

My Basic Religious Ideas

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Note: I was brought up in a Hindu household and as a result, my knowledge of religious practices and philosophy has been heavily influenced by Hindu philosophy. But I was fortunate to be exposed to other religions and philosophies, notably the Zen philosophy, and ideas of eminent philosophers and scientists such as Richard Feynman. – *Swami Devanand*

Introduction

In this article, I just want to give a flavor of some of my fundamental religious ideas.

First of all, I admit that in certain ways I am a deeply religious person. For example, I thoroughly enjoy visiting and spending time at temples and shrines – those that are beautiful and quiet. I am deeply affected when I listen to spiritual music such as the *choir music* and the *bhakti sangeet* of Hindus. And finally, I find meaning in the symbolism of Ganesh, Hanuman, and Krishna. But, as you will hopefully discover below, I derive this religious meaning and religious pleasure (if I may be allowed to use such a term) for totally different reasons than an average religious person.

For me *religion* is not separate from *spirituality*. Spirituality provides a framework using which one can live a rich and fulfilling life. The goal of spirituality, according to me, is not to overcome emotions or achieve permanent happiness, but only help us deal with nontrivial questions – sometimes by providing answers and sometimes by teaching us how to live with the unanswered questions. Spirituality must not be prescriptive: it must not specify a bunch of “do this” and “don’t do that”. It should just provide a set of guidelines and a framework for dealing with life’s various conundrums and challenges. In short, for me spirituality means “*living life fully with understanding and awareness*”.

Reason and Science are the basis for my brand of spirituality. So, something which seems supernatural, illogical, or unscientific – anything that doesn’t feel right – cannot be part of my spirituality. Of course, that does not mean that I demand a mathematical or scientific proof for everything that I believe in. In fact, it is quite evident that even mathematical and scientific theories are conjectures that depend on a fundamental set of *beliefs*.

The point is this: Yes, every idea or ideology is basically a set of beliefs; but, there are certain beliefs that *feel right*, and certain that you have to *force yourself to believe* – maybe because someone says so, or maybe because certain emotions like fear compel us to do so. I like to stick with the former kind of beliefs.

Now, let me mention some of the most fundamental ideas proposed by traditional religions, and propose my objections or modifications to these ideas.

The idea of God!

The most fundamental idea in most religions is the idea of a personal God – someone who is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient, and, in some cases, endowed with human qualities such as love and anger. This God takes an active interest in human affairs in a variety of ways: by making laws of moral conduct, by sending messages through saints, prophets or reincarnations, by punishing bad deeds and rewarding good deeds, and so on. The degree to which God interferes in human life varies across religions. (In an ideology called “Deism” for example, the belief is that God simply created the universe, determined its laws and then retired, i.e. he/she refrained from further involvement.)

It is easy to see how the *primitive* man came up with the idea of God. He was faced on a daily basis with so many perplexing questions and phenomena. “God” was an idea that was used to answer pretty much every unanswered question – “God did that!” or “God knows!” It also allowed societies to use *fear* (of punishment by God) and *temptation* (of rewards from God) in order to enforce codes of morality and ethics on their citizens.

To me, it seems that this universe of ours is an incredibly complex, wonderful, and terrifying place, and its origins and laws are mysterious. I like to believe that the natural energy and forces that run this awesome show are the real God: they are completely neutral, agnostic (to good and bad), devoid of any consciousness or feeling, totally disinterested in human affairs, and make no distinction between the living and the non-living. The “Brahman” as mentioned in Hinduism comes close to this idea, although I must emphasize the *unconscious* nature and the neutral and impersonal qualities listed above.

In my opinion, the time has come to accept this new concept of God. The old idea of a personal God (who is involved in human and all worldly affairs in some way) has caused more problems than it has solved, and that trend seems to continue in modern times. We do not need *carrot and stick* as motivations to be good citizens. We do not need God as the default answer to unanswered questions; we can investigate those questions using logic and science, even if it is not at all certain we will ever find all answers.

To all my fellow humans who believe in a personal God, I just want to suggest that we should tweak the definition of God and modify the extent of God’s involvement in our affairs. As described later in this article, we can still continue to worship and celebrate our new God. There is no fear of creating a Godless human civilization!

The idea of a soul!

The second idea is that of a *soul*. The belief is that there is something special, supernatural in every living thing which somehow survives birth and death and even travels to fancy places called heaven and hell. Of course, religions vary on the details of this idea. For example, Hinduism calls this thing “Atman” which is supposedly the essence of a person and which is a part of the indestructible universal consciousness called “Brahman”.

The idea of a soul was another wonderful idea created to answer questions about where we come from and where we go after death. The idea mitigated the terror of death – by suggesting that death wasn’t all that bad, it could not harm the soul, because the soul never perished. The soul merrily used rebirth to start life anew, went to special places called heaven and hell, or joined the greater Brahman. The soul even carried along with it a balance sheet of the person’s good and bad deeds. Complex theories were constructed to describe the soul’s journey through various life-forms, and the afterlife, if the soul made it to the heaven or hell.

My view of “soul” is a bit different. I believe that there is no *fundamental* difference between living and non-living things – we are essentially a play of atoms and molecules. Yes, it seems miraculous that living things have consciousness and other properties that are not manifested by non-living matter. Even to a Biology student who studies the intricacies of living organisms and the workings of the DNA it is difficult to fathom how a purely scientific process might someday explain the origin of life. I am full of unending wonder about the phenomenon of life, and I often stay awake at night thinking about it. And yet, I do not believe that we have been endowed by some divine entity a superior status compared to the rocks and the sand. We are simply a result of the marvelous tricks the universal energy and matter are capable of playing within the framework of science. I believe that our scientists *might* someday be able to uncover the secret of life.

I like to view the “soul” as the essence of each person – I prefer the word “spirit” – which is a part and parcel of the person’s body and mind; it is the essence of his/her qualities, personality, traits. But, it has no separate existence from the body/mind, nor does it exist before birth and after death.

I have no trouble with this new definition of spirit, since, we continue to be part of a greater thing: we are blobs of the universal matter (and energy) magically brought together by some happy random events. It is just that the universal matter and energy have no “consciousness” as the religions propose. They are neutral and uninvolved in the activities of living things and in matters of life and death.

The law of rebirth!

The next idea is “the law of rebirth or reincarnation” (proposed by Hinduism and Buddhism) which postulates that since the soul survives death it is capable of starting a new life. As

mentioned above this idea was supposed to remove the fear of death – since the soul could never be destroyed. The soul simply shed one body – like a piece of clothing – to adorn another body as it went from one life to another.

I believe the sad reality is that there is nothing permanent about us; we all, through a wonderful but random play of molecules, come together to take birth, spend a lifetime in this beautiful world doing whatever good/bad we can, and then dissipate as a bunch of molecules and join the universal energy and matter at the time of death. There is nothing more to it. There is no rebirth, no universal consciousness to join, and no heaven/hell to endure.

I think by discarding the concept of rebirth we give more importance to *this* life – which it absolutely deserves. We ought to focus on our present lives, the present moment, instead of preparing for tomorrow, the afterlife.

The law of Karma!

Another interesting idea that is based on the idea of a “soul” is the Law of Karma. It states that our fate is linked with our deeds. If we sin, we risk taking the form of a vermin in our next life. If we perform good deeds, we may be reborn as humans or get to enter the heaven or even achieve Nirvana (freedom from the cycle of rebirth). This idea was invented once again to create fear in the minds of people to ensure they engaged in good and moral deeds. It was also used to explain the inexplicable bad fortune of some people – by attributing it to their past karma, to the sins committed in their past lives.

Since I do not believe in souls that survive death, I do not need this law of karma either. Yes, to a certain reasonable extent, it makes complete sense to believe that we reap the fruit of our actions – but that applies only in the life we are presently living. If I don’t prepare for an exam, I am likely to fail. If I attempt to fight a tiger unarmed, I am likely to get hurt.

We do not need to believe in this law of karma to make people act ethically. In fact, the really fiendish people who act unethically and shamelessly obviously do not fear this law of karma. And ironically, it’s only the good people – who do not need this law – believe in this law! We also do not need this law to explain the misfortune of people by labelling them sinners and villains from past lives. It is just misfortune – plain and simple – and they deserve our sympathy and help to deal with that misfortune.

To summarize:

The ideas of personal gods, universal consciousness, soul, the laws of karma and rebirth, and indeed pretty much all religious ideas are products of human imagination. Every word written in all the religious scriptures of the world is the creation of man. These were doubtless wonderful products of inspired and creative thinking, but, the credit goes entirely

to some brilliant and inspired (although sometimes misguided) philosophers; there was no involvement of such phenomena as “divine revelation”, “divine presence”, “divine intervention”, “divine prophecy”, and so on.

My religious practice (or spiritual pursuit), thus, is to get familiar with the idea that I am a part of the universal energy and matter, and through miraculous random events (and no act of God!) I got this form of a living person. My job as a spiritual person is to meditate about it, develop familiarity with it, and make the best of this wonderful opportunity. My life is a clean slate on which I can write whatever I want. To me, it makes perfect sense to try to write good things on this slate: creative acts, helpful deeds, enjoyable pursuits, and so on.

What happens to morality and ethics?

I don't think we need fear of God to determine a common moral/ethical code for humanity. We can certainly borrow ideas from existing religious scriptures that seem common-sense and reasonable. The basic principle of the code should be to combine maximum individual freedom with individual responsibility to the survival and progress of the human community. This code should be a guideline and not the law.

Where do we derive our inspiration from?

While it is true that a lot of people – artists, writers, scientists, and even ordinary folks – have historically derived inspiration from their Gods and other religious beliefs and probably continue to do so, I personally do not see anything amiss in deriving my inspiration from the universe as I know it. Every time I look at the amazing display of nature around me, every time I contemplate the force of gravitation that holds the planets and galaxies in place, every time I consider the amazing opportunities that I have at hand, I undergo a *religious experience*, I am inspired to go out and make the best use of my existence. I think if we stop arguing for a moment about how this amazing world came to be (and thus keep aside the question of God) and focus only on how it works and what it offers, we will be thoroughly inspired to lead creative, meaningful, and happy lives.

It is also true that God and religious faith have come to aid in times of misery and destitution. Millions of our ancestors hung on to hope during times of calamity and destruction because they believed God was with them. How do I propose to replace that enormous source of hope and motivation in my theory? Well, I admit that I do not have a convincing answer. I personally derive inspiration from great people of past and present, who demonstrated amazing courage and determination during their lifetimes. I derive inspiration from *nature* itself, which demonstrates amazing stoicism in the face of calamity and change. I know deep in my mind that there is no supernatural power looking after me in a literal sense, and I must accept that possibility.

What do we do with all the enormous religious machinery out there?

We can retain a lot of this machinery. For example, it makes perfect sense to me to worship this universal energy as the new God. But it is extremely important to accept that this God is completely neutral, unconscious, unfeeling, disinterested, and lacks all human qualities / attributes / compulsions. This God doesn't give a fig if we believe in it or not, it does not care if we respect/worship it or not. It does not punish or reward any of our acts. Worshipping it is simply a way of admiring, paying tribute to the wonders of this universe. We gain absolutely nothing by doing so, other than the feeling of a sort of spiritual satisfaction.

A few ideas come to mind:

- Since this God has no shape or form, we could refer to any shape or form as its representation. Indeed, in a temple of this God, there could be a just a light, or a shape that changes randomly every day!
- The function of this God is simply to represent the universal energy, and nothing else. It does not interfere with our day-to-day life, our actions, our fate, the rules we live by, the rewards and punishments we enjoy and suffer, etc.
- This new concept of God will allow all humans to unite under a banner that is completely universal. There is no question of "your God" vs "my God". There is no question of preaching or converting.
- All activities such as worshipping, praying, singing, painting, dancing, etc. that are employed by traditional religions in their churches or temples, can be readily employed in this new temple too. We can and must celebrate our beautiful existence and thank the Universe by creating in its praise music, art, and poetry. We just have to give up such underlying purposes as, appeasement, expectation, forgiveness, etc. It would all be just in the spirit of celebration of our existence and of God. I often feel that the artists among us are the real spiritual people, since they meditate upon and celebrate the nature and the gifts of life in and around us.
- I think a few religious symbols like Ganesh (who represents wisdom and learning), Hanuman (who represents strength and good health), Krishna (who represents the ideal masculine or Yang), etc. are symbols (which, by the way, I personally adore a lot!) that we can certainly retain as *symbolic role models* and continue to idolize and worship. They help us keep in view what is important in life. But we must be careful not to endow these symbols any divinity or attributes of the old Gods.
- The scriptures and so-called holy books will simply become a new genre called "philosophical fiction" that one may want to study out of intellectual curiosity or for entertainment, and nothing more.

Unfortunately, most of the religious bureaucracy and God's human agents (priests) will go out of business because there will be no need for "washing sins" or "seeking redemption" or "preparing for a happy afterlife". We will just need a small maintenance staff to keep the new temples clean and in order.



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