Friends of the Universe
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Friends of the Universe

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We Hindus are fortunate to live in a friendly universe," I was musing to myself the other day, "For many the world is more a perilous place than an abode." "Nice of someone to notice," said a voice which seemed to come from all directions at once. "Who's that?" I challenged. "It's me. The Universe. Want to talk?" "Talk? With the Universe? Well, just for a few minutes. I know how busy You are," if offered humble.

"I wish," came the Cosmic reply, "The last conversation I had was with some half-crazed mystic poet. You'd be surprised how few people really talk with me. It used to be different, lots of tribal celebrations in my honor, lots of chants asking me for this or that. People would even feed me now and again in appreciation. That was nice. Now so many people think I'm just a heap of hydrogen strewn in space. Do you really think I'm friendly?"

"Sure, most Hindus would say so," I offered. "There are many ways down here to look at the Great Out There, the physical cosmos. For the past couple of centuries scientists have pretty much understood You as a chance mechanical system, sort of a complex clock that's slowly running down. Lately the best scientists are suggesting You might even be - ready for a heresy? - conscious. Hindus knew that all along. Existentialists have You pegged as an indifferent place, devoid of meaning or purpose. Some semitic faiths think of You as a place where evil and temptation fight it out with goodness, sort of the devil's playground. Nothing personal. That's just how they've got it figured."

"No offense taken. I'm bigger than that, as you can see. Still, I kind of like the Hindu view. Tell me more."

"For most Hindu," I explained, "the world is a good place, a sacred place. They see You as God's perfect creation where we all mature, where we all unfold spiritually. Quite a few think of You like God's body or God's power. They call You Prakriti or primordial nature and describe You as both matter and mind. God, they believe, is greater than You, but not separate from You. It can't be said that this is true for all Hindus - nothing I know of is true for all Vedic traditions - but it is mostly true."

I continued, "Other Hindus think of You as a Divine and Blissful Dance. A few see You as themselves, no difference. In the Hindu view everything You do is conspiring to help us on our way toward perfection. Even things which seem "bad" are really not, which is why You don't find us criticizing You too often. We try to see life's difficulties as part of the grand scheme of things. Rather than looking at You as separating us from the Divine, Hindus see You as the very thing needed to bring us closer to It."

"Wait a minute! You're not telling me the whole story, are you? I heard some people saying that Hinduism is life-negating and world-negating. That doesn't agree with this idea of a friendly universe. How do you explain that?" the Universe interrogated.

I explained the historical disaster, "You see, there was this Dr. Albert Schweitzer, a kindly missionary theologian who worked a lot in Africa helping people. He died in 1965. He thought a lot about human spirituality, and he wrote a little book about Indian and Hindu thought in which he sued those terms, 'world and life negation.' He meant one thing, but people took it to mean another. He was right that in Hinduism there are paths which stress transcending or renouncing the world, and there are paths that stress living well in the world. One focuses on moksha or liberation and the other on samsara or experience in the world. Both are acceptable approaches to the Hindu."

"So far it's hearsay. What did Dr. Schweitzer actually say? Not that I don't trust you, but we just met and you are an editor," said the Universe, who clearly knew human nature and publishing.

I read aloud to the Universe from Albert Schweitzer's writings, "'As we can see in the hymns of the Vedas, the Aryans of Indian antiquity still passed their lives in a

state of quite simple joy in existence...But even as early as in the hymns of the Rig Veda we can see the thought from which world and life negation developed. In these hymns we encounter men who know they are uplifted above this world. They are the yogins who get themselves into a state of ecstasy...which is the condition determining Indian world and life negation...Unlike Hellenic world and life negation, that of India does not claim to be generally accepted, but remains on good terms with world and life affirmation, which it allows to exist alongside of it.' Schweitzer was talking about the Hindu custom of living a full life, then, toward the end, withdrawing from the world to pursue one's enlightenment, one's liberation. In other words, it was a positive, and largely accurate, view of Hinduism. But then his friends got hold of the idea and spread the message that Hindus were against life and against the world. Never mind that this was totally false. It became accepted in the West, and even some Hindus adopted it as their very own."

"Cheer up. Consider me a friend."

"That's the point, I do," I confessed. "That's what makes me sad when I see people who are blithely oblivious of all You do and all You are. But things are changing down here."

"What makes You think there's a change going on?"

"Good question," I parried, using the world's oldest Socratic gimmick to allow me a few cerebral seconds to ransack the neural files. "Take a look at science fiction, for instance. It's sort of humankind's modern myth about space and time and mind. In Orson Wells' 1939 War of the Worlds, flying saucer aliens attack the earth, destroying cities, killing all in their path..."

"Right," came the interruption, "It's the same with movies."

"You watch the movies?" I spluttered.

"Sure. I watch everything. Aliens used to be mean, ugly creatures who mutilated their prey or zapped them or spread deadly viruses. Then along came ET, the friendly Extra Terrestrial..."

"Before ET there was Close Encounters of the Third Kind," I corrected the Universe, wondering if such protocol would be approved by Emily Post. "That was the first non-threatening, almost mystical encounter where aliens were super-intelligent, but still not awfully friendly. More aloof or neutral in their relationship. They didn't speak our language like ET learned to do. Since they weren't dependent on us, they kept their distance."

"Good point about dependence. The human race does have a few things to learn in that department," the Universe observed.

"Yes, that dependence made ET kind of a Teddy Bear alien. Finally, beings from space were our friends. Now the big movie for Summer 1990 is The Abyss, in which aliens are curious, magical, amicable beings. That makes You seem a more friendly place, less hostile. The world media is shaping and reflecting our collective changed view of You," I said, then continued.

"I just saw an article in the paper claiming that Christianity is worried about the growing exodus from the church. At a Washington meeting of 1,500 leaders of Christian broadcasting, televangelist Pat Robertson warned, 'There is something coming from the East. It's a modified version of Hinduism. It's called the new age. It's sweeping into American businesses, the classrooms of America, infiltrating into American businesses, the classrooms of America, infiltrating into Europe. It's even in the Soviet Union.' One sociologist explained that the new age is fast becoming the new Satan for the Christian right, replacing communism and secular humanism as the prime enemy of the church."

"It's this very issue of the so-called pagan view of a sacred Universe that worries the Pat Robertsons of the world. He's fighting the same battle that the early Christian church waged 2,000 years ago against mystery religions and nature-based spirituality. There are so many young people today who don't believe in the idea that man has a divine dominion over the earth. They see man's place as woven intricately and elegantly into the creation, and they say that western

notions of superiority are more ego than wisdom. Looking for deeper ways of comprehending the Universe, young men and women are naturally drawn to shamanism, to Eastern mysticism, to mythology and meditation, all of which produce an intimacy with nature, not a distance."

The phone rang, our correspondent in Kuala Lumpur. "Would you excuse me?" I inquired sheepishly.

"Sure. Be a friend. Stay in touch," she said.

I thought to myself, "Isn't that the point? The Universe always has time for us, but how often do we have time for Her?"

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