

Textbook

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1 Perspectives on the Religious Path

The Sacred is the focal point of religion, the ground of ultimate vitality, value, and meaning. The various modes of experiencing the sacred and the responses to this experience is what makes up the religious traditions of the world.

1.1 Studying Religious Experience

Some scholars approach the study of religion using scientific methodology to develop theories that explain religious activities like any other human activity. Others believe that scholars should just describe the phenomenon of religion as it actually exists and as it is interpreted by its practitioners.

1.2 Some Dimensions of Religion

The word religion comes from the latin *religio* which means bond or link.

Key dimensions of religion:

- human involvement in the realm of the sacred
- expressed in thought, action, and social forms
- a total system of symbols with deep meaning
- path of ultimate transformation

1.2.1 Human Involvement in Realm of Sacred

This suggests a relationship between two levels of experience, that of the limited human level and that of the sacred level. Basic to human experience is a deep sense of the *numinous* (a word stemming from latin for holy/sacred). The numinous has an unlimited, primordial, overpowering quality which leads to us to say that the sacred is ultimate, the basis of everything else, and nothing can supersede or encompass it. The human reaction to experiencing the sacred is called *mysterium tremendum* which means terrifying mystery because it evokes awe in us. Since the sacred is the source of ultimate value, the deepest need of human life is to have a relationship with it.

1.2.2 Expression in Thought, Action, and Social Forms

Religious Tradition It is suggested that there are three modes of religious expression that combined make up religious tradition.

- theoretical: thinking or speaking
- practical: doing or acting
- social: fellowship or community

Theoretical Mode sets forth a way of thinking about the most important issues of life. You can talk about it through narrative (story or myth) or doctrine (theoretical statements)

Practical Mode is the expression that has to do with religions visible and performed side.

Social Forms is religion as it is experienced by the group. The community is what carries religious tradition forward.

1.2.3 Total System of Symbols

Religion guides and gives meaning by presenting a whole view of the world through the use of **symbols**. If we imagine all that a human knows as a circle of the symbols important to them, then all the symbols will have a central vision which is colored by their religion. The symbols closest to the center are the **primary symbols** which are essential to those of that religious path. Towards the outside of the circle are the **secondary symbols** which change easily with new experiences. Religious tradition is not static. When we consider a symbol we must view it in its total context as the same symbol may have many meanings.

1.2.4 Path of Ultimate Transformation

Religion is a way of life, a path of transformation to ultimate meaning. Basically we recognize our fractured relationship with the sacred and use religion to make our way back to it.

1.3 Basic Human Concerns and Religious Responses

We explore religious responses through three areas of questions:

- Sacred Story
- Worlds of Meaning
- Ritual Practices and the Good life

1.3.1 Sacred Story and Historical Context

Individuals tend to connect their own story with the sacred story of their religion. Frequently the story of the founding or the revealing of the religious path is important as it frequently ties divine authority to one's religious identity.

Myths are stories that form the central focus by which people express their religious identity. There is always one *master story* more important than the other.

Our understanding of religious tradition comes from it being passed down between generations, which gives it a dynamic quality as each generation puts their own spin on it.

1.3.2 Worlds of Meaning

Often the power encountered in the world gets personified as gods or spirits resulting in *polytheism*. In most of these religions there is a supreme god (a creator or one who wield absolute authority) that delegates power to other gods. If there is only one god it's called *monotheism*. Some religions are **nondualism** which means that there is no difference between the two realities (real, and sacred). **Monism** is the view that all reality is one unified divine reality. Within monism there might be gods but they are facets of the one sacred reality.

Many religions try to deal with the big questions through **cosmogonic stories** about the creation and maintenance of the world. Frequently the world is created as the result of a divine being's actions and it is humanity's role to assist this being in their work. Through this we start to get the concept of an *ideal human existence*. By having this ideal to work towards humans can evaluate their actions and make changes to move toward it.

Many religions have a path that leads you to a transformation away from the "badness" of the world and towards a more perfect life. A religious path presents methods of interaction with the realm of the sacred so that this sacred power can transform your life. Some religions emphasize that humans cannot transform themselves alone and must rely on outside forces to help them and others emphasize the exact opposite. One of the distinctive characteristics of a religion

is its particular vision of the interaction between human practice and sacred gift usually through the modes of religious expression. The path to follow usually involves distancing yourself from badness and moving toward goodness.

The path to transformation is a means and an end. You want to reach the ideal state but you also are experiencing the sacred just by being on the path.

1.3.3 Ritual Practices and the Good Life

Most cultures allocate **sacred time** in which you practice ritual. It is thought that humans could not tolerate the meaningless chaos that would evolve from a life without special or “strong” times to provide centers of meaning. This is often called “re-creation” because we are recreating our connection with the sacred. It is at these times that we feel we are contemporaries with the spirits and heroes of our myths. Rituals also reorient our life back in line with the sacred path. They also connect the sacred to average life to remind us that it's always there.

There needs to be an emptying out called **kenosis** of the power of life. This allows renewal to take place. This is followed by a filling up called **plerosis** where the renewing power of the sacred can be felt. Often there is an in-between state called **liminal** where you return to a sort of prebirth existence.

Rituals are often repeating on patterns of varying length but they can also occur at important life cycle changes and only happen once (usually on an individual basis).

Most religions also have rituals to bring about healing and wholeness to a person. This often entails the creation of sacred time in which the individual can tap the powers of the sacred to heal. Frequently the community helps.

Religion is most often expressed through art because interaction with the sacred is based on perception (aka *aesthesis*). Art can point beyond itself to the sacred dimension and this act of symbolizing the sacred also works to share it somehow. Sometimes art is there to represent the sacred and other times it just presents it (presenting the sacred allows you to experience it while representing it is more informative). Art can evoke experience of the sacred much better than rational and logical attempts because it is so much more expressive. Often times religious architecture tries to embody *axis mundi* which is the center of the world when planning their orientation. Sometimes art can be too evocative and be considered idolatry (worship of an idol) which is not ok in some religions. Religious art of the east emphasizes intuitional, meditative, aesthetic experience while religious art of the west emphasizes word, intelligence, and logic.

Most religious societies gain their structure from their master story. This can result in religious leaders whose power is derived from their office or religious leaders that derive power from their own charisma.

Almost all of our understanding of religion is from a male-centric point of view. Very rarely are there predominant females in myths or in places of power, and if there were little is known about them.

Many religions have a sacred place usually established in their master story as the center of the world. A sacred land provides a feeling of rootedness which is why it is so very important to most religions.

All religions have a *sacred history* usually outlining what their gods did and such. It is in these texts that the good life is usually defined. The ethical life is how we should be and usually based on the religious vision of creation and human nature. This is usually decreed by some higher being outside oneself that we then internalize and make part of our life. Ethical life centers around controlling your desires and transforming them into something good to best serve your community. Many religions view their ethics as the truth and thus feel a responsibility to spread it to others so that they may live the good life as well.

1.4 Key Terms

Aesthetic concerning beauty or artistic perception, important for religious expression.

Cosmogenic Myth sacred story that tells of the creation or founding of the world and of basic human realities.

Ethics thought and study about moral decisions on the basis of traditions of right and wrong.

Healing Rituals religious rituals devoted to promoting health, often complementary to modern medical practices.

Kenosis “emptying out”; in ritual, the movement of separation or doing away with the old state

liminal in ritual, the state between separation and restoration

Monism view that all reality is one unified divine reality

Monotheism belief in one almighty god, separate from the world

Myth story about sacred beings in the beginning time, telling how existence came to be as it is and providing the pattern for authentic life

Nondualism view that ultimate reality and the phenomenal world are not different

Path of Transformation practice in a religious tradition that changes one from the wrong state to the right state

Plerosis “filling up”; fulfillment or restoration movement of ritual

Polytheism belief that many divine powers share in the world’s operation

Religious Traditions sacred stories and basic ideas and practices that religious communities hand over from generation to generation; that which is handed over (Latin traditio) is thought to maintain a recognizable unity even while changing over time

Rites of Passage rituals connected with the critical changes or passages in a person’s life

Rituals activities of many kinds that connect people with sacred realities

Sacred Space space that is made special by connection with the sacred, providing orientation for a people

Sacred Story master story of a religion, providing identity for the adherents

Sacred Time special time of ritual and festival, when mythic events are made present once more

The Sacred what is experienced as ultimate reality that is the ground of ultimate value and meaning

Symbols words, pictures, ideas, rituals, and so on that evoke deep meanings by connecting with sacred reality

Transformation the act of reaching the ideal state

Understanding “standing under” another’s way of thought and life, comprehending it by reference to one’s own experience

Worship respectful ritual activity in special times, directed toward sacred beings or realities of ultimate value

2 Hindu Sacred Story and Historical Context

The word hindu stems from the persian word meaning indian. The only people of india that wouldn't be classified as hindus are those that do not respect the Vedic scriptures and social class structure they describe.

2.1 Foundations of the Hindu Tradition

Hinduism does not have a specific founder. This faith places little emphasis on historical events or people, most things happen in a transcendental time frame. The vedic scriptures are considered timeless and eternal. The events described in their epics are said to have happened hundreds of thousands of years ago during various mythic ages. They do not attempt to fit their religious events and people into human time frames, giving them a eternal religious truth.

2.1.1 The Formative Period

The hindu story probably started with the Aryans in the indus valley, as their sacred text was the Vedas. The aryaans migrated to india around 2000 BCE and absorbed some of the indigenous peoples religions into the formative hinduism they practiced. The civilization of the indus valley was very advanced (enough to rival the egyptians) with its own writing system and advanced agricultural techniques. It had two major cities, Mohenjo-daro and Harappa were major centers for religion and government. There was a uniformity of culture throughout this civilization (all cities were laid out with the same plan) which implies it was controlled by powerful rulers.

The IVC (indus valley civilization) had a great reverence for water, each house had a bathroom and the major city centers had large water tanks for ritual bathing. The concept of water purification is also prevalent in hinduism. The region also greatly worships fertility and cycles (as an agriculturally based people this makes sense) which may have influenced the concept of samsara in hinduism. They also worshiped the male fertility power with many phallic symbols. Most interesting of all is a recurring figure of what appears to be a man doing yoga. It has been suggested that this figure grew into Shiva, a great yogi that is often symbolized in a lingam (a phallic symbol). The IVC started declining around 1900 BCE due to geological changes (extreme dryness).

After the IVC died out the Aryans moved into the area. The aryaans were pastoralists and splintered into tribes with chieftans. They had a three caste society (priests, warriors, and herders, sound familiar). They domesticated horses and invented the chariot and were quite good at metal working. The aryaans didn't have a writing system for a long time, so the Vedas were ritual hymns and shared through word of mouth, supposedly it was heard by the poet-prophets of old. This is how hinduism was formed. The four Smritis were collections of the original hymns, also called the Vedas.

The **rig-veda** is the oldest and most important collection. The **sama-veda** contains the verses to be sung to music during the sacrifice. The **yajur veda** had formulas to be spoken by the priest who performed the physical component of the ritual. the **atharva veda** contained incantations for priests to use during various other events (childbirth, illness, etc), kind of like spells.

The worship of the gods centered around sacrifice, petition, and praise. They resided in three realms, sky, atmosphere, and earth. The sanskrit word for god *deva* means shining. The gods were the powers that create life and growth in the many things around us (wind, fire, speech, consciousness, etc). There are many gods so we'll look at the four most commonly mentioned in the rig-veda.

Varuna is the god of the vault of the sky. He guards the cosmic order (called *rita*). He does this by watching humans and punishing their wrongdoings with disease (he catches them with his noose) so you must petition him to remove these effects.

Indra is the god of the atmosphere (storm, lightning, thunder, and so on). He is a boisterous god that like to drink and lead people into battle (think of Thor). He is famous for defeating the demon *vrtra* who had shut up the waters and the sun.

Agni is the god of fire, he resides in the third realm (earth). He is most important as the god of the sacrificial fire, he accepts the sacrificial offerings and transports them to the realm of the gods. This makes him the priest of the gods.

Soma god of soma, an intoxicating drink, also resides on earth. This drink is often offered to the gods as a sacrifice. He represents exstacy and the power of those that have experience the divine.

The aryaans believed that life centered around the *atman* or breath/should of a person. This lived on after death and by means of a funeral fire sacrifice could be transported to the heavenly realm (depended on their deeds in life). Most devotion to the gods came in the form of fire sacrifice. It would be done daily by the head of the house and in more complex ceremonies by the priests. It was believed that the gods would come and sit with you to enjoy the sacrifice and listen to your petitions. It was believed that these sacrifices were necessary to help sustain the gods so that they could continue their work on earth.

Hinduism entered a speculative period around 1000 BCE which resulted in the **Bramanas** and the **Upanishads**. The sages start to think that some power prior to the gods is the origin of everything and they start looking for the sacred center. They try to describe it and even personify it has a giant man called *purusha*. It is when Purusha is sacrificed that the universe comes into existence. This means that when a priest is enacting a sacrifice he is mimicing the primordeial sacrifice. Purusha also becomes the classes.

- mouth - priest class
- arms - warrior class
- thighs - merchant class
- feet - servant class

This is the first time the hindu caste system is mentioned in the vedas. This means that the caste system is of cosmic order. It also marks a transition where the priest class is now at the top where the warrior class used to be.

This period also showed an increase in the importance placed on knowledge. It is not just the sacrifice that is important but the inner knowledge that powers the blessing.

There isnt a clear break between the brahmanas and the upanishads. These combined with the vedic hymns are collectively known as the vedas. The brahmanas outlined new rituals that had exploded in complexity. The upanishads looked more into the inner truth of reality and the cause of human problems. Upanishad may come from the notion of teachers passing down knowledge (upa = near, ni = down, sad = sit).

This is the point at which “repeated death” is introduced. This is the concept of a death that ends all future lives. This is something to be feared but it grows into the concept of samsara and our need to escape it. The upanishad concludes that samsara is the cause of human suffering. The suffering you go through is caused by the karma attached to your atma from a previous life.

The upanishads continue to speculate on the one source of all and eventuall name it **Brahman** which is prior to all that is know, including samsara. From this they derive that knowledge of brahman could bring you liberation from samsara, called **moksha**. This meant that it is through inner knowledge that you can reach the divine and not external sacrifice.

The vedic hymns, brahmanas, and upanishads are collectively called the **shruti**, that which was “heard” by the sages, and form the basis of hindu belief.

The Many Faces of Hindu Tradition

Many powerful nations had started to form in the area and these gave rise to challenging faiths to Hinduism. Two such movements were Jainism and Buddhism, both of which strongly opposed the sacrifices used in hinduism. Jainists focused on asceticism (self control) and buddhists emphasized discipline and knowledge. In the midst of all this unrest, Alexander the Great invaded in 400 BCE and the Maryuna family created a dynasty in northern india that expanded greatly. This dynasty was not very loyal to the vedic faith and frequently converted to buddhism. Eventually unity was refound around 500 CE.

During this period of great upheaval many different religious traditions were formed. They tended to focus in a number of directions, later denoted *margas* (paths). This period was known as the epic period due to all these changes. Many new writings were composed and they are referred to as the **smriti** or what was remembered. They include the yogas sutras (yoga sutras of patanjali), the dharmasutras (the law-code of marnu), and the epics(ramayana and mahabharata).

Yoga A common concept in vedic ritual is the withdrawal from society and practicing ascecitism as you should have the utmost control of yourself. The image given is that the body is the chariot and the soul is the charioteer. Yoga takes withdrawal one step farther and aims to withdraw even from mental activity. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali outline

an eight-step method for discipline and control which is sometimes called royal yoga. This writing is often considered scripture.

Dharma Dharma is another name for the cosmic order (the thing guarded by Varuna) and many sages spent much time trying to outline what that is. In the Dharma Sutras they attempt to picture an idealized society. This often lead to tension with the pursuit of moksha that required withdrawing from society, but this is considered just a facet of the hindu faith. The Law of Manu is considered the laws of the cosmic order as passed down by Manu, the originator of man. It outlines the rights and responsibilities of the four classes (also called varnas) in hindu society. This was probably an attempt to order society after a time of great chaos and upheaval but came to be very influential and still practiced today.

Ramayana These epics outline the ideals of hindu values in a perfect history. It does not reflect actual events though. The Ramayana is the story of Vishnu and his fights with demonic forces. The hero of the story is **Rama** and prince that was born as an **avatara** (incarnation) of Vishnu. The villain is Ravana the demon king of the island Lanka. Rama fights a great war with the demon to save his wife Sita with the help of some monkey people lead by their chief Hanuman. During this time he sets a model for the ideal ruler. He accepts 14 years of exile instead of questioning his father's rash decision and even exiles his beloved wife because his subjects question her chastity and it was causing unrest. Rama is still considered a great hero and has a festival Ramlila every autumn.

Mahabharata The Mahabharata outlines the conflict between two clans in northern India. The heroes are the five Pandava brothers who have a conflict with their cousins about who will rule. It is a long and rambling tale, but the most famous part is the Bhagavad-Gita (song of the beloved one) in which one brother, Arjuna is overcome with grief when he sees that his enemies contain many good people. He says that he would rather die than inflict such pain. His charioteer is Krishna (an avatara of Vishnu) and he explains that he must do his duty as a warrior. He explains that although he will be killing their bodies, their atman will continue much like shedding clothes. He also explains that action done without desire (for reward) is higher than not acting. So you can seek liberation by taking selfless action which helps ease the tension between seeking moksha through withdrawal and the need to maintain society. Krishna also explains that liberation can be achieved through **bhakti** (the love of the gods), he says that the highest path is selfless action and wisdom through loving and surrendering to the gods. In this way the Gita summarizes the three paths to liberation.

Continuing Transformation in the Hindu Story

Unlike many other religions, hinduism doesn't have a clear end to its scripture, it can continue to evolve limitlessly.

Shaping the Sacred Ways: Puranas and Tantras

An explosion of bhakti resulted in many devotional cults to various gods. The new line of kings united northern India and gave strong worship to Vishnu. A series of stories called the **Puranas** were published about the various gods and devotion to them. Many stories focus on Vishnu, his wife Lakshmi, and his avatara Krishna.

A great revival of Vishnu bhakti swept through India as led by *Chaitanya*. It introduced parades and singing and dancing as shows of devotion. He also synthesized Krishna worship and built many temples. These practices are still carried on today even in North America through the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (aka Hare Krishna).

Shiva is the god of dualities so his stories have a different tone. He is creation and destruction, male and female, so on. Shiva is a great yogi so many of his followers were ascetics and yogis. Worship of him became very prevalent in southern India. The largest group was called the *Shaiva Siddhanta* and they had their own sacred texts equal to the Vedas called the *Agamas*. Another group called the *Virashaiva* protested the caste system and refused to go through the initiation ceremony. They also were called the *Lingayats* because they wore the lingam (Shiva's symbols).

In conjunction with the growing worship of Shiva, a group started worshiping his wife Shakti. Since Shiva embodies all dualities it was believed that Shakti was his power personified. Sometimes she was called Parvati or Uma. Shakti herself is also worshiped as a separate goddess through her three avatars Durga, Kali, and Devi. The relationship between these three is muddled, but Kali and Durga are vicious and destructive. Durga is famous for saving the world from a demon. Devi is worshiped as the divine mother. Kali is said to have emerged from when Durga became furious while fighting demons. She's scary as shit DO NOT CROSS KALI. Weirdly enough there are many people who worship Kali, the destructive mother, specifically.

Tantrism This is the pursuit of moksha through elaborate rituals including yoga and the worship of the great Goddess. It focused on uniting the dualities, specifically that of Shiva (intelligence) and Shakti (creativity). The right handed path involved matras, mandalas, and yoga to activate Shakti to unite it with Shiva. The left handed path was only for advanced practitioners, it involved a special ritual called circle-worship, and using forbidden elements. The forbidden elements (called the M's since all their names in sanskrit start with M) are wine, meat, fish, parched grain, and sexual intercourse. This is often frowned upon by traditional hindus.

Rethinking the Vedic Truth: Philosophical Systems

Many people spent a lot of time and thought on the philosophical underpinnings of the Hindu tradition. Through this extensive questioning 6 schools or darshanas (meaning view points) evolved.

- Samkhya
- Yoga
- Nyaya
- Vaisheshika
- Mimamsa
- Vedanta

Nyaya (school of logic) used logic as a means to reach liberation.

Vaisheshika (atomistic school) used cosmology as a means to reach liberation.

Mimamsa focused on the eternality of the vedas and thus how important vedic rituals are to dharma.

Samkhya-Yoga focused highly on the 8 stage path taught by Patanjali. This was combined with the samkhya's map of the cosmos and the causes of bondage. It talks about the duality of pure matter (a person's body and mind) and pure spirit (the transcendent consciousness). Bondage stems from the mind mistaking itself for the pure spirit and we must pull these apart to reach moksha.

Vedanta focused on the teachings of the Upanishads concerning Brahman. They focus on the union of atman and brahman and the correct knowledge (jnana). **Shankara** was a famous thinker in this school that wrote many very influential commentaries on the upanishads and the bhagavad-gita. He focused on the fact that brahman does not have a duality and thus is identical to the atman. He believes that our problem is that we view the world as changing and the way to liberation is through meditation to break this illusion.

Advaita believed in the nondualist vedantic view, founded by Shankara. There are no permanent individual selves and no samsara, these are all illusions. This implied that devotion to a god will not bring liberation because even the gods are just an illusion. There are different levels of truth and for those at a lower level, devotion to a god can lead you to spiritual understanding.

Vishishtadvaita founded by **Ramanuja** believed that withing reality there is a distinction between the self and god.

Muslim Presence and Impact on India

A great expansion of Islam spread throughout southern asia. By the thirteenth century muslim was dominant in northern india. Many clashes occurred between the two very different religions resulting many temples being replaced by mosques and heavy religious restrictions. The two religions heavily influenced each other and their ideas.

The Modern Era: Renaissance and Response to the West

When England arrived in India a bunch of stuff changed, they introduced Christianity and English and many other European things.

Reform Movement and Thinkers

Western ideas brought to India led to people questioning the caste system. A man named *Ram Mohan* spoke out against abuses in the Hindu system (polytheism, neglect of women's education, and burning a widow alive at her husband's cremation). He founded the *Brahmo Samaj* to advocate a rationalistic religion without the Hindu rituals and customs. This society later broke away from the Vedas by arguing that reason and conscience are the authority of religion. This group still advocated for ethical reform until it collapsed due to internal arguing.

The *Arya Samaj* was founded by Swami Dayanada Sarasvati also wanting to restore Hindu purity. He rejected the Puranas and all the popular gods of Hindu as well as the caste system. In his book he argued that Hindus should only rely on the original Vedas and all other religions had perverted this truth, it should be the source of all science as well. Anyone can study the Vedas and women should have more rights. In its work for social reform the Arya Samaj was very similar to the Brahmo Samaj, but they strongly rejected Western influence.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa he was a temple priest for Kali, but he worshiped many other gods. He practiced worship through a trance-like state. Weirdly enough he also followed Western disciplines from Christianity to Islam. He used these experiences to expand Hindu to incorporate any tradition of worship. This was based on his belief that the ultimate reality could be experienced by any one of any religion. His disciple Swami Vivekananda traveled the world spreading Hindu.

Independence and New Visions: Gandhi and Aurobindo

Gandhi was the leader of the independence movement in India to get away from Britain and remove Muslim influence. He was heavily influenced by the Bhagavad-Gita and the sermon of the mount and he used these to develop the philosophy of *satyagraha* (holding the truth) which is an act of nonviolent resistance that awakens guilt in your opponent. He lived an ascetic life with his wife and his spinning wheel which became the symbol of his movement.

Aurobindo was a contemporary of Gandhi that retreated from the world to practice tantric yoga and rewrite his books that described that spiritual reality can be found through the practice of an all-encompassing discipline of yoga.

Hindu Worlds of Meaning

The Ultimate Real: Brahman

Hindus often refer to two levels of truth when referring to Brahman. There is the 'formed' Brahman which is personified for worship and the 'unformed' Brahman which is more a force of nature. The Brahman without attributes (unformed) is called *nirguna* and is often described by saying what it is not, this is the highest truth. The Brahman with attributes is called *saguna* and is the creative power of the universe. Usually this is for experiencing Brahman in a personal sense called *isvara*. When you become enlightened you gain knowledge that the physical world is an illusion, called *maya* superimposed on the one reality, Brahman. It is through closer inspection that we can come to know this.

The above concept of two levels of truth is called *dualism* and its main proponent is *Shankara*.

God as Supreme Sacred Reality

Many philosophers argued the opposite of Shankara and said that the personal experience of Brahman (*saguna*) is the highest truth. This movement was led by *Ramanuja*. He was a dualist that was very devoted to Vishnu. He argued that *saguna* Brahman was like your soul's soul. God is the ultimate reality and so worshipping him is the highest truth.

The bhagavad-gita presents Vishnu as the highest god and in essence brahman. He is the creator and preserver of the world and his wife Laksmi is the goddess of wealth and abundance. When the world is threatened by demons he embodies one of his avatars to go fight (as seen in the ramayana epic). The vaishnavites worship him.

Many worship Shiva as the ultimate reality as they feel that the duality of his nature better represents the ultimate reality. A story in the puranas shows brahman and vishnu arguing and a large pole separating them from which the sacred om emerges. It is revealed that this pillar is shivas lingum and they worship him. He represents all dualities, yoga, and divine dancing. His lingum is the axis of the universe. He is worshiped by the shaivites.

Some people worship Shakti (shiva's wife) as supreme. She has many different forms and is usually associated with shiva. Durga is often worshiped for her power in fighting demons and protecting the world. A demon was set to attack the world and he was impervious to everything except a woman so the gods pooled all their power and formed durga, thus she is the embodiment of the strength of all the male gods. Her fury becomes Kali. She can also use her power to nourish the world. Some hindus believe there is a unified goddess Devi (Goddess) or Mahadevi (great goddess). Shakti (power) is applied to her because it is the creative force.