



# Beyond Symbolism

SEEKERS IDENTIFY WITH SPIRITUALITY RATHER THAN RELIGION BUT IF WE COULD THINK OF RELIGION FREE OF ITS RITUALS, HABITS, CREEDS AND BELIEFS, THE TWO WOULD BE ONE. WHAT IS MORE, ALL RELIGIONS WOULD THEREBY REVEAL THEIR ESSENTIAL UNITY, RESOLVING ONE OF THE PREMIER SOURCES OF DISCORD IN THE WORLD

by **Jamuna Rangachari**

“Why do only some and not all Hindus wear a sacred thread?” my son queried, looking at the photographs of the ceremony we held when he was younger. When I told him it was a significant milestone, he further queried why it was only Brahmins and not all Hindus who went through this ritual, unlike customs like the Bar Mitzvah of the Jews or the Navjote of the Parsis, both of which are also performed for similar reasons of stepping into adulthood.

My understanding was shaken to the core and this set me questioning the ‘isms’ or organised rituals more and more.

If Vedanta talks of God within each of us, why does Hinduism not treat everyone equally?

If Islam means peace, why are wars fought in its name?



If Christ symbolised forgiveness and compassion, why does Christianity condemn sinners to eternal hell?

The list goes on and on and on...

When one is told to accept something because it is the practice, I have felt, if God or a Higher Consciousness did not wish us to question, He would not have given us the ability to seek and question. What then stops us from doing so? Is it that we do not know where to begin?

### **Transactional Analysis and fallacies**

In his book, *I'm OK, You're OK*, Dr Thomas Harris lucidly explains the three distinct aspects in our personality, that of a parent, child and adult.

A parent acts dogmatically based on what has been told to him by people in authority, a child acts due to feelings of rejection or inadequacy, while an adult acts rationally after self-examination, self-exploration and experimentation.

Most of our perceptions of religion are due to a parent or child perspective. We follow rituals and customs either because we have been told to do so by people in authority, or because we are afraid that something negative will happen if we don't persist in

following the customary path.

If only we were to examine the practices in the context of the times in which they originated, we would perhaps understand and apply them in a better way.

Kamal Malhi, a seeker from Mumbai agrees, saying a break from conventions is essential for a true seeker.

### **The quest**

Truly, all seekers have had to go on individual quests to seek answers, with obstacles of conditioning strewn all through the path.

"When I read a pithy tale in a book with Sufi and Zen tales, it really set me thinking," says Nancy D'Souza, a seeker from Mumbai. The tale is of a young boy who was told, "You will be taken care of as long as you wear the amulet," when he sets off to a forest. The boy clutches it firmly and goes to the forest. Nothing happens to him and his faith grows stronger. Till one day, he loses the amulet and is completely paralysed with fear. The tale ends here, urging us to think, – is your faith in the amulet or in a higher power?

This triggered a great quest in Nancy, who went on to question, seek and find her answers in all wisdom traditions, not

with the fetters of a restricted viewpoint but with complete freedom. Actually, this made her understand her own religion in a better way. "When Christ said, 'I am light and love' he meant he had reached a higher consciousness. We all must bow to and aspire to become not Christ, the person, but Christ who symbolises this state," she explains now with complete clarity.

So is the case with other religious leaders who have been open to wisdom without any fetters. "There is so much we have to

learn from all traditions. We were sent to yoga and vipassana workshops. This has only made me a better Christian and a more mature human being," says Father Prashant, a Jesuit priest who strongly supports inter-faith initiatives. Bringing out acceptance too

as a key virtue, he continues, "Christ was the epitome of compassion and acceptance. By not understanding people of other faith and accepting them, are we not doing him a disservice?"

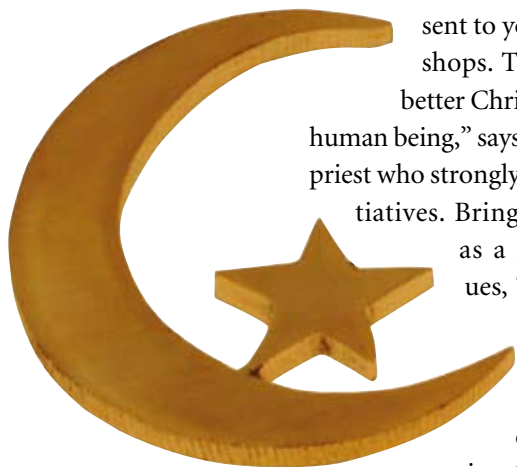
"Jihad is a struggle. In recent times, the satyagraha of Mahatma Gandhi is certainly a jihad as it required tremendous courage and perseverance," said Maulana Wahiduddin, when I queried him on the concept. A tireless crusader himself, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan has been on a mission to free Islam from the hold of self-interested clerics, and broadcast its message of peace and tolerance.

One cannot help recalling the other Khan – Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan – who was perhaps one of the few people who had the clarity and vision to realise what a potent message satyagraha had for Muslims. When people were sur-

prised at a Pathan advocating non-violence, he said, "There is nothing surprising in a Muslim or Pathan like me subscribing to the creed of non-violence. It was followed hundreds of years ago by the Prophet all the time when he was in Mecca." Excited at the prospect of a brave and disciplined Pathan enlisting, Gandhi welcomed him with open arms. Right till the end, both of them were among the few who remained true to the principles of satyagraha and non-violence.

Denis Khan from Mumbai was born in an inter-religious union and lost his father in the Partition riots of India. In the tumultuous times that followed, his mother took sanctuary in a Christian missionary school and counselled him to never lose faith in the goodness of man, whatever the situation in the world might be. Today, Denis, retaining his faith in the human spirit through all his travails, says, "When asked to pick two commandments from the ten, Christ replied, 'Love God with all your soul and heart, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.' These would be the ones I would pick." Is it not the same as Islam's brotherhood?

As a child studying in a convent school, K Gitanjali Balakrishnan, a seeker from Bangalore and disciple of Mahavtar Babaji, often wondered if proximity to Christ would be denied to her on account of being a Hindu. Today, understanding clearly what Christ is she expounds, "When Christ said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life,' he was talking about the 'I am' presence. He meant it the same way as Krishna does in the Gita when he says, 'I am the essence in everything.' Further, when Christ says, 'You will not reach the father except through me,' he is saying that we will be able to experience God only when we get in touch with our Higher Self also called



**John Abraham**

"It is only by working with the principles of compassion that one truly spreads the message of Christ."



the Christ Self. It is no coincidence that Krish also means Christos.”

Truly service-minded people would never discriminate, based on their tenets. For instance, when I called John Abraham, founder of Vision in Social Area, an organisation that helps rehabilitate street children in Mumbai, to ask if he would accept a disabled Hindu child in his institute, he asked, “Isn’t he a human being? He added, “It is only by working with the principles of compassion that one truly spreads the message of Christ.”

Most truly religious or should I say, spiritual people never have a problem with other religions as they are after all, streams of wisdom. As Sarah Ban Breathnach says in the book, *Simple Abundance*, “The more we allow ourselves to recognise the wisdom and truth in other spiritual paths, the closer to wholeness we become.”

The fact is we often confuse anthropology, sociology and culture with faith.

### Sociology and religion

Every culture has had certain influences. Just like a constitution, which is created at a particular time and place, and revised when necessary, so could the shariat and several other such laws. In fact, the word religion comes from the Latin word, ‘religare,’ which means ‘to bind’ and includes rituals, customs, and traditions used for that purpose.

Interestingly, Hinduism makes a distinction between Shruti, timeless wisdom and Smriti, a set of rules applicable at a particular time and place in history. Hence, while the Vedas and Upanishads are eternal, Manu Smriti is applicable only to a particular era.

Considering all faiths worthy, Prophet Zoroaster felt the principles could be applied by all, but they need not convert to Zoroastrianism. He realised that, after all, the practice is important. Further, when the Parsis arrived in India,

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COURTESY: SOCIETY FOR HOLISTIC ADVANCEMENT OF MEDICINE “SOHAM”

they had promised to mingle and not convert, and emerged as stalwarts and true patriots in all walks of life. However, the practical situation today is precarious. The Parsi community is dwindling. If they persist in not allowing inter-caste marriages, they would be sowing a seed of extinction within themselves. Officially, in order to be a Zoroastrian, one must be born of two Zoroastrian parents. No children of mixed marriages are officially Zoroastrian. One wonders if the founder would have stuck to his guns so forcefully under the circumstances or would he have changed the rules to suit the circumstances, given his catholicity of approach with regard to other religions.

In the case of music and Islam, Maulana Khan clarifies, “What the Prophet had recommended was that people must guard against music which uses foul language and steers people toward alcohol, lust and such sinful activity.” In fact, David or Dawood as he is known in the Islamic tradition, is revered for reaching God through his mellifluous music. Instead of

taking the true message, however, some people insist on throwing out the baby with the bathwater. When we examine it ourselves however, we will realise that music was created so that it could give us joy. Surely, such a thing could never be blacklisted.

The word Sikh itself means a learner, a student. When Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru realised all the truths had been compiled in the Guru Granth Sahib, and did not want it diluted, he asked people to use the book itself as the Guru and not be dependent on a human guru or be misguided. Still, if guidance or inspiration is sought from a human being, as long as it is in accordance with human values, then would the Gurus really object?

Such examples abound in all faiths. It is not just deep values but even external symbols that we confuse with religion.

### **Attire and other external symbols**

“Kabeer, when you are in love with the One Lord, duality and alienation depart.

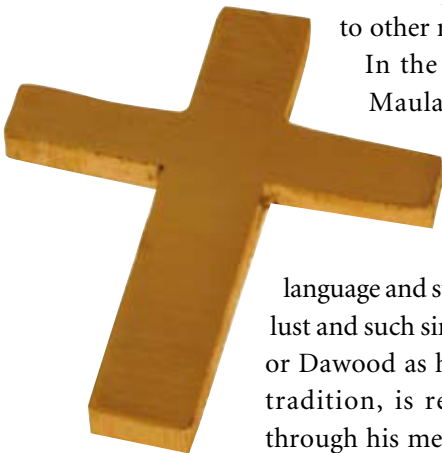
You may have long hair, or you may shave your head bald,” says a couplet in the Guru Granth Sahib. Doesn’t this show us that kesh (hair) is an external symbol, not intrinsic to the core of Sikhism?

In the case of women in Islam, it is modest dressing that is recommended, not an actual burqa at all times.

If one is comfortable with the symbols, then it is fine, but sticking to them and believing it is essential to the journey of enlightenment is counter productive.

Let us not forget that by putting on a bindi, we don’t become a Hindu, just as a burqa doesn’t make you a Muslim nor does a kada (bangle) make one a Sikh.

Similarly, bowing to an idol without understanding what it stands for or per-



## **FETTER OR FAITH? THE BENCHMARK**

- If a practice does not resonate completely with human values, surely there is something wrong
- Any tenet that is based on judgement of others, or something that takes one away from any part of the universe is essentially flawed
- A practice that is harmful, needs to be discarded or reinterpreted
- Understand the origin and context, and apply it only if it is still relevant and in a way, that suits the current context. In other words, apply it as an adult and not a parent or child.

forming prayers without faith is useless.


### Idol worship and festivities

What idols and festivities stand for can be powerful when understood well, but invalid if not really understood for their symbology.

Yoga teacher Shameem Akhtar had written about Chinnamasta, the frightful tantric goddess, in the book *Teaching stories* published by the *Life Positive* group, "The seemingly gory image hides the glorious and enduring exhortation, not just in Indian mythology, but from religions around the world to put aside our egos to get in touch with God." Quoting Dr David Frawley, she continues. "The image has a stronger and more dramatic impact in our psyche and conveys the process as fact rather than as theory. The mind can take in any theory and thereby avoid the reality. The image, however, cannot be so easily subverted. It communicates to the core of our being." The image stays with us simply by stunning us!

Pointing out the ecological effects of any celebration, Mumbai-based environmentalist Ramanand Kowta says, "Immersion of idols was sustainable and relevant when the idols were made of local materials, worshipped with local flowers and leaves (not plucked but those that had fallen down after they had done their dharma of photosynthesis and pollination) and immersed in the local water body. Now, instead of visiting the trees for worship (meant to prevent their destruction) we bring home their branches, flowers and discard them as garbage!"

Today, festivals, supposed to be occasions of joy for us, spell nightmare for the environment, invariably involving wastage and pollution. Christmas entails indiscriminate cutting of trees. Thoughtless use of firecrackers results in smog. Muharram and several Hindu festivals involve large-scale dumping in water bodies. Illumination and loud blaring music, considered an inseparable part of all celebra-




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## ANSWERS FROM THE HIGHER CONSCIOUSNESS

### Why do Hindus believe in caste?

We all are different and each of us has a specific role to perform. This is not determined by birth but one's innate preferences, choice and ability. There surely is no higher or lower as long as all duties are performed ethically.

### Why should a specific name be used for worship?

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," said Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Surely, Christ, Mohammed and all others would have approved. Truly, the name does not matter. The right principles do.

### Does vegetarianism make one more peaceful than non-vegetarianism?

Jainism, whose core belief is non-violence, abhors non-vegetarian food.

In today's times, vegetarian food is proven to be healthier. If you wish to follow a vegetarian diet for better health, do so. However, do not condemn or preach to anyone. Understand and accept all choices. After, all, non-acceptance is also one type of violence.

Never forget that what comes out from your mouth is more important than what goes in it.

### Buddha and some other prophets did not recommend idols and symbols. Still, symbols are quite useful sometimes to concentrate. Can we use them?

You are free to use them, but never be dependent on them. Again, it is the minimising of dependence that is most important.

### Jews consider themselves to be a chosen or special group. How do we understand this?

All creatures are equal in the eyes of God, but human beings are more empowered and hence, chosen to show the right direction to the world. Therefore, yes, all human beings, not just those born as Jews, are the chosen ones as they have the power to make the right choices.

### What is jihad, which the Muslims talk of?

Struggle may be required for justice and truth sometimes. If so, do it with courage and conviction. However, remember to use the right tools, not ones that cause agony and bloodshed.

tions, result in noise pollution and high consumption of electricity.

Though a Hindu, I used to shy away and even condemn gory images of gods and goddesses and loud festivities till I understood what they were meant to be. Shameem's interpretation certainly took me one step closer to complete acceptance of symbols for what they were meant to be. Similarly, the observation of Ramanand made me understand what the festivals were meant to convey.

From this space, I am more empowered to use and understand idols, symbols and rituals for the truth they convey, and not give too much importance to the image, symbol or ritual itself. Surely, this has made me come a step closer to freedom. For, isn't

aversion also a sort of clinging?

### Chosen ones, casteism and other divides

Photographer Raghu Rai has written a piece in *The Times of India* on Mother Teresa where he narrates an incident. An old lady dying in a ditch would not let the Sisters of the Missionaries of Charity help her as they were not Brahmins. Later, Mother Teresa succeeded in bringing her in. Raghu Rai quotes Mother Teresa as saying, "I thought to myself, who is a Brahmin? It has to be someone who prays to Him and looks after His people. So I'm a Brahmin too."

It is interesting to see how her response was not in debating casteism but in pursuing her goal. For, from a free space, one can

see how all divides are man-made.

In India, it is a sad reality that caste was and is misunderstood as being fixed by birth, and is used to oppress others. When we look at the principles, however, Vedanta itself would give the answers. The revered Adi Shankara himself had tripped into the quagmire of caste, when he shunned a chandala, only to recognise and show us what a stumbling block to realisation caste consciousness could be.

Whatever be the semantics are we not aspects of the same oneness? Surely, God the creator would not segregate and divide his own children, be it for the way they pray or the name they use.

### **The faithful and the not so faithful**

Not accepting others because they are different in any one aspect, such as the God they pray to, is one of the biggest stumbling blocks to enlightenment.

Professor Leo Rebello, born in a Christian family who has married a Zoroastrian, says, “Too much time has been wasted and too many lives have been lost in fighting over religions. The most important need of our generation is to rise above our religions and extend the arm of friendship and unity to all the people.”

Mumbai-based Kalpana Iyer, a seeker,

says, “I am surprised that even educated people believe in so many superstitions and fallacies, often forgetting that the core of all religions is goodness to others, and moral and spiritual values, which affirm that all mankind is one.”

Even Jainism, which stresses non-violence, recognised intolerance as a himsic (violent) thought, which is the true origin of anekantavada, a principle that encourages its adherents to consider the views and beliefs of their rivals and opposing parties. This is applicable to religion and philosophy too, where it says that any religion or philosophy including Jainism that clings too dogmatically to its own tenets, is committing an error based on its limited point of view.

In fact, this is equally pertinent to one’s food choices too.

### **What goes into our mouth?**

In the film, *Gods must be crazy*, we see the amazing culture of the Bushmen in the Kalahari Desert of Africa. The gentlest of creatures, they are happy sharing and caring for one another and even the



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animals they have to kill in order to survive. The movie shows us how it is the lack of possession or the need to possess and compete that makes them happy, content and stress-free.

When I went to Russia and saw the wintry conditions, which does not allow any kind of vegetation to grow, I could not help realising how lucky we in tropical countries are. Today, of course, one advantage of globalisation is the availability of vegetables and fruits from the whole globe all through the year. What choice would they have had in the pre-globalisation era but to eat meat?

This is why even the Buddha advised his monks to eat what was given with gratitude and love, be it vegetarian or non-vegetarian. Ramanand Kowta, who is involved in several environmental initiatives recounts a similar story which is told about a devotee offering a non-vegetarian meal to the great saint-poet-composer Thyagaraja. He simply accepted and ate it saying, "Something given with total love and devotion cannot be refused and will do no harm!"

Shirdi Sai Baba revered both by Hindus and Muslims, never advised his devotees to give up non-veg food. Sometimes, he even asked his vegetarian devotees to go and buy mutton from the market so that they could get over their revulsion.

For Mahatma Gandhi, the principle of Jainism's *anekantavada* was a key factor in accepting all choices. Although a staunch vegetarian, in fact naturopath, he was not dogmatic about what others ate but only shared his own experience in finding his choices as being beneficial for good health.

Ultimately, everywhere, one needs to remember that it is the attitude that is paramount, not the act per se. So, really, it is love, acceptance, respect and understanding that one needs to foster.

### Breaking the fetters?

In the times of the Vaishnvaite guru, Ramanuja, spiritual practices such as the mantra diksha (chanting of sacred mantras) were kept out of bounds for women and the lower castes in Tamil Nadu. But Ramanuja broke many rules of orthodoxy to reach out to the masses and to spread the divine knowledge to one and all irrespective of caste or gender.

Similarly, the Lingayat guru Basaveshwara's aim was to eradicate the deep-rooted *varnashrama* or the caste system in Karnataka. Though he was the minister, he used to invite the untouchables to his residence and have meals with them despite opposition from the orthodoxy.

Christ spoke against those Pharisees (priests) who were self-righteous, arrogant, and even called them 'hypocrites'. Guru Nanak tried to merge the wisdom from Islam and Hinduism and tried removing all barriers to oneness.

The list goes on...

Indeed, it is breaking the fetters that is the key to spiritual progress since time immemorial. In fact, the people who we call prophets or saints today were actually true seekers and reformers in their time. They did not cling to dogma but spoke for the changes required in their society in their respective era and society.

Their achievements were stupendous, mainly because it started from a space of wanting to understand the truth themselves. They may have been tested severely, but are our role models precisely because they had



**Kamal Malhi**

"The universe as we know is converging spiritually, which is why there is a blossoming of many varied forms of teachings without the fetters of conditioning."



the courage to persevere and never compromise on their principles.

“Listen to your inner self to see what is right,” is something they all believed in and lived by.

Would they not like us to do the same?

### Oneness – the zeitgeist of our times?

In the book, *Why I am a believer*, a collection of nine essays by scholars from various traditions, Harvey Cox, an eminent Christian scholar, says, “We are entering an age of unprecedented religious interaction and a global world torn by hunger, injustice and the appalling threat of nuclear catastrophe. But it is also a world bursting with fresh promise and new possibilities.” The book itself shows

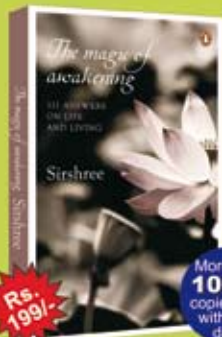
us the emerging trend of understanding today, with religious experiences not from one faith, but all streams of wisdom.

Similarly, there are seekers all over who pick and choose what suits them. Kamal Malhi points out, “The universe as we know is converging spiritually, which is why there is a blossoming of many varied forms of teaching, healing and spiritual workshops, without the fetters of conditioning.” Surely, the prophets and gurus would be happy at this movement into self-understanding and movement into oneness.

Come, let us break the fetters too, and be true followers of the greats, by taking a leaf out of their lives.

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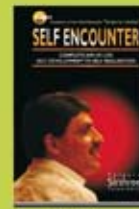
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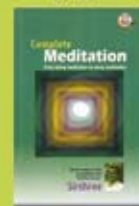
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