Book Excerpt: Why I Am a Believer, a Hindu's Answer
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Book Excerpt

Why I Am a Believer: a Hindu's Answer

Dr. Arvind Sharma chooses to be, and remain, a Hindu because of threeprofound features of Hinduism--its subtlety, charity and civilizational creativity

This fascinating book, Why I am a Believer, Personal Reflections on Nine World Religions, contains nine essays by articulate believers in the Buddhist, Jaina, Sikh, Dao, Jewish, Christian, Confucian, Muslim and Hindu faiths. The Hindu essay, by Dr. Arvind Sharma, who is also the book's editor, is remarkable for its concise intellectual formulation of Hinduism's ageless spiritual wisdom. He shows how Hinduism's implicit understandings about religion are becoming key propositions on the world stage as humanity searches for a way beyond fundamentalism to a new world of multi-faith, religious pluralism.

By Arvind Sharma, Montreal, Canada

Hinduism has three alluring dimensions that make me want to be a Hindu: subtlety, charity and civilizational creativity.

Subtlety

By subtlety, I mean Hinduism's capacity to draw and to hold on to subtle distinctions. Here are seven such distinctions for your consideration.

1. One such distinction is the distinction between emptiness and openness. We might indifferently describe a field as a vast open field or a vast empty field. But there is a difference. In fact, one could say that the goal of Hinduism is to convert an empty mind into an open mind. This is a delicate endeavor; how delicate may be seen in the West's attempt to do this in the form of the New Age movement. The

mind tends to become so open, according to observers, that the brain almost falls out.

2. Another such distinction is between the absolute and the universal. I think Hinduism searches for the ultimate in metaphysics and for the universal in morality, in comparison to the West, which concludes only too often that it has found the ultimate in metaphysics, even as it formulates the absolute in morality.

I know these remarks are somewhat opaque. They could perhaps be elucidated by drawing a related distinction between ultimate and final. Something is ultimate when nothing lies beyond it, in the sense that nothing could possibly lie beyond it. Something is final, however, in the sense that it marks the final point within a given framework, whereas the ultimate could transcend such frameworks. According to Hinduism, no religion can have the final say about the ultimate, precisely because each such claim to finality is made from viewing the reality from within a certain framework, when the reality itself might be beyond all frameworks. The philosopher Shankara is said to have begged God's pardon for three sins he committed: that although God is everywhere, he went on a pilgrimage; that although God is beyond thoughts, he tried to think of God; and that although God is beyond words, he tried to praise God in words. I value this Hindu self-relativization in its quest for the ultimate, the awareness of the risk that epistemology may forever fall short of ontology. I think it salutary to be cautious in this way in terms of metaphysics.

The West displays a tendency in the moral realm to speak in absolutes. An absolute is fixed; it allows of no exceptions. Stated in a positive way, one could say that an absolute is certain and firm; stated in a negative way, one could say that it is static and rigid. On the other hand, a universal is consensual and fluid. Stated in a positive way, one could say that it is broad-based and dynamic; stated in a negative way, one could say that it is wishy-washy and unsteady. The differences between the two lie in their orientation--one works from top down, the other from bottom up.

I think Hinduism is better off for implicitly distinguishing between final and ultimate, and between absolute and universal, and in further distinguishing between the goals of metaphysics and morality.

3. A third distinction implicit in Hinduism is one between single-mindedness and narrow-mindedness. Sometimes other religions, in trying to become single-minded, become narrow-minded, as in certain understandings of jihad in the context of terrorism, and of the Christian mission in the context of proselytization. I think the Hindu world has largely escaped this predicament, at least so far, because Hinduism is a religion which has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere, in the sense that the doctrine of the ishtadevata (or the chosen Deity) within it allows each Hindu to be a center of his or her own universe or to be single-minded in his or her devotion without being judgmental about others. Alternatively, Hinduism can be said to have its circumference everywhere and its center nowhere. However, we might wish to split the metaphor. By disconnecting the center from the circumference, it has ensured that being single-minded does not lead to narrow-mindedness in relation to another. This is true not just for Hinduism's individual members but also of the yogas within it. For example, one can single-mindedly follow a particular yoga, such as jnana, without narrow-mindedly insisting that it is the only yoga which will lead to liberation. True, some texts will say precisely this, but other texts will say precisely the same about other yogas. And Hindu sages periodically remind the flock that the four margas, karma, bhakti, yoga and jnana, are not exclusive of one another.

4. A fourth distinction implicit within Hinduism is that between sole and unique. When we use the word unique, we tend to assimilate the sense of sole into it, for unique means that which stands by itself. But the two should not be confused, according to Hinduism. Some Western religious traditions tend to confuse them, and because they are unique, tend to look upon themselves as the sole avenue to the divine. But each tradition is unique. In fact, each human being is unique. Does that entitle him or her to look upon oneself as the sole human being?

5. Another distinction implicit within Hinduism is between one and only. Often in introducing an outstanding person, such as the actor Amitabh Bachchan, we might employ the phrase "the one and only" so-and-so. But there is a difference between one God, and only God. When we say there is only one God we mean to say that there is no other God, but when we say there is only God we mean that there is nothing else in reality apart from God. In technical terms, these interpretations can be called monotheistic and pantheistic. But whereas the relationship between one and only is used in Abrahamic religions to uphold their own monotheism and dismiss that of others, the same relationship is used in Hinduism to embrace all other Gods, as there is only God, who can be grasped and represented variously. Hinduism also adds that God is not just contained by the world but rather contains it, and also transcends it, thereby leaving room for what is called panentheism.

6. Another distinction implicit in Hinduism is the distinction between common and identical. Many of us here in the audience are married. Marriage is thus a common phenomenon. But are all marriages identical? It is important to make this point because Hinduism is accused of saying that all religions are the same, as if their distinctive features did not matter. This is a misrepresentation. All the religions are the common property of humanity, but this is not to say that they are identical.

7. Another distinction implicit in Hinduism is between origin and cause. Hinduism is said to be reckless in borrowing from others on the one hand, and shameless in suppressing this fact on the other. But note that those who are exercised by the question "Who borrowed from whom?" are concerned with origins. But once you are concerned with cause rather than origin, you are not so much concerned with where something comes from as with how well it explains something, irrespective of where it comes from. If I catch the flu, its origin may lie in the person I caught it from, but its cause is viral infection. Note that causes are universal in comparison to origins, which are particular.

What makes it particularly exciting to be a Hindu in our times is the fact that these implicit assumptions of Hinduism are being forced out as explicit propositions as Hinduism confronts other religions. As this happens, our Hindu principles shed a flood of light on the religious predicament of the contemporary world. Here is an aphoristic list of some of these Hindu insights found scattered in its modern discourse:

A. Something can be wholly true and yet not true of the whole.

B. Everything goes, but not everything arrives.

C. All religions are valid, but they may not be valid for all.

D. To speak of religion that shall not be a particular religion is to try to speak language without speaking any particular language.

E. All paths may lead to the goal, but not all paths may lead all the way to the goal.

F. One begins by saying that all religions are true and ends by saying that there is truth in all religions.

G. Each religion is superior to the other.

These are to be distinguished from certain aphorisms about Hinduism itself which have become prevalent:

A. A Hindu is like everyone else, only more so.

B. Hinduism is not a belief, it is an activity.

C. Hinduism is not a religion but religion itself.

D. A Hindu is most a Hindu when least a Hindu.

E. Hinduism is encyclopedic, not textbookish.

Some scholars in the academia maintain that there is no such thing as Hinduism. A Hindu attempt to tackle this view reveals another subtle aspect of Hinduism. The phenomenon of deep sleep provides a good example here. One is said to be unconscious in sleep, but it has been argued by Sankara that sleep is really a state which represents the absence of anything experienced separate from consciousness, rather than the absence of consciousness itself. Similarly, when a Hindu says that all religions are the same as Hinduism, it indicates the absence of

any of them being experienced as separate from Hinduism, rather than the absence of Hinduism itself. This is Hinduism's answer to the fashionably current view that there is no such thing as Hinduism.

Charity

I am going to introduce this second element of my answer in a somewhat unorthodox way, for at this point I can hear you silently complain that you have taken us to the top of the mountain, but if you go on talking in this vein that mountain will dissolve in verbal mist. No matter how profound our admiration of Hinduism and no matter how subtle our appropriation of it--our admiration or appropriation of it cannot be unqualified. How about the caste system? How about sati? What about the dowry deaths? What about untouchability? What about the condition of widows in Brindavan? You have every right to ask, "Don't these shake our faith in Hinduism, and incline us to question it? "How can you even think of remaining a Hindu," you could ask me, "in the face of these stark realities? Is not Hinduism a black hole from which light is trying to escape unsuccessfully?"

And, one cannot escape the enormity of the issues we are facing by claiming that:

1. If we review the long history of internal critique within Hinduism, Hinduism's critics cannot improve upon Hinduism's self-capacity for criticism.

2. A massive reweaving of Hinduism's social fabric is in progress in India, even as I write, undermining if not eliminating this criticism.

3. The charge-sheet of other religions is more extensive and gruesome compared to that of Hinduism.

These are replies worth noting, but not responses worth entertaining for our purposes, because they do not go to the heart of the matter. A salient feature of nearly all of the issues mentioned is that no one is quite certain when they actually started. The origins of the caste system, of untouchability, of sati, of dowry, and so on, are shrouded in the mists of history. The starkness of the practice often goes

hand in hand with an opaqueness of the origins in the case of many of them. It would be too glib to put this down to a lack of a sense of history among the Hindus, if what I am going to propose bears scrutiny.

To understand how these practices arose and spread, note this feature of the tradition itself: that in the spirit of charity the tradition is plural and that, in the same spirit, it possesses no centralized authority. In such a tradition, practices are rarely formally introduced. They arise informally. It is vital to keep the fact in mind that Hinduism is a culture, and culture ultimately means how things are done. If some group, in this vast network of ramifying traditions which constitute "Hinduism," begins to do something, for whatever reason, then the rest of the tradition becomes open to its influence through osmosis and example.

It could well be this factor which makes the origins of a practice so elusive, because by the time it is practiced on a scale to become visible, it has probably already undergone migration, expansion and even transformation. And as this process continues, it becomes even more complex and complicated. The way abortion of female fetuses is now spreading in India is a good example of how things might have gone wrong. A technological innovation is introduced. It gains a foothold in a part of the country, in this case, say, particularly in Punjab, which has a history of gender discrimination, despite the emphasis on gender equality in the teachings of Sikhism.

The same practice, however, has had no impact in Kerala, which enjoys virtually universal literacy. However, observers are surprised that states with high literacy are also adopting the practice, although legally banned. This is reminiscent of sati, which is not mentioned in the Manusmrti (a well-known Hindu law book), but which was spreading during the centuries in which the Manusmrti was thought to be composed.

It is not only social pathology but also social reform which follows the same route. Thus some group must have felt upset by levirate (niyoga), although permitted in Vedic times. The Manusmrti is of two minds about it. A few centuries later, it became Kalivarjya, or a practice forbidden in the Kali Yuga, which is the Hindu way of abolishing it "legally." The way the abolition of untouchability in our own times has proceeded provides another example. Mahatma Gandhi created a group which frowns upon the practice, and gradually others followed suit for a host of reasons--moral, social, political, historical and so on. It could well have originated in

a similar manner, with its adoption by one group from another and subsequent spread to other areas or communities, for a host of reasons, although it never made it to Bali in Indonesia.

I have chosen the word charity to describe the mechanism by which social deterioration or amelioration has come about in this culture for reasons I shall explain in a minute. It is noteworthy that, in this sense, Hinduism has so far functioned more as a "society" than a "polity," an instinct shared by Mahatma Gandhi but not by Pandit Nehru, who preferred speedier methods of state intervention. What has all this to do with being a Hindu? Just this--that Hinduism is a free association of various constituent units, and both its good and bad choices are two sides of the same freedom. I would, however, like to substitute the word charity for freedom here, because charity implies our acceptance of someone else's freedom to do what they want to do and to be what they want to be.

Creativity

The third feature of Hinduism which binds me to it is its creativity. By creativity, I mean that sometimes when Hinduism faces a new challenge, it comes up with a solution which is 1) both superior to all the existing responses and 2) simultaneously more universal. Three examples come to mind, one from ancient, one from medieval, and one from modern times.

Ancient Hindu culture was primarily an oral culture for centuries, until sometime around sixth century BCE. Not possessing a script, the Hindu tradition responded to this challenge by devising a script--Brahmi--which was superior in terms of its phonetic fidelity to any other script of those times, and at the same time was also a script in which the languages using those other scripts could also be faithfully represented, perhaps even more faithfully than in their own scripts.

The example from medieval times is provided by the doctrine of ubhaya-vedanta developed by Ramanuja. What does one do when one comes up with another piece of religiously inspired literature, while one is in possession of it oneself? Does one subsume it within one's scripture, the way the Jewish Tanakh became the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, and is sometimes referred to as the Jewish Bible? Or does one view it as previous editions of one's own revelation, which are now deemed antiquated--the way Islamic thought came to view the preceding Jewish and Christian revelations? When Ramanuja, schooled in the Vedanta, came face to face with the devotional outpourings of the Alvars in the Nalayira

Divyaprabandham, he did not amalgamate the Nalayira Divyaprabandham into the Vedanta, nor did he subordinate it to Vedanta--he gave it a status equal to that of Vedanta. As T.M.P. Mahadevan explains: "Ramanuja followed a long line of Vaishnava thinkers. A number of poet-saints poured out their devotion in the form of songs in Tamil. These were collected later in what is called the Nalayira Divyaprabandham. Since these songs constitute the basis of Visishadvaita, equally with the Upanishads, Ramanuja's system is known as ubhaya-vedanta." Not only was thus the problem creatively solved, the solution contains within it a template worthy of universal extension in our age of religious pluralism.

The modern example is provided by Mahatma Gandhi's innovative use of non-violent protest on a massive scale, which not only proved ideal for resisting the British Raj in India for Indians but is now the method of choice in mounting protests to governmental authority all over the world.

Hindu culture now faces the challenge of learning to function as a polity rather than as a society (as mentioned earlier). At the same time, one sees all around the problem of good governance, for which the world as yet has no answer. And the central conundrum of good governance is the following: that the expenditure of time, resources and energy required to get elected in a democracy and to represent the people is so great that one has little time, resources and energy left to do anything, with the political power at one's disposal, for the people who elected you to represent them. Whether Hinduism rises to the challenge of becoming a polity successfully, and, in doing so, offers a solution worthy of global application is now up to you and me.

In concluding this essay, I see that I have perhaps unconsciously applied the three epithets applied to Brahman within Hinduism--sat, cit and ananda--to the Hindu tradition itself. Sat stands for truth, cit for awareness and ananda for bliss. It is perhaps not too much to suggest that subtlety corresponds to the sat aspect of it; charity to the chit; and creativity to the ananda aspect. So, my concise answer to the question "Why be a Hindu?" is: Satchitananda. PIpi