you need a clear head to assess when things really do turn into opposites: Attitude (3) tends to turn into attitude (1) and vice versa. When all we see is similarity with no individuality, then we treat everyone as a creepy little aberration, and treat them not as the same but as totally different from us. We make them different, anyway we can. We do not feel connected to them and feel compassion for them but instead try to assert our individuality, our specialness, and our will. In situations where attitude (1) prevails, as with equally powerful politicians, business people, professionals, artists, fashion setters, householders, or people who insist on their rights without also accepting their responsibilities, what people see is not the distinctiveness of the others, what makes them special and successful in their little

realms. People see only that there are other powerful beings out there, each all vying to assert his-her will. Everybody is reduced from unique to merely the same hunger for assertion and power. Everybody is the same now, and that leads not to compassion but to competition.

To prevent the collapse of (3) into (1) and vice versa, do not rest on abstracts such as we are all the same, all sparks of God, and should feel great compassion for each other. Instead, use more concrete guidelines about what a person is and how we should act toward others. We need the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, the rule of law, and the idea of a citizen with both responsibilities and rights. We need to merge those with experience and practicality. We need to put those into concrete form with good institutions such as schools, hospitals, charities, and research. Even then, we still make mistakes, but we are less likely to err, more likely to see both similarity and difference, and to bridge difference with proper compassion.

Equality under the law does not mean everybody has the same ability and all should achieve the same wealth, fame, power, romantic success, and family success. It does not mean we are all smart enough to succeed in modern capitalism. It means we all get treated fairly and honestly by officials and citizens, according to procedures that are set down and are available for all people to understand. Each person is the same under the law but all persons are not the same, and we expect people to differ, or there would be no need for the law at all. Yet through all the differences, there is a common personhood on which we can base the law and a society. We are neither so different that we cannot have any law at all nor so similar that we don't need law. We are different enough to need law and similar enough to make law and to make it work. “Applies equally” works the same way, and we can see “equality under the law” as a variation of “applies equally”.

The Golden Rule works the same way. If we really were all the same, and it was easy to see so, we would not need the Golden Rule but could rest on simple compassion. The Golden Rule says that there are others and they are NOT exactly the same as us or we would not have to think about how to treat them. We have to treat them well despite real differences. When we do think about how to treat them, we treat them as we wish to be treated, not just with simple great compassion.

Westerners do have problems with attitudes (3) and (1), and the collapse. The problem is a malingering threat in our societies, and we fear it. Lately we have been more worried about the idea that everyone is the same (3) than that everyone is absolutely qualitatively different (1). The fear of ultimate sameness is the “Communist Specter”. It is a theme of episodes of the old “Star Trek” TV show, often run by overly-parental computers. In the comic TV show of 2016, “People of Earth”, aliens abduct humans and they try to soothe humans by telling us how special each is; but one woman knows such patter is only twisting the human psyche to cover abuse, and she “calls” the aliens on their “bullshit”. Americans want a level playing field, equal opportunity. What they often get instead is politicians and interest groups, including business firms and wealthy people, using the system to get their version of a good outcome. While we dream of “equal under the law” what we usually get is a huge rationale for special privilege and adept conniving. Fittingly, other societies see America as plagued by attitude (1), economic individualism and radical insistence on rights over responsibility in society and to nature.

Hindus tolerate enormous diversity in practice, in details of belief about the Dharma, and in what serves the Dharma. The variety and diversity of Hindu sects is legendary. “Indiana Jones and the Temple of

Doom” is an unfair parody of Hindu diversity, but the movie means well, gives the average American a small sense of Hindu diversity, and shows the importance of family and community despite the religious ideologies. Imagine every saint and famous historical religious figure with his-her own cult and dedicated temples. Despite the diversity, Indian society does cohere. Hindus seemingly connect with each other through the idea that we are all sparks of the Dharma (God). This situation seems to validate the idea that seeing the core of commonality allows more individuality and allows individuals to bridge the gaps between them. Hindus seem to make attitude (3) work (we are all the same), and work well enough so that attitude (1) (deep distinction) is not a threat. Indians seem to merge attitudes (1) and (3) in a way that overcomes the threat of becoming the same bad thing.

But that is not what really happens in Indian and Hindu society. Rather, Hindu society often really is full of contention, Hindus are argumentative, and the society holds together as much through authority as common good will. The movie of Gandhi’s starring Ben Kingsley life give a good sense of the conflict in Indian society despite high ideals. The war between Hindus (Indians) and Muslims (Pakistanis and to some extent Bangladeshis) is better seen as a conflict between South Indians with the same general outlook than as a conflict between Hinduism and Islam.

One good analogy for a Westerner is Protestantism. For someone raised in the Eastern Orthodox Church, “Protestants” here includes Roman Catholics but, for here, take it in the sense of Protestants versus Roman Catholics. Protestants stress their equality and their right to interpret the Bible as they see fit. Everyone is equal before God and can have a direct relation to God that does not depend on any particular historical Church. They refuse to accept the authority of any established church, in particular the Roman Catholic Church, despite the fact that the Roman Catholic Church has historical continuity from Jesus. Despite all having almost the same Bible, they still find thousands of different interpretations. They often agree on well over 90% of what it means yet still split into factions over interpretation of as little as one verse or one practice, for instance over Baptism and the Eucharist. Commonality of text breeds not unity and compassion but diversity, disagreement, and enmity. As Christians, Protestants should love each other and help each other. Yet their stress on equality of standing produces thousands, or tens of thousands, of sects, many of which are so distinct they cannot talk to each other. Within each church, Protestants are notoriously authoritarian and accept little deviation – so much for individual self-determination through one standard text and direct personal relation to God. To someone outside the Protestant movement, the community seems not made up of the qualitatively distinct non-commensurate entities they say but made up of many nearly-identical highly-argumentative competitive robots that split hairs just to have something to fight about and to use to distance themselves from other people and God. The Protestant mix of attitudes (1) and (3) too often leads to badness. Protestants drove the slave trade and they found easy Biblical rationales. Particular Protestant groups often cohere through authority and, in bad irony, state-sponsored churches such as in England, Germany, and Scandinavia. When Calvinism prevailed, it was a bully among Protestant equals, taking over the state and using it as an instrument of superiority, as in Switzerland, Colonial America, and during the time of the Revolution in England. Contrary to misconception (fueled by a beautiful but wrong book by Max Weber), capitalism does not thrive under pure Protestantism but in societies with a blend of peoples and ideas. Pure Protestantism stifles Capitalism. When Protestant societies do succeed, as in the United States in its first 150 years, it is not through extreme individualism or extreme sameness but because they take seriously the Golden Rule and applies equally, their concrete realization in the rule of law, and in other institutions such as schools and hospitals. They also have neighbors who differ in belief and way of life and with whom they

have to trade and talk, that is, they have to cross borders between differences. America would not have been America without both Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

That is what Hinduism lacks. Imagine Protestant pseudo-individualism combined with strong coherence within each church-and-sect, and without “applies equally” and rule of law. That is the kind of coherence that prevails under Hinduism when attitudes (1) and (3) dominate.

I revised parts of this chapter during the 2016 election season, and I saw that American political parties might provide more familiar examples than Protestantism. Both parties have an ideal rationale for why the members are in the party, that is, both parties have an ideal for why their members are the same and should feel great compassion for each other, for Americans in general, and for Americans regardless of political affiliation. In fact, in both parties, nobody believes that rationale. Instead, both parties have half-a-dozen major special-interest groups, each group vies to take over, and each group secretly disdains the others no matter what each group says: white working class, white medium-sized business, other middle-sized business, rich people, the Religious Right, the Religious Left, Blacks, Hispanics, Women, and eco-activists. Every group says: “we love America and we have the one-and-only way to save America” but no group sees beyond its own problems to bigger issues and solutions. Love for America seems a lot like love for self. Each group acts like isolated captives of Hell according to Sartre and Lewis. No society ever was free of interest groups, and it is natural that subgroups seek power. It also use to be natural in working democracy that interest groups would seek the greater interests of the country and compromise with other groups to work toward those. That is the middle position described above. Since at least Reagan, and likely since the early 1970s, that middle position has dwindled to nothing, and America has slid down the road to the Hell of high slogans and low cunning.

(When Buddhists see clearly, the middle position above is an example of what they mean by “the middle path”. Few real Buddhists see this clearly, and most use “middle path” only as a slogan. Still, it is worth pointing out that Buddhists can see the middle and see how it can save us from suffering.)

(The three options above interact with ideas of hyper-order, order, and no order, of reduction and holism, and of individual-and-society. Hopefully, I go into these relations in other writing.)

Marxist Parallels.

Recall the famous dictum from the rules of “Animal Farm” as interpreted by the ruling pigs: We are all equal but some are more equal than others.

How do systems built on great ideals, such as compassion, fail? Without implying Hinduism is just like Marxism, Marxism is a useful comparison. I could as well find parallels in right wing movements such as Reagan-ism, “compassionate conservatives”, “contract with America”, or “a rising tide floats all boats”.

Marxism too taught compassion in ideals such as “From each according to ability; to each according to need”. That was the Marxist version of “love your neighbor” and the Golden Rule, and it superseded “love your neighbor” and the Golden Rule. The system was the means by which people showed abilities and received needs; people related through the system. This maxim implies that people should relate as persons even if they do it through the medium of the social system. Yet Marxism got caught in deep harsh

hurtful debilitating contradictions that prevented Marxist systems from treating people as person and from mediating between persons.

On the one hand, the great mover of the world is history. History makes empires and breaks empires. It leads to changes from one dominant form of this era to another dominant form of the next era, as when the large agrarian mercantile states of Europe fell to capitalism. History will lead communism to replace capitalism. (Marxism was influenced by Romanticism.) On the other hand, people make history. People are the actors in history. If particular individual people don't see what is going on, see what needs to be done, and do it, nothing gets done. The right things don't get done. On the one hand, people are mere pawns and cogs. On the other hand, people are what it is all about and are the main movers of progress both material and spiritual.

Marxism never resolved these conflicts. In practice, what happened is that all the little people became mere pawns, things, abstractions, to be used as system and leaders demanded. They lost personhood. On the other hand, the leaders, in theory, retained their personhood. And the Party became the biggest person of all with the biggest will and biggest role. People related as persons only through the medium of the Party, if they related at all. The leaders of the Party, and the Party, had no trouble suppressing the personhood and lives of the people when that served their ends. They had no trouble rationalizing what they did as actions needed to build history and build something better, as the road to realizing the ideal of "from each according to ability; to each according to need". Of course, they failed, and instead they got Stalinism.

Although in theory the leaders retained their personhood, in fact what they retained was power while they lost their personhood, that is, in old-fashioned terms appropriate to Christian slave masters, they traded their souls for power. This is what happens in a system of slaves-and-masters. While the masters retain power, in denying personhood to slaves, in the end they lose their personhood as well. In case you think this disease is only one of Whites on Blacks, Black leaders and Black thugs lose their souls as well when they lie to their people, and continue the slavery of their people, through half truths. George Orwell deftly criticized all this in "Animal Farm".

All this is what happens in big systems that eat the world and have vague ideas at their core such as Dharma, inevitable history, dialectic, and diffuse compassion. It happens even in systems with better ideas of persons. It need not happen; but, to stop it, we have to keep in mind lessons from history and we have to hold better ideals.

Diffuse Vagueness, Right Balance, Overly Rigid System.

When Americans think of a system gone wrong, we think of fascism and Stalinism. We think of a strong, centralized, hierarchical, rigid, highly ordered system with one leader. When we think of free persons, we think of free persons naturally opposed to such systems, fighting them, and defeating them. We define our personhood in relation to such systems as their opposite. We see Captain Kirk defeating Klingons, Luke Skywalker defeating Darth Sidious the Emperor, and Frodo defeating Sauron. We think that rigid and free are the only two categories, and they must be opposed. There is no better middle. Americans think all chaos is creative and only chaos can be creative. Only total freedom, that is, anarchy, can lead to right ideas of the person and society. If I criticize a system for disorder and not having some important

right ideas such as personhood and rule of law, Americans think I am secretly a fascist. When I say that vagueness is not necessarily freedom and does not guard the free person, Americans don't get it. When I say vagueness can lead to chaos, and out of this chaos comes not freedom but oppression, Americans think I am a rightist calling for a strong military leader. When I say Hinduism goes wrong and is elaborate because it relies on vague ideas such as Dharma and because it is diffuse, Americans don't get it. How can a system that is not hyper-ordered also not promote personhood and freedom? How can it lead to too much elaboration and to hierarchy?

Think of American Protestantism and politics again. I don't repeat the descriptions.

The founders of the United States knew the need for balance between system vs. anarchy, and knew that persons thrive best in that balance rather than in anarchy or deep structure. They knew that anarchy leads to the destruction of the free person, and the French Revolution proved them correct. They sought better balance in selected leaders, selected councils, and a strong legal framework (rule of law) much as the Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, and some Protestant churches did in the past – although the Orthodox Churches did not succeed well. These are not secret conservative ideas but open American, Western, and liberal ideas.

The West has the tools to find the right balance of system versus freedom, order versus chaos, person versus demon, etc. We don't usually find it but sometimes we do. When we do, we need to try hard to hang on to the balance. Despite its high ideals, Hinduism does not have the right tools, and the result is much as we find in American Protestantism with its high but diffuse ideas.

Impersonal Dharma versus Personal God.

Dharma is an impersonal order while God is personal. Karma is an automatic system of reward based on accounting while an interview with God is a merciful assessment and it helps more than hurts. Hinduism works well as a system that eats the world and supports structured society because Dharma is a vague impersonal idea that can be interpreted to meet both the needs of rulers and yearnings of ruled. Some good points of Hinduism arise because it is an impersonal system that includes both good and bad: "the rain falls equally on the just and the unjust", and, in some cases, that is a good thing. Yet the bad things of Hinduism come through its impersonal system-hood, and the bad outweigh the good.

Sometimes educated Christians say a personal God is unlikely to be misused as Hinduism is misused. A personal God would not stand for mixing good and evil, and bad relativism, even if a personal god would show as much mercy as justice. If this were strictly true, we could easily decide on one big point between Hinduism versus theistic religions - but it is not always true. It is certainly possible to interpret a personal god to rationalize bad deeds and bolster a structured unfair society. Christians and Muslims have a clear sad record for doing that. You are not automatically a bad person because your religion centers on the Dharma or a good person because your religion centers on a personal God.

Still, there is a difference, it makes a difference, and it is worth speculating.

A personal God does not let us get away with much self-deception and self-serving rationalization. A personal God forces us to think of other people as persons rather than as items in the cosmic system and

as the potential source of spiritual goodness points for our own advancement. Their good points are not part of their role in the cosmic Dharma system; their good points are just part of their personality. Their bad points are not part of their role in the cosmic Dharma system either; their bad points are just part of their personality; and sometime their bad points have no redeeming value. Compassion to real full mixed persons is real compassion rather than an indirect way to serve ourselves. Living with real persons, we have to take seriously the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, and “pay it forward” even if we don’t follow them well and even if we disagree with them. Martin Buber made all these points clearly in his classic book “I and Thou”. This personal view is a basic implication of Jewish ethical monotheism.

God’s Plan and the System.

I am sure God had something in mind when he made the world. I doubt he had in mind what people think of as “a plan” and I doubt he had in mind anything like the Mahayana or Hindu systems. No matter how comforting it might be, I doubt God has a detailed plan for everybody and that everybody has a key role to play in making the world come out alright. In the chapters on issues, I said God made the world so that it is diverse and interesting, and so most people can find what they need. God made the world so people could try to do the right thing for the right reasons and so people could see if they are up to the tasks of self-government and acting as steward for a planet. We have not done well so far.

The facts that (1) this world follows physical laws, (2) the obvious order in the world, (3) this planet and likely many others give rise to life and intelligent life, and (4) three billion years of biological evolution, (in theology, all aspects of the “argument from design”) give people the impression of a strong detailed plan or a system. While there might be a plan, the plan might not be what we think it is. When we learn our way around the forest, city, business we carry out, firm for which we work, school to which we go, or evolutionary theory, we feel we are in a planned system, it is all for the best, and we have a distinct role to play; but that is not usually true. We can make it truer if we make a place for ourselves. So, in the world in which we live, everybody has a place. Everything works out alright in the end even if some of us suffer deep pain along the way. Goodness overcomes evil. The great risk of the world seems obvious in daily life but it is not so in the great plan cosmic system because the cosmic system subsumes risk into a long range insurance policy. Existence is joy.

In fact, things might not work out alright in the end. Contrary to the “Marigold Hotel” movies about ideal romanticized Hinduism, sometimes it really is the end even though it is not all alright. I am sure some planets that evolved intelligent life went down the tubes, and this planet is in grave danger of doing that. Not everybody has a key role to play. Not every orc is an undiscovered Frodo; not even every hobbit is Frodo; and not every armchair political analyst is Winston Churchill. It might be that evil wins in the end. Not all evil can be turned to greater good; in fact, the definition of evil is that it cannot be exactly reversed and made good. If we want things to turn out well, we have to work hard to make it so. Even then, we have no guarantee. Yet we have to try anyway. The great risk of the world is real. The great risk of your life is real. You might fail. Some people will fail. Likely you will vanish after you talk to God after you die. In the meantime, there is a lot to do. You can keep busy and feel useful. You can get to know a lot about the world if you put your mind to it. You can have fun. You can make the world more interesting. You can use your life dreaming if that suits you. Life is a gift, life is worthwhile, and life is often a joy. But life is not a cosmic joy, and it is not a guaranteed joy for everybody.

I like it better the way I see it. I like being not big but still important, working hard, getting satisfaction from what evolution made for me, what I make for myself, what I get from others, and what I make with others. I hate that it might not work out well but I can stand that. I know not everybody thinks as I do, and many people seek a system because they need the comfort of something to watch over them. That is why Jesus and Krishna turned into God. Make up your own mind.

Explaining Everything Dramatically.

Hindus have deified beginning (Brahma), middle (Vishnu), and end-or-transition (Shiva). In deifying these principles, Hindus incorporate them into the vague Dharma system. Almost everything has a beginning, middle, and end. So these ideas, and these deities, explain almost everything. Whatever happens, you can think of it in these terms. You can incorporate everything into the Hindu Dharma system. In this way, and with many of the ideas described above, Hinduism is like Chi, Yin-and-Yang, matter-and-energy, and mind and matter, which also explain everything. Once you think that way, it is hard to think otherwise.

Most things that can explain everything really explain nothing. If everything has a beginning, middle, and end (transition), then what does it explain to say that a particular thing has a beginning, middle, and end, or to personify and dramatize the fact? We need more.

All these things had a beginning, middle, and end, even if, for some of them, we don't see the end yet: the cosmos, the sun, the Earth, oceans, trilobites, birds, dinosaurs, storms, humans, TV, movies, print newspapers, the Red Spot on Jupiter, capitalism, Indian society, and Hinduism. The trick is not to point out the beginning, middle, and end, but to say how each particular thing had its own beginning, middle, and end, and how each differs from the others. The trick is to explain not in terms like Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva but to explain in terms familiar from science and philosophy – which I don't go into here. We need to get into specifics in a way that systems like Dharma with Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva don't allow. We need to get beyond the idea that ideas that explain everything are good ideas. Ideas that explain more are usually good ideas (not always) but rarely so with ideas that explain everything.

The advantage of ideas such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva is that they are dramatic. They are a lot of fun. I find science fun but not everybody does, and I understand. People need something more dramatic than science. Sometimes drama and fun open our minds, help us to assimilate better, and even help us to come up with better explanations in more scientific terms. The “thought experiments” (“gedanken”) of Albert Einstein exemplify the good use of imagination to stimulate solid logical science. If you want to use ideas like Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva for fun without necessarily committing yourself to their objective existence and the system of which they are apart, then go ahead.

Indians, like my Greek ancestors, always were gifted enthusiastic analysts. They do not rest on simple ideas like Brahma (beginning), Vishnu (middle), and Shiva (end) but also give analyses based on other more concrete ideas. They do tend to return to some basic ideas such as Dharma. Hindus pioneered in analysis of the mind, society, and political society. Much of their specific analytics work can be found in the “shastras”. Hindus have written hundreds of long detailed texts of explanation, with which I am only barely familiar. In Thailand, which borrowed from India, modern Western-based sciences are called by a term particular to the science plus the suffix “shastra” (“saht”). Mathematics is called “khanit + shastra” or “khanit-saht”; economics is called “seta+saht” (“seta: wealth” + saht: study”). Magic is “saya” (“sleeping”)

+ saht (I thank my wife, Nitaya, for pointing out this case). Magic is delusory; it puts us to sleep; it adds to the stickiness of the world. The logic that comes out in shastras is like the logic that Westerners develop for particular topics and which we glorify with the suffix “ology”, as in “sociology” and “anthropology”, or the suffix “ics”, as in “physics” and “linguistics”.

Until recently, Hindus did not have an alternative to Dharma-based ideas to rest explanations on, and so did not make progress in science and explanation as Westerners did. In the end, shastras seem limited by reasoning based on ideas such as Dharma. Since finding Western science and logic, Hindus have proven adept at moving beyond Dharma based personified ideas such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva to more scientific style explanation, and have distinguished themselves. Off the top of my head, I can think of at least four South Asian Nobel Prize winners – I do not list them here. This is about the same relation that Western science has to the Jewish, Christian, and pagan ideas that gave it birth. It is what I expect to see more of.

Vague Contradictions at the Center.

Logicians argue that we can assert any nonsense if we start from a contradiction. Vagueness can play the same role as a contradiction, and allow us to assert any nonsense as if it were sense. Vagueness often generates contradictions. Vagueness plays a big role in big system and systems that eat the world. People get lost in contradictions, vagueness, and nonsense yet think they are in the middle of something important.

Having lived through the silliness of American politics and the American “culture wars” since the 1960s, I cannot claim that Westerners are much less prone than Hindus to vagueness, contradictions, nonsense, and all that follows. I can say: Hopefully educated experienced people now do not rest too much on vagueness, contradiction, and nonsense. Experienced people learn to see through political posturing to important realities below such as responsibility, freedom, and “live and let live”.

A critic can say our ideals are vague but I think that is wrong. Our ideals include personhood, freedom, justice, rule of law, etc. It is wrong to say those are the same kind of vagueness as, for example, “vital force”, “spiritual progress”, or Dharma. A critic might say I rely too much on vague ideas such as “God” in this book, but I do not here defend myself; hopefully the book already did defend my use.

Of vague ideas which support contradictions and nonsense, “Dharma” is likely the strongest and most successful. Everything is a product of the Dharma, even apparently opposed things such as good and bad, creating and destroying, and aristocratic freedom with lower caste slavery. Those are contradictions from which any nonsense flows. Even if the idea of Dharma does not give rise to flat-out contradictions, it supports animistic non-scientific thinking such as personifying.

Used properly, Dharma can be a beautiful idea, such as the Greek idea of the logic (“logos”) of a thing. But the idea of Dharma has not been used properly by modern Western analytic sometimes-scientific standards throughout most of its history. When Hindus think well now, they do not use ideas such as Dharma but use ideas that, these days, are usually taken from the West.

Both “Dharma” and “logic” mean how a thing works but the feel is different. Using Dharma is like using ideas from Aristotle or Medieval Europe but with more of a “hold” on the mind.

Imagine a Hindu and a Western social scientist seeking to figure out how Indian society works (here I mean a social scientist with a scientific bent, not an anthropologist overwhelmed in culture). At the level of villages, society is supposed to be egalitarian and governed by a village council. Society is definitely not egalitarian even in the villages, but that is a fact to be considered later. Yet at the state level, society is supposed to be NOT egalitarian. It is supposed to be stratified. In both cases, the Hindu says it is the Dharma of the social unit that leads it to be that way. It is the Dharma of villages to be egalitarian, and it is the Dharma of the state to put all these egalitarian villages in a stratified whole. That is as far as the Hindu needs to go. This (lack of) understanding is a contradiction – it is both Dharma to be equal and Dharma to be unequal - that allows the Hindu to rationalize all kinds of silly things about Indian rural life and Indian stratified court life such as that women should be equally subjugated and subjugated the same ways in both places despite the need to earn a living in one place and the need to intrigue in the other.

In contrast, the Western social scientist would try to find out how egalitarian or stratified things really were where. If there is stratification, what kind of stratification is there? Who benefits and who loses? How does the whole thing endure if somebody consistently loses? What are the winnings and what do the winners do with their winnings? What are alternatives? Would alternatives quickly lead to stratification again in a few generations if we magically made villages and the state start over as egalitarian systems? What are people’s motives both given from their desire to have a family and make a living, and from their culture? I have read enough to know that Western social scientists can come up with romanticized nonsense too but at least they don’t stop there. The group of colleagues works through alternatives until they get to something deeper than “Dharma”. With that something deeper, hopefully they can get away from romanticized nonsense.

Try the same thing with a bicycle. Bicycles should not stand up. A Hindu responds that it is the Dharma of bicycles to stand up, at least when moving. A Western scientist looks for broader comparisons and other types of explanation. What things stand up when still yet fall when moving? What things stand up when moving yet fall when still? How fast do they have to move? What is the distribution of weight on the things that fall or stand up?

When we combine this Western scientific outlook with Western ideas of the person and with Jesus’ ideas of the person and personal relations, we get good Western civilization. Resting on the Dharma, so far, Hindus have not been able to get that.

Again: Creative Chaos, Rebels, and Moderate Good Order.

From the second chapter on issues, from the chapter on Romanticism, and from comments above, recall American ideas about rebels, chaos, hyper order, and good order. I briefly re-frame these ideas in Hindu terms below. The re-frame is fun, but, if we look hard, we find that it adds nothing, and it helps lead us down the garden path of silly modern political myths. To get on a better track we need to return to the Western ideas that I have been promoting.

Unlike the past, modern Americans fear hyper order more than chaos. They even fear moderate order more than chaos. Americans fear that moderate order almost inevitably gets corrupted into hyper order, that is, fascism. Americans think chaos is creative and good. All chaos is creative. All creativity needs some chaos. The only source of goodness is creativity. So goodness needs chaos and comes from chaos. To get to goodness, we need chaos. To get to goodness, we must oppose hyper order and even moderate order. Rebels are natural enemies of hyper order and even moderate order. Rebels oppose bad hyper order and bad moderate order. Rebels create chaos. From chaos, artists arise to help create moderate good order. Better to be a rebel who opposes hyper order and even moderate order than to be a sheep who accepts moderate order, accepts rationalizations for all order, and so paves the way for bad hyper order. Better to live wild and free. Out of the wild and free people comes art and all goodness for all other people.

In Hindu terms, sometimes particular societies go bad (greater Hindu society based on Dharma cannot go bad; when particular societies within greater Hindu society go bad, contact with the greater Hindu society leads them to return to their correct Dharma path, as I am about to describe. Ultimately all societies, even in the West, East, and Islam, are particular societies within the greater Hindu society.). To change, old bad society must first end. That is the job of Shiva. Modern political rebels are Shiva doing his good job of shaking things up, overturning, destroying old bad order, and paving the way for the new good order. Brahma supplies Shiva his weapons. Brahma supplies many weapons, and, out of that array, Shiva is always able to choose the best weapons for the job. In the modern world, the best weapons for creative constructive disorder are rock and roll; drugs; sex; art; movies; TV; media including the Internet; conflict about ethnicity, gender, age, religion, etc.; political causes based on those conflicts; and even conniving right wing dirty tricksters such as people I cannot name for fear of being sued. The chaos of the 1960s through 2016 was the work of Shiva – in a good cause, even if we don't see it now.

As those forces do their job, Brahma also supplies weapons (tools) to Vishnu, who will build a new better moderate order and then safeguard it. Some of the same tools that serve Shiva also serve Vishnu: art, artists, political awareness, civic groups, etc. Especially artists and sensitive politicians will help Shiva build a better world. As I wrote this, America had swung much more toward social acceptance and some solidarity than it showed in the 1980s and 1990s. Gay people (homosexuals) were allowed to marry and to adopt children. Women were forging ahead in politics and some areas of business even if they still lagged in wages. Racism was talked about openly. At least three states had allowed limited marijuana use. If all this leads to a general consensus and the building of good institutions on that consensus, then Vishnu will have done his work.

Fine, but so what? Using this logic, we can explain everything, including a return to 1950s conservative family life, if that is how America turns out, and what America settles into. Using this logic, if it happens, we could explain White Power taking over America. If Vladimir Putin restores the Russian Empire and make it even stronger despite all the challenges of the 1980s through early 2000s, we can use this logic to explain that. Using this logic, we can explain the rise of militant Muslim fundamentalism and terrorism. If ISIS (ISIL) restores the Caliphate, takes over the Middle East, oppresses all Muslims, oppresses women, and wages war on Christians all around the world, we can use this same logic to explain that as well, especially from the view of ISIS who would consider that outcome great.

How do we explain that Americans are beginning to accept gay people and marijuana but are still uneasy about abortion? How do we explain that class fear lingers even when Americans are more comfortable around gay people? Is the persistence of capitalism despite some unfairness the work of Vishnu?

When we contrast scenarios, and get into the specifics of particular scenarios, the Hindu categories won't do. Everything goes through destruction, change, innovation, and stasis, and so alluding to destruction, change, innovation, and stasis explains nothing. We need better. When we use better, we mostly use the style of thinking and categories that the West has developed.

Dharma in the Modern World.

When Hindus reinterpret Dharma for the modern world, I think the new Dharma will come to look much like Western science combined with ideas about people as persons. The patterns that we find in the physical world will be amenable to explanation by science rather than Dharma. The formation, life, and death of stars will be less about Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva than physics. The invention and spread of bio-technology will have less to do with Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva than about applying genetics and chemistry. Whether capitalism is fair, and whether it can serve as the basis for a plural democracy in the modern world, will have less to do with the Dharma of capitalism, bankers, and workers, and more to do with patterns of interacting self-interest from evolved persons. "You are that" will have less to do with giving alms to a beggar sometimes and will have more to do with working personally in charities, figuring out how to run the welfare system well, and treating other ethnic groups as humans. Hindus will have to act as good citizens in modern plural democracies, which means they have to participate in education, charity, and personal action. They have to pay it forward, follow the Golden rule, follow "applies equally", and have to see other citizens as persons rather than as Dharma points.

Not Simply Idolatry.

To a believer in God, especially in the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, it is easy to make out the Hindu Dharma system as idolatry, and commitment to the system as idolatrous worship. This is wrong. While commitment to an impersonal Dharma system might be a mistake, it is not idolatry as Christians think of idolatry. Commitment to the traditional Hindu system is more like commitment to an elaborate theological system such as in Islam, Christianity, and Mahayana. Commitment to the Dharma is like commitment to Roman Catholic Thomism or Protestant Existentialist Humanism. Commitment to a Hindu god or avatar is more like commitment to a Christian saint or to Mary than demon worship. Worship of the free market with wildly wrong ideas of persons and business firms, or commitment to political correctness with its wildly wrong view of human nature, are as much idolatry as commitment to the Dharma system and as much idolatry as commitment to Mary or a saint.

Rather than think in terms of idolatry, it is better to think in these terms: What difference does it make if I put commitment to the teachings of Jesus, and put my action, in the context of a system, versus if I just accept and act? What mistakes does putting myself in the context of a system lead me to? What do I really add to my commitment and my acts if I put them in the context of a system?

People do need some context to act. Normal people cannot simply act. They are not Zen and Taoist masters. How much context, and what kind of context, do I need? How can I get the appropriate kind-

and-level of context without leading to big errors, without leading to a bad relativistic system that eats the world? I think that is what the teachings and Western values do well.

Duty.

The following poem is by Richard Lovelace. I use American spelling. I love this poem.

“To Lucasta, Going to the Wars”

“Tell me not (sweet) I am unkind,
That from the nunnery
Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind,
To war and arms I fly.

True; a new mistress now I chase,
The first foe in the field;
And with a stronger faith embrace
A sword, a horse, a shield.

Yet this inconstancy is such
As you too shall adore;
I could not love thee (dear) so much,
Lov’d I not honor more.”

As a matter of temper, I see in terms of duty, and I over-stress duty. It is a duty to make the world better, follow the Golden Rule, strictly follow “applies equally to everybody”, be decent, treat people as persons, and love your neighbor. Immanuel Kant first stated the idea of “applies equally to everybody” in terms of duty, and that appealed to me when I read it.

In Hinduism, the world is a big adventure dream of Dharma, reality is not as it simply seems, and you can see your role in the system as playing, yet still Hinduism sees affairs largely in terms of duty. Your social role (personal-social Dharma) is needed for the entire social and cosmic system to work. You owe duty to your parents, family, caste, socio-economic class, and race. You owe duty to other sentient beings who are trying to play out their karma heritage and their current Dharma. Mostly you owe a duty to the entire Dharma system.

Despite sharing a common stress on duty, I cannot take on the Hindu view. The Hindu sense of duty has a different feel than my sense of duty or the typical Western sense of duty. The Hindu view differs from how I think Jesus felt about duty and how followers of Jesus see things. The most apparent difference is that Hindus do not usually do kind acts except out of a sense of duty while followers of Jesus do kind acts out of both a sense of duty and for other reasons.

The cosmic order will not end if people don’t do their duty. God will be unhappy, and this little damp rock Earth might turn into a crap hole, but God will go on, and other planets have their chance. You personally are not responsible for the cosmic order. You have a duty but you do not carry the big burden of the

world. In Hinduism, the cosmic order falls apart if you neglect duty. You do not merely disappoint the gods, you deprive every person of his-her Dharma rights, and you stop the entire wheel of Dharma from turning. This burden keeps Hindus focused on duty rather than on other motives.

Followers of Jesus institutionalize their sense of duty and their connection to people and animals through charities such as Red Cross and World Wildlife Fund, through schools, projects, etc. Hindus do not. To the extent that Hindus act on duty to people below them at all, they give alms.

Hindus feel an official duty toward people beneath them in station but they do not act on it much and they do not institutionalize it. Their sense of a cosmic system does not lead them to extend the same sense of duty they feel toward fellow caste members to everybody; rather, it leads to the opposite. Hindus do not set up charities for the poor except under the lead of Christians. They do not set up institutions to try to get people out of poverty and keep them out. In fairness, for the last thousand years, there have been so many poor people, and poor people have reproduced so fast, that it is unlikely any institution could have done the job. But Hindus did not feel it part of their duty to try.

In Hinduism, duty is something that you carry out as something inherent in you and your station. Duty is not something that you do from a sense of others as people and their situation.

Both followers of Jesus and Hindus feel duty toward kinds of people such as mothers, police officers, and children, and feel duty toward animals. Hindus sometimes do feel duty toward a person because of who he or she might be regardless of his-her position, such as Jane who happens to be your sister. Followers of Jesus feel this kind of duty more than Hindus. Hindus feel duty to people mostly because they too are members of the system of Dharma. Followers of Jesus feel duty to people and animals because they are people and because they are living persons.

I feel duty to an ideal such as “friendship” as in the Chandler novel “The Long Goodbye”, to justice, love, freedom, and compassion. My sense of duty is to an ideal rather than to a cosmic system. Some ideas command attention and duty on their own. Hindus would recognize these ideas but, as in their attitude toward other people and other religions, would put them in the context of the cosmic system, as Krishna placed bravery, loyalty, and compassion in the context of a cosmic system.

Besides duty to ideas, I feel duty toward real individual persons rather than about social-cosmic roles. I do my duty for Nit, Dino, Imad, Else, Ginnie, John, Emily, Chris, Bruce, Norm, Wayne, Donn, and other people. When I act toward people I do not know, I imagine them as individuals, like people I do know, to the extent I can. This is why I can extend the sense of duty beyond immediate family to include friends, people in the neighborhood, people in the city, and everybody. I am sure Hindus feel this sense of duty-about-real-people toward family and toward people they know well but they do not seem able to extend it beyond that limit. Beyond that limit, the objects of duty again are players in the cosmic system.

Acting Well Not from a Sense of Duty.

Both Hindus and I make a basic mistake when we make duty the major basis of actions. Rather than duty, I should think in terms of acting toward other people (and animals) for two better reasons. First, they are people (and animals), and that is how you act toward them. They really are like me. They really

do have hearts and minds, and I should act toward them in a way suited to that fact. Second, giving, justice, caring, sharing, helping, guiding, educating, healing, giving clothing to, etc. are right and good in themselves. You do not do them out of duty; you do them out of themselves. You do not even to them because they are good; you do them out of themselves. Of course, you have to not contradict goodness when you do them out of themselves, but you should not always have to place helping or educating in the context of cosmic goodness to do it. People should not even act well because it is God's command. It should just be something people do.

Hindus do recognize these virtues and do understand their value in themselves. Yet Hindus do not often act on these virtues apart from a sense of cosmic duty or sense of what is going on in the cosmic system. Kindness is part of the Dharma; educating is part of the Dharma; and healing is part of the Dharma. We Hindus do it because it is our role in the Dharma not because it is right and good in itself and the receiver of the benefit is another person like ourselves.

For people like me who have trouble acting apart from duty or cosmic system, we just have to accept our limitations and we have to get along that way as best we can. If you are lucky enough to be able to just do well without thinking about duty or the cosmic system, then carry on.

Behaving Rather than Believing.

I care less about what people believe than what they do. Hindus allow people to know mere partial truth, and even some false ideas, as long as people act according to their station and carry out their duties. Again, superficially these attitudes resemble but they differ where it counts.

Hindus want people to do their social duty to sustain the system. I want people to act following the ideas of Jesus. I do not insist they have the same ideas that I do but I want them to act as if they knew the ideas. They can act according to the Golden Rule without being able to state it and without knowing that Jesus made it common. I am not sure how acting as if you know ideas is different than knowing the ideas; and I don't argue about that issue here. The ideas that I want people to act as if they knew do not require a person to follow a strict social code, and sometimes the ideas lead a person to go against the social code.

Suppose Harry was brought up to know all the rules of correct behavior for a soldier although he does not know why soldiers have these rules. David never learned about being a soldier but did learn honor and duty, and he could apply the ideas in different situations so as to act correctly in those situations. When David is drafted, he acts like a better soldier than Harry even though he does not have the same ideas as Harry.

I don't care if people say they are Hindus, Jews, or Christians as long as they act according to the Golden Rule, "applies equally", and the ideals of good citizenship in a modern Western plural democracy. This is not the same as saying they are doing their duty although they have only imperfect partial knowledge of the system. I do not make people relative to the system when I allow that they can act well even if they do not publicly share my religious ideas.

Alms and Compassion.

Giving alms is a sacrament in Hinduism. Hindus should give alms out of compassion. Giving should get across the Hindu idea of universal connection. Yet when a Hindu gives alms, the giving benefits the giver at least as much as the receiver. Givers get “spiritual points” that help them to be reborn in a better life, higher life, or to have opportunities for spiritual growth opened to them. In fact, people give alms for the benefit they get more than they give alms to benefit the receiver or because giving alms is good in itself. The giver of alms acts as an agent in a system rather than as one person giving to another person as the only way the first person can help the second person right now. This is not compassion.

Followers of Jesus should not worry about getting “spiritual points” for helping other people or for doing their duty toward other people. They should do it because they can “see the heart” of the other person, and know that what they do helps the other person, as with the Good Samaritan helping the victim of robbers. Christians do say the giver benefits more than the receiver but they don’t have in mind spiritual points. Givers increase their sense of being like other people. They become aware of what truly helps and what does not. If all that a giver gets is a sense of do-gooder accomplishment, and maybe scoring some points with God, then that has to do but it is less than what is available.

You can give out of duty but you can’t real feel compassion out of duty. Giving can be done as a duty but giving is better when it is done because the other person needs help and can use help, without thinking even that it is a good thing to do but because you just do it as one person to the next.

In Hinduism, at very best, other people are like the other people in the movie “Groundhog Day”; you help them but they have no chance of reaching high levels of spirituality. They are not full persons. At usual best, other people are the object by which you give to get spiritual brownie points. You don’t bother to find out what they really need and what might make their lives really better because they are not persons in the same way that you and your clique are. More commonly, they are just other people to whom you owe a systematic duty, which you carry out for your own benefit.

I do not discourage people from giving alms. I want people to give alms both directly to needy people and through charities. Don’t let an imperfect heart stop you. Nobody is perfect. Institutional charities are one of the great achievements of Christians. You should write checks to charities (or give a card number) even if you don’t know any real persons that will be helped and even if you give from duty from a sense of duty. If you live in a town where nobody really needs personal help then all you realistically can do is give through charities, and that is a lot. Think about what you would do in a personal situation. That might be all you can do sometimes. Even that is better than toting up spiritual points.

Saving Everybody.

Although Unitarian-Universalists and Hindus both believe everybody eventually will be saved, even the Devil, the end attitude differs between them. Unitarian-Universalists come out of the Western Christian tradition and they tend to be kind-hearted Liberals who want good for all creatures great and small. They treat everybody well. They want to save the Devil out of sympathy for the Devil. I am not sure how many of them have been the victims of real evil.

In contrast, Hindus want to save everybody to make sure they are saved and to make sure the system works well. Saving the Devil is a way to make sure everybody is saved and so they are saved. I do not get the sense in Hindu literature that Hindus really have much compassion for bad guys, not even for the misguided cousins of the five hero brothers in the Mahabharata. Bad guys get saved because they are the unwitting tools of moving the plot forward (“turning the Wheel of Dharma”) and so should be rewarded for the service they perform. If anybody ever were truly beyond redemption then the hope of the system would fail and the system would end.

I have said I don’t believe everybody will be saved or deserves it. We don’t all live many lives so that we all eventually become saints. Part of being a person is the chance that you won’t become a saint, or even the chance that you will be bad. People can just fail. We should be proud of the people who do succeed in seeing beyond themselves even in little ways. We cannot rely on a system to save us. As a person, we can count on some help from some other persons. Get used to all this.

People sometimes become better people because they have to deal with badness. Badness offers good people a chance to act well and advance goodness. I don’t know if good people need bad people so as to become good and act well but I doubt it. If good people do need bad people, then it seems God should ultimately rescue bad people as a reward for their unwitting sacrifice and service to goodness. I can see this logic but I don’t agree with it. It is like arguing that God should reward malaria because it gives good people a chance to take care of each other. Bad people can simply be lost.

Adventure, Fun, and Games.

Hinduism is not a “Peter Pan” religion for most Hindus who have to deal with social class, making a living, government, sexism, prejudice at home and abroad, and the other realities of life. Hinduism does feed into mistaken ideas about life being an adventure for people who have the luxury to look at life that way, or need the excuse of looking at life that way, including Hindus and Westerners. This life is an adventure, this life is one of many adventures, even death is an adventure, and the whole circle is a ball of joy. The more adventure I have, the better off everybody is. Hinduism suffers from the same potential for abuse as other systems of many lives and other ideas of life as a game. This is why the Upanishads and early texts in Hinduism stressed stopping it all, getting off the wheel.

When westerners discover Hindu ideas about life as an adventure, they often use the Hindu ideas as an excuse to go off on tangents of self-indulgence. That happened in the 1950s and after, and it then fueled the reaction against Eastern religions and in support of stern unhappy fundamentalism.

The cure for this disease is not to stress how serious life is, how much we have to suffer, how we need to sacrifice everything for the sake of others, how much depends on us personally, our duty to God, life is not worthwhile, or getting off the wheel entirely. The cure is not to say that this life ultimately is a game of adventure, and part of the adventure is being lost in the supposed seriousness of this life, so we can play it out that way if it adds to the fun.

The cure is simply to deal with the current situation as best you can and to let any big games worry about themselves. Dealing with the current situation as best you can includes seeing other people as persons, making moral decisions, being useful, working hard to make the world better, and being a good citizen. It

includes enjoying life, having fun, and, yes, some adventure and games. World War Two was won by a big team. If you personally alone need to carry the Ring to the Lake of Fire, God will let you know. If you have fun chasing Sasquatch, and you don't need any rationalizations, then do it. Again, we have to find the right balance between empty games with bearing a "really real" world on our shoulders.

More against Making Jesus and His Teachings Relative.

Christianity has been used to ratify many kinds of social organization from small churches on the margins of the Roman Empire to the entire hierarchy of the Roman Empire and the European states that followed. It has been used to justify slavery in the United States. So it is hard to say that Christianity condemns the Hindu Indian state and easy to say Christianity could approve of the Hindu Indian state. The teachings of Jesus do not necessarily condemn stratified Hindu Indian society any more than they supported Imperial Rome. So Hindus can say Jesus supports the Dharma even if he does not specifically support stratified Hindu Indian society.

Suppose Christians insist Jesus would not support a stratified unfair state such as the traditional Hindu Indian state. Hindus still can make Jesus relative. Christianity has supported many kinds of states. Now it is used to ratify a modern plural democracy. Modern plural democracy is the foremost representative of the Dharma now on Earth, at this point of human history. So Jesus supports the Dharma as it appears in modern democracies. Rightly interpreted, Hinduism also supports modern democracies as the current best representatives of the Dharma. Christianity is not so flexible that it usually sees Jesus in this way, as helping the best state available in a historical period. Hinduism can see both Hinduism and Jesus this way. So, again, Jesus is a hero of the Dharma and Hinduism can encompass Jesus and Christianity.

Although Hinduism might be able to make Jesus relative in these ways, I hope it does not, and I think to do so is wrong. While Jesus was sent by God, that does not make him representative of the Dharma, an avatar. The idea that Jesus is an avatar is similar to a mistake that formal Christians make when they see Jesus as God in some way. Rather than think Jesus is important because he represents the Dharma or he is God, think of the content of his teachings, and assess the content of his teachings as the content is relevant to conditions of people at times in human history, including under different kinds of state. Even if Jesus is God or the Dharma, to see him that way while neglecting to act on his teachings is to betray his teachings and to betray him as Dharma or God. Forget about the big Dharma system and the Christian theological system both.

The teachings of Jesus should not be used to ratify any kind of state, good or bad. I hope I did not do that with Western plural democracy. I support Western plural democracy because it goes with the best moral and political values. Jesus' teachings also go with those values and so support modern plural democracies. Jesus' teaching provides values that can be used in many situations, and so can be used in a variety of states. That does not mean they can be used to ratify any kind of state. They can be used to convince people to support a kind of state when they coincide with the values of that state, as they do mostly with modern plural democracies. As I have said before, no state is the New Israel and is thus the embodiment of God and of all correct living on Earth. Not even modern democracy is so perfect as to be considered a type of New Israel. Modern plural democracy happens to be the best we have now, and we can give good reasons why it is best. Modern plural democracy and Jesus' long-running teachings go well together. That does not make Jesus representative of the Dharma now on Earth.

Avatars and Prophets; Jesus is not an Avatar, Holy Person, Yogi, or Guru.

A prophet is a real person, who lived and died, and who had ideas. Some ideas were correct. Correct ideas took us a step forward in how we see God, our relation to God, each other, and nature. Sometimes prophets did not have new ideas so much as they implemented good ideas of previous prophets, such as did Moses, Joshua, and Mohammad. Prophets erred, in both their personal lives and as prophets. Not all their ideas were good steps forward nor did all their acts lead people rightly. The new ideas of a later prophet could override the old ideas of an earlier prophet. I don't know exactly how prophets are "from" God, and I don't worry much. We have to take the entire stock of prophets, sift it, and make guidelines. We may, and should, accept advice from church and authorities.

In contrast, an avatar has a direct link with a god, and, within the scope of his-her work, is infallible and unstoppable. An avatar is the "coming across and down" of a god into this world in the form of a person. The apparent person is not really an ordinary person but is really a god. Usually an avatar is a character in literature such as Krishna. Sometimes an avatar is a real flesh-and-blood person but then his-her role as avatar is based on such a strong idealization that the real person disappears and only the god-avatar remains, as with leaders of sects or schools. An avatar is a cosmic idea-force embodied rather than a real person. Even if an avatar took flesh as a real historical person, an avatar is an idea-force in the flesh rather than a real person. Sometimes an avatar resolves problems merely by his-her presence, awing people into submission and correct behavior. Christianity has similar characters in its idealized saints, especially saints with a knack, such as George, Christopher, and Santa Claus. As far as I can tell, for many Christians, Mary Mother of Jesus is an avatar of femininity and Grace. I don't know of any recent real historical person who is considered an avatar although Mohandas Gandhi might be taken as one, and Hindus likely do see some real holy people and national leaders as avatars.

An avatar can be from (of) a good god, as Krishna is an avatar of the good god Vishnu. An avatar can be from a god of disorder such as Shiva. Even if from a disorderly god, an avatar ultimately serves Dharma and so serves good. An avatar can be from a demon-like force such as with avatars of Kalima-Kali Durga (awful fearsome female deity) but, again, ultimately the avatar serves the Dharma and thus goodness. In the American elections of 2016, idealized Donald Trump was an avatar to many Americans – from both heaven and hell.

A real person can be an avatar without knowing that he-she is such, without knowing that he-she is doing the work of a god, and even without intending good or intending to stir up the world. Gandhi might have been an avatar of Vishnu or Shiva without knowing or even while denying it. This idea of doing the work of a god without knowing is a fun literary device, common in "sword and sorcery" stories and comic books. It goes along with the idea that the cosmic is doing its work (playing) through us. Still, I reject it. You can serve God, even greatly, without being an avatar.

Although an avatar sounds better than a prophet, and although we like heroes and villains bigger than life, I prefer prophet to avatar. I dislike avatars. They lead us away from the beautiful but often hard reality that God gave us. At least since Shakespeare, Westerners have preferred heroes (including women) flawed so as to show how the hero connects to reality; the trend has gotten stronger since 1890 with Sherlock Holmes, anti-heroes, and their descendants; and my view is biased by the trend. But I can

discount the trend and still honestly prefer prophets to avatars. I would rather sort through the flaws and mistakes of prophets to take to heart the truth that they offer than be overcome by an avatar with his-her logic and presence. We make ourselves less when we follow the awesome presence of the avatar than when we think about what a prophet says, and do what is right accordingly. I distrust religions that rely on avatars, and whose systems seem like giant avatars.

When Christians see Jesus as the Word made Flesh, as God come to Earth, as Salvation incarnate, Love incarnate, Prince of Peace, the only path to Justification, embodiment of any idea, answer to all questions simply through his being, then they make Jesus into a mere avatar, no matter how good and wonderful Jesus as God-Word made flesh seems. Christians diminish Jesus into an avatar. In diminishing Jesus that way, Christians also diminish his message and diminish the religion. To see Jesus this way opens the door to a Hindu interpretation of Jesus as avatar. When Hindus do that with Jesus, they also diminish Jesus and diminish following Jesus.

I do not reject Jesus as avatar because Jesus was real and most avatars are made up. Gandhi was real yet it is easy enough to make him into an avatar. I reject Jesus as avatar because the idea is false and it leads us to think and act incorrectly. We focus on devotion to Jesus rather than doing what he wants. If we think of Jesus as avatar we easily overlook really acting according to the Golden Rule, working hard to make the world better, and really seeing other people as persons.

I am sorry I can't give an exact citation for the following image. Hindus sometimes portray Jesus as they do holy people, yogis, gurus, and holy-people-as-avatars. Jesus sits cross-legged, floating in the sky, a halo around his head, with beaded necklace, his hands spread in standard Hindu gestures of blessing, dispensing compassion and grace, flowers and rainbows spraying about, Jesus beaming down on us all. When Hindus see this image, they do not see the points below. They do not see anything definite about Jesus that leads us to think of people as persons rather than as the mere recipients of compassion and workers for the Dharma. Hindus do not see what would lead to specific acts of making the world better and to building institutions. They do not see what leads to active do-good churches in the West. They see only an insipid wise man who tells us to be vaguely good in a way that supports Dharma and society. Seeing Jesus that way avoids what is important about him and his message. Far too many Christians do the same who simply worship Jesus as God. Hindus do not see:

- Jesus struggling to apply the Will of God to specific human situations
- Jesus struggling to understand the Jewish Law in terms of "Love God" and "Love your neighbor as you do yourself"
- Jesus thinking about how far to apply the Golden Rule, who to include and who to overlook
- Jesus thinking what ideas and acts are appropriate to persons as God sees us
- Jesus wondering how to get the Kingdom of God actually moving
- Jesus wondering how to set up the Kingdom of God, what institutions to support, so the Kingdom will last a long time
- Jesus trying to get a band of ragtag followers to act as if they were saints
- Jesus trying not to get killed by the authorities yet knowing there is a good chance he will
- Jesus confused as to why God does not lend him more vigorous support
- Jesus fearing he has to die to get his message across
- Jesus dancing at weddings, having fun, and enjoying life

- Jesus drinking wine
- Jesus with a temper, sometimes a bad temper
- Jesus annoyed at being pestered by people, especially to solve all their problems
- Jesus having an unrealistic view of the Temple, how the Temple works, and the role of money changers
- Jesus finally getting murdered by the authorities

That Jesus was murdered, was murdered by the authorities, was murdered on a cross like a bad criminal, and, in standard Christian belief, rose from death, and went to heaven in glory, are not as important to me as his message, so I do not elaborate here on what difference those make for Hinduism. I do stress that Hinduism simply avoids the issues, as far as I can tell. To a standard Christian, these issues are central. These facts about Jesus are what save us. Standard Hinduism so far, cannot deal with these aspects of Jesus and his life, no matter how much it exalts Jesus as avatar or holy person. Hinduism cannot explain how these facts save people. Without dealing with these issues, Hinduism cannot explain the appeal of Jesus to most people and the historical success of Christianity. I leave standard Christians and standard Hindus to argue this topic in more detail.

For the same reasons that I reject Jesus as avatar, I dislike the idea of Jesus as God, even the God-Man of orthodox traditional Christianity. Orthodox Christianity turns Jesus into an avatar even though orthodox Christianity does not have the term and it recognizes only one avatar. Jesus is to orthodox Christianity much as Krishna is to those particular Hindus who, in practice, take Krishna as the one and only avatar that matters and so the one and only real avatar. Orthodox Christianity is misleading even when it says that Jesus is both God and human. Because this chapter is about Hinduism, I do not dwell here on this misleading Christian view of Jesus as avatar of Yahweh. I invite Christians to think of the ways in which they doubt the Hindu idea of avatar and then turn those doubts onto the Christian idea of Jesus. The fact that Jesus was a real historical person is irrelevant for this issue. I ask Muslims to do the same with Mohammad. Muslims make Mohammad an avatar even if they insist he is only human and they don't officially have the idea of an avatar – a mistake against which they warn other religions.

All Paths Lead to What God?

If all paths lead to God, we should expect them to lead to the same God and, eventually, to get there. We should expect the God of all religions to be the same, and should expect all seekers eventually to find this one God. These claims are not true. I don't see how the Christian God, or the God that sent Jesus, can be made out as the Dharma, or as an aspect of the Dharma, at least not without going against the basic intuition of the God behind Jesus, the basic sense of God from the Jews. Buddhists, Taoists, Confucians, and Hindus might all be good people and do wonderful things, and might all make spiritual progress, but I don't think they all reach the same God. This mystic ideal is not true. If, at some level, everyone were playing the same game although everyone appeared to be playing a different game, then we should expect the games to go to the same end and to have the same feel. Eventually we expect everyone to reach the goal and to see they have reached the same goal. But they don't.

I do not condemn other religions, say they have no truth, say traditional orthodox Christianity has all the truth and the only truth, or claim what I have written is all the truth and the only truth. I accept that every vision is only partial and almost every vision has some element of truth and goodness (see the opening episode of the TV show "The Good Place"). I say: (1) Not every religion and every vision is contained

within Hinduism. (2) Regardless of where we start, we all have to come to grips with the message of Jesus and the West about persons, the Golden Rule, applies equally, rule of law, and good institutions. (3) What a given religion lacks can be important. Hinduism lacks ideas about persons etc. People have to go beyond Hindu relativism and have to deny that Hinduism contains all other religions and visions. The same is true of other religions. I am not a strident relativist. (4) The idea that all religions are a path to God yet all religions are contained within Hinduism is a strong way in which Hinduism makes all other religions to itself and eats the world. I don't like that.

Even if God is not the same, Hindus can say the basic moral teachings of all big religions are the same. This claim is close to true, and I am glad of it. If the basic moral teachings are the same, and they lead people to act in the same good ways, then, in that sense, they lead to the same God. If you want to take the claim in that way, then it might be true; but I don't see how this claim leads to the Dharma, Allah, the Christian God, the Heaven of the Chinese, or the Tao. It doesn't lead to any one particular God that we can identify as the God of any particular religion. It doesn't lead to any one God that we can identify as the God of all religions. The claim that all religions promote a similar morality does not support the further claim that the God to which all religions lead is the Hindu Dharma. All this claim says is that people want to act well and sometimes they use different self-illusions about God (Dharma) to act well. It does not say that the illusions are the same.

All religions are only partial views of God. As long as religions follow the best moral principles, all of them can take us toward God but no one religion can take us all the way. Likely not even a mix of all religions can take us all the way. In this sense, all religions are paths to God and no one path is clearly better than any other path. Yet, still, the Hindu claim of religious relativity cannot hold. Even though all religions are only partial paths, they are not equally good; and, even if they lead toward the same God, they do not all lead to the same God. Straight across a river at the widest deepest point gets you to the other side but it is not as good as going down the bank a little to the ford. Floating downstream never gets to the other side. If all trips down the river end in a swamp, then you never get to the ocean. If all religions are only partial paths then, by its own logic, the Hindu Dharma path cannot claim to be the best path, claim to encompass all other paths to the same goal, and claim that one goal is the Hindu Dharma in various disguises.

If the Hindu path is not the best, then what else do we need? If the Jesus path is not the best, then what else do we need? In the case of the Jesus path, the "what else" is not what Hinduism gives us. In the case of Hinduism, the "what else" is what Jesus and the West give us. Think about this for a while to see how much relativism, and what kind of relativism, survives.

As long as the basic feel for the God (Heaven, Dharma, Tao) of religions is different, then the religions are not all paths to the same God even when different religions support the same morality. How much difference it makes that the Gods of the different religions are not the same, I don't know.

The God of the Dharma game is not the God of Jesus, and etc. All I can do in this situation is hold to my intuition of what the God is like who lies behind this universe, evolution, sentience, morality, the various prophets, especially Jesus, good government, science, and modern times. That God is not the Dharma. Allow me to repeat that I don't much care what other people think of God as long as they act according to the teaching of Jesus combined with practicality and the best Western values.

I understand that: Different people have different skills and serve God in different ways. It is hard to say one way is absolutely better than another. People should do what suits them because they are likely to do the most good that way. Nobody sees God entirely. Nobody serves God perfectly. We need a lot of different people. "It takes all kinds to make a world". Some religions suit some people better than other religions, and some people are not at home in a particular religion. Religions do well to make a home for all sincere people who do good. Hinduism, some versions of Mahayana, large Christian churches such as the Roman Catholic Church, and Islam before about 1700, were among the churches that do best at accommodating the diversity of people and guiding them to serve God well.

None of this about individual people changes what I said above. The issue of personal differences is distinct from issues of: (1) All religions are paths to God and equally good paths to God. (2) Hinduism subsumes all other religions and swallows them, so, really, being the one-and-only true path to God. We can accept personal differences and still not think Hinduism handles that issue best and so automatically is the biggest broadest best path to God among other lesser paths.

Suppose a Hindu looks at Christianity like this: Jesus is an avatar. Jesus told people that they are alike, and we should all feel compassion toward each other. Jesus did not want people to overturn the system. He wanted people to do their social duty honestly. If people must choose between harming others versus allowing others to harm them, people should allow others to harm them. That is what dying willingly on the cross means. When people see such an example, they are more likely to see how they are alike and how they should feel compassion. When they do that, the social order gets along much better, the social order follows the path of what it means to be human, and most individuals follow what it means to be human - the Dharma path of humans and human society. Jesus saved people by showing us that we are alike and should feel compassion for each other, even to the point of death: "few people love each other so much that they will die for others". Salvation is getting on the right Dharma path, whether you know it or not, and Jesus showed us how to do so in a way that most people can feel. Many Christians teach this view of Jesus and his message although they do not put in the part about the Dharma path because they don't know that yet. Most sermons in church and lectures by Christian authority figures pretty much boil down to "be good" in this way. The life and message of Jesus is the same as the message of Hinduism, and Christianity is one of the purest branches within Hinduism. Christianity reinforces Hinduism.

This is how one religion eats other religions and eats the world. I could do the same for Hinduism with Islam, Judaism, Taoism, Mahayana, Theravada, Zen, and Confucianism.

How to Get Out of Hindu Relativism.

I have already said that moral relativism is useful if done carefully ("judge not lest you be judged") but is prone to misuse and so is dangerous. Hinduism goes too far with moral relativism. I don't say much more than to re-assert this assessment.

The only way to strongly distinguish Jesus from a Hindu avatar would be to show that (1) Jesus does not support the Dharma system because Jesus goes against the system somehow, (2) Jesus does not care about any system so that we don't need a system, (3) Jesus demands something of us that the Dharma system does not, or (4) the Dharma system leads to acts, person, or institutions that are objectionable.

This is hard to do. It is hard to find cases where Jesus goes against the Dharma system because that is like finding cases where Jesus goes against slogans about goodness and God. It is hard to find cases where Jesus doesn't care because that is like saying Jesus doesn't care about goodness and God. Even where Jesus cares more about the Kingdom of God than he does about Israel or Rome in his time, he still does care about the Kingdom of God, and that is close enough to the idealized Dharma system.

The real problems with seeing Jesus as an avatar of the Dharma system are (3) and (4): that Jesus asks of us what the Dharma system does not and the Dharma system leads to results that we don't like and he would not like. We have to accept the reality of the Dharma system as well as the platitudes. Briefly, the teachings of Jesus support Jewish values, Western values, and proactive "doing good" while the Dharma system does not. The teachings of Jesus support the acts, people, and institutions that I want while the Dharma system does not. The Dharma system leads to acts, people, and institutions that I don't want such as rationalization, exploitation, and social injustice. The Dharma system gets in the way of being a good person in the sense of Jesus' teachings. In the Kingdom of God, people do not have castes and mistreat beggars, and they do set up schools and other good institutions. If we see Jesus as an avatar, we lose focus on his proactive teachings and we fall back into rationalization.

This difference might be enough for a follower of Jesus to argue against using relativism to make Jesus an avatar but might not be enough for a Hindu. Hindus might still be able to make Jesus relative to the Dharma system if they adopt modern Western-like values into a Dharma system. Christians might have to put up with Hindu-izing Jesus in the modern world.

The Hindu Dharma system gets in the way of acting according to the teachings of Jesus not only because it is Hindu and a Dharma system but because it is a system, a big system, a system that eats the world, has a hole in the center, allows rationalizing roles, and uses relativism, superiority, and encompassing. Other religions that are similar systems get in the way as well. Even Taoism and Zen get in the way when they fall back on their versions of dogma. It is natural and can be useful to work with systems. It gives people comfort to find their meaning in the context of a system. Even so, I advise that you stop to put aside systems for a while. Get used to the idea of simply acting in accord with the teachings of Jesus without worrying about justifying yourself in the context of a system. The most system-like attitude you should use at first is to try to please God and to treat people decently. When you have sorted that out, if you do, then, if you still need it, you can find your selfness in a system. If you find yourself in a Dharma system, tell the world how that works out.

Systems, Me, and God.

I just don't feel as if I am in a system. If I am in a system, it is not relativistic in the bad sense; not based on a hole in the middle, rationalizing roles, superiority, hierarchy, and encompassing; does not support any traditional stratified society or any bad society; and does not consist of adventures within adventures. If I am in a system, it is God's system, not mine and not the Dharma's. I don't want to take over God's system. I don't want to be the star. I don't want to milk the system for my own gain. I can imagine God sending teachers without thinking of them as avatars of a system. I have a duty to do the right thing, not toward the system. I have a pretty good idea what I am supposed to do, and what I do is the same if I am in a system or not. I am more likely to make mistakes if I think I am in a system.

Some Last Words.

I don't know if the idea of Dharma can be developed without system, hierarchy, relativism, superiority, encompassing, and traditional stratified society. I don't know if any of these ideas-and-social relations are independent, if they all need each other, if some need some of the others, or the whole set has to come together. This is what modern Hindus have to think out. I think they can develop the idea of Dharma without the other bad ideas; but they have to be careful. I would be surprised if Hindu imagination was not up to the task. I wish them luck.

PART 8: Systems and Persons: The Movie "Groundhog Day".

This part of the chapter is optional. I mentioned the movie "Groundhog Day" in other chapters. It stars Bill Murray and Andie McDowell. The movie is a fun way to contrast Hinduism with Christianity. It shows how Hinduism (and systems like Hinduism) shapes ideas. As you read this picture of "Groundhog Day", think of what Hinduism would do with movies such as "The Breakfast Club" and novels such as "Tom Sawyer" and "Huckleberry Finn".

"Groundhog Day" is a "chick flick" "rom com" (romantic comedy aimed at women). It also features motifs from Hinduism, or from any system based on Dharma and on many lives. All art, movies, and chick flicks have conventions. So do Hinduism, Christianity, and Western culture. The movie mixes conventions so that it is not possible to say for sure where an important theme comes from. For example, the Bill Murray character changes for the better over the movie. This change in male lead is typical of "chick flicks" such as "Knocked Up", and "You've Got Mail", and is important in major religions – Moses, the Buddha, Arjuna, Paul, and Mohammad. All I do is point out motifs and guess what produces what.

You should decide what produces what. The real issues are not what force drives what romantic ideal but how characters are persons, how characters change, what change implies for them as persons, and what being a person implies for relations to other persons. The real issues are about people. You should look through conventions to decide if Hinduism or the teachings of Jesus most likely leads us to correct and good ideas about persons.

The movie uses the motifs from Hinduism to reinforce conventions of modern love, especially to present an ideal man. The ideal seems to come from Hinduism, as a logical growth from Hindu premises. But that conclusion is misleading. The ideal romantic man is a mishmash of ideas, mostly from the chick flick genre and Western Christianity. The ideal is tacked on to motifs borrowed from Hinduism as a way to tell a story to reinforce chick flick ideals. I describe the borrowed Hindu motifs, how they build a base for the romantic ideal, and how the ideal does not depend on the motifs.

Murray's character "wakes up", literally, symbolically, and spiritually. The same dramatic change for the better that happens to him cannot happen to all people at once in a Hindu system because, if it did, the system would vanish. For Murray to wake up, other people have to remain "asleep". As you read this, think how to make a similar movie if all the people in it went through the same changes as Murray and woke up. What does it imply if some of the people have to stay asleep so the main character can wake up? Thinking about this might help the sorting out.

Here I write as if people really believe myths, motifs, and conventions: “Romantic love saves us”. I know that often the myths are not true and that most Americans don’t believe them. Still, Americans often act as if they believe. They hold out for true romantic love even when, on another level, they know it isn’t true. Please willingly suspend disbelief about what people believe.

Just because the movie mixes motifs of East, West, and “rom com”, does not mean it is bad, silly, or a “fluff piece”. The movie is good, not just in its genre but as a movie of any genre. If it weren’t good, I wouldn’t use it. I like the ideal person that the movie builds to. I like that we can see this ideal as resting on Hindu roots, as one flower from the best of Hinduism. Only by using a positive view of Hinduism in a good movie can I show fairly how Hinduism is misleading.

I use terms like “selfless” without implying anything, in particular without implying that we can overcome our evolved tendency to self-interest. When you see “selfless”, you can substitute a phrase such as “based on an ability to empathize with others, and ability to act to further their welfare, even at some cost to your short-term welfare; abilities which might have led to your long-term welfare under conditions that were common in our evolutionary history”. Sometimes everyday language is easiest.

Peculiar disclaimer: I use the term “person” to mean a human sentient being. I do not imply anything about non-human animals. I make this point because originally the word “person” came from “persona”, which is a mask used in the drama of Greece and Rome for a role or character. Here I use “person” to contrast with a mere role.

The Story.

Bill Murray and Andie McDowell are part of a big city news crew that goes to a rural town to do a “fluff piece” on a groundhog festival. Murray’s character starts as a selfish cad with unrealistic ideas of his own importance. Murray considers the assignment far beneath him. McDowell is the typical charming sweet talented sensitive helpful pretty romantic comedy heroine, and stays so. Murray likes McDowell but he shows it by being rude to her and by trying to have casual sex with her. A freak winter storm blocks all traffic in or out, trapping the whole crew in the town. Murray and McDowell stay in separate rooms at a local bed-and-breakfast.

The next morning, Murray wakes up and finds that this day repeats the day before. It is still Groundhog Day. It is the same day. Every night, Murray goes to bed hoping the day has passed, and every morning he wakes up to the same day. The same day repeats and the same events repeat. The same people are in the same places doing the same things and they say the same words.

At first, Murray takes advantage of the situation to have adventures, steal, lie, seduce, assert dominance, be nasty, indulge his senses, and pay back old grudges. After a while, the adventures and nastiness get boring. Then he gets desperate and bored. He kills himself but, each time after he dies, he wakes up again in the same bed on the same morning, and the whole ordeal starts all over again.

Then, rather than seeking adventures, payback, or indulgence, he begins to live in the situation and to make the most of the situation this time each time. He begins to do good things. Murray helps out old

ladies with flat tires, gives money to bums, tries to save the life of a bum, buys insurance from a pushy salesman, warns women of men who mistreat them, plays the piano at parties, sings, and acts politely toward McDowell. He begins with small acts but as he gets more adept at being good, and as being good becomes part of his self, he does bigger good acts. Murray loses himself in helping other people and in making the town a better place, a better world. The skills (karma) that he learns in one “day” (one life) of “Groundhog Day” carry over into the next day (life), so he has many days (lifetimes) to accumulate skills (karma) by which to help others (more karma). He learns to dance, play piano, talk to people, entertain them, educate them, help them with what they need, and provide them therapy.

Murray learns all about the true you of McDowell, and they fall in love. He shows he is really in love by not taking sexual advantage when he has a chance. Murray loses himself in love instead of selfishness. Naturally (karmically, Dharmically), Murray wakes up next morning and it really is the next day. He is no longer stuck. He has gone on. His literal waking up is the same as symbolic waking up. He is free. The days stop repeating. He goes on to a “brand new day”, “the first day of the rest of his life” with the woman he loves and who loves him.

By the time Murray wakes up, he has been transformed into almost an ideal man. He is cooked instead of raw (the image comes from Thai culture rather than from Claude Levi-Strauss). You have to decide by what standards he is an ideal man. I list most of his new good qualities below. Murray does not lose his former “badness”. He is still full of life and full of emotion. He still likes sex. He still has a good sense of humor. He still enjoys naughtiness as long as it is not really hurtful. He is still not bound strictly by rules, but he does appreciate rules, and now he is bound by caring. Murray now knows how to channel energy and “joy in living” better both for other people around him and for himself.

Murray is “saved”. His selfless love for the townspeople and selfless romantic love for McDowell save Murray. “Saved” not too strong a word for what happens in chick flicks, and Murray’s shift is so profound that it qualifies for “saved” in Hinduism. Murray does not accept Jesus but he does act as Jesus taught, and he acts as a good Christian should, so “saved” is not too strong a word for a sensible Christian view of Murray. If Murray does not deserve to go to heaven, who does? If Murray is not likely to get the Grace of God, who is? The movie does not have to say exactly what “saved” means, and how a saved person acts for the rest of his-her life, for the movie to show that Murray is saved.

A Central Problem as a Handy Image for Religion-Based Movie Criticism.

Despite how strongly Jesus, Immanuel Kant, and Western Christianity teach us that we should treat all people as persons all the time in all cases, we just can’t. Sometimes people are bad and then we have to control them. Sometimes we deal with people under conditions in which we are supposed not to act as if we were simply persons but according to other rules, and, if we did act person-to-person or sibling-to-sibling in those cases, society would fall apart. We do not treat a judge as if he-she was our sibling and he-she cannot treat us that way. We really can’t treat the postal carrier as a sibling. Not only must we refuse to treat all job applicants as if they were our siblings, when our siblings apply for the job, we have to treat our siblings as if they were not our siblings. This does not mean we can’t see a person behind the role and can’t be nice along with being officious but it does mean we have to rely on the role first. Mostly, though, treating people as persons like our own siblings (ourselves) all the time is too much trouble and society would fall apart if we tried.

Different groups and different art forms have their own ways of dealing with this issue. Usually societies create subgroups that the members of the society treat differently. How many subgroups there are, how big each subgroup is, and how we treat each subgroup, varies with religion, culture, society, historical period, economic system, etc.

Chick flicks and Hinduism deal with the problem in a similar way. Each has a very small group at the top within which people treat each other closely. With Hinduism, it is the parents and their children while with chick flicks it is the girlfriend and boyfriend. Beneath that group is the family in Hinduism and the family-and-or-entourage-of-friends in chick flicks. All the rest of society is not people but roles. The similar way in which chick flicks and Hinduism deal with the issue of who is a real person and who is merely a role allows "Groundhog Day" to use Hindu motifs to support the chick flick world, and to make it seem as if the ideal hero comes out of Hindu-like experiences.

Western Christianity says ideally that we should treat everyone like ourselves, as a full person, but in fact Western societies set up a pyramid. We treat people at the top as full persons almost like ourselves, with each descending subgroup treated less like persons and more like roles. At the top is a small subgroup within which to be fully sibling-like such as the members of the same family or church; in America, then come friends; then people mostly sibling-like such as close neighbors and parents with their children in the same school; officers of all kinds; fellow workers; general neighbors; nice people in public places such as restaurants; people in general on the street; and so on.

Chick flicks acknowledge the Western Christian ideal, and use the ideal as a test of the hero, but do not structure their final romantic society on that basis. Hinduism sees something like the ideal, as shown in their adages "you are that" and "great compassion", but societies based on Hinduism pretty much ignore it in practice for most people not in the inner circle.

To be precise, both chick flicks and Hinduism do not see the people in the small bubble at the top as full human persons but they do see them as special kinds of roles that approach what I see as a full human person. If we exclude most of humanity from full personhood, then we find it hard to give real personhood to the privileged few in our inner circle. We have to practice it with everybody even if we do not succeed. Western Christianity carries the ideal of full human person even if Western Christians do not often live up to the ideal, and Western Christianity encourages practicing it with everybody.

"Groundhog Day" as Chick Flick Rom Com Love Story.

This section covers only a few conventions. This section does not try to resolve any contradictions in the conventions or between the conventions and human nature.

The heroine is wonderful mostly as she is although she might have developed some bad habits. Even in movies where the heroine has to change, such as "Clueless", "What Happens in Vegas", "Friends with Benefits", "Valentine's Day", "Bridesmaids", and "Bad Teacher", the heroine only discovers her true nature that had not yet shown itself. She doesn't really change much.

The hero has to change. He is good at heart or he wouldn't be worth changing; but he does have to change.

The hero changes by seeing the value of the heroine and a few of her closest friends or family. The hero comes to accept most people as they are but especially he accepts the heroine and her entourage. The hero comes to see people somewhat as persons, valuable in themselves. He comes to see the heroine as especially valuable.

It is not entirely clear what distinguishes the heroine from other women, but, she is distinct, and better. She is better than her primary sidekick. The heroine often contrasts with other women in the film so we can see that she is better.

As part of his change, the hero comes to see other people as persons and so valuable. He stops acting toward them as mere instruments of his own satisfaction and begins treating them as valuable in their own right. If the hero did not see people in general this way, he could not learn to see the heroine both as valuable in herself and as better than other people.

The chick flick genre solves the problem of who to be most personal with by restricting it to the bonded couple; after that the entourages of both members come close; sometimes the family also comes close; and then it really doesn't matter much.

Although the hero sees the value of other people, he does not act toward all other people equally. If he did, he would not see the heroine as special and would not fall in love with her. The hero cuts his ties to any bad guy former friends (selfish guys); he treats people in general pretty well; he treats the heroine's entourage better; and he treats the heroine best of all. While paid work is important so that the hero can give his share to the couple's treasure chest and can show his general responsibility, paid work cannot interfere in his relation to the heroine. The heroine is at the top of the hierarchy as a person in a bubble all her own; then comes her entourage and family who are treated as full persons; then the general public are treated pretty much as role players but nice; and last comes the rejected selfish male world.

“Groundhog Day” as Hinduism.

Even if the average viewer could not explicitly connect themes in the movie to themes in Hinduism and Christianity, he-she can implicitly feel the link to some idea systems. The background idea systems are clear enough. This section describes how themes in the movie are like themes in Hinduism.

Repeating the same day over and over is like repeating lifetimes. We can choose to use lifetimes to do nothing, feel awful, or get better. Murray did all three. If we have enough lifetimes, eventually we choose to get better. Once we choose to get better, the choice should stick for all the lifetimes after, even if we backslide in some lives. Once we accept the path of getting better, we are on it from then on.

Murray is able to carry over what he does in one day (lifetime) to other days even if the other characters in the movie could not. Carrying over is what allows Murray to progress. Carrying over is like karma. Karma works whether people are consciously aware of it, as was Murray, or not.

At first, Murray has adventures, especially self-indulgent adventures. When indulgence is not enough, Murray tries acting bad. Murray is like God deciding to lose himself in the world so as to find himself through the world. The most obvious sign of losing yourself in a world, being asleep in a world, is selfish seeking after success in the narrow obvious terms of this kind of world: sex, wealth, power, cunning, and nastiness. Even if you did succeed in those terms, it would not be enough. Adventure for its own sake, badness, and indulgence get horribly boring, the boredom for which there is no cure on its own terms.

After deciding to get better, by having many lifetimes and carrying over, Murray does get progressively better. He does not just get to be a better piano player or better mechanic; he gets to be a better sentient being; a better person. Improvement is what the whole process is about. Ideally, constant improvement might lead to enlightenment, where a Hindu sees what the whole system is about and sees the place of all kinds of people in it. But constant improvement need not lead to that. Constant improvement is a goal in itself and has value in itself.

Originally in the precursor ideas to Buddhism and Hinduism, many lives was a curse, not a blessing. The cycle of many lives was called "the wheel of Dharma" and it had the feeling of a wheel on which we are tortured (crucified), not exalted. Mahayana and Hinduism spread by making many lives an opportunity both to get better ourselves and to contribute to others. To make many lives an opportunity, we have to see it that way. At first, for Murray, many days (many lives) is a curse; but then, when he wakes up a bit, it is an opportunity. The more he uses many days, the more it becomes a blessing. That is part of the benefit of accumulation.

Murray must lose himself first before he gets better. In particular, Murray does not treat himself as a full person and so cannot see any other persons. That is when Murray acts badly. This motif is common in most "pilgrim" stories but that does not mean it is not part of the overall Hindu fell. See more on this motif below.

Hinduism solves the problem of who to be most personal with by restricting it to me-and-the-Dharma. We engage other people only as they are roles in the self-reinforcing Dharma system and we expect them to do the same with us. Personal in the Western Christian sense is not relevant. We might be personal with some people but that has little to do with role relations. In traditional Indian society, the closest Dharma relation was parents and children. They formed the a little bubble at the top. Husband and wife were not closest. Eventually, as they became parents themselves, a husband and wife might form their own little bubble at the top of their own pyramid. Other people come in far below and are mostly Dharma roles. That resolution is not acceptable in chick flicks, so they invert the order, and adjust the Dharma system accordingly. The hero still shows his general moral worth by being nice to almost all other people but he cannot be as nice to people in general as he is to the heroine. She is in the place the hero once had with his parents. The parents and entourage are now in the secondary place. And, of course, everyone else is still in roles below. With these minor adjustments, Hinduism and chick flicks can coincide fairly well.

When Murray begins to wake up, the appropriate feeling for other people is compassion. While we can't stop other feelings, especially bad feelings toward bad people, bad feelings are not best either for Murray or other people. We don't have to act on bad feelings. When we feel compassion, we should act on it. Murray does feel compassion and is able to overcome other bad feelings.

Murray does several kinds of acts out of general compassion but I do not list them all here; see below. Only some kinds of acts from general compassion are important in Hinduism even if all the acts might come from general compassion, those that support the bubble at the top and support the total Dharma system. What counts is doing your Dharma duty as your new Dharma self. What counts in your acts towards others is how you help them realize their Dharma role and carry out their role. In ideal conditions, you might help people wake up but none of the town people are near to waking up so that ideal does not apply here. Murray does do the kind of acts that are important in Hinduism but he also does other acts that are important for chick flicks and for Western Christianity.

While the form of this movie is like Hinduism, the content is still “chick flick”. Despite Murray’s many lives and karma, Murray does little that a Hindu might see as promoting the Dharma system or Dharma social world. Murray does get people to stop doing bad things but he does nothing like what Krishna did for Arjuna and the other brothers. Murray focuses attention on the heroine. He treats all other people nicely but they come in far below.

Helping other people does also help society generally. Even if we don’t help other people directly, by helping good social interaction, we do help other people. In Hindu thought, ordered society is always good, so, if we help ordered society, we help people too. Murray does this when he helps parties to work well as when he entertains at parties.

Helping other people helps yourself. In particular helping other people helps you to wake up, and helping other people to wake up helps you even more. In Hinduism, it is hard to tell the difference between an act done for the sake of another and an act done so that you make progress. Overall, the feeling is of doing good deeds for your own spiritual progress rather than for others. The attitude of helping, and confusion over who you are really helping, contributes to the motives of the Mahayana bodhisattva and the Hindu avatar.

Before anybody can fully wake up, he-she has to feel diffuse compassion to everybody regardless of the person’s station in life and moral status, and regardless of whether the feeling really helps them or really helps you. Only after feeling this can a person realize how much he-she is a person, and how much he-she is like that other person. This is the Hindu “you are that (him-her)”.

This fully waking up toward other people is the first culmination of the movie, as waking up of some kind appropriate to your Dharma role now is the culmination of Hinduism.

In the movie, after Murray wakes up, then, and only then, can he have a satisfying romantic relation with McDowell. This fully waking up, focused on the heroine, is the final and real culmination of the movie.

“Groundhog Day” from Western Christian Values.

By “Western Christian” I mean values that Western Christians hold about people, relations, society, etc. as part of the combined heritage of Jesus, the Church, and Western values. I do not separate sources of values here.

Christians can say that many days is not the same as many lives and that remembering what you learn is not the same as karma. Many days can be the many chances that God gives us even when we screw up continually and when we don't deserve it. Remembering is just remembering, especially when it is in the service of spiritual progress. Waking up is waking up to God's love and to the love we can have for other people, not necessarily waking up to our role in a Dharma system. I don't argue much which view is best. I think, deliberately in this movie, "many days" and "remember over days" are more like Hindu many lives and karma.

In Western Christianity, appropriate actions based on compassion can be many, and Murray does all of them. First, Murray helps other people in bodily ways, as by giving them food, keeping them from getting run over by cars, or feeding people. Second, Murray keeps people from hurting themselves, as when he keeps women from staying with abusive boyfriends. Third, Murray keeps people from hurting others as when he stops bad men from preying on women. Fourth, Murray helps people achieve what is important to them as individuals, sometimes because it is important in their jobs or in their current situations. For example, he buys insurance from a pushy salesman and he warns the workers in a bar of future events. Helping people in all these ways does not really help people to wake up but it is important to them and it can help them relax enough to think about better things.

Fifth, Murray helps people to see other people as people. Not everybody can fully see everybody else fully as a person, so we have to adjust how we help people wake up that way, and we cannot expect too much. But we can nudge people along. Murray does some of this latter task but he does not do much of this latter task, and this lack is important below.

In theory, Hindus would not expect to do much of this. Hindu aid from one person to another sometimes comes in time of need such as famine; and, apart from acute need, aid usually comes to help a person along a spiritual path; but it rarely comes just as help from one person to another. I can see a Hindu buying insurance to get rid of a pushy sales person, intending all the while never to pay any premiums, just as Hindus give a beggar a penny to get rid of him-her. But I can't see Hindus buying insurance to help a person succeed as a seller because that is important to the person. I can see Hindus giving a bum a dollar but not taking care of him when he is sick and dying, or trying to save his life with curbside CPR. A Hindu might think it sad that men use women but I doubt a Hindu would do much to stop particular cases unless the women were kin. Hindus do not see people as people in the way that makes giving help to people generally compelling. Hindus cannot build institutions on that basis.

I know these judgments sound harsh but that is the point. Westerners have made into habits and have institutionalized views and expectations that other people might see sometimes but do not make a habit of seeing and do not act on often. I know that most Christians don't live up to these ideals and that many Hindus act according to these ideals even though the ideals are not explicitly taught in the religion. That is not the point either. Even when Hindus act out of general humanity, they limit their action to members of the same village, caste, neighborhood, or socio-economic class. They do not see "neighbor" as almost everybody. So the point is just that one religion, Western Christianity, fosters pro-active and re-active help from one person to another, and builds institutions on that basis, while the other, Hinduism, does not.

Western views of people have found their way into genres such as chick flick but have not transformed those genres. Except for point five, Western Christianity and chick flicks have about the same general

expectations of good guys such as Murray. Chick flicks have taken much of their general expectations from Western Christianity. To argue these points, I would have to contrast chick flicks in the West with chick flicks from “Bollywood”, and I can’t do that. If Hindu heroes in chick flicks act on points one through four, they limit their actions to close family members and do not act toward the public, based on seeing other people as persons, as Murray did in “Groundhog Day”.

Despite taking some ideals from Western Christianity, chick flicks still differ from it. The difference shows up in point five. Western values expect us to help other people not just by tending needs and wants but by helping them be better persons. This is part of being a person ourselves and of seeing other people as persons. Western values do not expect us to save people or to wake them up. Treat people decently, let them know why you are treating them decently, hope they wake up a little, and that they shift over to treating people decently as a result. If they don’t wake up a little, we don’t stop helping them. But we try to help them see what it means to be a person and to treat other people as persons. We do not expect to fully succeed and we do not expect to transcend roles but we expect to hold the ideal of person-to-person contact even so.

Chick flicks cannot try to extend personal relations to everybody as in the Western Christian ideal. Chick flicks cannot even hold this value as an unreachable ideal as in Western Christianity. Chick flicks have to focus on the relation between ideal man and ideal woman, and have to see all other characters as mere characters or roles – as in Hinduism.

Chick flicks want the hero to wake up to the heroine-as-a-person, help her (devote himself to her), and maybe wake up to some of her friends-as-persons to a lesser extent, but chick flicks don’t care much about other people generally. By learning to feel love, love saves the man hero and saves his relation to the woman, but it does not save much more than that and it does not have to extend beyond that. Chick flicks take acts from one to four as evidence of a new man who can feel in the way that is needed to wake up enough for romantic love with the heroine. To wake up enough for romantic love, sensitivity such as in points one to four might be needed but diffuse respect of all people as persons, point five, is not. Chick flicks are closer to the Hindu point of view. I am not saying women, or any watchers of chick flicks, are like Hindus. I am saying that we tend to fall back into a restricted point of view when we do not expect more of ourselves and when we are part of a system.

A Note on Human Character.

Only after Murray has wallowed in self-indulgent adventure, badness, and boredom long enough does he “break on through to the other side” to live in the current situation and to seek goodness. Most of us need to do some wallowing in naughtiness, hopefully without hurting anybody irreparably. We can do most of this wallowing in our imagination and by watching what happens to other people. We do not need to go to the extremes of Murray to get past the allure of badness. Once past the allure of badness, we do not need to achieve the sweet great goodness of Murray. If we think we have to be a saint when we give up the allure of badness, we never give up the allure because we can’t be saints. Only when we see that all we need is be normally good people who genuinely try hard, and that we can do this, do we give up the allure of badness.

When Murray gives up self-indulgent adventure and badness, and when he takes up goodness, he goes “whole hog”. He stops doing anything naughty, does only good, does much good, and does sweet good. He is amazingly considerate. It takes many days, that is, many lifetimes, to learn this. This result is not realistic and it is not meant to be realistic. The movie exaggerates to make a point. In real life, nobody is that sweet, nobody wants to be that sweet, and nobody wants to be around a person like that. The movie made Murray super sweet to make a good point but we should not be overwhelmed by the good point into the mistake of not trying.

Other People and Self Success Again.

Because of the importance of seeing other people as persons, it is worth looking again at conventions in movies, particularly how movies don't fully meet Western Christian ideals.

Murray goes farther toward seeing himself and other people as people than most characters in movies and farther than most “chick flicks”. Murray goes farther than most real living people do and farther even than most dedicated Christians do. The change in him is not sappy but inspiring. If Hinduism and real practiced Christianity really led people to become like Murray, I could heartily endorse both. If Murray was not a good model for this change then the following point would not be strong:

Despite the change, other characters in the movie are not full people as I would like them to be and as Jesus taught us to see people. The other characters are still primarily vehicles for Murray's spiritual and romantic success rather than full persons in their own right. Everything still centers on Murray. Even when Murray comes to see them much more as persons, and we see them as persons through Murray's eyes, that is not enough. The more that he comes to see them as persons, the more “you are that”, the more they are mere vehicles, and so fall short of being full persons. It is a paradox that we can easily miss. This flaw is typical of “chick flicks” and of religions, including formal Christianity, but especially religions like Hinduism. The point is not to try to be perfect but to keep the problem in mind and to try to do better. At that, Murray does succeed well.

When the movie begins, the everyday people are annoyances to be avoided, and have no personhood or humanity at all. As the movie goes along, Murray treats them better and he sees them as persons. This is all-well-and-good but something else is going on socially, and this social change should worry us about what personhood really means. Not only people get better but society gets better. Parties are happier; the workplace is happier; people do their jobs better; the people that Murray helps carry out their social roles and work roles better; bums are not a threat; and we all get along. We begin to see the characters in their social roles. We begin to see a better society as the proper result of better persons, and to see people as subordinate to their role in helping society do better. Murray himself takes on that role. He is good because he makes society better not primarily because he treats people as people. We begin to see society and the people in society as a sing-along around the piano. Everything gets better and better for people and society. Everything turns out alright for everyone and society in the end. It is not the end until it does turn out alright for everyone and society. I don't want to fall back on the other extreme cliché of modern fake-rebel Romantic myth that all society is bankrupt and the only real people are outlaws. I don't want to replace “Groundhog Day” with French New Wave such as “Breathless”. I do point out how easy it is to think of good people in social terms rather than as simply persons. This is what Hinduism

necessarily does, necessarily grounding it in a metaphysical context. This is what makes “The Breakfast Club” and “Huckleberry Finn” good antidotes to Hinduism.

In almost all drama, supporting characters are not supposed to be as much persons as are the leads; an exception might be movies such as “The Misfits” and “Bus Stop”. But in this movie that limit should not hold. The point of this movie is that the lead character comes to see other characters as persons, even to his detriment. So other characters need to be believable as persons. If the movie wants us to take the change in Murray seriously then the filmmakers should show other people in the movie as more “realized” persons; but they don’t. The conventions of drama are partly to blame but not fully.

The issue does not arise because of bad writing or bad acting. The movie is well written and nobody could have acted the role better than Murray. He does an excellent job showing change, of showing a growing feeling for other people, of showing that the character resigns himself to doing good without reward, showing the limits on the new feeling, and a slight uneasiness.

If I wanted to be unfair to Hinduism, I could blame the adopted Hindu motifs for the fact that other minor characters are not developed much as persons. There might be some truth to this assessment but adopted Hindu motifs are not the major roadblock.

The major roadblock is that chick flicks and romantic comedies don’t see any characters other than the leads as really persons. Sometimes the leads aren’t even very realistic. Sometimes the friends of the leads are interesting as in “Knocked Up” but they still don’t become very human.

In chick flicks, typically the hero changes for the better but the heroine doesn’t change much because she is already wonderful. Even in “Clueless”, where the heroine is the one who changes, her change is more to realize the good person she always was than to change at a deep level. The same is true of “Friends with Benefits”. In the movie “What Happens in Vegas”, both the hero and heroine change quite a bit but the hero still changes more.

None of this might matter much except that real people get ideas about life from art, and act on the basis of those ideas, and so make mistakes. I don’t expect much art to be realistic; I expect it to be unrealistic somewhat so as to get across ideas. But we do have to notice when conventions, even fun conventions, lead us astray.

We can see the same effects in religion. An ideal of the Upanishads is “you are that”, which implies that all people are full persons, whether hero, heroine, or supporting player, and whether fully awakened or not. The reality of Hinduism is not like that. In much of Hindu literature, the only near-persons are the hero and-or the person who fully wakes up. Other people might be quite nice or might be quite bad, but they are characters that move the plot rather than real people. Except maybe for Arjuna and Yudhisthira in the Mahabharata, all characters in Hindu “big” literature are not persons, they are stereotypes who represent cosmic ideas. They seem less human than even supporting characters in epics of the West such as the Iliad, Odyssey, and Death of Arthur. In Hindu literature, the hero treats other people nicely, even bad guys, but other people are there to serve the spiritual advancement of the hero. To do that, they need not be fully developed people. In real life, what matters are you, your family, and social duty. Other people don’t have to be full people to do their social duty, and, in fact, the system works better if

they are not. When the hero or heroine learns to treat other people well, the lesson is part of a total experience in which the hero or heroine progresses spiritually. Spiritual advancement necessarily gives rewards. The reward sometimes is enlightenment but more often are a good marriage, status, and worldly success. The hero and heroine reap the rewards, not necessarily the supporting cast, although the supporting cast usually benefits from the general glow of the spiritual-worldly advancement of the hero or heroine. To me, chick flicks seem like Bollywood.

When Jesus teaches and acts, almost everyone is a person. By helping other people, Jesus does not gain material goods or power, and he does not advance spiritually. He does not help other people as a way to get to heaven. According to Jesus, you do not use other people for spiritual progress. You do not think of your service to people as a way to awaken, get better, or go to heaven. It is not the way to get to heaven. It is not a technique of spiritual advancement. Acting well toward other people as people is part of doing unto others, treating everybody the same, making the world better, being decent, and being a good citizen in the Kingdom of God. Working out this ideal in real life might force you to change for the better, and that change can be an interesting story in itself, but that is not why you do it. You are not the hero of the world, and other people are not your supporting cast. Of course, this is hard to do, but the ideal is clear, and perfection is not required.

Contrary to the teachings of Jesus, in most practiced Christianity, and even in preached Christianity, a person treats other people well so the original person can go to heaven. Other people are means to an end even when, as part of the means, we treat other people as if they were persons. Christians have trouble reconciling the ideals of family love, romantic love, friendship, and patriotism to this strategy of being loving so as to get to heaven, but, still, Christians focus on the strategy of using other people so as to get to heaven, and that strategy is what they teach their children. In some Christianity, people ascend a spiritual ladder to get better and better, at the top of which is God's approval and heaven. In these versions, other people are the means by which the hero ascends the ladder. Learning to treat other people well, as full persons, is part of the ascent, but it is only part of the ascent, and it is not the main goal. What matters is the ascent. We see this attitude in classics such as "Pilgrim's Progress" and "The Imitation of Christ". C.S. Lewis leans heavily on it in his writings. Although well-intended, I consider all this Christian attitude to be a mistake. It is found in other religions as well, such as Hinduism and East Asian (Mahayana) Buddhism.

As with Hindus, in real life, Christians, and other followers of Jesus, do not successfully treat everyone as a full person. It is just too hard. They do what they can. They catch glimpses of other people as full persons. They hope what they do is good enough in itself, or is good enough to make God like them or to go to heaven. Even in the classic "A Christmas Story" by Dickens, Scrooge learns to feel for other people only because the future scares him silly. I have met Hindus in the United States who have just as much sense of other people as persons as do any Christians.

Although Hindus and Christians are similar in high ideals and lowly real life, they do differ in the middle, where it counts a lot. Hindus tend to get caught up in a system that lets them see themselves as the hero in a drama, and lets them treat other people as minor characters or treat other people badly. Christians know they should not do that, and try not to do that, even if they fail often.

What Happens in the movie "Groundhog Day".

What happens in the movie “Groundhog Day”? The movie was a chick flick made in a Judeo-Christian country but deliberately adopting some Hindu motifs so as to tell the story in a more interesting way. The Hindu motifs give a better sense of what it takes to improve than do most chick flicks, in which the change comes almost by magic. The Hindu motifs make sense of the chick flick convention that the man has changed much for the better and the better man is now focused on his beloved; he does not squander his newfound goodness on the public in general. He has an all-around better personality, he is good when it is reasonable, he is extra good to her friends, and he is still a lot of fun, but he is not a selfless saint to everyone. While he sees that all people are persons, he doesn’t treat them as full persons like he does his beloved and her friends. The Hindu motifs lead up to this ideal man well but the ideal man does not depend on them.

It is hard to decide if chick flick conventions, Western Christian ideas, or Hindu ideas win. Murray does learn to be deeply nice to other people, and does see glimpses of their humanity. That approaches the ideal in the teachings of Jesus. When Murray does an ultimate selfless act, and so wins McDowell, that pattern is like getting to heaven through a selfless act, and so is like the teachings of Christianity.

The point is not to decide whether chick flick conventions, the teachings of Jesus, Christianity, the ideals of the Upanishads, or practiced Hinduism, dominate, but: First, see how these ideas can work through a piece of art and can find a place in our minds. Use art to see what has been put into your head and to figure out what you want to stay in your head. Second, when you act within any system, especially one which rewards right acts, then consequences follow for the actors and society. You have to pay attention to the realities of the system, of how it affects people and relations. Third, this result with systems is true of Hinduism too. If you place finding yourself and finding true love within the context of a system of many lives, karma, Dharma, and tight social relations, results follow. You cannot have any kind of people, acts, and relations in this system. You have to have the right kind of people, acts, and relations, ones that go along with this system, and ones that the system promotes. We can use art to think about this question too. Fourth, it is still important to see other people as persons and to treat them as persons as best we can. Do use them merely as vehicles to perpetrate the Golden Rule or to make yourself feel better. Do what they need. At the same time, we can’t be perfect at this. We think of ourselves first, even spiritually, and that is that. But we can try hard. That is all God asks. Trying hard this way is a way of being perfect enough.

Optional Notes on Chick Flick Conventions.

(1) Apparently some men are permanently scarred by looking at too much porn and then hoping to find that impossible porn ideal among real women and real acts, even when men know they personally do not measure up to fantasies. Likewise, women might be scarred by chick flicks into seeking the impossible ideal man, and assuming they can “get” him, even when they know they personally don’t measure up. They overlook reality; they overlook what is more matched to them personally. Replacing the real with the ideal, then longing for the ideal when we know we can’t measure up, is a problem with all mythic conventions, especially in religion.

(2) Watching “Groundhog Day” or any chick flick might give insight on why women try to change men and why they think they can.

(3) In the movies, romantic love saves people and saves communities just as strongly as just as surely as God's love saves people in Christianity. In movies, romantic love takes the place of love and salvation in Christianity. Westerners have replaced Christian love and salvation with romantic love and salvation.

(4) That exchange might not be a good bargain.

(5) Romantic love as salvation, instead of salvation from religion, is one of the ideas that are going around the world with modern life.

(6) It might be worthwhile trying to figure out why this idea is part of modern life and why it has spread. To do that, we have to figure out why people want to be saved.

Reprise: People in Hinduism and other Similar Systems.

Even if other people are not going to wake up, and so are not as important as heroes such as Murray and McDowell, still, all those other people are there, so Hinduism needs to explain them in a way that makes them less than full persons but does not force us to notice that they are mere token characters.

First, in Hinduism, "everybody will have his-her day". Ideally, eventually, in a Dharma system, everybody takes his-her turn as hero (heroine), at playing the character of Murray, at being Arjuna. Second, not everybody can have his-her day all at once. If everybody woke up at once, the system would end, and we don't want that. Third, after you individually wake up, you can help other people wake up. Fourth, everybody needs everybody else; even awakening or awakened people need sleepers; so everybody is valuable as they are. Fifth, there is really no difference between awakened and sleeping people. We are all connected. Even awake people are part of the system that includes sleeping people. All these five points are how relativism arises naturally.

The teachings of Jesus do not need to provide for the "other people" in these ways or any other ways.

So, in Hinduism, other people are a problem at one level but on another level they are part of the solution. In a Dharma system, the job never runs out. People always need help. They need help because they don't see each other as persons but see each other as things. They need help because they are asleep. If ever they all wake up, the whole Dharma system ends. But they are asleep, see each other as things, and need help; and this is fine too. It perpetuates the Dharma system, and having the Dharma system is better than not having the Dharma system even when we can only maintain the Dharma system because most people are asleep, see others as things, and need help. The fun is not in ending the task but in doing the task. The fun is not the destination but the journey. The journey is the point. What seems to be the problem of not being able to fully appreciate other people, what seems to be the problem that other people are not fully persons, is really part of the solution of continuing on joyfully forever. God loses himself in the world. God loses himself in persons-who-really-are-not-persons. If people did not see the world as not-persons, the world would not be so much fun. The situation is really joy in disguise. This is the sense we get of Murray and his relation to other people at the end of the movie. What happened to Murray can happen to any in his turn, especially if a woman nudges him along.

This answer in Hinduism is a pyramid scheme. A few people at the top (think they) benefit when they wake up just because most other people stay asleep. Yet it is alright that other people do not benefit in the same way because really they support the system and the system is fun. By selling the system, everybody expects to be at the top someday. Even people that are low in the system expect to be at the top someday if they sell the system enough. That is how “all paths” arises naturally and why the idea of “all paths” is not satisfying.

When we see other people not as full persons but as sleepers who are part of the solution that keeps the whole system going, then we fall back even further into treating other people as spiritual “brownie” points even when we treat them well. We fall further back into thinking of our self even when we treat them well. Thinking of other people as part of the system is only a disguise for thinking of our selves. This is not a solution to the problem of other people; it worsens the problem. In thinking their sleep is our waking up, and we can succeed by giving them standard help, we fall further into sleep ourselves. We want them asleep, so we can help them, so we can help our self, really regardless of them. We don’t want them to fully succeed. We are selfish so we can score points. This fake solution to the problem of other people arises in the practice of Christianity when Christians want other people to be bad off so Christians can help them and so justify themselves. This fake solution to the problem of others arises when Christians act well toward other people so they can help them and so help really help themselves. This fake solution arises naturally in Christianity when people think of heaven, salvation, or justification rather than simply acting well. This fake solution does not arise in the ideas or practice of Jesus. This fake solution to the problem of other people arises naturally in Dharma systems, and it comes naturally along with relativism, superiority, and encompassing.

“Other people as a problem” diminishes if we stop thinking in terms of sleeping, fully waking up, spiritual success, selfless love as success, and romantic love as selfless love and success. Stop thinking in terms of a Dharma system or anything like it. Stop thinking in terms of heaven, or in terms of chick flick motifs. Stop thinking of saving yourself and going to heaven by doing good deeds or by inviting God’s grace. Just be useful. Just be decent. Do the best you can as hard as you can. Use what you have efficiently. See people as persons as best you can. If you do a few selfless deeds in your whole life, count yourself lucky. If you wake up a little, enjoy it while it lasts. Don’t demand of others that they be selfless to achieve spiritual success or even to achieve romantic success. You can more easily treat other people as persons if you don’t demand of yourself that you be selfless, purely loving, and a spiritual success. Don’t demand it of other people either; and don’t demand they be asleep, lost, and need your help.

PART 9: Some History and Social Science.

This part is optional. It explains more about relativism in Hindu society and the origin of relativism. It clarifies why relativism is an intrinsic natural part of Hinduism, and how relativism works with the ideas of system, superiority, hierarchy, and encompassing. In explaining for Hinduism, I hope it helps explain relativism anywhere.

Some History.

Hinduism did not begin as a relativistic religion. It began with a dominant ethnic group openly asserting their superiority. The dominant ethnic group in India is closely related to people in Iran, and less closely

related to people in Russia. They are the “Indo” part of “Indo-European”. Until a few decades ago, the Indo-Europeans were also called “Aryans”; now that term is not useful. As with other Indo-Europeans, Indians likely originated in Southern Russia. They arrived as conquerors before 2000 BCE. Their ideas changed due to contact with local people, but I cannot describe what happened. Originally the invaders were nomadic cattle herders. Their priests were like Celtic Druids or Roman priests, called “Brahmans”. The Brahman priests kept a tight hold on the militaristic leaders and common people through rituals for most situations, which only they could act. As the cattle herders settled down and formed princedoms, the rulers and the Brahmans split duties: rulers got military power but they had to support the Brahmans, who, in turn, made sure everything ran well by making sure the princedom was in tune with the cosmos. The two social classes were mutually dependent.

After 1000 BCE, the power of the priests began to wane. A similar split between rulers and the priestly class also happened in other parts of the world under similar conditions, such as in China and Greece. When the power of the Brahmans waned, the new ideas listed above really took hold. In India, the new ideas were expressed by thinkers who wrote a set of texts called the “Upanishads”, as described in the chapter on the self and above. The Upanishads are among the greatest documents in world religion, are fairly short, and can be fun to read. In addition to the Upanishads, the new ideas appeared in Theravada Buddhism, Jainism, and later Mahayana Buddhism.

The Upanishads stressed a key idea in the Mahayana-Hindu solution to the problem of existence: “you are that”. You are just like all other sentient beings and they are like you. There, but for the grace of karma, go you. Here, but for the grace of karma, goes him-her. The Upanishads did not always say explicitly that you and he-she are exactly the same, are similar because you are both aspects of God, have God in you, or are a part of God; but it was easy to develop any of those interpretations later.

When the Indo-Europeans had gained most of the north of India (Bharat), agriculture supplanted cattle rearing, and the new people had to interact on a daily basis with old local people. The Indo-Europeans and local people merged, kept separate, and interacted across their separation, in many ways that need not be explained here. What is important is how they saw their relations. The invaders and original people were separated but mutually dependent in a way that fostered social relativism and ideological relativism.

First, everybody was divided into four large ranked classes or “castes”. The Indian word for social-class-caste is “Varna” which means “color” as in “color of your skin”. The Indian conquerors were lighter in skin color than the local people, and so they held lighter-skinned people, themselves, better. The highest class-caste in prestige was the Brahmans, who continued as ritual specialists and advisors to the rulers. (A “Brahmin” is a member of the group of “Brahmans”; sometimes “Brahman” is also used for a single person; and sometimes “Brahmins” is used for the group). The second class-caste was the military-political rulers (“Kshatriya”). The Buddha Siddhartha Gautama was a member of this caste-class. The third class-caste was farmers who controlled their own land, although under the ultimate ownership of the rulers. The fourth class-caste was merchants and crafts people. In addition to these class-castes, some people fell outside the system for various reasons, including making a living through crafts that were considered morally bad such as butchery. These people became the infamous “outcastes” that Gandhi tried to help and that are still an issue in India.

A similar social division into four or five large classes appeared in many agricultural state societies, such as in Rome, Europe, and China. How India differed cannot be addressed here. Although in theory the Brahmins were at the top of the hierarchy, in practice the military-political elite often ran the show, and they demanded respect from the Brahmins. Although in theory merchants ranked low, in practice, a rich merchant family would have much prestige and power. The real power of the rulers and merchants is one reason that religions offering equality, such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Hindu Devotion (bhakti), spread in India especially among the military-political rulers and the merchants.

Even though the castes were in a hierarchy, the castes understood their relation to each other as mutual dependence. No caste could get along without the others. Just as the rulers and the priests needed each other, so the priests and farmers needed each other, the rulers and merchants needed each other, and everybody needed everybody else. This idea is similar to how the major castes understood each other in the novel "Brave New World". It is still how social groups explain each other in modern times.

Second, the major classes were good as general guidelines for social relations but they did not help in daily life, as the case of the merchants shows. In practice, people were divided according to particular occupation such as tailor, barber, chariot soldier, bow soldier, grain farmer, fisherman, goldsmith, etc. People were divided by region, so that the barbers of one "county" were not necessarily the same as the barbers of another county. People were divided by family history, so that the rulers of this county were not necessarily of the same family as the rulers of the next county. People of one particular group, such as warriors of Snowy Mountain, tended to marry within the group, or to marry consistently with a few other similar groups such as the ruling classes of Bald Peak and Fertile Valley. Social scientists say Indians are "largely caste endogamous". Caste endogamy is holding up pretty well even in modern urban life.

Third, the major castes did not necessarily have their own patron deity but nearly all other divisions did: place, particular occupation, family, etc. The local deity of one occupation in one place might not be the same local deity of the same occupation elsewhere, although there was a lot of overlap. Each deity had its own rites and expectations for worship. This situation in India is much like the patron saints in Europe and Latin America.

When Indians explained this situation to each other, they used an idea that is common in the West but is not given as much force: What is right for them is right for them but is not necessarily right for us; and what is right for us is right for us but is not necessarily right for them. This is relativism. This is not such a bad idea for the situation. It is a good version of "live and let live". It is like saying that all the species in nature have a right to go on living, and that there are no better or worse species. It is also like saying that all the social groups mutually depend on each other in one system in the same way that all the species in nature mutually sustain each other in one system.

Most people were content not to force a single system onto this multitude but instead to live out relations as events came up naturally in their daily lives. Only intellectuals would want to force a single system onto such a multitude, but India had intellectuals, and respected them. When intellectuals saw a single system, they explained the diversity like this: All the local deities are manifestations of one basic god, or of no more than a few basic gods. At heart, the one god is simple, but, in practice for most of us limited beings, the god is so complex that few people can see the god in entirety. Most of us see only aspects of the god. The aspects of the god are the local deities. People relate to the one god by relating to their

local deity. They have various ways of relating to their local deity. For the few people who see the god in its entirety, these various ways might be more accurate or less accurate, but for the vast majority of people who cannot see the one god in its entirety, the various ways are only different, and each way is right in its own style. We should respect the various ways. We should respect different ideas about god not as absolute ideas about god but as relative ways of seeing god according to the situation and past history of people. People belong in a social group due to past karma. People in various ways depend on each other. If we subvert the local deities, we subvert the identity of the particular social groups, we subvert their mutual dependence, we subvert the fabric of society, and we subvert the karmic system that keeps the Dharma and the whole world going. So respect is not only a matter of respect for other people but also respect for the basic god and for the entire Dharma-karma system that the basic god instituted. Disrespect for the social system is disrespect for god. When we consider other people and the social system, we also consider ourselves, because we are like them and they are like us. We can help them by considering their place in the social system and their beliefs. We can also help them by guiding them toward better understanding of the one god and the entire system.

This system eventually was put in a larger theological setting under mature Hinduism, but it is better to delay giving that picture for a while.

This is relativism. It can be good or bad relativism depending on how it works out. Modern Hindus would like to make it good relativism, and so would modern people of other religions. Whether good or bad, this is exactly the religious relativism that the Tanakh (Old Testament), New Testament, and the Koran fought against. They refused to see local gods as manifestations of the one true God, refused to see the social system as depending on karma and local deity worship, and refused to see nature as the interplay of local deities. For Theravada Buddhists and Zen Buddhists, ultimately the controversy is not important as long as you keep to the goal of freedom from the world-that-is-not-itself-worthwhile. The trick in the modern world is to sort through all this so as to keep both the good relativism of Hinduism and the spiritual-mental rigor of theism and Hinduism.

As Social Assimilation.

I first learned of this system not as a mental system that assimilates various views of the gods but as a social system in which a large society assimilates smaller societies even while it seems to let the smaller societies retain some of their identity. The process is called, appropriately enough, "Hindu-ization". The following example is completely artificial.

As large Hindu society conquered its way across the Indian sub-continent, it encountered a local people whose society had the following characteristics: they herded goats (not cattle), raised millet (not wheat of the Indo-European conquerors), adeptly sold goat and millet products on the market, and their young men were staunch warriors. Hindu society will certainly defeat these people. Thus these people face these choices:

(1) Fight until the local people are defeated, nearly wiped out, their lands are taken away, and their way of life totally lost forever. This is the option that some Native Americans took when Europeans and ex-slave Blacks invaded.

(2) Assimilate totally into Hindu society. Their way of life will be lost forever and their gene pool will be absorbed. In a different context, this is the solution that was forced on some Native Americans.

(3) Assimilate by taking a place in the Hindu caste system. To do this, they have to accept the authority of the Hindu ruling class and, in theory, the Brahman priests. To accept such authority does not require much of a change in life. In most cases, Brahman priests would have little to do with them anyway, so, to accept Brahman authority meant nothing. Local people still get to carry on most of their way of life, and most of their original culture. Local people have to decide whether to assimilate primarily as warriors, merchants, farmers, animal herders, etc. They might break up into different castes according to these particular ways of life within the larger sub-society. Each caste will need its own deities and its own marriage relations.

While the people in the local society might think they are preserving their way of life, in fact, they have become Hindu whether they know it or not. As long as they interact with Hindus, they are Hindus. The more they preserve of their way of life and its distinctions, the less those distinctions matter, and the more Hindu they become. In a few generations, they will not be distinct from any other older Hindu caste. This assimilation is as true of their religion as of their social way of life. "Resistance is futile".

The Hindus in this situation would rather the local group take the third alternative because it provides the Hindu rulers and priests with additional steady income, provides them with allies, and saves the problem of a war. That is what happened with most groups. Other empires and other groups faced these choices as well, including in Greece, Rome, and China. China was famous for assimilating peoples, especially its conquerors. As in India, mostly the other empires assimilated through option (3). How Hindus differ from other peoples is too much to consider here.

When Jews, Christians, and Muslims were the minority group, they tried to gain a successful version of option (1). When they were in power, usually they did not give other groups option (3) but allowed only options (1) and (2). Jews and Muslims were sometimes a bit more lenient, and allowed a conquered group to retain its identity as long as it was clearly subordinate.

Western "Hindu-ization".

Thinkers in India used widespread ideas in their time, such as karma, reincarnation, and Dharma, to forge systems that spread all through Asia and Europe. The first new system out of India was Theravada. Mahayana followed. When these idea systems moved around Europe and Asia, it was much like what happened after World War One through to the present, when America forged a pop culture that moved around the world. America conquered the world with its music, song, and drama rather than with guns (alone). In the same way, India conquered the world twice before with Theravada and Mahayana, and then developed another system that almost conquered the world with Hinduism. When non-Hindus feel uneasy with Hinduism, that uneasiness is the same feeling as when non-Westerners feel uneasy with Americanism.

To Americans, it matters little if other people watch American TV, watch American movies, play American video games, listen to American music, eat American food, wear American clothes, drive cars designed for American roads, drink American sodas, learn English, start schools on the British-American model,

send their children to American universities, and copy British-American institutions such as representative democracy, free press, impartial judiciary, and rule of law. To the other people, it makes a big difference. The other people appreciate the knowledge of the West but they fear the total loss of their identity. There is only so much any culture-society can absorb before it stops being its own culture-society and becomes the other culture-society.

The institutions that Americans take around the world are not so much American as of the modern middle class and upper middle class. They are how people live in a successful capitalist economy-society. They are international values now, values of the international middle class. Any society-culture has to develop versions of these institutions to support economic development.

It happened that these institutions grew first, and on a huge scale, in America, and that America exported them around the world. The institutions took an American flavor wherever they flourished. So, what are really more class institutions than cultural institutions feel like cultural institutions to other societies. Now other societies have to develop a version of these same institutions even if the institutions had not spread to them from America, as, for example, if they had spread from France, Germany, Russia, China, India, Iran, or Saudi Arabia. Many cultures-societies are making their own versions. When I first wrote this section, "Gangnam" style from the Korean pop singer Psy was peaking in popularity.

When the American version of capitalist society-culture spreads around the world, Americans do not force it on anybody, or not very much. Other cultures-societies take it up the American version of middle class values so they can interact with the dominant culture-society-economy of the world. Other cultures-societies become assimilated into the American version of world middle class values in the same way that local peoples in India became Hindu-ized in the past. America seems like a large amoeba, as did Hindu society-culture when it spread. To many people around the world now, Americans are the Hindus of modern culture and society. To many people around the world in the past, Hindus would have been the Americans of religion.

Cultures-societies can take on enough Western ways to develop economically without necessarily taking on all good Western institutions and without necessarily taking on the American version of middle class culture-and-society. China and India are now developing economically without taking full Americanized identity. It is still an open question how much a culture-society can develop without also taking on at least some version of middle class political institutions such as free speech, rule of law, equality for women, and equality for formerly-oppressed groups such as gays. I think cultures-societies that adopt economic change with only limited social and political change will be able to develop for a while but will not be able to compete over time with societies that accept the full array of changes.