

Introducing Hinduism
Class Discussion Questions
Chapter 1 - 9

Chapter 1

What complexities arise when attempting to define “Hinduism?” Do you think that these complexities will continue as Hinduism evolves over time?

Why might the discovery of the seal depicting the “ithyphallic-proto Śiva” be important to Hinduism?

Discuss both the Cultural Diffusion Hypothesis and the Indo-European Migration Thesis. Which of these theses do you think is stronger, and why?

Chapter 2

Is Uddālaka’s description of “Being” similar to the Upaniṣadic description of Brahman? Why or why not?

Āyurveda is still widely practiced today. Discuss possible reasons for its continued practice.

To what degree do you think Max Müller’s speculations on the origin of religion affected the evolution of Hinduism, and why?

What appear to be similar motifs in the aśvamedha and agnicayana rituals?

Chapter 3

Why do you think Hinduism does not have a single authoritative cosmology? And, do you think this has had a positive or negative impact on the tradition?

Many of the Vedic hymns make statements about the nature of the gods, the creation, or aspects of reality, and often such statements are framed as questions. Why do you think this is so?

There are a few general beliefs regarding cosmology which Hindus agree upon. What are some of these general beliefs, and why do you think they are agreed upon while other beliefs are contested?

Chapter 4

What impact do you think the Puruṣa Sūkta hymn of the ṛg Veda has had on Hindu religion and society?

How is status determined in Hindu society, and how do notions of status affect Hindu religion?

According to the Havik Brahmins, even the gods are susceptible to the hierarchies of purity and pollution. Why do you think this is so?

Chapter 5

What is the Sanskrit term for life-cycle rites?

Describe the yajñopavita.

What are the four life-stages prescribed by orthodox Hinduism?

Can men from the twice-born classes take on wives from lower classes?

Define Śrāddha.

List the four goals deemed worthy of pursuit by orthodox Hindus.
What are the eight categories of marriage provided by Manu?
Nowadays, this term is used to designate any kind of teacher.
This is viewed as the regulator of the two goals kāma and artha.
Define saubhagya.

Chapter 6

Do you think Hindu notions of purity and impurity enter into the realm of Indian language?
How do you think the notions of Śiva and Śakti as the quiescent male and active female principles have impacted the Hindu tradition?
Sanskrit language is created through the union of consonants and vowels, likened to the union of Śiva and Śakti. What do you think this says about the Sanskrit language?

Chapter 7

Patañjali states that Yoga is the ending (nirodha) of the whirling (vṛtti) of thought (citta). If Yoga means “union,” how might ending the turnings of thought be regarded as “union?”
Discuss Vaiśeṣika’s category of non-existence, and come up with some examples of things that contain a quasi-existence through the words that designate them.
Discuss why you think the Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika darśanas have received sparse attention since the ascendancy of western logic, mathematics, and science.

Chapter 8

What are the two main Hindu epics?
Which epic is said to have taken place in the Tretā Yuga?
How many kaṇḍas make up the Rāmāyaṇa?
Define svayaṃvara.
Who is Śūrpaṇakhā?
What is the name of the monkey general in the Rāmāyaṇa?
In what manner was King Janaka’s daughter born?
Who is the Mahābhārata’s author?
Who are the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas?
For how many years were the Pāṇḍavas exiled into the forest?

Chapter 9

Discuss why you think it is effective that the Gītā does not present a simple, unified philosophy.
What is the supreme sacrifice as mentioned in the Gītā, and what might the consequences of such a notion of sacrifice be?
Karma yoga involves action without attachment. Discuss whether you think attachment might ever be considered helpful in the quest for enlightenment.