



Religion and Spirituality

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IN THE BEGINNING OF THIS ARTICLE I will discuss some general concepts and issues related to religion and spirituality. Next I will examine the place of religion and spirituality in Hinduism. In the third section I will present my personal approach to leading a spiritual life.

Religion and Spirituality: General Concepts

A religion usually is defined as a collection of beliefs about God and his relation with the universe and individual persons. There are many religions

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in the world, but I will deal only with the major world religions, which include Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The beliefs of these religions are documented in certain books, which are considered to be sacred and used for guidance as to how a man is supposed to act in the world. Many religions also have a hierarchy of organisations and clergy, and they have considerable influence on their followers and dictate how the respective religions are practised.

The religions of today are preceded by many different types of belief systems and there has been a gradual evolution of religious views. The origin of religions can be traced to animism, fetishism, and the worship of nature gods. These approaches now are considered to be crude, but they reveal

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man's quest for something beyond the phenomenal world. Gradually more refined concepts of God emerged some of which are polytheistic and some monotheistic. One important aspect of most of these theistic views is that they consider God and gods to be essentially different and separate from man and believe that man can approach God for help and salvation but can never unify with him. Hinduism, which we will discuss later, is an exception due to its monistic metaphysical view.

As the evolution of thoughts and views continued, religious beliefs were challenged by scientists and intellectuals of the modern era, and gradually materialistic philosophies emerged. These philosophies, which can be found in both the West and the East, do not believe in anything that cannot be verified by the senses and scientific instruments. In this article I will not examine materialistic philosophies. However, I will examine approaches that do not follow traditional religious practices, and spirituality falls in this category. It should be noted that all the major religions of the world—Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—have variations of belief and practice within them, and they have both religious and spiritual components. The spiritual component usually is mystical in nature.

The term spiritual is used in several different senses. For example, some persons think that the term spiritual is related to spirits that are forces of nature, or souls of dead persons; this is a narrow meaning of the term spirit. Some consider certain practices such as meditation as spiritual no matter whether the person meditating believes in having a spiritual self or not. I will use the term spiritual in the sense that is compatible with Hindu philosophy, which believes that Spirit is the ultimate Reality and that it is the essence or Self of everything. Spirit is self-existent consciousness, which is eternal and the inner reality of existence. A spiritual person believes

that he is not just a mental being and that his outer personality, which is driven by 'ego', is the construction of his nature. He believes that he has spiritual consciousness and a spiritual self or soul, which is higher or greater than his mental consciousness, and that it is hidden deep within him. Spirituality involves self-finding or self-realisation. A spiritual person also believes that God dwells within his consciousness and that he can reach him through his inner self or soul.

Spiritual or mystic personalities can be found in all religions. In Judaism, Kabbalah represents a spiritual approach, and there are many teachers of Kabbalah who are highly spiritual persons. Within Christianity, St Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) are examples of highly spiritual persons. Within Islam, Sufis are considered as mystics or spiritual persons. One well known Persian poet who was a Sufi mystic is Rumi (1207–1273). Religious and spiritual approaches are not necessarily opposed to each other. Many saintly persons combined religious and spiritual life; their religious life was motivated by a sincere yearning for contact and union with God.

Place of Religion and Spirituality in Hinduism

Hinduism accommodates both religious and spiritual approaches. The original sourcebooks of Hinduism are the Vedas. Yajur Veda, one of the four Vedas, has been most influential in Hindu religious practice, and it serves as a guidebook for priests for performing ceremonial rituals. The fundamental concept that underlies these rituals is that of sacrifice. External sacrifice involves offerings to the gods in different forms. The offerings are of food, flowers, and in rare cases, animals. It is important to note that these sacrifices are performed for gaining the favour of the gods. Getting rewards such as wealth, fame,

children, and protection from danger is the primary motive of these offerings. However, rituals in many cases are symbolic in nature and offerings can be interpreted as expressions of devotion and adoration for God. Rituals can be performed with correct knowledge and interpretation of the symbols with no expectation for rewards, and in that case they assume a spiritual nature.

The foundation of the spiritual approach of Hinduism is the Upanishads, which is referred to as Vedanta. The Bhagavadgita is also considered to be Vedantic literature. The Upanishads' spirituality involves the experience of the Atman, which is Spirit and represents consciousness at the highest level. For Hinduism spiritual practices lead to self-realisation or finding one's true nature, which is Brahman. Self-realisation is a difficult task and it requires a change or transformation of consciousness. One has to shift one's focus from the external ego to the inner self within. According to the *Katha Upanishad*: 'The self-existent Lord destroyed the outgoing senses. Therefore, one sees the outer things and not the inner Self. A rare discriminating man, desiring immortality, turns his eyes away and then sees the indwelling Self.'¹

The Upanishads generally accept the validity and efficacy of Vedic rituals. However, they also point out that ceremonial sacrifices and ritualistic worship lead to gains that are materialistic and of limited value. The Upanishads recommend a spiritual approach for

gaining higher knowledge, finding the Self and uniting with Brahman, the ultimate Reality. Among all of the Upanishads it is the *Mundaka Upanishad* that addresses most clearly and directly the difference between the ritualistic religious approach and the spiritual approach towards God. Although the *Mundaka Upanishad* does not denigrate Vedic rituals, it clearly presents spirituality as being superior to the ritualistic approach. I quote here a few verses that present the view of the *Mundaka Upanishad* on the ritualistic approach: 'Since these eighteen constituents of a sacrifice, on whom the inferior karma has been said to rest, are perishable because of their fragility, therefore those ignorant people who get elated with the idea "This is (the cause of) bliss", undergo old age and death over and again.'² 'The deluded fools, believing the rites inculcated by the Vedas and the Smritis to be the highest, do not understand the other thing (that leads to) liberation. They, having enjoyed (the fruits of actions) in the abode of pleasure on the heights of heaven, enter this world or an inferior one' (1.2.10).

The following verses present the recommendations of the *Mundaka* and *Katha* Upanishads for spiritual practice leading to self-realisation, and this practice includes the study of the Upanishads, gaining higher knowledge and equanimity, casting away of desires, and meditation on Brahman: 'Taking hold of the bow, the great weapon familiar in the Upanishads, one should fix on it an arrow sharpened with meditation. Drawing the string, O good-looking one, hit that very target that is the Imperishable, with the mind absorbed in Its thought' (2.2.3). 'The intelligent man gives up happiness and sorrow by developing concentration of mind on the Self and thereby meditating on the old Deity who is inscrutable, lodged inaccessibly, located in the intellect, and seated in the midst of misery.'³ 'When all desires clinging to one's heart fall

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955)



off, then a mortal becomes immortal (and one attains Brahman here' (2.3.14).

The Gita's views on the ceremonial and ritualistic approach are similar to those of the Upanishads. The Gita recognises that the ritualistic approach can yield desired enjoyments and rewards, but these gains are of limited value. The Gita prefers a psychological or spiritual approach. I present here a few verses that would reveal the Gita's views on ceremonial sacrifices:

In the days of yore, having created the beings together with the sacrifices, Prajapati said: "By this you multiply. Let this be your yielder of coveted objects of desire. You nourish the gods with this. Let those gods nourish you. Nourishing one another, you shall attain the supreme God. Being nourished by sacrifices, the gods will indeed give you the coveted enjoyments. He is certainly a thief who enjoys what have been given by them without offering (these) to them."⁴

Those who are versed in the Vedas, who are drinkers of Soma and are purified of sin, pray for the heavenly goal by worshipping Me through sacrifices. Having reached the place (world) of the king of gods, which is the result of righteousness, they enjoy in heaven the divine pleasures of gods. After having enjoyed that vast heavenly world, they enter into the human world on the exhaustion of their merit. Thus, those who follow the rites and duties prescribed in the three Vedas, and are desirous of pleasures, attain the state of going and returning (9.20-1).

The Gita recognises a variety of sacrifices, which can be performed and these sacrifices range from the offerings of food and flowers, ascetic practices of self-control, doing selfless work, and gaining knowledge of Brahman. After recognising the validity of these sacrifices the Gita reveals its preference for doing works as a sacrifice and also gaining knowledge as a sacrifice: 'O destroyer of enemies, Knowledge considered as a sacrifice is greater than sacrifices requiring materials.

O son of Pritha, all actions in their totality culminate in Knowledge' (4.33). The Gita presents its profound concept of sacrifice: 'The ladle is Brahman, the oblation is Brahman, the offering is poured by Brahman in the fire of Brahman. Brahman alone is to be reached by him who has concentration on Brahman as the objective' (4.24).

Sri Aurobindo explained the above verse:

This then is the knowledge in which the liberated man has to do works of sacrifice. It is the knowledge declared of old in the great Vedantic utterances, 'I am He', 'All this verily is the Brahman, Brahman is this Self'. It is the knowledge of the entire unity; it is the One manifest as the doer and the deed and the object of works, knower and knowledge and the object of knowledge. The universal energy into which the action is poured is the Divine; the consecrated energy of the giving is the Divine; whatever is offered is only some form of the Divine; the giver of the offering is the Divine himself in man; the action, the work, the sacrifice is itself the Divine in movement, in activity; the goal to be reached by sacrifice is the Divine.'⁵

The Gita wants us not only to understand the meaning of this verse, but also to act accordingly; and that requires us to be desireless and egoless. Every action, however small it may be, should be done for God as an offering, and this approach is expressed clearly in the following verse of the Gita: 'O son of Kunti, whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer as a sacrifice, whatever you give and whatever austerities you undertake, (all) that you offer to Me.'⁶

Personal Perspective on Religion and Spirituality

This section is meant for sharing with the readers how spirituality finds a place in my life. I must acknowledge that my perspective has been moulded by the views of several philosophers whose views match Vedantic views on spirituality. Prominent

among these philosophers are Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda. The books and articles that have had significant influence on me include lectures of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita* and *The Life Divine*. I am concerned that when I present my views I may come across as a wise person who is trying to teach others how to lead a spiritual life. So I want to seek the understanding of the readers of this article that I am in no position to give advice to others. My goal is to share with the readers my understanding of how I *should* act spiritually although I do not always succeed in acting according to these ideas and ideals.

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I have believed in God since my childhood. I believe in the power of God, which I worship as the Mother. I was highly influenced by my visits with my parents to Dakshineswar, where Sri Ramakrishna lived, and Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry. I am fortunate to have seen Sri Aurobindo and the Mother when I was ten years old. My father was a disciple of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. He was a brilliant student of philosophy and a scholar of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy and yoga. However, he never told his children what to do spiritually, but his life's example has been very influential. After he passed away, I had a sincere call to follow his path. I started taking courses on religion and philosophy at the university where I taught, and I was exposed to various religions and also Western philosophy. Some of the professors of the departments of religious studies and philosophy became good friends and their guidance has been extremely helpful. I sincerely believe that learning about other religions

and Western philosophy enhanced my understanding of Hinduism significantly.

When I was growing up some of the incidents of Swami Vivekananda's life made an indelible impression on my mind and psyche. One such incident had to do with his going to the Kali temple of Dakshineswar at the behest of Sri Ramakrishna to ask Mother Kali for financial help because his family was going through hardships after his father passed away. He could not ask for money but only for knowledge and peace. He was sent back by Sri Ramakrishna to pray again for financial help, but again he could not ask for anything but knowledge and peace. Since my childhood when I pray I do not pray for any specific reward or success for myself. I can only pray for guidance for doing the right thing. Another thing that impressed me is Swami Vivekananda's pronouncement: 'We want to worship a living God. I have seen nothing but God all my life, nor have you. ... The living God is within you, and yet you are building churches and temples and believing all sorts of imaginary nonsense. ... The moment I have realized God sitting in the temple of every human body, the moment I stand in reverence before every human being and see God in him—that moment I am free from bondage, everything that binds vanishes, and I am free.'⁷ In my personal life I try to treat everyone—poor and rich—with respect. I do come across persons who are malicious, and instead of fighting or arguing with them I try to stay away from them as much as possible.

Swami Vivekananda's life is a testimony for work. I try to follow the Gita's approach to work, which is to work without any attachment to the results and offering all works to God. It is very important for my spiritual development to control my emotions such as anger and jealousy and that work without attachment is a means for diminishing my ego and attaining equanimity. The approach of the Gita can be followed by the

continuous remembrance of God and the offering of all works to him. The Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram had a simple message, 'remember and offer', which I try to follow sincerely. The same message is found in several verses of the Gita such as these: 'Therefore, think of Me at all times and fight. There is no doubt that by dedicating your mind and intellect to Me, you will attain Me alone.'⁸ 'Mentally surrendering all actions to Me and accepting Me as the supreme, have your mind ever fixed on Me by resorting to the concentration of your intellect' (18.57).

Doing external rituals just to gain the favours of gods does not lead to spiritual growth, and it does not help one come closer to God. However, one can perform rituals with sincere devotion and yearning to reach God, and such practices can prepare one for spiritual life. For me, the most important task is to be vigilant about my emotions and control them, and also to work without attachment remembering God continuously. It is not easy to 'remember and offer' all the time, but I try to do that despite many failures. ❧

References

1. *Katha Upanishad*, 2.1.1.
2. *Mundaka Upanishad*, 1.2.7.
3. *Katha Upanishad*, 1.2.12.
4. Gita, 3.10–12.
5. Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Aurobindo Ashram, 2000), 120.
6. Gita, 9.27.
7. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 2.320–1.
8. Gita, 8.7.

