

Comparison of God and Soul Concepts
From a Baha'i and Hindu Point of View



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Conceptions and Experiences of the Afterlife

Abstract

To attempt some kind of synthesis of Hinduism in a short time is difficult and akin to how astronomers must feel when confronted with the complexity of the universe. I have chosen Hinduism and the Baha'i Faith because of the contrast between the diffused, multi-faceted approach of Hinduism and the focused clarity of the Baha'i Faith. The other reason I have chosen these two is because of the antiquity of Hinduism and the newness of the Baha'i Faith having begun as recently as 1844. In this paper I have mainly focused on Hinduism's Brahman in comparison with God as described in the Baha'i Teachings and the complex understanding they both propose of the soul and Atman. Because of my personal belief that the essence of all religion is one, I was interested in finding the common thread between these two. Even though there seems to be such a difference, especially with concepts like reincarnation, I hoped I was able to dust off the differences enough to find some common ground shared by both.

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*"Death's grip can break our bodies, not our souls;
if death take him, I too know how to die.
Let Fate do with me what she will or can;
I am stronger than death and greater than my fate;
My love shall outlast the world, doom falls from me
Helpless against my immortality."
– Sri Aurobindo –*

Hinduism

Hinduism is often called the oldest religion in the world. The Vedas are considered the earliest literary record and form the bedrock of Sanatana Dharma, (a Sanskrit word meaning “the eternal law.”) There are many sects of Hinduism but the four main ones are: Saivism, the oldest of the four major sects who revere Shiva, Vaishnavism, the worshipers of Lord Vishnu, Shaktism, followers of Shakti, also known as the Divine Mother, and Smartism, liberal Hindus who accept all major deities as forms of Brahman. There are many sub-divisions of these four who also may or may not accept the Vedas as authoritative scripture.

The term religion usually applies to an institutionalized expression of belief based on an accepted scripture. This and the identification of a supreme, universal deity, most commonly, give a basic definition of a shared belief system called a religion. In the case of Hinduism with its many gods, astonishing number of philosophies, gurus, rituals, and strong emphasis on *right practice*, it is understandable why it is often referred to as a way of life rather than a religion. Hinduism, more accurately could be called a collection of religious traditions.

There are such a variety of ways to practice Hinduism and it has been subject to many changes, both evolutionary and from the influences of geographical cultural diversity. The transition in Hinduism from many gods to a common understanding that these many gods are a reflection of the one Brahman is one example of the organic changes over time. This was a major shift in the third century BCE.

The Hindu concepts of God and the soul are complex and multi-dimensional. While the Divine or Absolute is considered timeless, infinite, and unknowable, it is also, according to some beliefs, a prisoner of the material world. This is one of the many paradoxes found in Hinduism. There is great controversy over where Brahman is. Some say He is in everything and others say He is above and beyond His creation, and yet others say He and the Atman in humans are one.

In some schools Brahman refers to the essence found in all things. In other schools Brahman is personal, impersonal, or transpersonal depending on what sect; however, He is a central theme of almost all of the Upanishads where He is described as the eternal principal, the omniscient, without beginning or end. These descriptions are similar to descriptions of God in other faiths.

Journey of the Soul in Hinduism

In Hinduism the soul is distinct from the body and is eternal, however, a common belief is that each person has within them a “spark of the Divine”, a part of Brahman called the Atman. This is another interesting and confusing contradiction. How can the spiritual reality of a person be distinct from the body and at the same time have a divine spark within them? This idea that the soul can enter or depart from the body or move to another body as in reincarnation or transmigration is challenged strongly in the following quote from Abdul’Baha, the grandson of Baha’u’llah, the founder of the Baha’i Faith. I include it here as it seems so relevant to this discussion.

Consider what a puerile imagination this is which is implied by the belief in reincarnation and transmigration. Believers in it consider the body as a vessel in which the spirit is contained, as water is contained in a cup; this water has been taken from one cup and poured into another. This is child's play. Abdul’Baha (1981)

There are two main choices open to the soul in Hinduism. One is to lead a good life in order to reincarnate into a better life and the other is to escape from the wheel of karma and merge with the Ultimate Source, Brahman. The average Hindu is content with trying for a better re-birth. The other choice is for the more spiritually adept. The Bhagavad Gita describes these two paths that the soul may journey on. One is the path of the sun or the bright path and the other is the path of the moon or dark path.

When the soul chooses the path of the sun, it will never return, but instead, re-unite with Brahman. If the moon path is chosen, the soul will return or re-incarnate. If the person committed bad deeds and lead an ignoble life, he will go to the lower worlds and suffer the consequences, in other words, hell, *narakam*. On the other hand, the reward for a pious, good life is worlds full of light, heaven, *svargam*. In the Bhagavad Gita, The Laws of Manu and other Hindu scriptures there are many references to heaven and hell. Again, this polarity lies at the heart of ethical action in Hinduism: the fear of hell and the goal of heaven are strong social constructs that may be some of the motivation for the amount of ritual demanded.

The consequences of living a so called “bad” life are that you can be reborn into a life of pain and suffering, samsara - cycle of existence, or worse, transmigrate into an animal or insect. This samsara applies to everything in the cosmos including the cosmos itself. The concept of samsara, the endless wandering of the soul, would be punishment in itself if not tempered by the belief that every soul will eventually find its way home, back to the source, Brahman. “He who thus vows His soul to the Supreme Soul, quitting sin, passes unhindered to the endless bliss of unity with Brahma.” -Bhagavad Gita-

The ultimate goal in most traditions is the realization of Moksha, the oneness of the soul and the Atman. There seems to be a division between the two. The soul consists of the mind, the senses and all of the baggage it has collected through the karma of living. It is this that the soul takes into the next life. The Atman on the other hand is the “spark” the bit of Brahman that longs for reunion and is eternal.

Madhva (1197-1276), the founder of the Dvaita branch of Vedanta philosophy, asserts that “Brahman is different from the individual soul, and that Brahman is also different from the material world. Brahman is an independent reality, while the soul and the material world depend for their reality on Brahman.” This would indicate that the relationship between the Infinite One or Brahman and the individual soul is one of creator and a creation that is dependent on the Creator for its guidance and well-being.

The Baha'i Faith

The founder of the Baha'i Faith is Bahá'u'lláh, (the Glory of God). He was preceded by a man called the Bab, (the Gate) in 1844. The Bab was the forerunner and proclaimed the coming of Bahá'u'lláh and proclaimed Him to be the fulfillment of religious prophesy of all world religions. Bahá'u'lláh also declared Himself to be the Promised One, He Whom God Will Make Manifest. The Bab was martyred along with twenty thousand of His followers and Bahá'u'lláh was exiled after a lengthy term of imprisonment to the Prison in Akka Israel, formally known as Palestine. Because Islam considers Muhammad the Seal of the Prophets, the understanding is that Muhammad was the last teacher from God, and anyone who came after Him must automatically be a liar and an infidel. Due to this unfortunate interpretation of the Koran, the Bab, Bahá'u'lláh and their many followers were murdered and persecuted. It is still against Iranian law to be a Baha'i in Iran and they are regularly imprisoned and persecuted as they are in many Muslim countries.

Bahá'u'lláh died a prisoner but during those forty years of imprisonment, He revealed over 100 volumes of teaching which comprise the revelation He left with the world, many of which cover extensively topics of the soul and life after death.

The Concept of God in the Baha'i Faith

First and foremost, Bahá'u'lláh warns that any concepts of God are necessarily inadequate or incomplete as God is unknowable. He explains that there is only one God and what we can know of this God are His attributes such as love, kindness, power, might, and so on. He goes on to explain that this God does not incarnate in creation. "To every discerning and illuminated heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the Divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress." Baha'u'llah (1983ed)

Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith and the great grandson of Baha'u'llah explains further.

“Indeed, the God who could so incarnate His own reality would, in the light of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, cease immediately to be God. So crude and fantastic a theory of Divine incarnation is as removed from, and incompatible with, the essentials of Bahá'í belief as are the no less inadmissible pantheistic and anthropomorphic conceptions of God -- both of which the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh emphatically repudiate and the fallacy of which they expose. Shoghi Effendi (1938)

Reflection and manifestation are words that appear frequently in Baha'i literature. A messenger from God or prophet is described as a manifestation of God, a pure reflection of God and the human soul has the ability to reflect the Manifestation. It is also interesting to note that the soul is not in the body but manifests or reflects through the body. If the body is ill or broken in some way, the soul is therefore unable to manifest completely. The metaphor often used would be that God is like the sun that reflects perfectly in His messengers and teachers, and then by turning to the manifestation, the soul is able to safely see and reflect the qualities of God. The soul therefore, is not affected by the condition of the body. Any illness or incapacity of the body is like having a clouded or broken mirror. If we are to use that metaphor the soul is limited in its ability to use the body but remains resplendent and unaffected as the sun.

The Soul's Journey in the Baha'i Faith

At the moment of conception, the soul is not created but becomes an individual. This leads to the question, what and where was it before? In one of the Hidden Words, a book written by Baha'u'llah, there may be a description of the soul's preexistence. When He describes “that true and radiant morn” or “beneath the shade of the tree of life, which is planted in the all-glorious paradise? Is He talking about some preexistent state? Is this similar to being merged somehow with Brahman?

O MY FRIENDS!

Have ye forgotten that true and radiant morn, when in those hallowed and blessed surroundings ye were all gathered in My presence beneath the shade of the tree of life, which is planted in the all-glorious paradise? Awe-struck ye listened as I gave utterance to these three most holy words: O friends! Prefer not your will to Mine, never desire that which I have not desired for you, and approach Me not with lifeless hearts, defiled with worldly desires and cravings. Would ye but sanctify your souls, ye would at this present hour recall that place and those surroundings, and the truth of My utterance should be made evident unto all of you...-Baha'u'llah- (1985)

Another wonderful metaphor is the one used by Abdul'Baha, the son of Baha'u'llah to describe the powers of the soul. He describes how the human fetus develops five physical powers in the womb

such as sight, hearing, etc. that are designed to perceive the physical world. In like manner, the soul has five spiritual powers which are imagination, thought, comprehension, memory and the common faculty that serves as the intermediary between our physical senses and our spiritual ones. These qualities of the soul are considered eternal.

From the Baha'i perspective, the soul is indivisible, impervious to dissolution and therefore eternal: that the journey to God is also eternal and never ending. The Writings describe how when death occurs, the soul moves into the spiritual world but that there are many worlds of God beyond that one. Heaven and hell can be found in *all* the worlds of God. They are not places but states of mind or soul. Nearness to God is heaven and distance from God is hell. The whole purpose of this life is to develop one's soul and fulfill the potential of loving and knowing. These two qualities are the foundation for all of the other attributes such as wisdom, compassion and so on. If the soul's journey through this world can be compared to the journey of the fetus in the womb, then it is developing the necessary qualities needed for a future world that it will subsequently be born into.

There are descriptions in the Writings also of consciousness in the next world where memory plays a part: remembering and rejoining with loved ones, reflecting on the life in this world, influencing and inspiring the arts and sciences in this world. It is described how the soul in the spiritual world, associates with those who are on the same spiritual level but development and progress are possible only through the grace and mercy of God. The Writings indicate that the next world is not a static destination nor is it a material place as the soul is not material and not in need of a place. Baha'u'llah claims that the human soul is a sign of God and if it be faithful, it shall return to Him.

Conclusions

God

In the Upanishads there are many references to Brahman as the "Supreme, Ultimate", "the One who rules over the root causes and the primal forms of all things"... There seems to be no discrepancy between this view and the Baha'i view of God. Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhava and others, all represent

the Divine or Ultimate reality from different points of view and all have some validity: none are completely right and none completely wrong. Baha'u'llah admonishes that no matter how wise sages and mystics may be, whatever they have said or written can never exceed the finite mind. He claims that only the teachings of the manifestations of God, in their pure form, are the word of God. Regardless of these age old arguments, whether from a dualistic or non-dualistic point of view, it is obvious in the Hindu Writings that Brahman or God is revered by all.

The main difference between some sects of Hinduism and The Baha'i Teachings regarding the Ultimate Reality is pantheism which seems to draw no distinction between God and man, ending in the proposition that the Absolute and the relative occupy the same condition. This is a contradiction again, not only with the Baha'i Teachings but within many of the Hindu Teachings.

The Soul

The wheel which is driven by karma is a fascinating concept. On the one hand, it is viewed as a part of Brahman and on the other hand it is something to transcend. According to the Baha'i Writings, God's attributes are reflected in every atom of the Universe although the essence of God is unknowable and supreme above all things. This may be where some agreement can be forged between the two systems of belief. There are no explicit teachings on Karma in the Baha'i Faith that I could find but as it is a construct that includes reincarnation, I would say that there would not be agreement but if Karma is a description of how your actions can affect your spiritual life in this world and the next, then yes, I imagine Baha'is would strongly agree.

Although there are so many Hindu texts, translated by many different people, I think it safe to say both faiths agree that the Atman and or soul is eternal, and a creation of Brahman or God. The main differences arise on the subjects of reincarnation and transmigration. Baha'is believe that the soul travels onto the next world, to the "Abha Kingdom" and has no need to return to this world. Hindus generally believe that the soul/Atman either reincarnates or merges into Brahman depending on the karmic status of the individual. Although Baha'u'llah agrees that there is an element of truth in the idea of re-birth, He

claims that the concept has been misunderstood and taken literally. He teaches that it does not mean the return of the exact same soul but rather types of people return. One example would be manifestations, avatars and prophets of God return over and over. They are each unique but are also the same type, just as a rose may return year after year and demonstrate the same qualities as last year but is not the exact same rose.

The greatest argument against the idea of reincarnation is given by Abdul’Baha, the son of Baha’u’llah and the interpreter of His writings. Abdul’Baha has written extensively on this subject. For brevity sake, I offer my humble understanding of his explanation... Return does not change what something is. It is not the cause of change. Darkness will remain darkness no matter how many times it returns and likewise, no matter how many times you bring back goodness it will never become darkness. He goes on to explain that everything in the physical universe is unique. Every grain of wheat in all the silos of the world are one of a kind. The sign of singleness is apparent in everything. The material universe is a reflection of the spiritual one. The reality that everything in this world happens once like the unique appearance and disappearance of a snow flake is a reflection of the laws that govern all the worlds of God so in that light, reincarnation would run contrary to the laws of nature and of heaven.

In conclusion, there is great beauty in both religions. It seems that as a religion ages, it accumulates layers of human perceptions and materialistic filters that diminishes its ability to illuminate or transform the heart. It is for this reason that religious truth is renewed and like spring, brings life and new hope. Hopefully it also brings peace.

“The purpose of religion as revealed from the heaven of God's holy Will is to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world; make it not the cause of dissension and strife.
- Baha'u'llah - (1988)

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