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PUBLISHER'S DESK

## Hinduism: the Original Humanism

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A critical examination of secular humanism and Hindu humanism for youth immersed in the academic atheism of college

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MODERN UNIVERSITIES ARE MOLDING the minds of our youth in ways parents might not expect. This is because reason and science dominate the learning at higher

institutions, pushing religion to the side, an understandable but limiting academic strategy. Even if a professor has strong personal religious convictions, the rules of the institution (with the notable exception of religious universities) do not allow him or her to share these beliefs, or their intellectual implications, with students. The result: the atheistic/agnostic values of secular humanism have been enshrined as the default icons of mainstream education.

Many Hindu youths leave home for college as good Hindus but, after studying the typical subjects through an anti-religious bias, come back doubting the existence of God, the Gods, the inner worlds, life after death and the mystical teachings of their parents' faith. I have heard graduates explain to their parents, as did a young man recently, "We are trained in school to follow the scientific method and to question everything. I no longer believe in God because there is no scientific proof of God's existence." Steeped in the university's atheistic ambience, these youth have essentially converted from Hinduism to secular humanism. Universities, being equal-opportunity institutions, have the same affect on unsuspecting adherents of all faiths. Jewish students return home more unbelieving, Catholics turn more liberal and Muslims become strangers to their born religion.

Gurudeva was confronted by this issue nearly three decades ago. In response, he directed his swamis to compose a summary of the beliefs of this school of thought along with three other atheistic viewpoints (materialism, existentialism and communism). He published the results in *Dancing with Siva*. He realized how important it is for students to know the belief systems of Western thought and doctrine, for they permeate and color most university subjects. I have been asked by youth and parents how we can reconcile Hinduism with secular humanism. Hence, on pages 12-13 I have prepared a Hindu counterpoint to each of the nine secular humanist beliefs.

In its search for meaning and value in life, secular humanism (or simply Humanism, the uppercase term adherents prefer) views the world through the lens of reason and science alone. Its concepts of morality have a purely rational, nonspiritual basis as well.

In 2002 the International Humanist and Ethical Union issued the Amsterdam Declaration as their official defining statement: "Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more

humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.â

To help Hindu students cope with the overwhelming influence of secular humanism, I suggest that Hinduism is the original and most humanistic philosophy of all. It has everything that humanism has and much more.



## SHUTTERSTOCK

Pondering issues: A college student is musing over the subjects his professor is presenting, most of which reflect Western views of reality. His challenge is to discover how they connect to his Hindu upbringing.

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A core concept of Humanism is expressed by its third belief: "I believe in the preservation and enhancement of the human species as my ultimate concern, and in the global human family, which must preserve the Earth for future generations."

Hinduism has no trouble endorsing this conviction. The difference lies in the question, "What aspects of the human condition need to be enhanced and how?" Hinduism accepts the secular humanist values above and adds what it considers the essential purpose of human life—spiritual advancement, moving closer and closer to God (which for monists is one's innermost, divine Self) over a span of many lifetimes.

Hinduism approaches the advancement of humanity in the context of its divinity, and indeed the divinity of all things, including the material universe. A Hindu would point out that quantum physics is revealing that the universe itself is supernatural and conscious, a concept thoroughly described in our millennia-old scriptures.

While secular humanism nobly advocates service to one's fellow man, Hindu humanism spiritualizes selfless service in the form of karma yoga, transforming our work and all our activities into worship and thereby bringing us closer to realizing our innate union with God. Pramukh Swami Maharaj of BAPS counseled his followers in the aftermath of the 2001 Gujarat earthquake: "When people are facing difficulties and sorrows, our Indian tradition is to offer them solace. We feel that by serving the human beings we serve the Lord Himself."

Ideally the Hindu approach to worshiping God through service is taught to teenage Hindus by both their parents and temple teachers. Also, it is important for these

teens to have the experience of participating in service projects on a regular basis. Fortunately, many temples organize such service projects. If there are no Hindu projects in your area, then expand the search into the general community for activities related to improving the environment, disaster relief, or providing clothes, food and care for the needy.

What are some of the other key differences between these two forms of humanism? While secular humanism glorifies reason as king, Hinduism knows it to be but one source of knowing. What the former denounces as superstition the latter reveres as mystical experience. While secular humanism says there is no afterlife, the Hindu believes that each and every soul under-takes many lifetimes on the planet. He understands the wisdom in this cycle of birth, death and rebirth and seeks to do well enough in this life to earn entry to a high-minded family in the next. The knowledge of reincarnation eliminates the fear of death and, coupled with the law of karma, explains the diversity of human experience. In an ironic twist, the current frontiers of university science, not the old school, are deeply immersed in studies on nonlocal consciousness (read soul and reincarnation), nonmaterialism of the cosmos (the darling of quantum physics) and awareness in plants and even inert matter. So, a century from now some of this conflict may be moot.

Gurudeva spoke of how Hinduism brings forth the wonderful feelings of a belief in the cosmic processes of reincarnation coupled with knowledge of the laws of karma and the wisdom of dharma in which everyone has his rightful place and purpose in life. It brings the broadmindedness of total acceptance of all other religions as expressions of the One God's creation, the blessing of a complete devotional path revolving around powerful temples, the fulfillment of a profound mystical teaching founded on yoga and brought forth by the seers and saints and gurus, and so much more. Our religion is so strong, so rich and varied that very few can claim to understand it in its completeness. It is immense, an immense religion, so immense that we have difficulty sometimes explaining it to those who hold to a simpler doctrine.

With their understanding of the workings of the three worlds, Hindus also have the joy of pilgrimage, setting aside worldly concerns and journeying to sacred places at auspicious times for special blessings. Gurudeva explained, "Unlike the proud free thinkers who deem themselves emancipated, above the religious life, we Hindus feel that receiving the darshan from the Gods and the help that comes therein invigorates our being and inspires us to be even more diligent in our spiritual life. Unlike the rationalists who feel confident that within themselves lie all the resources to meet all needs, and that praying to Gods for help is a pathetic

exercise in futility, the Hindu wisely submits to the Divine and thus avoids the abyss of disbelief.â

Then there is the joy of mysticism. As Gurudeva put it: âHow grand is the Hindu mystical tradition, with its sadhanas and yogas, with its wealth of understanding of the etheric bodies, of the nadis and the chakras, of the aura and the pranas, of the various states of consciousness and levels of existence, and so much more.â

Young Hindus going to college should be prepared to immerse themselves in the academic world, where reason is king, as a temporary limiting of awareness to gain the lessons the courses have to offer, not to be converted to the path of skepticism and doubt. I advise youth to keep in mind that many academics are dedicated to convincing theists that they are on an ignorant path, and to convince Hindus that our religion is crude, outdated and rife with superstition. I urge them to continue their spiritual practices at school, including puja, japa, yoga, meditation and scriptural study, and look forward to graduating as a great student who is still a good Hindu.

The nine beliefs below, drawn from Dancing with Siva: Hinduismâs Contemporary Catechism, summarize the worldview of secular humanism. To the right we offer a Hindu counterpoint to each humanist belief.



## 9 Beliefs of Secular Humanism:

- 1                                      Dismissal of Theism    I believe in nontheism, as there is no rational proof for the existence of God, and do not delude myself with thoughts of a Supreme Being.
  
- 2                                      Rejecting Religion & Superstition        I believe that traditional religions and faiths preach false doctrines, are oppressive and lead their followers toward ignorance, bigotry and dogmatism, and that it is my duty to be actively skeptical of and challenge the illusions of orthodox religions and all attempts to explain the world in supernatural terms.
  
- 3                                      Furthering Humanity    I believe in the preservation and enhancement of the human species as my ultimate concern, and in the global human family, which must preserve the Earth for future generations through developing a secular, planetary morality and system of law.

4                      Being Good Without a God                      I believe that living a good, moral life is the best means for individual and collective happiness and that morality has a rational, secular basis.

5                      Protecting Human Rights                      I believe in expanding human rights and intellectual and moral freedom, and in secular democracy, with strict separation of church and state, as the means of eliminating discrimination and attaining equality and justice for all.



- 6                                      Education & Free Inquiry                                      I believe in the development of the creative human potential through education in the arts and sciences and in the paramount importance of free inquiry in an open, pluralistic, universalist society.
- 7                                      Relying Solely on Reason                                      I believe in the application and development of reason and modern science as the highest means to understanding the universe, solving human problems and enabling each individual to realize his greatest potential.

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| 8 | Focus on this Life;<br>Disbelief in an<br>Afterlife | I believe in striving for fulfillment and happiness in this life and reject all notions of reincarnation and afterlife as false and baseless, seeking my fullest capacity as a human being here and now, serving others and creating a better, more just world. |
| 9 | Belief in<br>Reincarnation                          | I believe in Darwin's theory of evolution as scientific fact, and in naturalism, holding that the known world is all that exists, and that it has no supernatural or spiritual creation, control or significance.   |



## And a Hindu Counterpoint:

- 1                      Strong Faith In God I believe in a one, all-pervasive Supreme Being who is both immanent and transcendent, both Creator and Unmanifest Reality. Great souls have testified to their personal experiences of the God, whose existence is affirmed by scriptures.

- 2                      Respect for Religions                      I believe that the world's religions are based upon valid transcendental experiences of the Divine. I believe that no particular religion teaches the only way to salvation above all others, but that all genuine religious paths are facets of God's pure love and light, deserving tolerance and understanding.
- 3                      The Sacredness of All                      I believe in the sacredness of life, which includes the vast cosmos in all its manifestations, and thus in the preservation of the Earth and all its species, and in the value of spiritual luminaries working with and advising secular leaders in matters of government.

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| 4 | Guided Toward Goodness by God | I believe that moral, religious life is essential to the highest form of individual and community good and that ethical principles have their roots in the soil of faith, spiritual experience, holy texts and cultural wisdom.  |
| 5 | Guarding All Human Rights     | I believe in a balance of human rights and responsibilities, in the necessity for equal religious and intellectual freedom for followers of all faiths and that Hindu spiritual principles, properly exercised, will eliminate discrimination and bring equality and justice to all. |

- 6 Knowledge & Freedom I believe there is a profound reservoir of human karma and capability that gives rise to creativity, art, science and indeed all forms of knowing and that people will unfold these best when given unfettered freedom of thought and inquiry.
- 7 Relying on Reason & Superconsciousness I believe that a full comprehension of the universe requires the partnership of superconsciousness and religious tradition with reason and science, and that there is no inherent conflict between the two.

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| 8 | Belief in Reincarnation           | I believe in reincarnation, that the soul, consciousness, is nonlocal and survives physical death. Nonetheless, it is fruitless to dwell on past or future lives, and wise to live this life fully in the now, fulfilling dharma, so we may attain our higher purpose in future births.     |
| 9 | The Discoveries of Modern Science | I believe that the natural and supernatural form one reality, that science is only one measure of the cosmos and, in fact, quantum physics is discovering the reality of nonmaterial dimensions and affirming Hinduism's declaration of a unitive consciousness that pervades the universe. |



