Hindus acknowledge that, at the most fundamental level, God is the One without a second — the absolute, formless, and only Reality known as Brahman, the Supreme, Universal Soul. Brahman is the universe and everything in it. Brahman has no form and no limits; it is Reality and Truth.

Thus Hinduism is a *pantheistic* religion: It equates God with the universe. Yet Hindu religion is also*polytheistic:* populated with myriad gods and goddesses who personify aspects of the one true God, allowing individuals an infinite number of ways to worship based on family tradition, community and regional practices, and other considerations.

Here are just some of the many Hindu gods and goddesses:

* **Brahma, the Creator**

Brahma is the first member of the Hindu Trinity and is “the Creator” because he periodically creates everything in the universe. (The word *periodically* here refers to the Hindu belief that time is cyclical; everything in the universe — except for Brahman and certain Hindu scriptures — is created, maintained for a certain amount of time, and then destroyed in order to be renewed in ideal form again.)

* **Vishnu, the Preserver**

Vishnu is the second member of the Hindu Trinity. He maintains the order and harmony of the universe, which is periodically created by Brahma and periodically destroyed by Shiva to prepare for the next creation.

Vishnu is worshipped in many forms and in several *avatars* (incarnations). Vishnu is an important, somewhat mysterious god. Less visible than nature gods that preside over elements (such as fire and rain), Vishnu is the *pervader* — the divine essence that pervades the universe. He is usually worshipped in the form of an avatar (see below).

* **Shiva, the Destroyer**

Shiva is the third member of the Hindu Trinity, tasked with destroying the universe in order to prepare for its renewal at the end of each cycle of time. Shiva’s destructive power is *regenerative:*It’s the necessary step that makes renewal possible.

Hindus customarily invoke Shiva before the beginning of any religious or spiritual endeavor; they believe that any bad vibrations in the immediate vicinity of worship are eliminated by the mere utterance of his praise or name.

* **Ganapati, the Remover of Obstacles**

Ganapati, also known as Ganesha, is Shiva’s first son. Lord Ganapati, who has an elephant head, occupies a very special place in the hearts of Hindus because they consider him the Remover of Obstacles. Most Hindu households have a picture or statue of this godhead, and it’s not uncommon to see small replicas of Ganapati hanging from rearview mirrors of cars and trucks!

* **Avatars of Vishnu**

The literal meaning of the word *avatar* is “descent,” and it’s usually understood to mean divine descent. Avatars are savior forms of a god that descend to earth to intervene whenever help is needed to restore *dharma* (moral order) and peace. Two of Vishnu’s ten avatars are Rama and Krishna.

* + **Rama**

Rama is one of the most beloved Hindu gods and is the hero of the Hindu epic called the*Ramayana.*He is portrayed as an ideal son, brother, husband, and king and as a strict adherent to dharma. Millions of Hindus derive satisfaction from reading and recalling Rama’s trials and tribulations as a young prince who was exiled from his kingdom for 14 years.

* + **Krishna**

If one Hindu god’s name is known and recognized throughout the world, it is Krishna. Hindus identify Krishna as the teacher of the sacred scripture called the *Bhagavad Gita* and as the friend and mentor of prince Arjuna in the epic the *Mahabharata.*

For his devotees, Krishna is a delight, full of playful pranks. But most of all, Lord Krishna’s promise to humanity that he will manifest himself and descend to earth whenever dharma declines has sustained Hindu belief in the Supreme Being over thousands of years.

* **Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning**

Saraswati is the consort of Brahma the Creator and is worshipped as the goddess of learning, wisdom, speech, and music. Hindus offer prayer to Saraswati before beginning any intellectual pursuit, and Hindu students are encouraged to offer prayers to her during the school/college term and especially before and during examinations.

* **Lakshmi**

Lakshmiis the goddess of good fortune, wealth, and well-being. As the consort of Vishnu, she plays a role in every incarnation. (She is Sita, wife of Rama; Rukmini, wife of Krishna; and Dharani, wife of Parashu Rama, another avatar of Vishnu.)

* **Durga Devi**

Durga Devi is a powerful, even frightening goddess who fights fiercely in order to restore *dharma*(moral order). Yet, while Durga is terrifying to her adversaries, she is full of compassion and love for her devotees.

* **Indra, the King of Heaven and lord of the gods**

Indra wields a thunderbolt and is a protector and provider of rain.

* **Surya, the sun**

Surya (or Soorya) is a golden warrior arriving on a chariot pulled by seven white horses.

* **Agni, the fire god**

Agni holds a special place in Hindu fire ritual to this day as the *sacrificer* (the priest who performs the ceremony); the *sacrifice* (the ritual fire and the offerings made into it); and the *witness* to all rites.

* **Hanuman, the monkey king and devoted servant**

Hanuman is featured in the great Hindu epic the *Ramayana.* He earned his path to deification by performing feats of strength, devotion, and courage while helping Rama (an avatar of Vishnu) in countless exciting incidents.