

Hinduism and Secularism

A lecture given by Anil Bhanot on 22nd February 2009 at Leicester Secular Society.



While I stand before you today as the General Secretary of the Hindu Council UK, in my day job I am a chartered accountant running my own practice in West London. So you might say an “accountant with a soul” and I’m particularly delighted to be invited to speak today in front of so many of you, because what I would like to talk about is how Hinduism respects the divinity in all, not least the secularists.

We are living in an age where many believe ‘God’ has become an embarrassing word. There is an increasing unease within wider society about the privileges afforded to believers in the way of faith schools, blasphemy or incitement to religious hatred laws, the right to evangelise, and so on. Well, as a believing Hindu, I share some of these concerns. In fact, what I want to explore with you today is my belief that the fundamental principles of Hinduism are actually not so far off from some of the aims and philosophies of secularism, part from the idea about God which is of course important. Though I hasten to add that the secularism I am comfortable with is the old style soft secularism, the inclusive secularism not the new hardened one which has become a little evangelistic.

Hinduism has its foundations in the Vedas, a collection of 17,000 mantras, hymns and stories that are believed to be revealed directly from God through seers, or Rishis, and female seers called Rishikas. Despite being upto 6,000 years old, the Vedas are full of wisdom that is still very relevant today. What I find particularly exciting about the Vedas is that they don’t concern themselves with spiritual issues alone. They describe scientific advances such as ships sailing around the world in just 11 days, and of air planes encircling the earth three times a day. For music they have the Ragaas as the fundemnatals. The contain a lot on physical sciences – they calculated the distance between the earth and the sun, and knew the earth revolved around the sun long before Copernicus formulated the views, later declared heretical by his faith. There are even hymns about gravity. And of course I particularly like the Vedic mathematics, though it is believed that the Zero was developed much later by Aryabhatta. According to Vedic mathematics, for instance, life on earth first appeared 1,972,949,111 years ago. This may be out by a billion years or so with modern science but nonetheless an amazing sum according to an ancient science.

Read the Vedas and it is quickly clear that that there is no conflict between Hinduism and science, a fact that perhaps explains why the largest Hindu nation on earth, India, is at the cutting edge of scientific and technological discovery, leading the world in the fields of technology, electronics, space and nuclear research, genetics, biotechnology – I could go on and on. And here is the paradox: you will find that each and everyone of those scientists would have a belief in God.

In the main, however, the Vedas for Hindus represent the “eternal testament” of God. Some of the concepts mentioned within these sacred texts are likely to be much older than the Vedas themselves - ideas such as Karma and re-incarnation for instance. And while these may be dismissed by the secularist who believes we have only this life the philosophical messages within the Vedas give hope, I think, for all of us, whether we believe in God or not.

The Vedic philosophy is centred around four pillars:

1. Tat Twam Asi – “you” are god, or truth, the idea of omnipresence of God. 2. Idd Nan Mmam - Civilisation - the idea of nothing for self, unless for society 3. Rta, or government - the divine laws of social, moral and physical order 4. Artha, Kaam, Dharma and Moksha – the four fold purpose of life

The first pillar, Tat Twam Asi, requires that respect should be given to everyone. Because Hindus believe everything to be divine, or potentially divine, we greet anyone we meet with the word ‘Namaste’ by joining hands, meaning our minds may be one and adding a small physical bow to signify we are bowing to the divinity within you. It is a beautiful concept, the idea of each individual being important, being worthy of respect, of equal and fair treatment, and is one that few secularists – and I am sure no humanist – could disagree with.

The second pillar, is one of looking after oneself only so long it fits in with society, So not looking after Number one philosophy but rather taking account of your family, community and country at the same time. Similar philosophies have formed the basis of many a secular system of ethics, though recently there has been a too far shift towards individualism.

The third pillar of Rta includes the law of Karma, in a nutshell, the belief that we reap what we sow, or what goes around comes around. It is a law of cause and effect but with a “moral” underpinning. In Hinduism we do not have commandments. We each have a free choice, a choice which leads to one or other set of consequences. And giving all due consideration to the consequences of one’s speech or actions is a principle that is so needed in the modern world today. Our bankers taking risks on our deposits for which we get a fixed interest and yet awarding themselves huge bonuses for playing monopoly for shareholders, would be well advised to read and practice the doctrine of Karma. It’s a doctrine little understood in the West but it is a doctrine that makes you responsible for the consequences of your actions. It is the height of self regulation.

The fourth pillar is about the purpose of life with all its practicalities. Artha imeans security, the need for security of a job, a roof over our head. Kaam reflects our desires for procreation and beauty. Dharma is the moral side of living. Dharma has ten principles as opposed to commandments which, with some variations, we share with our sister religions like Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Finally Moksha is liberation from the cycle of birth, offering the opportunity to escape the wheel of rebirth and become one with the Absolute Reality.

So, it is just this one concept of Absolute Reality that secularism is likely to have a problem with. But should it?

Within Hinduism, the Rishis and Rishikas who compiled the Vedas observed that there was nothing constant in the universe. Everything they said was changing; there was nothing fixed; nothing eternal in the ‘phenomenal’ universe, the word phenomenal in Sanskrit means ‘that which appears

to the senses.' So nothing in the world we experience is permanent. All is changing in both form and time.

However, the Rishis and Rishikas thought that because the phenomenal world is in a continuous flux, there must be a constant substance behind it, like the sky behind the moving clouds. Hence they deduced there was another Reality behind what appeared to us as a reality. This substance they called the Absolute Reality or, in Hindu terms, Brahm or Brahman.

Further logic then dictates that this substance, the Absolute Reality, must be above the phenomenal world, otherwise where does the order in the phenomenal world come from? Why does the earth rotate round the sun so accurately to a decimal point age after age? Who created the law of gravity?

The phenomenal world does exist but then where did it come from? The Rishis advocated the axiom that nothing can be created out of nothing. Then they postulated that the universe must be the "image" of that reality Brahm. Then if Brahm is the Absolute Reality, they deduced that Brahm cannot have a cause, since that would imply that there is another reality behind Brahm, and then there is no end to the realities causing other realities. The philosophers among you will recognise this as an ontological argument for the existence of God and, in Hindusim, the uncaused cause is Brahm.

The next question was whether Brahm is changeable. Can the absolute Reality split into two? But nothing can be created out of nothing and therefore Brahm can never change since it is all that is real and if it were to change it could not change into nothing nor could it divide into parts as there would be nothing else for it to divide into.

Of course secularism does not see the need to look behind the phenomenal world for reality. But you may recall that even the most vociferous of critics of religion, Professor Richard Dawkins, when pushed I am informed, admitted he accepts the "possibility" of a transcendental intelligence, existing beyond the range of present human experience.

I did plan at this point in my talk to go into a detailed history of Hindu philosophies, but, it would have been far too heavy a discourse and I am sure I would have earned the title "boring old accountant" even from an illustrious audience such as this, so I thought I'd simply leave it at mentioning that there are 6 major systems of philosophy in India and in fact one of them is on Humanism. However, there is another minor one, not part of these major six, which most of you will probably be completely home with.

The Charvakas philosophy, named after its founder in around 1000BCE has the motto, "enjoy your life, for tomorrow we die." – a bit like your recent Bus campaign. Like secularists, the Charvakas believed that matter is the only reality and the 'soul' is part of the mind which perishes at death. You may also be interested to know that there is some evidence that this system was a reaction against priestly rituals which the Charvakas thought were clever means of extracting money from the masses! However, even these materialist Hindus still believed in the law of Karma, so they were still good Hindus, who simply proved the rule that Hindus by nature do not accept dogma as their religion.

Throughout its long history, the Hindu tradition has always challenged theology and on the basis of "Tat Twam Asi", the first pillar that you are potentially divine, the tradition grew by means of a

respectful debate and enquiry. It aimed to absorb all that is rational and good and this philosophical approach kept the theology on its toes, and thus dynamic. To put it simply we reject dogma, that God will do this or that if we don't 'behave', whatever that means. Hindus have always held onto the idea of enquiry over scripture, and because we have access to many different theologies and philosophies, freedom of choice is easy. In any one family you will find many shades of Hinduism, each respecting the other. There are several differences of practice even across different states of India. Lord Krishna offers several ways to attain Him and one of which is through Karma Yoga – the right action, though coupled with the right devotion in the mind. Free choice is fundamental to the practice of Hinduism, because Hinduism hold you responsible for your own actions through the doctrine of Karma. Theologically there is no pressure to even adopt a “saviour-deity” lest you miss the heaven door, although most Hindu homes would have a shrine of their deities. But the lack of pressure is due to the fact that the doctrine of reincarnation of many births allows you to manage your “risk/reward ratio” until you are ready for the ultimate grace of God in that state of Moksha you “experience” God here on earth. Again all this exemplifies “free choice” to be at the very heart of Hindu tradition.

We Hindus know – and I am sure you in this audience would agree – that we don't need to be religious to be moral. I believe that religion helps, in the main, although I am not blind to recognising how even iconic religious personalities can be highly immoral, and how sometimes religion itself can be corrupt. Its human nature as we say. That is where Hindus believe that Morality is evolved through the right Karmic action and human birth is evolved enough to have that sense of morality at the point of birth and although through early childhood it is reminded of what is right and wrong by parents each human being brings with it a sum total of its past karma which is what gives one the individual personality and through karmic experience the morality continues to refine. So morality is directly linked to Karma, our experiences of thoughts and actions.

To begin to sum up. I hope if you take only one thing away from this talk it is that Hindus have held onto the idea of enquiry – including secular enquiry - over and above their scriptures for thousands of years. However, while many Hindus today consider themselves secular, “soft secular”, to distinguish themselves from the practising orthodox ones, secular to them does not mean atheist. They still believe in God, in Karma, in reincarnation and the 10 principles of Dharma.

This is why I think it is regrettable that fervent secularists, perhaps not understanding the philosophical background of my faith and so taking such a hardened tone against religion, have inadvertently spawned a counter-move against this progressive, soft-secular Hinduism. This is particularly so in India as the Indian Government moved away from the older constitutional secularism of treating all religions as same to now rejecting religion altogether. The Communists in India pose the greatest threat.

This is upsetting. To see my noble religious tradition, honed and winnowed over generations, being reduced to religious exclusivity, which in turn leads to bigotry and fear in society, which is of course directly contrary to the second pillar of the Vedas as mentioned earlier, for a progressive civilised society.

The greatest concern for all of us, I believe, whether we are people of faith or people of no faith, is that our children should not be allowed to be brainwashed to think that one or other theological or moral system is the best. For me, the extreme secular fundamentalist position is just as frightening as the fervour and discrimination of those evangelicals who would Christianize my spiritual homeland, without a shred of regret or remorse for the loss of centuries of rich and diverse culture. Now here also, at the Church Synod, they have called for a return to evangelic conversions. This is sad and particularly so because I believe that some of the moderate church leaders support such moves, albeit from the back door. I think the easiest thing for human nature is to idolatrise an

ideology, and in this case their “singular-saviour”. This is blind faith or superstition which gives them the right to destroy others’ “good” ways of life or simply cull God’s “beautiful” diversity. Frightening for the Dharmic faiths, who consider “freedom of worship” as an individual’s fundamental human right.

This is why the Hindu Council UK is, like secularists, a little bit uncomfortable with single-faith schools. We believe that a multi-faith approach is far more preferable, as it reduces the potential for exclusivity and division in society. We do want faith in schools and we do understand when some parents want to teach their theological practice to their children and there is no harm in that but the differences come when we try to indoctrinate singular rather than universal values. So I think the single faith schools will need to reform if they are to survive in the long term.

What I believe we need to teach in our homes, our schools, and our workplaces is a universal moral philosophy which is beyond theology based values. We need a soft secularism that is inclusive of all faiths and philosophies and non-faith, which is what most Hindus are comfortable with.

I will end with a quote from The Upanishads: “Let one keep the mind pure, for what a human thinks, that he becomes.” It would be a wise move if we were all to purify our thoughts and take right actions so we can truly respect the unity and equality of all humans, so rich in all our religious and non-religious diversity.

Namaste! I bow to the “divinity” in you all, even though some of you may not accept the divinity part, yet!

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Hindu Council UK (HCUK) is the foremost and largest national network of the Hindu temple bodies and cultural organisations co-ordinating all different schools of Hindu theology within the UK. HCUK is the representative umbrella body for the British Hindu issues for which a UK wide mandate was received during a two year consultation with the British Hindu public culminating in its launch in November 1994.

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