

## [Einstein's Religious Theses](#)

Category : [January/February/March 2004](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jan. 02, 2004

### PHILOSOPHY

## Einstein's Religious Theses

Comparing the famous physicist's concepts of God and soul to Hindu beliefs

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Many people, mostly theologians, have accused Einstein of being an atheist; such a scientist, say his detractors, could hardly be religious. Einstein's view of religion did not include a personal God, which in the first half of the twentieth century was tantamount to saying he was atheistic. But no atheist spent so much time, and put so much thought, into celebrating God. And perhaps no physicist ever considered so deeply the link between science and religion. When asked how he accounted for being both a scientist and a man known for religious musings, Einstein replied: "Well, I do not think that it is necessarily the case that science and religion are natural opposites. In fact, I think that there is a very close connection between the two. Further, I think that science without religion is lame and, conversely, that religion without science is blind. Both are important and should work hand-in-hand. It seems to me that whoever doesn't wonder about the truth in religion and in science might as well be dead."

Then there are the theological issues raised by Einstein's scientific discoveries. For example, Hindu philosophers have frequently suggested that Einstein's famed equation,  $E=mc^2$  (that mass and energy are different manifestations of the same thing), is remarkably parallel to certain concepts in Hindu philosophy. Other aspects of his work, such as the mutability of time, have intriguing parallels in the philosophies of India. At the request of Hinduism Today who gave me the assignment despite my lack of philosophical credentials I ventured into the fascinating world of Albert Einstein's religious beliefs and the theological consequences of his scientific discoveries.

Born to Jewish parents in Germany in 1879, Albert Einstein's first education was at a strict Catholic school in Munich, where order and discipline were instilled in the students. The experience left him with a lifelong disdain of regimentation and a distrust of authority figures. Apparently to balance the Catholicism Albert was learning in primary school, his parents hired a distant relative to tutor him in the fundamentals of Judaism. These studies sparked a spiritual interest in young Albert, who began preparing for his bar mitzvah, the religious rite Jewish boys undergo when turning 13. He eagerly read the scriptures of his faith and even gave up eating pork. While other boys were dreaming of becoming soldiers and going to war, Einstein abhorred the thought of being in the military. "When I grow up, I don't want to be one of those poor people, " he told his parents. He would remain a devout pacifist throughout his life. He spent a lot of time deep in thought, and he credited his trait of profoundly wondering about things with helping him in his scientific endeavors. Einstein even believed his childlike curiosity, allowing him to think without boundaries, set the stage for his discovery of the relativity theory as an adult.

Einstein maintained a deep interest in his Jewish studies until a family friend lent him several books on natural science. Suddenly, he viewed the world through an empirical lens. He wrote in his autobiography: "Through the reading of popular scientific books, I soon reached the conviction that a lot in the Bible stories could not be true. The result was downright fanatical freethinking, combined with the impression that young people were being lied to by the state: it was a shattering discovery." Einstein turned his back on organized religion and refused to take his bar mitzvah; he was, therefore, not a proper member of the Jewish community something that might have later become an issue had he taken up Israel's 1952 offer to be the country's second president.

The young Einstein soon focused his attention on geometry, finding in Euclid's axiomatic-deductive method a clarity and certainty that he had not found in the Torah and Talmud of his Jewish instructions. From higher mathematics it was only a short and logical step to the world of philosophical thought. With an analytical mind and a passion for deep thinking, he was equal to the task of absorbing Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, a complex work addressing issues of human existence.

The influence of Spinoza

Einstein most admired the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, whose writings he had discovered in his twenties. In Spinoza he found a kindred spirit. Both were solitary, pensive Jews who were eventually alienated by their religious heritage. Einstein was especially impressed by Spinoza's major work, *Ethics*, in which the philosopher uses Euclidean geometry to prove the validity of ethical ideas. Spinoza argued that "God, or substance, consisting of infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality, necessarily exists." According to Spinoza, infinite substance is indivisible. "God is One, hence, in the nature of things, only one substance is given," Spinoza wrote in *Ethics*. Philosophically, his position that whatever exists is a part of a single substance is called, in Western philosophy, "monism." A similar concept exists within many forms of Hindu philosophy.

Spinoza believed in a form of pantheism, from the Greek *pan* and *theos*, meaning "everything is God." Adherence to monism specifically, his belief in pantheism has parallels with the tenets of several Hindu systems of thought, including Advaita Vedanta. The common scientific view is that there is nothing but the physical universe that we can see and measure with our instruments. What separates Spinoza, and later Einstein, from this is two-fold. One, that "what exists" likely extends far beyond our human ability to perceive and analyze it, and two, that "what exists" is divine, Godly and not inert matter.

Some place Spinoza's philosophy under the heading of modified pantheism, in which God is believed to be the reality behind nature. In this way his philosophy differs from Sankara's Advaita Vedanta, in which Brahman alone is reality and all else is illusion. In his *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, William Reese calls Advaita Vedanta "Acosmic Pantheism," the belief that God is in and beyond the manifest world, which does not enjoy true existence.

But Spinoza's view is similar to the view of Saiva Siddhanta and several others systems that the universe is the body and mind of God, while at the same time God transcends the universe. It's a difficult task to compare these Western and Eastern philosophies, not only because they use different terminology, but because the Western philosophies are generally reasoned out, while the Eastern philosophies rely more upon meditative experience and insight. One also has to keep in mind that from the 17th century onward, in Europe and America, Western religion was under full-scale attack from the emerging philosophy and discoveries of science. The relationship between science and religion in the West remains largely hostile. Not so in the East.

Spinoza's views on religion therefore provided something of a way around the hostilities, and they validated ideas that were already germinating in Einstein's mind. "I am fascinated by Spinoza's pantheism, " he said, "but admire even more his contribution to modern thought, because he is the first philosopher to deal with the soul and body as one, and not two separate things." Einstein viewed the human being as a single unit, and scoffed at the idea of a soul which transcended death.

"I am not an atheist."

Einstein's ideas on spirituality enjoyed some influence due to his revolutionary work in physics. Some theologians felt threatened by his scientific theories, and Einstein was frequently asked to contribute articles about religion, perhaps in part to demonstrate he was not an atheist attempting to disprove the existence of God or to demonstrate he was, since both sides interpreted Einstein's ideas to suit their own agenda. These articles, interviews and essays are some of the best evidence we have of Einstein's philosophy.

One, titled "Science and Religion, " presented at the 1940 Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in New York, became the center of controversy. "A person who is religiously enlightened, " he wrote, "appears to me to be one who has, to the best of his ability, liberated himself from the fetters of his selfish desires and is preoccupied with thoughts, feelings and aspirations to which he clings because of their superpersonal value." He then went on to define religion as "the age-old endeavor of mankind to become clearly and completely conscious of these values and goals and constantly to strengthen and extend their effect."

Einstein concluded his paper with a statement about the conflict between science and religion, which he believed has its root in the concept of a personal God. Theologians attending the conference were in an uproar, misinterpreting Einstein's statement as a denial of God. He was asked straight out if he believed in God, and he replied: "I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with fates and actions of human beings." One faction took this to mean Einstein was a believer in God as they understood God. An opposing camp said Einstein's believing in Spinoza's nonpersonal God was the same as believing in no God at all.

In an attempt to define why and in what way he was "religious," Einstein said, "Try and penetrate with our limited means the secrets of nature and you will find that, behind all the discernible concatenations, there remains something subtle, intangible and inexplicable. Veneration for this force beyond anything that we can comprehend is my religion. To that extent I am, in point of fact, religious."

One person asked Einstein to define God. He replied in this fashion: "I'm not an atheist, and I don't think I can call myself a pantheist. We are in the position of a little child entering a huge library filled with books in many languages. The child knows someone must have written those books. It does not know how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written. The child dimly suspects a mysterious order in the arrangement of the books, but doesn't know what it is. That, it seems to me, is the attitude of even the most intelligent human being toward God. We see the universe marvelously arranged and obeying certain laws, but only dimly understand these laws. Our limited mind grasps the mysterious force that moves the constellations."

Einstein was blunt in his rejection of the central tenets of Western religion. "I cannot conceive of a God who rewards and punishes his creatures," he said, "or has a will of the kind that we experience in ourselves. Neither can I, nor would I want to, conceive of an individual that survives his physical death; let feeble souls, from fear or absurd egoism, cherish such thoughts. I am satisfied with the mystery of the eternity of life and with the awareness and a glimpse of the marvelous structure of the existing world, together with the devoted striving to comprehend a portion, be it ever so tiny, of the Reason that manifests itself in nature."

An unusual aspect of Einstein's beliefs, again following Spinoza, was in "determinism," the position that every event or occurrence is determined, that is, could not have happened other than it did. For Spinoza, the feeling of being free is simply the state of ignorance concerning the cause. Einstein's belief in determinism was in part behind his lack of acceptance of quantum mechanics, which held one could not deduce the future state of the universe from the present one. He famously said, "God does not play dice with the universe." However, despite his best efforts, he could not disprove quantum mechanics.

The "cosmic religion "

Einstein summarized his philosophy in what he termed the "cosmic religion," which is characterized by a feeling of awe and an experience of the mysterious that he declared to be the source of his religiosity. In this experience, God does not punish or reward. Although his cosmic religion does not include a personal God (i.e., Ishvara), which he believed was devised due to fear of the unexplained, Einstein believed, "The religious geniuses of all ages have been distinguished by this kind of religious feeling, which knows no dogma and no God conceived in man's image; so that there can be no church whose central teachings are based on it." At this point, for Einstein, religion and science meet, for the cosmic religious experience "is the strongest and noblest driving force behind scientific research."

In response to a question about whether or not modern science can offer spiritual insights where organized religion has failed, Einstein said, "Speaking of the spirit that informs modern scientific investigations, I am of the opinion that all the finer speculations in the realm of science spring from deep religious feeling, and that without such feeling they would not be fruitful. I also believe that this kind of religiousness, which makes itself felt today in scientific investigations is the only creative religious activity of our time." Einstein said that science cannot teach men the importance of ethics and morality, for the simple reason that science deals with what is, and ethics with what should be.

## Meeting Tagore

Among the most famous Einstein dialogues took place in 1930, when Rabindranath Tagore visited him in Germany. Einstein reserved the highest admiration for Tagore, as well as Mahatma Gandhi, and they, in turn, regarded him with esteem. They were united in their concern for the poor and the state of the human condition. Tagore and Einstein shared a love of music and the belief that religion is not found in rituals and tradition. But the poet and the physicist disagreed on at least one point. When Einstein said he agreed with Tagore's concept that beauty is inseparable from man, but that he did not agree that the same held true for truth, Tagore asked, "Why not? Truth is realized through man." After a long pause, Einstein replied simply, "I cannot prove that my conception is right, but that is my religion." Tagore finally declared, "If there be some truth which has no sensuous or rational relation to the human mind, it will ever remain as nothing so long as we remain human beings." To this Einstein replied, "Then I am more religious than you are!"

## Relativity in the light of Vedanta

In Einstein's theory of relativity,  $E=mc^2$ , he postulates that mass is equivalent to energy. Both space and time, deduced Einstein, are no longer absolutes. Consider his theory in light of the Vedanta system of Hindu philosophy. All matter throughout the universe is the outcome of one primal matter called akasha. Moreover, all force, whether gravitational or electromagnetic, is the outcome of one cosmic energy called prana. Prana acting on akasha is creating or projecting the universe. Einstein had thus proven mathematically what Vedantists had known for years. Some theologians have taken the theory of relativity one step further, speculating that Einstein's mass-energy equivalence also accounts for energy and matter as true functions of each other. A God of pure energy could thus become an avatar a doctrine held by some Hindus, Tibetan Buddhists and Christians.

Relativity may also be explored in terms of the system of 36 tattvas, or categories of existence, common to several systems of Hindu philosophy. These begin with shuddha maya, pure spiritual energy, the first evolutes, emanations or creations out of God. The first five tattvas are forms of consciousness, while the next seven are forms of spiritual-magnetic energy, including time (number 7, kala tattva). The final 24 consist of magnetic-gross energy, and include the mental faculties, organs of perception and action and finally the elements ether, air, fire, water and earth. The system of tattvas also regards matter as a form of energy. The major difference is that Einstein did not appear to speak in terms of consciousness as Hindus do, and his religious concepts seemed for the most part to deal with physical reality and not these higher realms of knowing or the subtle worlds spoken of in the Vedas.

## The search for a unified field theory

In 1933, Einstein renounced his German citizenship and accepted a position in the United States at the new Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. He spent the rest of his life as an American citizen in Princeton with his wife, Elsa. They lived in a simple house, and most mornings he walked a mile or so to the Institute to work on his unified field theory. He was attempting to link all known phenomena to explain the nature and behavior of all matter and energy in existence, work that caused some excitement among nonscientists then and now. Paramahansa Yogananda praised the physicist in his 1946 autobiography. "Reducing the cosmical structure to variations on a single law," Yogananda wrote, "Einstein has reached across the ages to the rishis who proclaimed a sole fabric of creation: a

protean maya."

More recently, Eknath Easwaran wrote in his commentary on the Bhagavad Gita that Einstein's quest is a theme found in Hinduism: "One of the most fervent hopes of Einstein was to find an overriding law of nature in which all laws of matter and energy would be unified. This is the driving question in some of the ancient Hindu scriptures, too. Mundaka Upanishad 1.1.3 asks, 'What is That by knowing which all other things may be known?' "

Einstein's search for proof of a unified field eluded him his entire life, although his perception of existence seemed as clear to him as it was to the rishis. He wrote, "A human being is a part of the whole, called by us 'Universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security."

For more information on Albert Einstein, log on to the new Einstein web site, <http://www.alberteinstein.info> additional references are "Einstein and Religion " by Max Jammer and "Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion " by William Reese.