

Did God Become Man? (part 2 of 5): The Gods, Man is God, and God Becomes His Creatures

Description: A look at the concept of God and pantheism in polytheistic faiths, specifically Hinduism.

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The Gods

However, there does remain an aspect of belief in God which defies all logic and reason, but which has become a corner stone of faith. It is the belief that God became man. Where the original monotheistic belief in God degenerated into a belief that there must be intermediaries between human beings and the Supreme Being to either convey human quests or to act on behalf of God in the world, the intermediaries became objects of worship. The intermediaries were often conceived as spirits found in all manifestations of nature. Consequently, humans from primitive times have worshiped spirits of the forest, rivers, skies and the earth etc., until the present time. Occasionally nature itself was worshiped, and at other times, symbols representing nature were worshiped. The religious systems, which evolved from these types of beliefs tended to be localized and remain scattered among primitive people around the world till today. Such beliefs did not converge in the form of a single belief system of international impact, as far as is known in the current records of human history.

On the other hand, where the monotheistic belief degenerated into the personification of God's power as separate intermediary entities represented by images, idols became a focal point for worshipping God. The powers of God became gods. Such beliefs have culminated in ancient and modern times as natural religions of international impact. Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman religions have died out due to the complete subversion of these empires by Christianity. However, the Indian expression of Hinduism survived both Muslim and Christian colonization and remains the national religion of approximately one billion people in India. Christianity and Islam, with exception of Bali in Indonesia, have supplanted their direct international impact in the majority of the Far East. However, the different forms of Buddhism, its offshoot, have become the main religion of hundreds of millions in the Far East. Different forms of this Hindu reform movement continue to spread in the West today.

Man is God

According to Hinduism, the basic concept is that everything is God. There is, fundamentally, no distinction between God and His creation. In Hindu philosophy, every living being has a self or a soul that is called Atman. It is generally believed that the soul

is actually God, called Brahman. Consequently, the essence of Hindu belief is the idea that Atman and Brahman are one and the same; in other words, the human soul is divine. Furthermore, human society is divided into castes or classes, where each caste represents human beings who came into existence from different parts of the divine being, Brahman. The upper caste, the Brahmins, came from the head of God; whereas, the lowest caste, the Sudras, came from God's feet. Though there are officially only four main castes, there are, in reality, many sub-castes. Each one of the main castes is subdivided into thousands of lesser castes. Hindus believe that when a person dies, he or she is reincarnated. The soul, Atman, of the dead person never dies but is continually reborn. If people are good in this life, then they will be reborn into a higher level of the caste system in their next life. Conversely, if they are bad in this life, they will be reborn into a lower level, which is one of the main reasons why so many Hindus commit suicide annually. Daily, newspapers regularly record incidents of individuals and families hanging themselves from fans in their homes. In a recent edition of one of the local papers, a Hindu man killed himself when India lost a cricket match to Sri Lanka. When one's belief system espouses reincarnation, suicide becomes an easy route to evade difficulties in this life.

When a person reaches the top caste, the Brahmins, after various re-incarnations, the cycle of rebirth ends, and he reunites with Brahman. This process of reunification is called Moksha, and in Buddhism it is called Nirvana[1]. The Atman becomes once again reunited with Brahman. Thus, man becomes God.

God Becomes His Creatures

In Hindu belief, the attributes of *Brahman* are manifest as different gods. The attribute of creation becomes the creator god, *Brahma*, the attribute of preservation becomes the preserver god, *Vishnu*, and the attribute of destruction becomes the destroyer god, *Siva*. The most popular one amongst them, *Vishnu*, becomes incarnate among human beings at different points in time. This incarnation is called in Sanskrit *avatar*, which means "descent." It represents the descent of God into the human world by becoming a human being or one of the other creatures of this world. Primarily, the term *avatar* refers to the ten main appearances of the god *Vishnu*. Among them is *Matsya*, the incarnation of God as a fish; *Kurma* as a tortoise; *Varaha* as a boar (a wild pig); *Narasimha* as a half-man, half-lion; *Vamana* as a dwarf; and probably the most common one is *Rama*, the human incarnation. *Rama* is the hero of the epic, *Ramayana*, about which movies are made and shown regularly in India. The other popular god is *Krishna*, the other incarnation of *Vishnu* as a human being. His epic is the *Mahabharata*, which describes the descent of the gods in human forms to save the Goddess Earth, oppressed by demons, burdened by overpopulation and in danger of dissolution[2]. There are different variations of this belief regarding how many incarnations there are and what other animal forms they adopt, but all generally follow these manifestations. Consequently, in Hinduism, the belief of one-fifth of humankind, man is God or part of God. The difference between the Creator and His creation is only superficial.

Popular Buddhism shares the Hindu incarnation concept with its own modifications. It

teaches that every conscious being possesses the "Buddha nature" and is, therefore, capable of becoming a Buddha. Buddha, in earlier teachings[3], was truly a human teacher who lived and taught. However, in *Mayahana* Buddhism, the idea of the "eternal" Buddha, embodying the absolute truth, developed, and Buddha was elevated to Godhood. In order to reveal his message to humankind, this eternal Buddha manifests himself from time to time as an earthly Buddha to live and work among humans. Thus, Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, became just one of the earthly appearances, a phantom apparition created by the eternal Buddha[4]. Buddhism incorporated the elements of the Indian system of the gods and heavens and responded to the popularity of *Bhakti* Hinduism, personal devotion to savior deities. The Absolute or Buddha nature was seen by some as having attributes manifest as eternal Buddhas and bodhisattvas[5] who existed in spiritual realms and offered their merits, protection and help toward enlightenment to all their followers who were devoted to them.

The chief ones among the eternal bodhisattvas were Avalokitesvara, a personification of compassion, and Manjusri, a personification of wisdom. And among the eternal Buddhas were Aksobhya (the Imperturbable), Amitabha (Eternal Light) and Amitayus (Eternal life).

Endnotes:

[1] This is a Sanskrit term meaning "blown out," referring to the extinction of all worldly desires, or salvation. Though the term originated in Vedantic writings (*Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Vedas*), it is most often associated with Buddhism. In Hinayana Buddhism the term is equated with extinction, while in Mahayana Buddhism it is a state of bliss (*Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, p. 393).

[2] The theological centerpiece of the epic is the *Bhagavad Gita* (*Dictionary of World Religions*, p. 448).

[3] *Theravada* Buddhism, Doctrine of the Elders, is essentially a discipline, which an individual practices in order to achieve salvation for himself by himself. Only monks who have the stamina and will power to live the strenuous religious life can reach this goal, and one who achieves it is called an *arhant*. There are two types of *Nirvana*, one with residue and one without. The first is achieved by the *arhant* here and now, the five aggregates (*skandhas*: which comprise all individuals; matter, sensation, perception, predisposition and consciousness) are still present, although the cravings that lead to continued rebirth are extinguished. *Nirvana* without residue refers to the state of the *arhant* after death about which the Buddha remains silent. There can only be one Buddha in an eon and enlightenment is reserved for an elite few. This aspect of Buddhism is called *Hinayana*, or Lesser Vehicle.

With the passage of time after the Buddha's death, *Theravada* monks were criticized as being too narrow and individualistic in their teachings. Dissensions arose and Buddhism evolved. A new form, *Mahayana*, or Great Vehicle, came to dominate. (*Dictionary of World Religions*, pp. 126-127)

[4] Dictionary of World Religions, p. 129.

[5] Originally this term referred to former Buddhas while they were still in their quest for enlightenment. In *Mahayana* the bodhisattva postpones his final complete enlightenment and attainment of *nirvana* in order to aid all other beings in their quest for enlightenment. (*Dictionary of World Religions*, p. 112).

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