

# The Epistemological Double Standard Inherent in Christian Metaphysical Beliefs

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## Abstract

This paper uses comparative religion to critique Christian claims of possessing exclusively true metaphysical beliefs. In so doing, this paper takes a different approach than most other challenges to Christian metaphysical beliefs. Instead of directly responding to Christian arguments supporting their views, this paper challenges the Christian by pointing out that their grounds for rejecting the metaphysics of other religions will necessarily undermine the grounds of their own beliefs. Specifically, the paper takes the metaphysical beliefs of Hinduism, which has a metaphysics that appears both significantly different from and contrary to Christian dogma, and demonstrates that the same types of epistemological arguments that a Christian would almost certainly have to use against a Hindu can just as fruitfully be used to demonstrate the weaknesses, inconsistencies, and lack of evidential foundation that are prevalent in Christian metaphysical beliefs.

## Keywords

Comparative Religion, Hinduism, Christianity, Metaphysics, Epistemology, Philosophy of Religion, Christian Metaphysics, Problems with Christian Metaphysical Beliefs, Hinduism vs. Christianity, Comparing Hinduism and Christianity, Comparing Hindu and Christian Metaphysical Beliefs

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## 1. Introduction

This paper uses comparative religion to critique Christian claims of possessing exclusively true metaphysical beliefs. In so doing, this paper takes a different approach than most other challenges to Christian metaphysical beliefs. Instead of directly responding to Christian arguments supporting their views, I challenge the Christian by pointing out that their grounds for rejecting the metaphysics of other religions will necessarily undermine the grounds of their own beliefs.

Specifically, this paper examines the metaphysical beliefs of Hinduism, which has a metaphysics that is both

significantly different from and contrary to Christian dogma, and demonstrates that the same types of epistemological arguments that a Christian would almost certainly have to use against a Hindu can just as fruitfully be used to demonstrate the weaknesses, inconsistencies, and lack of evidential foundation that are prevalent in Christian metaphysical beliefs<sup>1</sup>.

One caveat we should keep in mind is that Hinduism is not monolithic. Just as there are different Christian sects, such as Catholicism, Presbyterianism, Methodist, Baptist, etc., each with its own distinctive beliefs, there are also different beliefs in Hinduism, and arguably much more so because not only was there no central Hindu Church to ensure uniformity in belief, but also Hinduism is an older religion which developed with numerous local variations in each particular region and community. Moreover, the Hindu primary texts are both greater in number and were written over a longer period of time than were the books comprising the New Testament, and as a result it is not surprising that there are inconsistencies between the various Hindu texts. With this in mind, I will examine some basic Hindu metaphysical beliefs that I think were and are held by the majority of Hindus, and they will be compared to the corresponding dominant Christian beliefs.

A second caveat is that this paper will point to some apparent puzzles and paradoxes in both Hinduism and Christianity while ignoring possible replies by the proponents of each religion. The purpose of this paper is not to explore these problems in full; rather, it is to highlight how the Christian would likely find Hindu paradoxes and unsubstantiated assumptions to be significantly damaging to the credibility of Hinduism, while at the same time, and quite conveniently and unfairly, finding Christian inconsistencies and evidential inadequacies to be far less problematic<sup>2</sup>.

Because it has become rather fashionable to interpret other religions, including Hinduism, as tapping into the same metaphysical realities as Christianity, I want to note at the outset that the two religions seem to hold very different views, and this is reflected in both the written texts and the actual practice of most past and present followers of each religion. For example, both John Hick and Huston Smith wish to interpret the Hindu concept of Brahman as the equivalent of the Christian God, and there is some support for that position in the later Hindu texts. I think, however, that when considering the majority of Hindu texts, and especially the earlier ones, this is more wishful thinking than reality since it seeks to equate the Brahman of no attributes with the Christian God who has the attributes of perfection, such as being all-good, just, compassionate, all-powerful, and all-knowing. Reconciliation between the two religions becomes even more challenging when one looks at their other metaphysical beliefs. For example, the plethora of Hindu gods is nowhere to be found in Christianity; the Hindu concepts of reincarnation and karma assert that each soul will have numerous earthly lives, quite contrary to Christian dogma; and the concept of a Christian Hell as a final resting place would make little sense to a Hindu who believes that one's soul is reincarnated from life to life until it stops incurring karma and then merges with the Brahman where it will lose its individuality and no longer have personal experiences. In fact, we would expect the Hindu to be quite taken aback by the Christian idea of Hell and the horrible fate that supposedly awaits the soul who is sentenced to an eternity there.

<sup>1</sup>I believe that the comparative approach taken in this paper demonstrates the profound weakness of Alvin Plantinga's argument that the belief in God is a basic belief that requires no further justification by other beliefs. Using Plantinga's ideas, it seems he would be unable to challenge the Hindu who claimed that their competing and contrary beliefs were just as basic (Plantinga, 1982, 1983). In fact, Plantinga's position suffers from many serious problems. For one, the classical foundationalist standards for a basic belief, those of self-evidence, incorrigibility, or being evident to the senses, are a far cry from religious beliefs. For example, we have faith in our senses because sensory information can be tested and verified, future predictions can be accurately made based on those perceptions, and further, our perceptions can be confirmed by all others in the same room with us. This is not true of religious beliefs, and why we can have no confidence that religious metaphysical beliefs put us in touch with the truth. As such, religious beliefs do not seem to qualify as basic beliefs. He asserts that basic beliefs cannot satisfy their own standard, but I think this is wrong because both self-evident beliefs and beliefs which are evident to the senses are in themselves self-evident. Further, the Coherence theory may be right that there are no basic beliefs; rather all of our beliefs may be interdependent on our other beliefs so that they together cohere into a system that is likely to lead us to truth. If it is true that there are no basic beliefs, then religious beliefs should not be believed unless there are good reasons to believe that they put us in touch with the truth, and further, that they do not contradict our other beliefs which seem to be well-grounded in truth. For well-articulated criticisms of Plantinga's position, see Martin, 1990.

<sup>2</sup>Since this is in part a comparative religion paper, we might note that John Hick has set forth three primary possibilities for comparing the myriad of differing beliefs between religions: The Skeptical or Atheistic position that none of the religions tap into transcendental or metaphysical entities, realities, or truths; the Exclusivist view that only one or a few religions tap into religious truths; and the Pluralistic view that many if not all the major religions tap into the same ultimate Divine Reality/Truth or truths. This third position, which is the one advocated by Hick, is particularly appealing since it fosters tolerance between religions (See Hick, 1973). Although pluralism is appealing, the numerous and significant metaphysical differences between Hinduism and Christianity that are addressed in this paper seem to militate against it.

However, even if one were to believe that Hinduism and Christianity have the same metaphysical beliefs but merely express them differently, my thesis is not dependent on the reader agreeing with my interpretation of Hinduism. The points made by my paper apply if any people in the world have the beliefs which I have attributed to Hinduism. Moreover, even if nobody has such beliefs, my basic argument can be viewed as a thought experiment—because if anyone were to hold the metaphysical beliefs which I attribute to Hinduism, we could reasonably foresee that those beliefs would have to be challenged and questioned by the Christian. It is the ways that the Christian exclusivist would unavoidably go about challenging the competing metaphysical beliefs which make their own beliefs similarly questionable.

## 2. How a Christian Scrutiny of Hinduism Undermines Christian Metaphysics

I will explore the six Hindu metaphysical beliefs of Polytheism, Karma, Reincarnation, Moksha, Brahman, and Atman, and compare them to the Christian concepts of Monotheism, Heaven & Hell, the Devil, and the Soul. Since Hinduism presents a competing and quite different aggregation of metaphysical beliefs from those of Christianity, the Christian would have to either challenge such contrary beliefs, or else concede that they may be true, and if true, then the competing Christian metaphysical beliefs would be false.

What are the three primary methods of argument which the Christian would likely use against Hindu metaphysical beliefs? First, we would expect the Christian to ask for some type of evidence or proof to support Hindu beliefs, preferably with a way to test and verify those beliefs. Second, the Christian would likely cite the Christian holy texts of the Old and New Testaments as a basis to question Hindu beliefs. Third, the Christian would look for internal inconsistencies, paradoxes, and puzzles within the Hindu metaphysical concepts themselves, including whether Hindu concepts seemed to contradict our experiences of the world. All three of these approaches, however, can just as readily and effectively be utilized against Christian metaphysical beliefs. In fact, we shall see that there appear to be considerably more internal inconsistencies in Christian metaphysical beliefs than there are in the corresponding Hindu beliefs.

### 2.1. Polytheism v. Monotheism

The original Hindu belief in many gods is still followed by many, and probably the majority of Hindus today. Although some Hindus believe that these deities are all manifestations of one ultimate Diety, there is no corresponding equivalent to these lesser deities or manifestations in Christianity. Many Hindu communities believe that one God is the most powerful or highest, but the name for and attributes of that God vary from community to community. These Gods have abilities beyond those of humans, and they can aid humans in their quest for enlightenment or what the Hindus call moksha, although they are not considered perfect in the Christian sense of omnipotent, omniscient, and all-good. These Gods can also take human form.

The Christian, on the other hand, believes in only one God—a God that is perfect in every way, including all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good. It is inconsistent with Christian dogma to believe in many gods, as clearly stated in the First Commandment: “I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: You shall have no other gods beside Me.” (Exodus 20:2-3)<sup>3</sup>. So if a Christian met a traditional polytheistic Hindu, how would the Christian want to challenge him or her on this issue?

First, we would expect the Christian to demand some type of evidence or proof that these gods exist. This seems natural to do whenever confronted with metaphysical beliefs that one does not support. For example, if someone said they believed in unicorns, mermaids, Santa Claus, or tooth fairies, I think it clear that most of us would want some type of proof that such things exist. We would ask questions such as the following: What credible people have seen or otherwise sensed these entities? Is there somewhere all of us could go to see them and verify their existence, or is there a way to bring them to us so we can see them? Similarly, we would expect the Christian to ask for support for the belief in the Hindu gods—for some credible proof of their existence. We would expect the Christian to inquire as to why these gods cannot be seen or experienced by our senses? Why do only Hindus and those who already believe in such gods experience them? Why is there no place the Christian can go to obtain an undisputable experience of them? What tests can be performed to verify their presence?

While all of these questions are legitimate, I think it is obvious that the Christian would be in no better posi-

<sup>3</sup>All quotations taken from Old Testament come from Plaut, 1981, and all quotations from the New Testament come from Holman Bible Publishers, 1999.

tion. Why do only pre-existing believers in the Christian God clearly experience that God? Why cannot everyone see and hear God if God exists? Where can we go to get a clear experience of God? Furthermore, why do Hindus, Taoists, and atheists never experience such a perfect God<sup>4</sup>?

We could imagine several responses that the Hindu might make to the Christian in order to produce evidence or support for the existence of their gods: 1) Communication with their gods, 2) Prayers answered by their gods, 3) Interactions with their gods, especially those who have taken human form, 4) Religious texts that speak of these gods, including of human encounters with these gods, and 5) Miracles performed by these gods.

The Christian cannot accept any of these claims since it contradicts their belief in one and only one God, so how would a Christian respond to such assertions? The Christian would have to assert that the Hindu has mistaken beliefs, probably due to either constructing or manufacturing experiences which do not have a basis in reality, and/or misinterpreting their experiences.

As to the first claim of communication with these gods, the Christian might start off by inquiring as to what type of communication this is? Is it just a feeling, is it a thought in their mind, or is it audible? If audible, do they hear actual words and sentences being spoken, and if so, what is the sound and tone of the voice they hear? They might ask how the Hindu could be sure that they were not imagining the voice or communication.

Specifically, the Christian would likely claim that communication with those gods is suspect because only believers in those gods are able to communicate with them. They could point out that if a Christian were in a room with a Hindu who claimed at that time to be communicating with one or more gods, the Christian would not hear, see, feel, or otherwise have any reason to believe such communications were actually taking place. Given that the great majority of humans have similar sensory body parts and sensory abilities, and that numerous people in the same room would have virtually identical experiences regarding physical occurrences in that room, it becomes highly suspect that the Hindu is actually communicating with any unseen gods that non-believers can neither communicate with nor sense. Notice that it is not merely that the Christian or other non-believer does not communicate with these gods, but they also do not and seemingly cannot witness the supposed communications between these gods and the Hindu, even if they had a desire to do so.

The Christian, though, is in a similar position in regard to any claim he or she might have with regard to communication with a single, perfect God. The Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, agnostic, and atheist have no such communications with such a god, and even if in a room with Christians who claim to be communicating with God, they neither witness that communication, nor have similar communications with the unseen entity called God. They could question the Christian as to the nature of the communication, and why others cannot hear or otherwise sense this same interaction.

Turning to the second Hindu claim that their gods answer their prayers and requests, the Christian would likely inquire about all of the prayers and requests that go unanswered, and suggest that that what occurs could be explained without an appeal to the supernatural. Of course, the same response could be made regarding the prayers supposedly answered by the Christian God—as so many of the prayers of deserving and good Christians go unanswered.

Third, Hindus believe they can interact with their gods, especially when those gods take human form. For example, in the holiest Hindu text, the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna is a God who takes human form as the cousin of the protagonist Arjuna, and Krishna advises Arjuna about how to resolve a moral dilemma. Krishna explains who he is as follows:

My true being is unborn and changeless. I am the Lord who dwells in every creature. Through the power of my own maya, I manifest myself in finite form. Whenever dharma declines and the purpose of life is forgotten, I manifest myself on earth. I am born in every age to protect the good, to destroy evil, and to re-establish dharma (*Bhagavad Gita*, trans., 1984: p. 158).

The Christian will certainly not accept that there are Hindu gods that take human form. What proof is there that gods, even if they exist, take human form? A person's claim to be a god, without more, is certainly not

<sup>4</sup>The approach taken in this paper is consistent with Epistemological Conciliationism—the view that if two people are in an equivalent epistemological position (such as being in the same room together, and both possessing normal sensory and mental abilities) and they disagree about what has occurred, then each of them should have less confidence in their own beliefs. Although this is true when the Hindu and Christian compare their metaphysical beliefs, it seems that both of them should have an even greater degree of doubt about their own beliefs when considering the skeptical views and experiences (or lack of experiences) of those who do not believe in God or other metaphysical entities.

proof.

It should again be obvious, however, that the Christian must tread lightly because fundamental to Christianity is the claim that God took human form in the body of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the description of Krishna is surprisingly similar to descriptions of Christ in that both were finite manifestations of the Lord who have manifested in human form and whose purpose is to help humanity find its moral way. However, of the many Jews living in Israel at the time that Jesus lived, the overwhelming majority did not see or believe that Jesus was anything more than a man. What convincing evidence or proof is there that Jesus was more than a man?

The Christian would likely answer this question by relying, at least in large part, on Scripture for support that Jesus was more than a man, as demonstrated by the miracles written about in the New Testament<sup>5</sup>. This brings us to the Hindu's fourth support for their polytheistic beliefs—religious texts. The Hindu, too, will cite their Scripture as the basis of their claim that gods can take the earthly form of a person<sup>6</sup>. In the texts, Hindus claim to have interacted with these incarnate gods. The Christian is in the position of having to claim that the Hindu scriptures are unreliable. They might point to contradictions in the texts to demonstrate their unreliability, and would certainly be tempted to argue that those religious texts were written long ago, from 1200 B.C. to 100 B.C., at a time when people were superstitious and without modern technology and science. As such, those texts should be viewed as inherently unreliable.

The Christian, however, has similar problems with regard to the texts that they hold sacred. The Old Testament was written during roughly the same time period that the Hindu texts were written, and the later-written New Testament was also written long ago during superstitious times and before the birth of modern science. In truth, historians have wide disagreement about virtually everything regarding the reliability of the New Testament books. A widely accepted view among historians is that none of the books were written until decades after Jesus' death. Moreover, many scholars believe that the authors of the Gospels were not eyewitnesses to the actual events in Jesus' life (See Aune, 2010; Ehrman, 1999: pp. 43-44; Ehrman, 2009: pp. 102-104). To make matters worse, New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman has made a strong case that many of the New Testament books are in fact forgeries—meaning that the authors of the texts tried to deceive others into believing that they were Jesus' disciples or from his inner circle, when in fact they were people who lived decades later and who were trying to lend credibility to their faith and church (Ehrman, 2011).

Additionally, there are numerous discrepancies in the Christian holy books that call their reliability into question. For example, many people do not realize that there are two different stories in the Old Testament's book of Genesis about what occurred on the sixth day of creation of the universe. The first version in Genesis states as follows:

God said, “Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creatures: cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts of every kind.” And it was so. God made wild beasts of every kind and cattle of every kind, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth. And God saw that this was good. And God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.” And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them (Genesis 1:24-27).

Here the order of creation is that first God created the animals, and then he created man and woman, apparently creating man and woman at the same time. Now let us look at the more familiar second version that appears just a little later in Genesis.

The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being… The Lord God said, “It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper

<sup>5</sup>As to Jesus, on facts beyond his baptism and crucifixion there is little agreement among historians. This is not surprising since it appears that there were no books, or even written historical references, about Jesus during his lifetime, or for many years thereafter, as both the comments written by historians and the books of the New Testament came decades after Jesus' death, which historians place no later than 33 A.D. For example, the two most ancient references to Jesus outside of the New Testament books come from the Roman-Jewish historian Josephus in 93-94 A.D. and the Roman historian Tacitus in 116 A.D. In a review of the state of the research, Amy-Jill Levine stated that “no single picture of Jesus has convinced all, or even most scholars”, and further, she points out that all portraits of Jesus are subject to criticism by some group of scholars (Levine, 2006: p. 1).

<sup>6</sup>The Hindu has little hesitation in relying on Hindu texts as the sole or at least primary basis for their metaphysical beliefs. For example, in defending the Yogen belief in one God or Isvara, Vyasa's commentary on Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* states as follows after #24: “The question, therefore, arises whether this perpetual supremacy of Isvara, on account of the excellence of His Self, is something of which there is proof, or is it something without any proof? The reply is: ‘The scriptures are its proof.’” (Aranya, 1983: p. 64).

for him.” And the Lord God formed out of the earth all of the wild beasts and all of the birds of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name. And the man gave names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to all the wild beasts; but for Adam no fitting helper was found. So the Lord God cast a deep sleep upon the man; and, while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. And the Lord God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman; and he brought her to the man (Genesis 2:7, 18-22).

In the second version we see a new order of creation on the sixth day where first a man is created, then the animals, and lastly a woman. This differs from the first version where the animals came first before man, and then man and woman were formed at the same time after the animals.

A second example from the Old Testament regards two differing accounts of where Aaron died. The first account appears in Numbers 33:38 (also stated in Numbers 20:22-29) which states that “Aaron the priest ascended Mount Hor at the command of the LORD, and died there…” while later in Deuteronomy 10:6 it says that “the Israelites marched to Moserah. Aaron died there and was buried there…”

A third apparent inconsistency regards the Biblical story of Noah and the flood. According to Genesis 6:19-22, God ordered Noah to bring “of all that lives, of all flesh, you shall take two of each into the ark to keep alive with you; they shall be male and female.” A little later in Genesis 7:2-3 it states “of every clean animal you shall take seven pairs, males and their mates, and of every animal which is not clean, two, a male and its mate.” (emphasis added).

The New Testament is not immune to similar discrepancies between its different books. For example, there are at least four different versions of the precise words that appear on a sign put over Jesus after he is crucified (Compare Matthew 27:37, Mark 15:26, Luke 23:38, John 19:19); There are competing versions for who was Jesus’ 1<sup>st</sup> Apostle and the subsequent order of the Apostles who next joined and followed Jesus (Compare Luke 5:1-10 and John 1:35-45); There are different stories of the fig tree (See Mark 11:12-26, and Luke 13:6-8); In two versions of the parable of the Vineyard Owner some of the master’s slaves are killed (Matthew 21:33-36, Mark 12:1-6) while a third version states that they were not killed, but rather all were only beaten (Luke 20:9-12); Jesus’ last words vary in different books (See Mark 15:34 and Matthew 27:46 vs. Luke 23:46); In one book Jesus seems to have been crucified on the day of preparation for Passover (John 13:1 and 19:13-16), but in the other books he is crucified after the Passover dinner (See for example Matthew 26:17 - 27:50); Lastly, there are various versions about who went to the tomb to see Jesus after the crucifixion, and who actually saw Jesus thereafter (Compare John 20:1-20; Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-10; and Luke 24:1-24).

Indeed, a reliance on scripture written long ago is problematic for both Hinduism and Christianity, and although the Christian will choose to disbelieve in much in the Hindu scriptures, and I think for very good reasons, those same types of reasons are ignored when it comes to their own scriptures.

Finally, the Hindu might rely on miracles performed by their gods as evidence of the existence of these gods. The Christian would of necessity believe that either the so-called miracles did not really occur but were intentional fabrications, or that they were not actually miracles at all but had been mistakenly misinterpreted due to a lack of scientific and other knowledge, or that they were miracles but were performed by the one perfect Christian God and not the Hindu gods. We can readily see that if we should not believe the miracles listed in ancient Hindu texts, then we have a similar problem in justifying belief in the miracles listed in Christian texts. David Hume pointed out the problems with relying on the statements of ancient people to substantiate the existence of miracles, and these problems apply equally strongly to Hinduism and Christianity:

For first, there is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested to by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good-sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in selves; … It forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations, that they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations; or if a civilized people has ever given admission to any of them, that people will be found to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors, who transmitted them with the inviolable sanction and authority, which always attend received opinions… It is strange, a judicious reader is apt to say, upon the perusal of these wonderful historians, that such prodigious events never happen in our days (Hume, 1777: pp. 78-80).

Perhaps the Christian would argue that indeed both religions rely on the metaphysical concepts of God or gods for which there is limited evidence, but that in view of this uncertainty it is better to believe in only one

God than in a myriad of Gods. The Hindu could reply, however, that the belief in one perfect God is inherently unbelievable in a universe such as our own which has so much chaos, destruction, and suffering, and, therefore, the metaphysical belief in many less than fully perfect or finite Gods is more likely to be true.

Indeed, we can see that the Christian would have to challenge the Hindu's beliefs in many gods based either on Christian scripture, or on the unverifiability and untestability of Hindu beliefs and personal experiences. Yet the Christian fares no better when subjected to these same standards. In the next section, we will explore the inconsistencies present in many other metaphysical beliefs—Hindu inconsistencies that the Christian would likely recognize, and Christian inconsistencies which escape Christian scrutiny and judgment.

## 2.2. Karma, Reincarnation, Brahman, & Moksha v. Heaven, Hell, & the Devil

Hindus believe in reincarnation—that the soul goes from one life to the next until it reaches enlightenment, or what the Hindus call moksha. Hindus also believe in karma. Karma is the law that one's thoughts, words, and actions have future consequences in either this life or in future lives. Karma is characterized as a law because it works a certain way, and always works that way.

Karma is an impersonal process, not a judgment or punishment from the gods, nor is it dependent on the gods to operate. It is a law of cause and effect. Hindus believe it is the way the world works, similar to the scientific belief that gravity is a force in the world that functions in a certain way. It can also be considered a law of ultimate justice since one's actions will necessarily have future ethical consequences that will depend on the nature of one's thoughts, words, and actions. Karma does for Hinduism what God's ultimate judgment of sending souls to either Heaven or Hell does for Christianity—it ensures that good people reap good consequences and bad people receive their just punishment. In general, Hindus believe that if one leads an ethical life, karma will cause them to be born into a higher caste or class in their next life, while if they lead an immoral life then karma will cause them to be born into a lower caste, or, some Hindus believe, even as an animal.

Although karma seems to operate in much the same way that a natural law does, in some important ways it is very different than the natural laws which science can confirm. First, karma does not seem to be physical since it dictates the nature of each rebirth in accordance with morally just deserts and not in accordance with any known physical force or energy that has causal powers. Second, science has no way to test it to verify its presence, nor to measure it. Moreover, we cannot prove that karma transfers from one lifetime to the next, nor even that we have multiple lives. Additionally, it is not only unverifiable, but also unfalsifiable. No matter what the evidence, no state of affairs can ever count conclusively against it. For example, even if a bad person kept having good fortune in their life, the Hindu would maintain that it is still inevitable that in future lives their karmic debt will be repaid. Since karma appears to be untestable, unmeasurable, unverifiable, and unfalsifiable, and further, does not seem to be a physical force, it is clearly a metaphysical concept or idea, unlike the scientific laws.

There are many potential problems with the idea of karma that a Christian could raise. For example, when will the karmic effect take place—tomorrow, in 20 years, in the next life, or in 20 lives from now? What could trigger it to take place when it does? If it is impersonal and non-physical, it is difficult to see what could cause the just desserts to occur when they do, or how it could be determined when karmic justice had been served, or what would be a fair and just consequence for one's actions. If the force is impersonal, who or what determines when and how justice will be served? If one tortures another in this life, must they be tortured in this or another life, or can something else suffice? What would be a karmic equivalent since the same action will affect two people quite differently? What if you become enlightened before you pay your karmic debt—must you still pay it? If not, then who or what would suspend karma from operating? We are faced with the paradox of a seemingly unconscious “force” or causal power which seems to make very sophisticated conscious decisions, or, at the least, inexplicably mirrors the types of decision-making that conscious entities make, and then somehow is able to carry out those decisions.

Moreover, karma is supposed to be a law of justice, but if a person cannot remember their past lives, then how is it meaningful to have that person suffer for what they did in past lives? After all, they cannot learn from their past indiscretions if they cannot remember them. It is almost as if that person is suffering for the bad deeds of another.

The Christian would likely bring up these puzzles about karma, and also inquire as to what support the Hindu has for the concept of karma. It seems the Hindu would have to retreat to their religious texts which speak of karma, and assume that the Hindu gods accurately communicated the concept, but as we mentioned, the exis-

tence of those gods and the accuracy of ancient texts are already an issue. There is no way to test or verify these things, and I think the Christian would insist that the Hindu acknowledge that their belief in karma lacks adequate foundation since it is not supported with evidence.

Turning now to some of the other Hindu metaphysical beliefs, Hindus believe that when a person learns to become selfless, loses their sense of individuality, and realizes their true self as the soul or what the Hindus call “atman,” then they have stopped incurring karma. The cycle of death and rebirth will then terminate, and the individual soul will merge with the world soul, called “Brahman.” The soul has then achieved moksha or enlightenment, similar to what the Buddhists call Nirvana. The atman still exists, but all ties to the individual ego have been abandoned and broken. One common Hindu analogy used to explain the atman merging with the Brahman is a drop of water which has been tossed into a river or ocean. The drop of water still exists, but has lost all individuality. It can no longer be identified or described as a separate entity as it has become an indistinguishable part of the whole<sup>7</sup>.

We would not expect a Christian to accept any of this. On the contrary, we would anticipate them to ask for some type of proof of reincarnation, and proof of merging with the world soul.

If a Hindu replied that he or she could recall some of their past lives, as many Hindus have claimed, then the Christian would likely ask why followers of other religions, who constitute the majority of people on earth, have no such recollections. It seems that the only people who can recall past lives are the same people who already believe in them, which appears to be an example of something called confirmation bias, where we interpret things so as to reinforce our preexisting beliefs. Indeed, the Christian would likely suspect that the Hindu has manufactured or created the memory of an experience of a past life, and that no past life had actually occurred. Certainly, our senses cannot verify reincarnation or moksha, and there is no scientific or other test we could use to confirm the existence of these supposed states of being.

There are other questions that the Christian might raise. One supposedly reaches moksha and is freed from rebirth when the atman merges with Brahman. But what exactly is a world soul or Brahman? Although Brahman is referred to in the scriptures as the goal to be achieved, the descriptions of it are anything but clear. Sankara, an 8<sup>th</sup> Century Hindu philosopher, gives us one of the more thorough descriptions:

I am Brahman. I am all, always pure, enlightened and unfettered, unborn, all-pervading, undecaying, immortal, and imperishable. In no being is there any Knower other than Myself; I am the Overseer of deeds, the Witness, the Observer, constant, attributeless, and nondual (Mayeda, 1979: p. 104).

This description presents us with several problems. If Brahman is attributeless, then how is it anything? Don’t all things have to have some attributes? Moreover, the concept looks to be contradictory. How can Brahman be both the Knower, or what is elsewhere described as pure consciousness and which seems to be something, and also attributeless? Isn’t consciousness an attribute? Further, what evidence is there that an attributeless consciousness exists? According to the Hindu texts, the individual soul/atman is the invisible essence behind the physical appearance of a person just as Brahman is the invisible essence which lies behind the world. However, what is it that is behind everything? How could it direct or play a role in the world? The Hindu texts are anything but clear about this, and a Christian might well conclude that Brahman is an incoherent or otherwise baseless concept.

The Christian, however, will be in no better position regarding their metaphysical beliefs. In the previous section we saw how the Hindu might question the basis of a belief in one perfect God, which cannot be verified by the senses or scientifically tested. Even assuming for purposes of argument that God exists, the Hindu could point out that we cannot verify or test whether God sends souls to Heaven or Hell to ensure justice. Moreover, the Hindu could contend that the concepts of Heaven, Hell, and the Devil are every bit as troublesome and perplexing as the concepts of karma, reincarnation, moksha, and Brahman.

Turning first to the idea of Hell, the New Testament depicts Hell as a place of eternal punishment and torment for sinners and false prophets where they are consumed by eternal fire. There will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 13:42 & 13:50. See also Matthew 25:41 & 25:46, and Revelation 19:20, 20:10, & 21:8.)

The overriding problem is that Hell seems to be inconsistent with an all-good and perfect God. We should note at the outset that there is some confusion in the New Testament as to whether one’s action or one’s faith, or

<sup>7</sup>For example, the *Mundaka Upanishad*, Part III, 2, paragraph 8, states “The flowing river is lost in the sea.” (Upanishads, 1987: p. 74). The water which was in the river still exists, but it has lost its identity as a river.

a combination of both of them, are the basis upon which people go to Heaven or Hell. Not only is there an apparent inconsistency in the New Testament here which harms the credibility of the text, but each possibility presents its own inconsistencies. Let us first take a look at some of the passages which stress that one is judged worthy of heaven or deserving of hell based solely on their actions.

So, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, instinctively do what the law demands, they are a law to themselves even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts. Their consciences testify in support of this, and their competing thoughts either accuse or excuse them on the day when God judges what people have kept secret, according to my gospel through Christ Jesus... If some did not believe, will their unbelief cancel God's faithfulness? Absolutely not. (Romans 2:14-16, 3:3-4)

Do not be amazed at this, because a time is coming when all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come out—those who have done good things, to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked things, to the resurrection of judgment. (John 5:28-29)

He will repay each one according to his works: eternal life to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but wrath and indignation to those who are self-seeking and disobey the truth, but are obeying unrighteousness. (Romans 2:6-8)<sup>8</sup>

But here are two passages which indicate that both one's actions and one's faith will determine whether a person will go to Heaven or Hell.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith, but does not have works? Can his faith save him?... You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone... For just as the body without spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. (James 2:14, 24, 26)

But the coward, unbelievers, vile, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolators, and liars—their share will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death. (emphasis added) (Revelation 21:8)

In the last quotation we see that unbelievers are lumped together with murderers—and both of them will be sent to Hell. Thus, both one's actions and beliefs would be subject to God's judgment.

Assuming that one's actions determine, at least in part, whether one will ultimately reside in Heaven or Hell, the idea of Hell seems inconsistent with an all-good and just God. First, any punishment that is eternal would seem to far exceed any amount of wrongdoing that one could do in one lifetime. A Hell of perpetual burning with intense suffering, and forever, would certainly surpass any possible finite number of crimes. This seems to be the opposite of justice, and in fact makes God appear both malicious and evil.

Second, since one who goes to Hell goes there forever, one is never given the chance to later be rehabilitated and repent. Such a God who would create and endorse this seems to be neither forgiving nor compassionate, and therefore certainly not all-good.

Third, we should notice that there appears to be only two choices for God to make—to send souls to either Heaven or to Hell (purgatory being only a temporary stop before going to Heaven). From this it follows that those people just above a certain line will be just good enough to go to Heaven, and go forever, and people just below that same line will go to Hell, and forever. But these two people are almost identical. Those just above and below the line have almost no differences in behavior, and yet one is rewarded forever and the other is sent to an eternity of torture. Again, this appears anything but just, and is inconsistent with a good and just God. Notice that God could have created a myriad of places to send souls, but Christianity limits the options to only a Heaven and a Hell.

Fourth, if a young child dies before it would be fair to judge their actions, then that child would seem to have to go to Heaven since eternal punishment would be unwarranted. However, in that case it would be a great advantage to die as a young child since a child would have a guaranteed spot in Heaven while adults have no such

<sup>8</sup>The following quotations also support the position that actions determine one's ultimate fate: "But I tell you, everyone who looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." (Matthew 5:28-29) "I tell you that on the day of judgment people will have to account for every careless word they speak." (Matthew 12:36) "In the same way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them committed sexual immorality and practiced perversions, just as they did, and serve as an example by undergoing the punishment of eternal fire." (Jude 1:7).

guarantee—an unjust result ([See Paul, 2009: pp. 139-141](#)).

Fifth, it seems exceedingly unfair for God to have created us as flawed beings, and then to eternally punish us for acting as flawed beings could be expected to act, especially in a world where we compete for limited resources. If anything, God would seem to bear a large portion of the responsibility for our wrongdoings because he could have created us more naturally sympathetic and empathetic, and/or less selfish, and thereby have created us so we would have been much less likely to harm others or otherwise be sinners.

Let us examine the other possibility—that the belief in God and faith in Jesus’ redemptive power are what determine whether someone goes to Heaven or Hell, and not the morality of their actions on earth. The following are New Testament passages for this position:

We know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. And we believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no human being will be justified. ([Galatians 2:11](#))

But Israel, pursuing the law for righteousness, has not achieved the law. Why is that? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were by works. ([Romans 9:31-32](#))<sup>9</sup>

This brings us to a sixth problem: It seems both unjust and cruel to send someone to Hell forever on the basis of a mistaken belief, especially when the mistake seems both understandable and has no ill will behind it, and even in the case when the person has otherwise led an exemplary life of helping others.

Seventh, if someone lives an ethical life but does not believe in or accept God into their life then they go to Hell forever, but someone who has murdered people and then subsequently accepts Jesus and God just before they die would go to Heaven forever. It seems very arbitrary and unjust to let a serial killer who accepts God to go to Heaven forever, but to never allow a non-believer in God or a lesser sinner to leave Hell.

Eighth, if belief at the time of death is what matters, it seems arbitrary and unjust to allow the person into heaven who accepts God just before death, but to not allow the soul who accepts God minutes after their death to go to heaven, but on the contrary to suffer in Hell forever, especially if that second person has led a moral life. In such a case, almost no time has elapsed between the repents of the sinner who repents just before death, and the one who repents right after death. Yet the two are treated radically differently.

Ninth, as Theodore Sider has explained, not only actions, but also belief and faith come in degrees ([Sider, 2002](#)). In many lives, there are times and degrees of doubt regarding God’s existence. As such, God would have to draw a line where some people just above the line believed in God only a little stronger or a little more of the time than those just below the line, and yet one will go to Heaven forever, and the other will be doomed to eternal damnation forever, hardly a just result in keeping with proportionality.

Tenth, if, on the other hand, all that matters is the strength of your belief at the time of death, a similarly unjust result ensues. In such a case, a person who led a moral life and had always believed in God but who had doubts at the time of death would go to Hell, while the person who never believed in God and led an immoral life would go to Heaven if they come to fully believe in and accept God just before death.

Eleventh, it seems that nonbelievers in God who have never heard the Gospel can still make it to heaven if they live exemplary lives because it would be exceedingly unjust for them to go to Hell forever through no fault of their own. If this is so, then they have an unfair advantage since they are guaranteed a spot in Heaven while adults who have heard the Gospel are not so guaranteed.

Twelfth, as Sider has pointed out, how do we deal with the nonbeliever in God who heard the Gospel only once, or only ten times, and/or only after they have been indoctrinated into a contrary belief? Wherever the line is drawn in excusing the basis for a nonbelief in God and Christ, there is very little difference between those just above and those just below that line, and yet those people close to the dividing line are once again treated radically differently.

<sup>9</sup>The following quotations lend additional support to the position that one’s fate or final residence after death is determined by one’s beliefs, as opposed as to their actions: “I assure you: People will be forgiven for all sins and whatever blasphemies they may blaspheme. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.” ([Mark 3:28-29](#)) “The one who believes in the Son has eternal life, but the one who refuses to believe in the Son will not see life; instead, the wrath of God remains on him.” ([John 3:36](#) “Jesus told him, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.’” ([John 14:6](#)) “All the prophets testify about Him that through His name everyone who believes in Him will receive forgiveness of sins.” ([Acts 10:43](#)) “He saved us—not by works of righteousness that we had done...” ([Titus 3:5](#)).

In a similar fashion, it seems hard to reconcile the Devil with a just God. Why would God create such an evil being, and why does God not stop the Devil from his misdeeds by either killing him or taking away his powers<sup>10</sup>? After all, when we encounter a serial murderer, we either put him to death or restrain him in jail forever. Why does God not act similarly to protect us? Furthermore, it seems unjust to allow the Devil to tempt good people, and then deliver the ultimate punishment to those same people who give in to temptation, especially when other people are fortunate enough to not have to face such strong temptations in their lives. In fact the real culprits would be the Devil for his actions, and God for not limiting and/or eliminating the Devil's actions. While giving in to temptation might well be worthy of punishment, a much lesser punishment than an eternity in Hell would certainly be appropriate for those who are led astray by the wrongdoing of others.

The Hindu could point out that not only are the concepts of Hell and the Devil inconsistent with the idea of a perfectly good and just God, but the idea of Heaven is paradoxical. According to the New Testament, the Kingdom of Heaven is where God resides and where good people are rewarded with eternal life (See Matthew 5:12, 6:9, 13:44-50, 19:29; 1 Peter 1:4). Most people interpret the Bible passages as describing a place where one's soul experiences eternal happiness. Revelation describes heaven in the following passage:

Look! God's dwelling is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will exist no longer; grief, crying, and pain will exist no longer, because the previous things have passed away. (Revelation 21:4)

On its face, Heaven seems consistent with an all-good God, so does not appear to have the obvious problems that come with the idea of Hell. However, Heaven presents some puzzles of its own. First, how could happiness be guaranteed if one's soul has experienced emotional pain during its stay on earth? Just as an adult lives with the emotional scars of their childhood, so the soul would seem to carry the bad memories and prior emotional traumas that can be relived in the mind.

One possible solution to this problem is as follows: When one goes to Heaven, God would erase their unhappy memories and thoughts from their consciousness or soul. However, then in what way is it your soul? That would erase a large and seemingly very important part of you. If each person/soul is a sum total of their experiences, then to erase a significant portion of those experiences is to substantially alter who you are. The Buddhists have an interesting way at looking at enlightenment. They claim that everything that happened in your life up to the point of your enlightenment was necessary for your enlightenment. After all, all those experiences made you the person that could be enlightened at that moment. If anything were changed, you would not be the same person, and therefore would not have become enlightened, at least not at that time. Similarly, if substantial portions of your memory were erased, you would no longer be you.

Additionally, could not even happy memories also produce unhappiness in that we could long to be with someone from the past, or long to do something from our past. This is especially true if in Heaven one no longer has a physical body and therefore cannot engage in an activity that one enjoyed during their earthly existence. Indeed, how could God eliminate all such longing and its attendant unhappiness without wiping out all of our memories, in which case it is difficult to see how you would exist as yourself anymore?

Furthermore, even if all our wishes were granted in heaven, couldn't we have numerous simultaneous wishes that could not be simultaneously fulfilled, and thus produce unhappiness?

Next, if only good things can happen in heaven, then could you not become bored and unhappy? Does this idea of eternal happiness even make sense?

This last point is wonderfully demonstrated by an episode of the old television series *The Twilight Zone* titled "A Nice Place to Visit" (1960, Season 1, Episode 28). In this episode, "Rocky" Valentine, who has led a life of crime and immorality, is killed and finds himself in a place where his every wish is granted. For example, he goes to a Casino where he is with beautiful women and wins every game he plays. Everyone is impressed by him, and he thoroughly enjoys himself. His every desire is granted day after day. After about one month, however, the meaninglessness of his new after-death existence becomes apparent to him, and Rocky becomes bored,

<sup>10</sup>In fact, in Revelation it appears that the Devil will ultimately be punished and stripped of his powers by God: "The Devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet are, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever." (Revelation, 20:10) Why does God not do this much sooner, and why does God allow so many good people to be misled and tempted into sin by the Devil? God's inaction seems anything but righteous and just, and his eternal condemnation of those souls too weak to resist temptation seems to be extraordinarily cruel.

frustrated, irritated, and unhappy. He complains to Pip, the person who has been ensuring all his wishes are granted, “If I gotta stay here another day, I’m gonna go nuts! I don’t belong in Heaven, see? I want to go to the other place.” Pip informatively replies, “Heaven? Whatever gave you the idea that you were in heaven, Mr. Valentine? This IS the other place!!” As the episode demonstrates, what could possibly guarantee nonstop and everlasting happiness? It certainly isn’t having one’s every desire fulfilled, nor would it seem to be in having one’s desires thwarted. There just does not seem to be any way to ensure happiness.

Finally, if nobody can do bad or evil things in heaven, and souls could only do good, then has not our free will been eliminated, which seems to have reduced us to mindless robots, similar to the robot wives in the famous movie “The Stepford Wives,” who were so pleasant as to be nauseating?

When you think about it, the concept of heaven seems not only unrealistic, but is also riddled with these perplexing puzzles. It does not seem as if eternal happiness can be guaranteed to souls/entities who possess free will, nor would it seem possible without wiping out all of our memories, or at a minimum our unpleasant ones, but those memories are what make each of us who we are.

So far, we have pointed out arguments which the Hindu could make against the very concepts of Heaven, Hell, and the Devil, and those arguments center on whether the concepts make sense and are consistent with the idea that God is perfect. However, even more fundamental, the Hindu could question the metaphysics of Heaven and Hell. Do they physically exist, or are they immaterial places<sup>11</sup>? If a Christian believes that the body after death has some physicality, which was the dominant Christian view early in its history, then it would seem that Heaven and Hell would also have to be physical places, and yet nobody has any evidence of where they might be.

The Hindu could argue that since the Christian does not believe in numerous past lives, how could a Christian possibly know what happens after death, or where a soul goes after death? After all, the Christian does not believe that they have ever died before, unlike the Hindu who believes they have had past lives and past deaths which are remembered by some Hindus. Since Christians do not believe they or anyone else has had a past life or death to be remembered, how could they know about what happens after death, i.e., how could they know about the existence of Heaven and Hell? Here again the Christian would seem to have to fall back on ancient Scripture, but then the Hindu can retort that there is no more reason to believe Christian Scripture than there is to believe Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim Scriptures. Just because something is written down does not make it true, and without a way to test for Heaven and Hell, or to verify it with our senses, it is no more believable than the Hindu beliefs in karma, reincarnation and moksha, and maybe less so due to the numerous internal inconsistencies and puzzles that the very notions of Heaven and Hell seem to entail<sup>12</sup>.

### 2.3. The Hindu Atman vs. the Christian Soul

As previously noted, atman is the Hindu term for the individual soul. Both Hinduism and Christianity believe that there is a part of you that is indestructible and immortal. Although both religions believe the soul survives our physical death and continues forever, there are significant differences between how the two religions view the soul. We have already mentioned that for Hinduism, the soul goes from one physical body to another, but ul-

<sup>11</sup>The Catholic religion has recently injected confusion into this issue. In general audiences on July 21, July 28, and August 4, 1999, Pope John Paul II asserted that the essential characteristics of heaven, hell, and purgatory are that they are states of being, rather than places. Specifically, the Pope asserted on July 21 that Heaven “is… not a physical place in the clouds, but a living, personal relationship with the Holy Trinity.” On July 28 the Pope proclaimed that “rather than a place, hell indicates the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy.” However, Pope Benedict has made several statements which seem to indicate that Heaven and Hell are real places, and are not temporary states of mind. For example, in March 2007 Pope Benedict stated “Jesus came to tell us that He wants us all in heaven and that hell—of which so little is said in our time—exists and is eternal for those who close their hearts to His love.” (Westen, 2007).

<sup>12</sup>It was challenges such as these that caused Gandhi, the great spiritual Hindu leader of India who was anything but a blind follower and in fact questioned many Hindu beliefs, to scrutinize Christianity and draw the following conclusion:

But I saw no reason for changing my belief—my religion. It was impossible for me to believe that I could go to heaven or attain salvation only by becoming a Christian… My difficulties lay deeper. It was more than I could believe that Jesus was the only incarnate son of God, and that only he who believed in him would have everlasting life. If God could have sons, all of us were his Sons. If Jesus was like God, or God Himself, then all men were like God and could be God Himself. My reason was not ready to believe literally that Jesus by his death and by his blood redeemed the sins of the world. Metaphorically there might be some truth in it… I could accept Jesus as a martyr, an embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher, but not as the most perfect man ever born… Philosophically there was nothing extraordinary in Christian principles. From the point of view of sacrifice, it seemed to me that the Hindus greatly surpassed the Christians (Gandhi, 1957: p. 136).

timately will come to rest outside and independent of any physical body when it merges with the world soul.

For Christianity, it is somewhat unclear if the soul must be tied to a physical body. Early Christians believed that the soul was always associated with some physical body, and that at the time of resurrection and judgment, the soul would inhabit a similar body to the one it inhabited on earth, one that would be recognizable to those who previously knew the person on earth. However, the current majority belief seems to be that the soul is wholly immaterial and that after death it is independent of any physical body. Biblical passages are unclear on this point<sup>13</sup>.

In any event, in current times the soul is considered to be immaterial in both religions. However, in Christianity each individual soul is formed at a specific time by God (Colossians 1:16, Revelation 4:11, Acts 17: 28-29), while Hinduism espouses that each individual soul has always existed. For example, in the *Bhagavad Gita* the warrior Arjuna faces a moral dilemma. War has broken out, Arjuna is on the righteous side, and he is a warrior. As a warrior he has a duty to fight, and he also has another duty to fight for the righteous cause. However, Arjuna has relatives fighting on the opposing side, and he does not want to kill his relatives and thereby violate his family duties, similar to the dilemma many soldiers faced in the American Civil War. Krishna's response to him explains the Hindu position of the nature of the self/soul, and its existence since the beginning of time and to the end of time.

The wise grieve for neither the living or the dead. There has never been a time when you and I and the kings gathered here have not existed, nor will there be a time when we will cease to exist... One man believes he is the slayer; another believes he is slain. Both are ignorant; there is neither slayer nor slain. You were never born; you will never die. You have never changed; you can never change. Unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial, you do not die when the body dies. Realizing that which is indestructible, eternal, unborn, and unchanging, how can you slay or cause another to slay? (emphasis added) (*Bhagavad Gita*, trans., 1984: p. 153).

We can see here the first two differences between the Hindu and Christian beliefs regarding the soul: First, the Hindu soul has always existed and thus has no creator, while Christian souls are created by God. Second, for the Hindu the soul's immortality is infinite in both past time and future time, while for Christianity the soul had a definite beginning and its infinite existence in time runs only in one direction—toward the future<sup>14</sup>.

The above passage also introduces us to a third difference between atman and the Christian soul in that the Hindu soul is described as “immutable” and “unchanging.” Buddha rejected the notion of atman because he believed that the nature of the universe is impermanence and change, and as such each individual is always changing. The Christian conception of the soul would seem to agree with Buddha’s idea regarding the changing nature of things, as Christians believe that a soul changes as it goes through new experiences, and as one makes decisions which display an ever-changing character. The dominant Christian view is that each of us can change our

<sup>13</sup>How could one decide which of these versions is right? Here are several passages from Corinthians that only add to the confusion on this point (Corinthians 15:35, 38-40, 42, 44, 46, 52, 54):

But someone will say, “How are the dead raised? What kind of body will they have when they come?... But God gives it a body as He wants, and to each of the seeds its own body. Not all flesh is the same flesh; there is one flesh for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are heavenly bodies, but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is different from that of the earthly ones... So it is with the resurrection of the dead:...sown a natural body, raised a spiritual body... However the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual... For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed... and this mortal is clothed with immortality.

These passages tell us that initially people receive their physical body, and then afterwards receive their soul or spiritual body, which is immortal. After they die, they are resurrected, and raised as a spiritual body. Does that spiritual body have any physicality? It is unclear.

<sup>14</sup>At least one prominent Western philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) believed that the Hindu conception of the soul as having always existed is the more convincing view (Schopenhauer, 1818). In spite of Schopenhauer’s opinion, there seems to be a problem with the Hindu conception. If all souls have always existed, then how could there be more people living today than at any time in the past? For example, experts estimate that in about 10,000 B.C. there were only between 4 million and 12 million people on earth, while now there are over 7 billion. This means that now there are approximately 1000 people for every one person there was only 12,000 years ago. Where did all of these souls come from if they supposedly have always existed? Most Hindu texts do not describe a time when the soul does not have an earthly body, since it apparently goes from one body to another immediately after death. If so, then the addition of new souls does not add up. If anything, we should expect there to be less people/souls on earth as time goes by because some souls become enlightened and then are not reborn into bodies. One possible solution to this problem would be if animals have souls which can become human souls, presumably due to the development in those animals of moral thoughts and actions which display selflessness.

direction in life, and redeem ourselves by acquiring new beliefs and performing moral actions. As such, the Hindu unchanging atman and the Christian changing soul are very different conceptions.

A fourth significant difference in the two religions' concept of the soul is that the Hindu believes that the individual soul/atman at the time of enlightenment will lose any connection to its individuality and become Brahman, where it will merge with everything and attain a unitive state with no individuality. This view is illustrated in the following passages, the first from the ancient Hindu religious text known as the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, and the second passage from the Bhagavad Gita:

In that unitive state there is neither father nor mother, neither worlds nor gods nor even scriptures. In that state there is neither thief nor slayer, neither low caste nor high, neither monk nor ascetic. The Self is beyond good and evil, beyond all the suffering of the human heart... Where there is separateness, one sees another, smells another, tastes another, speaks to another, hears another, touches another, knows another. But where there is unity, one without a second, that is the world of Brahman. This is the supreme goal of life... They are free because all their desires have found fulfillment in the Self. They do not die like the others; but realizing Brahman, they merge in Brahman ([Upanishads, Chapter 4, trans., 1987: p. 15](#)).

They are forever free who renounce selfish desires and break away from the ego-cage of "I," "me," and "mine".... This is the supreme state. Attain to this, and pass from death to immortality ([Bhagavad Gita, chapter 2, trans., 1984: p. 155](#)).

Another way to characterize the Hindu conception of the soul is to view the individual self that most people identify with as the ego, while the atman is the true self that is a part of Brahman. When one learns to let go of their ego-self, they are able to realize their true self as atman-Brahman. In Christianity, on the other hand, the soul always maintains its individuality, and never merges with the souls of others.

A fifth difference between the two religions' conception of the soul is that many if not most Hindus believe that animals also have souls, while most Christians believe that only humans have souls<sup>15</sup>.

A sixth difference regards the soul's journey and final resting place. The Hindus believe that their soul goes from one earthly life to another until it reaches eternal contentment when it merges with Brahman, while the Christian conception of the soul includes only one earthly existence and a final destination in either the eternal happiness of heaven or the eternal torture of hell.

So the Christian is confronted with several significantly different Hindu conceptions of the soul and its attributes: First, a soul which has no creator; second, a soul that has always existed and has no beginning in time; third, a soul that is changeless; fourth, a soul that will lose its individuality when it attains enlightenment, or put another way, when it recognizes its universality as atman-Brahman; fifth, a soul that is not unique to humans in that animals also possess souls; and sixth, a soul that has multiple earthly lives, and no possibility of a final destination that consists of Hell's eternal torture and unhappiness. These Hindu ideas would be unacceptable according to Christian dogma.

If the Christian challenged the Hindu to produce some type of proof for the belief that each soul has always existed, then the Hindu could ask for proof that God is the one who creates souls at the time of conception or soon thereafter. Similarly, if the Christian requested evidence that souls were unchanging, the Hindu could ask for evidence that souls are constantly changing. And if the Christian were to question the Hindu as to what proof they have that one's soul could lose its ego or individuality and merge with a world soul, the Hindu could just as forcefully ask for proof that Christian souls retain their individualities. Likewise, if a Christian were to insist on proof that animals had souls, the Hindu could ask for proof that animals did not have them, and further could point out that neither the Christian nor the Hindu could prove that human souls exist and can survive physical death. Lastly, if the Christian demanded proof that the soul had multiple lives on earth, the Hindu could ask for proof that the soul has only one life and then takes up permanent residence in either heaven or hell. Each might point to their respective religious texts, and each would believe that the others' texts were of dubious reliability. The impartial observer who was not brought up in either tradition would likely quickly notice the confirmation bias on each side, and might well conclude that there were no convincing reasons or evidence to believe in either

<sup>15</sup>Gandhi made the point as follows: "Again, according to Christianity only humans had souls, and not other living beings, for whom death meant complete extinction; while I held a contrary belief." ([Gandhi, 1957: p. 136](#)).

version, or even in the existence of souls at all<sup>16</sup>.

### 3. Conclusion

The exclusivist Christian would undoubtedly see the lack of evidence to support the Hindu's metaphysical beliefs in many gods, an unchanging soul that has always existed, reincarnation from one life to the next one, an impersonal force called karma that can somehow ensure that justice is served, and moksha as the final resting place where all souls merge into a world soul.

However, Christianity is riddled with just as serious, if not more serious, problems, including inconsistencies and paradoxes which the Christian is only too happy to ignore, or at the least excuse. For example, how can an all-good and powerful God allow so much evil, misery, and suffering in the world? How could an all-good and just God send anyone to Hell forever, thereby administering an infinite punishment for finite wrongdoings? How could a just God send almost identical people to such very different places—one to Heaven forever, and one to Hell forever? How can Heaven guarantee constant happiness? How can we be confident God exists when God cannot be seen and heard as other things are, and God does not make His existence clear to everyone? How could a person, Jesus, be a god<sup>17</sup>?

It is not that the Christian is any guiltier than other believers in metaphysical things. It is that the Christian undoubtedly would recognize the shortcomings of the metaphysical claims in other religions, but conveniently fail to acknowledge that their own religion suffers from similar shortcomings for similar reasons.

Indeed, both Hinduism and Christianity suffer from the problem that their particular metaphysical beliefs present us with puzzles, paradoxes, and contradictions. Additionally, both religions suffer from the inability to produce evidence or proof to substantiate their metaphysical beliefs. This is in fact the problem with all metaphysical beliefs since our senses cannot put us in touch with anything that is not physical. As such, there is no way to know if such things as gods or souls exist.

As David Hume so famously remarked regarding any books on metaphysics:

If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity and number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion (Hume, 1777: p. 114).

It is this illusion that the Christian so clearly sees and articulates in the metaphysics of other religions, but for which they suddenly become blind and deafeningly silent when it concerns their own.

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<sup>16</sup>We have not addressed the two major challenges to people who believe in souls. First, it seems a soul would at a minimum include your personality and memory, but we now know that these are tied to our brains. For example, if we injure certain parts of our brain we will lose our memories, and if we injure other parts we will lose our ability to make moral decisions. If our memories and personality are tied to our brains, and our physical brain dies and deteriorates after our death, then how could our personality and memories continue? Second, it is difficult to understand how a disembodied soul without any of the senses could see, hear, or feel anything. As such, there would be no contact with an outside world, or communication with other souls. This would present a truly isolated and frightening existence, one that seems incompatible with an existence in heaven or hell where one can have experiences and recognize others. British philosopher Stephen Cave explains as follows: "But if we each have a soul that enables us to see, think, and feel after the total destruction of the body, why, in the cases of dysfunction documented by neuroscientists, do these souls not enable us to see, think and feel when only a small portion of the brain is destroyed?... If either your eyes or the optic nerves in your brain are sufficiently damaged, you will go blind. This tells us very clearly that the faculty of sight is dependent upon functioning eyes and optic nerves... But if the soul can see when the entire brain and body have stopped working, why, in the case of people with damaged optic nerves, can't it see when only a part of the brain and body have stopped working? In other words, if blind people have a soul that can see, why are they blind?" (Cave, 2013; See also Russell, 1957: pp. 88-93).

<sup>17</sup>On this last point, we can turn to Soren Kierkegaard, the famous Christian philosopher known as the founder of Existentialism, who concedes that Christianity is riddled with paradox that cannot be rationally justified, and gives us the following example:

*Can one prove from history that Christ was God?* Let me ask another question: Is it possible to imagine a sillier contradiction than wanting to PROVE—it does not matter for our purposes whether from history or from anything else in her wide world one wants to prove it—that a particular individual man is God? That an individual man is God, declares himself to be God, is indeed the offense... The proofs which Scripture advances for Christ's divinity—His miracles, His resurrection from the dead, His ascension into heaven—are accordingly only for faith, they are not proofs, they have no intention of proving that all this accord exactly with reason; quite the opposite, they would prove that it is at odds with reason and so is a matter of faith (Kierkegaard, 1850: pp. 27-28).

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