

1. Hinduism and the Universal Claim

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SOURCES

 [If Hinduism is "Universal Truth", Why Did the World Reject It? · Part 1](#)

 [If Hinduism is "Universal Truth", Why Did the World Reject It? · Part 2](#)

1. Hinduism and the Universal Claim

quick read

- Hinduism is the third largest religion by number, but almost entirely concentrated in India. Outside South Asia, there is not a single majority Hindu country.
- The question is, "what structural features of Hinduism prevented it from becoming a universal religion in the way that Christianity and Islam did?"
- These chapters break said question into six categories. Definition, caste, mission, karma and rebirth, Advaita, and scriptural authority.

reading path

2. Defining Hinduism
 3. Birth, Caste, and Belonging
 4. Mission and the Problem of Spread
 5. Karma and Moral Agency
 6. Advaita and the Non Dual Problem
 7. Scripture and Selective Reading
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Hinduism has been around for three to four thousand years by its own reckoning. It had a head start and a civilisation. It had philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, grammar and poetry. It had everything that other religions used to spread. And yet, it stayed in India.

Well, not entirely. The Chola dynasty spread east. Hindu temples appeared in Cambodia (Angkor Wat, the largest religious monument in the world), Thailand, Bali, Indonesia. But even in those places, Hinduism morphed. Some communities eat cow. Some worship local gods alongside Hindu ones. Some have a version of the Ramayana that looks nothing like the Indian original. The question is whether a religion that changes this much in transit, is still the same religion (readers are reminded of the *The Ship of Theseus*), or whether it has become something else entirely.

And the western spread never happened at all.

Six problems explain why.

Definition

Sanatan dharma (the "eternal way") is not a stable label. It can mean Hinduism, or it can widen to absorb Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. It can centre on Krishna, or Shiva, or the goddess. The supreme god changes depending on whom you ask. See [2. Defining Hinduism](#).

Caste

The **jati** (birth-caste) system is inherited. The [Chandogya Upanishad 5.10.7](#) links good past life karma to birth as a Brahmin and bad past life karma to birth as a dog, pig, or **Chandala** (outcaste). Converts enter at the bottom. Crossing the ocean could destroy your caste (**kalapani** taboo). In essence, this is indeed a birth gated system, and said systems do not produce universal religions. See [3. Birth, Caste, and Belonging](#).

Mission

Hinduism has no consensus missionary tradition. ISKCON is an exception, and the fact that it is an exception proves the rule. There is yoga which has spread far, but its more along the lines of technique rather than theological per say. See [4. Mission and the Problem of Spread](#).

Karma and agency

The [Padma Purana](#) teaches 8.4 million life forms before human birth. The [Srimad Bhagavatam 11.9.29](#) treats human birth as uniquely privileged. [Bhagavad Gita 3.27](#) says the [gunas](#) (material qualities) perform all actions and the soul is merely a witness. See [5. Karma and Moral Agency](#).

Advaita

The non dual school says only Brahman (absolute reality) exists, then uses multiple levels of reality to explain everything else. Every time a contradiction appears, the system retreats to a "second layer". [Bhagavad Gita 16.8](#) associates "the world is unreal" with demonic nature. See [6. Advaita and the Non Dual Problem](#).

Scripture

Hindu texts are vast, but there is no stable hierarchy for resolving contradictions between them. And, among these scriptures like the [Shrimad Bhagavatam](#) , [Valmiki Ramayana](#) , and [Manusmriti](#) , various filters occur through a guru, school, mode, or era. See [7. Scripture and Selective Reading](#).