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## Approaches to the Divine

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## Approaches to the Divine

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Composed of philosophical and cultural ideas and unique art and practices, Hinduism is an eastern religion predominately practiced in India. Millions of people practice Hinduism which is one of the Earth's oldest religions. Notably, this faith's main distinctive qualities are the belief in reincarnation, the Path of Desire and the Path of Righteousness and one absolute being, Brahman. Hinduism seeks to answer the fundamental questions of life: what do we want out of this life and how can we obtain it? The religion explores the idea that there is more to us that meets the eye; an infinite being constrained by the desire for pleasures and wealth. And not until we set aside these aspirations can we realize our "supreme strength, the fullness of wisdom and unquenchable joy" (Smith, 26). Humans have an unrelenting desire to be closer to God, and in fact, to see him. This is not only true for Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, a major Hindu scripture, but also for Muhammad in the Qur'an and St. Paul in the Holy Bible. Through the study of the Bhagavad Gita as well as Huston Smith's *The World's Religions*, there are four main ways to build the relationship between humans and the Divine."



*Adrienne Aldridge*

## **Approaches to the Divine**

### *Introduction*

Composed of philosophical and cultural ideas and unique art and practices, Hinduism is an eastern religion predominately practiced in India. Millions of people practice Hinduism which is one of the Earth's oldest religions. Notably, this faith's main distinctive qualities are the belief in reincarnation, the Path of Desire and the Path of Righteousness and one absolute being, Brahman. Hinduism seeks to answer the fundamental questions of life: what do we want out of this life and how can we obtain it? The religion explores the idea that there is more to us than meets the eye; an infinite being constrained by the desire for pleasures and wealth. And not until we set aside these aspirations can we realize our "supreme strength, the fullness of wisdom and unquenchable joy" (Smith, 26). Humans have an unrelenting desire to be closer to God, and in fact, to see him. This is not only true for Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, a major Hindu scripture, but also for Muhammad in the Qur'an and St. Paul in the Holy Bible. Through the study of the Bhagavad Gita as well as Huston Smith's *The World's Religions*, there are four main ways to build the relationship between humans and the Divine.

### *1.) Four Paths to God*

Smith very clearly illustrates the four ways to the Divine: through work, through love, through devotion and through knowledge, all designed to unite the human spirit with the Divine who is concealed in the deepest recesses of our being. *Karma yoga*, the path to God through work is meant for those more active than others. Sometimes when we work, our ego swells and we continue to work purely for the benefit of ourselves. Recognizing that humans have a psychological drive to work, *jnana* is a way to accomplish tasks while simultaneously becoming closer to God. *Jnana* is the way to "identify oneself with the transpersonal Absolute that resides in the core of one's being" (Smith, 38). The idea of this path is that every act done without thought for one's self strengthens the bond with the Divine. When acts are not done for our personal interests, our ego is lightened and the film that blocks our infinite selves becomes lighter. The path to oneness with the Divine through knowledge is known as *jnana yoga*. This is the process of turning the "knower" into that which she knows and developing the power to "distinguish between the surface self that crowds the foreground of attention and larger self that is out of sight" (Smith, 29). The final path, *raja yoga*, seeks to uncover the beyond within through psychophysical exercises. Through meditation (yoga) and allowing the mind to work through the body, one can attain knowledge, awaken infinite self and eventually enlightenment. Becoming closer to God through love, known as *bhakti yoga*, is the most popular of the paths. The *Bhakta* will strive to love God with every fiber of their being. Love is the staple of this yoga, "not just to claim such love, but to love God in fact" (Smith, 34). The objective of this path is to aim all of the love and the base of the heart and direct it towards God unwavering, undeniably and unendingly.

### *2.) A Vision of God in the Bhagavad Gita*

The Bhagavad Gita is cornerstone in the Hindu faith. A seven hundred verse scripture, this book describes the conversation between Arjuna and his guide Krishna on a variety of philosophical issues. More specifically, chapter eleven investigates one of the ways to build a relationship with God, which is through devotion. When contemplating whether he could bear to withstand the bad karma he would accumulate in war from killing his cousins, brothers, and uncles, Arjuna receives from his charioteer great

counsel. Krishna, the God and the charioteer, also reveals that behind his human form, is the universal form; He is the Supreme Being. Arjuna asks to see the true appearance of the Supreme Being which is granted. However, since one cannot see the universal form with their human eyes, Krishna grants Arjuna sight with divine eyes. With his illusion dispelled Arjuna sees the mystic wonders of the universe, unlimited mouths and unlimited eyes. The form was decorated with divine, dazzling ornaments and arrayed in many garbs. He was garlanded gloriously, and there were many scents smeared over His body (Bhagavad Gita 10-11).

The Supreme Being explains that even transcendental eyes cannot understand the complexity of his present being. Pure devotional service is the only way to understanding.

### 3.) *Parallel Visions of God*

Similar to Prince Arjuna, Dante, the protagonist in the *Divine Comedy*, also seeks to see the true form of God. In Canto XXXIII of Paradise, Dante is granted permission by Mother Mary who obtains for him the vision of God. What he sees next is too great for words, similar to how Arjuna felt about the beauty of the Supreme Being in his cosmic form, and he claims to remember it is a dream. Therefore, he prays to God that He let Dante remember some of the events so that he may convey His glory through his poetry. In his vision, he sees a book, the Word of God, enveloped by light and bound by love. Finally he sees God, as three circles, representing the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and he suddenly understands Incarnation in a flash of light. Dante has built a relationship with God through knowledge at this instance. “But now was turning my desire and will, even as a wheel that equally is moved, the Love which moves the sun and other stars” (Paradise, Canto XXXIII). Although he cannot speak the entire truth of what he just saw, due to his dreamlike state, his vision is proof of God’s love and he returns to the world with his free will in harmony with God’s. This experience represents one way to God, through devotion and love. Dante prays to God in hope of seeing Him in His cosmic form, which he does. And much like Arjuna, the vision is explained as too great for words, but both characters absolutely love and follow the Divine and return from the experience enriched and knowledge.

### 4.) *Mohammad’s Night Journey*

Al Israa and Surah Miraj in the Qur’an explain the Prophet Muhammad’s meeting with the Divine, who had a similar experience to Arjuna’s and Dante’s. in which he was granted permission to Heaven. Al Israa refers to the “Miraculous Night Journey” of Muhammad and Surah Miraj refers to his ascension into Heaven. Along with Gabriel, Muhammad traveled from Makka to Jerusalem, “the farthest Mosque.”

Holy is He Who carried His servant by night from the Holy Mosque to the farther Mosque –  
whose surroundings We have blessed – that We might show him some of Our signs. Indeed He  
alone is All-Hearing, All-Seeing. (Qur’an 17:1)

Upon reaching the gates of Heaven, Muhammad offered prayers so that he might see, with his own eyes, God. The Prophet went through various levels of Heaven, meeting other prophets and other religious figures such as Abraham and Moses. Finally, he reached the highest point of Heaven and was graced with an experience of the Divine Presence. At the conclusion of the chapter, Muhammad was ordered to pray five times a day (originally fifty, but even Moses thought that was too much). This is again an example of reaching God through devotion. Praying five times a day is a constant reminder of the phenomenal journey of the Prophet as well as the glory of God.

5.) *St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians*

St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians explains to the people of Corinth why he could not make the voyage there and help settle the strife that had plagued them for quite some time. He opens the letter giving thanks to God, apologizing to the Corinthians and giving forgiveness to the man that shamed him after his first visit. Towards the end of his letter, St. Paul makes a fairly brief allusion to a visit Heaven.

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know but God knows—was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. (2 Corinthians 12:2-4).

This experience is very similar to Dante's in that the state of consciousness is not clear, whether it was a dream or not, or whether it was an inner or outer body experience. St. Paul approached a relationship to the Divine through love, work and knowledge. Not only did St. Paul dedicate his life to spreading the Word of the Lord to those in need, such as the Corinthians but this letter expresses that everything he did for them was for God; every act he accomplished, every word he spoke was to relay God's message.

*Conclusion*

Through Arjuna's, Dante's, Muhammad's and St. Paul's experience with the Divine, it is obvious that their relationships and relied heavily on reaching out to the Divine through devotion and love. Although none of them were certain of what they were going to see when faced with the Supreme Being, they all had faith and unwavering love for their superior and were enamored and awed by what was before them. Through their experiences, each of these men also built a relationship with the Divine through knowledge; each heard and saw things that could not be explained in words and in fact did not seem real to them or those who heard of their travels. But although it may be hard to believe, Christians, Muslims and Hindus continue to hear these magnificent stories and try to build a relationship with the Supreme Being. In the process of building this relationship, the infinite human soul is, little by little, being freed, allowing for an enriched, complete life and a thorough understanding of the Divine.

