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Sinner or Divinity?

While some faiths view man as sinful by nature, Hinduism holds that our inmost self is the divine and taintless soul, or atma

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In today's world of global communication, we encounter a multiplicity of views about the nature of man on a regular basis. At one extreme, each human being is inherently weak, imperfect, sinful and--without divine redemption--will remain helplessly so. At the other extreme, each human is inherently divine.

This is one of the themes I talked about with Hindus in the Caribbean in August of 2011. I was told in Trinidad last year that this message--"You are a sinner in need of redemption"--is being promoted strongly in an effort to convert Hindus. I am often asked, "What should we say when confronted with this argument by strong-willed evangelists? What is the Hindu view?" Let's explore three quotations from prominent swamis to define our perspective.

The first is from Swami Vivekananda's address to the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893, in the bold manner in which he affirmed truth as he saw it: "Being and becoming are different aspects of the same reality and are only relative to our intelligence. Man has the promise and potentiality of divine realization, of spiritual perfection, and therefore is God in the making; for even his humanity is intelligible only if regarded as an individualized self-expression of God. It is derogatory to

human nature, therefore, to attribute sin to man. Besides, God being the sole and supreme Reality, how could a foreign element like sin invade the sanctuary of being? The Hindus refuse to call you sinners. Ye, divinities on earth, sinners? It is a sin to call man so! It is a standing libel on human nature."

Swami Chinmayananda, founder of Chinmaya Mission, explained: "Man is essentially divine. But the divinity in him is veiled by the unbroken series of desires and thoughts arising in his bosom. A variety of these grades and concentration of these create the variety of human beings. To remove the encrustation of desires and thoughts, and unfold the divinity inherent in man, is the ultimate goal envisaged by the scriptures."

Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, my Gurudeva and founder of Hinduism Today, gave a succinct description of our divine nature: "Deep inside we are perfect this very moment, and we have only to discover and live up to this perfection to be whole. We have taken birth in a physical body to grow and evolve into our divine potential. We are inwardly already one with God. Our religion contains the knowledge of how to realize this oneness and not create unwanted experiences along the way."

These opposite perspectives on man's nature--sinner and divinity--were candidly juxtaposed during a 2012 interfaith panel discussion in Midland, Texas, at which I represented Hinduism. The issue arose as clergy from five faiths responded to the question "In your faith, is humanity considered a one family?"

My answer was: "The Hindu belief that gives rise to tolerance of differences in race and nationality is that all of mankind is good; we are all divine beings, souls created by God. Hindus do not accept the concept that some individuals are evil and others are good. Hindus believe that each individual is a soul, a divine being, who is inherently good. Scriptures tell us that each soul is emanated from God, as a spark from a fire, beginning a spiritual journey which eventually leads back to God. All human beings are on this journey, whether they realize it or not."

The next speaker, Dr. Randel Everett of the Baptist Christian faith, put forth a distinctly different perspective. "The idea of the oneness of humanity--this is where Christianity would differ from some of the religions. We do believe in the oneness of

humanity but that the oneness of humanity is that we are a fallen people. We do not believe that we are inherently good. We believe we are inherently selfish and self-centered, and that's why we need to be rescued or redeemed--that Christ rescues us from the domain of darkness." (You can view the entire 2-hour interfaith panel discussion [here](#))

Looking more closely at the Hindu belief that man is not inherently sinful--rather, the essence of man is divine and perfect--a further question arises: "What is the Hindu view of sin?" Gurudeva responds in *Dancing with Siva*: "Instead of seeing good and evil in the world, we understand the nature of the embodied soul in three interrelated parts: instinctive or physical-emotional; intellectual or mental; and superconscious or spiritual.... When the outer, or lower, instinctive nature dominates, one is prone to anger, fear, greed, jealousy, hatred and backbiting. When the intellect is prominent, arrogance and analytical thinking preside. When the superconscious soul comes forth, the refined qualities are born--compassion, insight, modesty and the others. The animal instincts of the young soul are strong. The intellect, yet to be developed, is nonexistent to control these strong instinctive impulses. When the intellect is developed, the instinctive nature subsides. When the soul unfolds and overshadows the well-developed intellect, this mental harness is loosened and removed."

This understanding of man's three-fold nature--instinctive, intellectual and spiritual--explains why people act in ways that are clearly not divine, such as becoming angry and harming others. There is more to man than his essence or inner nature. We also have an outer nature. However, man's actions, whether beneficial or harmful, sinful or divine, are all expressions of a one energy. That energy finds expression through the chakras, fourteen centers of consciousness within our subtle bodies.

Many of us have seen the system for water usage at temples in India: a long pipe with faucets along its length from which many people draw water to wash their hands and feet before entering the temple. That's a nice analogy to energy and the chakras. Our subtle body is like a pipe with fourteen spigots. Water is water; it can come out of any of the spigots. It's still water. Energy can come out through any of our chakras; it's still energy.

Energy flowing through the higher chakras expresses the superconscious or spiritual nature. How do we control or direct our energy to keep it flowing through

the higher chakras? Gurudeva used to say, "Energy goes where awareness flows." We control our energies through consistent meditation and devotional activities in the home shrine, chanting, performing puja, attending puja and going to the temple on a regular basis. Listening to and playing refined music and performing traditional dance and other creative arts are also ways of channeling the energies through the higher chakras.

Our regular activities determine how our energy flows. If we are engaged in spiritual pursuits, occasionally we might get up to the chakra of divine love. And hopefully we frequent the chakra of direct cognition, in which we are able to look down on our mind and understand what we like and don't like about ourselves, and work steadily to change what we don't. And we get into the chakra of willpower. These are the qualities we tend to manifest if we are engaged in regular spiritual/religious activities.

If we are not elevating the energies, we are just living an ordinary life in the force centers of willpower, reason, memory, maybe fear and occasionally anger. If we see the flow of energy impersonally, then we can control it through the activities we choose to engage in.

I like to say that we have an inner perfection and an outer imperfection. We can take heart in identifying more with the inner perfection, our soul nature, and realize the outer has its problems, which we can work on--and that is the purpose of our life on earth, to work on ourselves, to learn, evolve and ultimately know God. With this attitude, born of the belief in our divinity, we are more detached from our shortcomings and difficulties. It's just energy flowing through our various chakras, more water flowing through one spigot or another. It is not who we are. We realize that we can control that energy flow. "Which spigot shall I turn on today? How do I want my energy to flow? Which negative habit do I want to improve today?" It all becomes easier to tackle because we look at it in an impersonal way.

The concept of the fourteen chakras can help us put our failings into perspective so that we do not become discouraged by them. Shortcomings, such as occasionally being hurtful toward others, do not at all change the fact that our essence is divine. We can deepen our experience of inner divinity and overcome shortcomings by consistently following the various practices found in the Hindu religion. When we feel good about ourselves, we can more readily identify negative patterns and change them. If we have a negative concept of our self, believing that we are

inherently flawed and sinful, we are not in such a good position to advance on the spiritual path. And one thing we can all feel good about is that Hinduism assures us not only that we are not sinners, but that every human being, without exception, is destined to achieve spiritual enlightenment and liberation.