

# Theology for beginners, via Hindus



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HIGHLAND VIEWS

**“H**ow is the person of tranquil wisdom (to live), who abides in divine contemplation? What are their words? What is their silence? What is their work?”

This line, from the ancient Hindu scripture the Bhagavad Gita — “Song of the Lord” — is helpful when we consider our “words about God,” or theology.

Anyone can seek wisdom, though few of us probably do. Contemplation is good, if we can calm down enough to do that. If we practice a peaceful wisdom and mindful reason, then what do we say, what do we do?

Spiritual teachers across the centuries have told us where wisdom can be found (mostly in wise teachers like them), how to contemplate, meditate and cogitate. Some tell us what to say and what to do. Yet as the Gita suggests, the missing piece may be: “What is their silence?”

Could it be that our greatest teachers are the ones who know how to be silent?

In my evangelical college days, a professor passed along this quote I’ve never forgotten: “The greatest teacher is the one who teaches others to be

self-taught.” When I read Emerson’s “Self-Reliance,” I heard the same wisdom (he read the Gita too).

We might keep in mind that a lot of famous teachers of religion who base their words on famous old books may not know more than anyone else in these matters. Hold that thought.

Here’s a simplistic summary of the world’s major religious philosophies, and I hope you’ll see I’m bringing a little humor into it (with apologies to the scholars).

» **Taoist** (ancient Chinese): Follow the path. The path cannot be told. Honor the dead. There is no death. Balance your imbalance. Earth and Heaven are one.

» **Jewish**: The best God of all gods, who has no name, moves around (gardens, mountains, deserts, temples). God chose one group of people to move with Him. They all moved to one place to settle. It was a very unsettled place.

» **Christian**: God sent God so that God would die to please God. God is love. God made hell for those who don’t love Him.

» **Muslim**: God is greater than all religions and prophets. Our religion and prophet are the greatest.

» **Hindu**: Many gods. Many paths to many gods. Many gurus (teachers). Be your own guru. God is nothing — God is everything.

» **Buddhist**: Wake up! Maybe you are God but if there is no God, you are not

God. There is no Buddha but there is “buddha” (awakening) and you are a buddha. Learn to laugh. Buddha laughs too (if there is a Buddha).

I told you this was simple and I hope it causes smiles. But the serious side is this: Definitions of “God” are all over the map of history. Who decides what “God” is and who decides who decides these things? Does religion create theology or does theology beget religion? What comes first, the chicken or the universe?

Some describe God as “ineffable” (indescribable). Others use lots of words to say that God is “transcendent” (above and beyond words).

Yet others tell us that God is “infinite,” “unknowable” or “unsearchable” (Theology uses a lot of negatives).

But then they fill whole libraries with books about who God is, what God thinks and feels, who God likes and doesn’t like.

Confusing, isn’t it?

Theologians are professional guessers. I’ve known some. I hear their objections.

“Now wait a minute! I’ve studied the ancient words and I’ve read all the other theologians. So I’m NOT guessing!” I would smile and calmly reply, “So, you’re telling us you know something about Someone we can’t see, based on what people have said over thousands of years?”

Hindu theology offers a way out of

getting too serious about our theologies. It teaches that the divine is “Not this; not this.” Is this God or is this God? Not this; not that. How does a theologian handle that?

Psalm 146:7 presents a practical theology-beyond-theology: The Lord “executes justice for the oppressed; gives food to the hungry; sets the prisoners free ... watches over strangers; upholds the orphan and widow.”

Or take the verses that I first heard as a “call to ministry”: “Is not this the fast (religious duty) that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice ... share your bread with the hungry; bring the homeless poor into your house” (Isaiah 58). Is this true theology?

Naturalist John Burroughs wrote, “People are ... coming to see that devotion to the truth is the essence of true religion, and that the worst form of irreligion is the acceptance of creeds and forms without examining them, or upon the sole authority of some book or sect (or authority)” (“Accepting the Universe”).

Looks like we’re all beginners with these things.

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