

CHAPTER 13

WORSHIP: ARE IMAGES IDOLS?

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A central teaching of Hindu scriptures is that the whole of creation emerged from the One Supreme Being that is Pure Consciousness. Hindus are taught to see the Divine in all things: within themselves, in all other humans, in all beings and in the whole universe. Mountains and rivers, trees, animals and planets are all seen as sacred, being manifestations of the One. This is not merely a “belief”; it has to be a way of living.

To see Divine presence in everything around us, at all times, requires a mind that is exceptionally pure, calm and one-pointed. Hindu scriptures offer a variety of ways of transforming our minds to achieve this state of mind.⁶¹ For some people the best path might be deep study of the scriptures or a sustained practice of intense meditation. For most Hindus, however, the best way is the path of devotion to God, developing an attitude of total surrender to God.

Surrendering to God is far from easy. It is made less difficult when we can see God in intimate terms as a mother, father or trusted friend; as one who knows our deepest anxieties; as one who is always there to guide and lift us up in our darkest moments. This is a very personal relationship that is nurtured over a long period of growing devotion to God and is a precursor to seeing God in all forms in the universe.. Hinduism responds to this yearning for a personal relationship with God by promoting the practice of worshipping God in a specific form. The specific form is represented as a picture or a sculpted image and is used by a devotee to help focus the mind in ardent devotion. It is the nature of the human mind to create a mental image even when thinking of an abstract concept. Pure Consciousness, beyond name and form, beyond the conceptual capacity of the human mind, is the ultimate in abstraction. Worshipping God as represented in a physical image is a means for the human mind to connect with the Supreme Being that is the source of all life and manifests in all forms in the universe.

Hindus worship images as physical representations of particular manifestations of the One Supreme Being that is called God. The devotee focuses his or her mind on the image as a way of making the mind single-pointed and to imbue it with love and devotion to the transcendent Divine Consciousness. The image is not seen as an independent source of power or divinity. Before worshipping an image, a special ritual is undertaken to invoke in this image the energy of the transcendent God-Consciousness. Once this is done, the image, known as a *murti*, is seen as a living entity and suitably worshipped. The ritual worship of a *murti* is known as *puja*. Its components are similar to how one would treat a respected guest to one’s home. The transcendent Divine force is invoked and invited to reside in the *murti* placed on an altar; the *murti* is bathed and adorned; prayers are chanted or sung to the accompaniment of bells; various

⁶¹ See the author’s note on Spiritual Practice.

symbolic offerings are made including flowers, fruit, incense and light; and finally, the devotee takes leave of the Divine force as it departs from the *murti* until it is time for the next worship ceremony, known as *puja*. Sometimes, the *murti* is made of clay and ritually destroyed at the end of the *puja*, having served its purpose. It is these practices that distinguish Hindu worship of an image from the practice of idolatry that is so strongly condemned in the Hebrew Bible and the Quran.

The *puja* ritual is designed to captivate the mind by engaging all of the senses of perception. The sense of smell is stimulated by the incense, camphor and fragrant flowers; the eyes are bathed in the light that illuminates a beautifully decorated *murti*; the ears absorb the sound of bells, cymbals, the chanting of Vedic *mantras* and singing of devotional songs; the sense of taste is satisfied by eating the *prasada*, the food that has been ritually blessed by the deity; and the sense of touch is engaged in all of the activities of performing the rituals. Engaging all the senses keeps the mind fully focused on the *puja* and enhances the worshipper's devotion.

A significant feature of Hinduism is the large number of names and forms in which God might be worshipped. This has two important benefits: first, persons of every temperament can find a form of God that appeals to their heart and to whom they can offer deep devotion; and second, seeing Divinity in so many different forms creates in Hindus a reverence for the Creator who has brought forth this wondrous diversity. Hinduism is the only major religion in which God is worshipped in female form, known as *Shakti* that means energy. Hindus pray to *Ganesh*, the God of Wisdom who helps overcome all obstacles; Durga or Shakti as Goddess of power, *Sarasvati*, the Goddess of learning; *Lakshmi*, the Goddess of abundance; *Rama* who came to earth to show humans how to live the path of Dharma; *Krishna*, who came to earth to eradicate evil and protect the good; *Hanuman*, who is the ideal devoted servant of Rama; and many other forms that inspire Hindus to express their devotion to God. There is a wealth of stories relating to each of these manifestations and Hindus enjoy retelling them to inspire greater love of God in themselves and in others. A Hindu typically worships God in all these forms on various occasions, though most choose to worship a favorite form, an *Ishta Devata* in their daily prayers.

Some Divine forms resemble animals or birds. Lord Ganesh is depicted with the head of an elephant; Lord Hanuman with the face of a monkey; Lord Narasimha with the head of a lion; Lord Hayagriva with the head of a horse; Lord Adishesha as a serpent. God has descended to earth for specific purposes as an *avatar* in a variety of forms including a fish, a tortoise, a boar and a dwarf. Gods and Goddesses are depicted as accompanied by animals or birds such as the bull, eagle, lion, peacock, mouse, dogs, owl and swan. Sacred rivers such as the Ganga and Yamuna are worshipped as embodiments of Divinity. It is a common practice to worship the Tulsi plant every morning as a part of the daily prayers; and the Ashwattha or Peepul tree is sacred to all Hindus. The variety of such forms reminds Hindus that the entire creation is merely a manifestation of Divinity, deserving of our reverence.



The *murtis* that depict the various forms of God incorporate symbolic representations that serve to remind the devotees of the transcendent greatness of God. Consider, for example, some of the physical features of the image of Ganesha: the large head represents perfect wisdom; the large stomach symbolizes the Divinity that envelops the entire universe; the large ears represent God's capacity to hear silent prayers; the small feet show that God does not need to go anywhere because God is everywhere already; multiple arms show the all-powerful nature of God; one hand holds an axe that cuts the bonds of false attachments; another hand holds a rope that pulls us to the goal; another hand holds a sweet reward for the sincere seeker; and one palm is held in a gesture of blessing. Similarly, the physical forms and adornments of each of the images create mental associations that enhance love and reverence of God.

Hindus may relate to *murtis* in a variety of ways depending on the level of their own understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of Hinduism. Some Hindus may believe that their chosen form of God is the only true representation of the Supreme Being; but even so, they respect others who have chosen to worship a different form of God. Those who are more philosophically aware recognize that all the different forms are but manifestations of the One. Sincere devotion to a single chosen form itself leads to deeper love of God and an acceptance of the multiplicity of manifestations described in the Hindu scriptures.

Hindu scriptures repeatedly emphasize that the essence of spirituality is to rest one's mind in God "by any means whatsoever." Scriptures also describe numerous techniques to achieve this goal and one of the most accessible of these techniques is *murti puja*. Worship of a physical representation of God is a reliable means of connecting with the Supreme Divinity that is the Source of all life.