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In My Opinion

The Case for Hindu Pluralism

How I came to understand the value of our religion's seemingly competing points of view

By Arvind Sharma

I discovered the logic of Hindu pluralism, to begin with, not so much rationally as experientially. This is how it happened. At the time I was teaching in the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia. When I visited Brisbane last year, it was bristling with modernity, but when I began teaching there in 1976, it had the unenviable reputation of being the backwaters of Australia. Be that as it may, the religious liberals in Brisbane felt that they were in a minority and proposed, after my arrival, that we all meet on a weekly basis. I was glad to be part of it, and regarded it as a satsang.

When, after some presentations, the group felt itself to be at a loss for topics--at least momentarily--I proposed that each member share an account of his or her moral, ideological and spiritual journey through life, or as I put it more racyly, "expose themselves." I hope it was not entirely due to the sexy metaphor in which the request was couched that the proposal was not only received, but also implemented with great enthusiasm. When, at the end of these presentations, I reviewed these close to fifteen wonderfully rich and candid accounts, I was struck by a curious but striking fact.

Despite their enormous diversity, they shared one feature in common: Everyone had gradually tended to move in a direction opposite to one's original orientation as each had progressed through life. That is to say--if one started out as a believer in God, one had begun to develop doubts on the score as one moved through life; if one was an atheist to begin with, one had become more open to the possible existence of Providence. Those who began by believing only in the ultimate existence of matter were no longer certain that this was an undeniable truth, and

had become more open to the possibility of life possessing a spiritual dimension.

Those who believed in living life in accordance with a strict moral code had become more aware of the need for charity in observing them, while those who were moral relativists to begin with now begun to see some merit in the norms of conventional morality. Those who had started as conservatives had begun to warm up to the comforts of liberalism. Those who had started out as liberals had developed an appreciation of the conventional wisdom of conservatism. And so on.

This made me coin a line, which, I felt somewhat egoistically, could well have found a place in the Tao Te Ching: "Opposite is the movement of the Tao." This tentative formulation received a surprising endorsement at a conference just ahead of the Parliament of World's Religions, when it met in Barcelona in 2004. One of the speakers was about to share the experience of their group with the religious autobiographies of its members, when time ran out. On an impulse I just got up and said: "Before you go, did all the members of your group move in a direction opposite to..." He stared back at me in disbelief, as he said, somewhat taken aback: "You got it."

This experience, combined with my previous one at Brisbane, has made me look at Hindu pluralism in a new, and perhaps more profound, light. Hinduism's diverse theologies, philosophies and approaches to life may result from an understanding that life is simply too complex, protean, dynamic and multi-faceted a phenomenon to be capable of being captured by a single model or paradigm forever. A Hindu whose spiritual understanding evolves and changes over his life is unlikely to be pushed beyond the boundaries of his multi-faceted faith, as happened with several in my Brisbane satsang who came from religions with a more narrow focus.

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