

CHAPTER 18

RESPECT FOR OTHER RELIGIONS

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Respect for other religions is part of the Hindu fabric. Hindus naturally accept the validity of the spiritual paths defined by other religions and have no hesitation in participating in worship with followers of other religions.

The primary source of this intrinsic respect for other religions is in the core philosophy of Hindu scriptures: that the Supreme Divine Truth is beyond human comprehension. Anyone who thinks he “understands” this Truth, doesn’t.⁷⁹ The essence of spirituality in Hinduism is seeking better understanding of the Truth about our own true nature, our relationship with each other, and with the Divine Source of all being. As each religion is capable of casting some light on this goal, Hindus treat them all with respect and are ready to learn from them. Even within Hinduism, different philosophical traditions co-exist and are vigorously debated, creating a willingness to engage respectfully with other viewpoints. Hindus are not out to defend a doctrine and, therefore, do not feel threatened by the ideas of other religions.

Another fundamental feature of Hindu philosophy is the belief that Divine Consciousness is all-pervasive, present in all beings. The Bhagavad Gita teaches that God does not favor or reject any being.⁸⁰ The idea that any being may be “doomed” is alien to this philosophy. Every human being is believed to be capable of evolving spiritually and God accepts all forms of spiritual practice provided only that it is offered with devotion.⁸¹ Indeed, practitioners are cautioned not to disturb the equilibrium of those who are less spiritually evolved but rather to encourage them in maintaining their practice.⁸²

There is a great variety of spiritual paths within Hinduism. Recognizing that spiritual seekers differ greatly in personal temperament, physical and mental abilities and preferences, scriptures offer a variety of spiritual practices suited to different seekers. Thus, Hindus are accustomed to seeing a variety of practices even within their own families and this diversity is embraced. Some visit temples regularly and frequently, others do not. Some engage in formal worship at home, others are more casual about it. Some fast, others don’t. It is natural, therefore, to refrain from being critical of the practices followed by other religions.

The readiness to embrace diversity is seen also in the concept of “God”. There are those who worship the Divine as abstract Consciousness while most Hindus express their devotion to particular manifestations of Consciousness as a personal God. Hindus believe that God has

⁷⁹ Kena Upanishad

⁸⁰ Bhagavad Gita 9.29

⁸¹ Bhagavad Gita 9.26

⁸² Bhagavad Gita 3.26 and 3.29

appeared in a great variety of forms. They cultivate devotion to God by developing a close personal relationship with a “chosen” form of God through worship of an image, recounting stories and constant remembrance of God. Within a family, preferences might vary and a typical family altar would contain images of several different forms of God. The different images are not seen as different Gods, or as competing forms of God but rather as diverse manifestations of the One Supreme Being. Thus Hindus recoil from the proposition that there is only one legitimate form of God, rendering the worship of other forms as somehow wrong or inferior. They view the Supreme Reality as being beyond all description while yet open to being described in many different ways. Descriptions offered by other religions are thus naturally deserving of respect.

This expansive view of the nature of Divinity has led to a long history of Hinduism co-existing with other religions in India.⁸³ While there were instances in early years of violence between Hindus, Buddhists and Jains, these conflicts have long been resolved. For about 800 years since the 12th CE, India was ruled by non-Hindus—first Muslim and then Christian—until Independence in 1947. Tensions arising from this period continue to reverberate in India today. Throughout Indian history, Hindus have not embarked on wars to subdue other religions. Since independence, India has been governed under a secular Constitution that guarantees the rights of minorities to freely worship and follow their faith.

Buddhism originated in India in the 5th BCE. Siddhartha was enlightened at age 35 and preached extensively in India as the Buddha for 45 years until he died a natural death at the age of about 80 years. Buddhism remained a dominant religion in India for about a thousand years, during which time it spread through most of Asia. Hindus still worship Buddha as one of the major incarnations of Lord Vishnu. Although concepts of God differ greatly, Hinduism and Buddhism share much of their philosophy, ethics and spiritual practices, especially in the field of Tantra. Hinduism adopted from Buddhism the concept of monastic orders to promote scriptural study and practice. Followers of the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan Buddhist leaders have had shelter and support in India since 1959.

Jainism predates Buddhism and has coexisted with Hinduism since ancient times. Its followers were known first as *Sramans*, then as *Nirgranthis* and, after Lord Mahavira who preached in India slightly earlier than Buddha, as Jains. The first Jain *Tirthankar*, or teacher, has a prominent place in Hindu scriptures. Despite major theological differences between Hinduism and Jainism, worship practices in the two traditions are very similar although specific rituals differ. Many families practice both Jainism and Hinduism and there are temples that serve both religions. The cultures are so intertwined that it is hard to identify boundaries.

Sikhism was founded in Punjab, India, by Guru Nanak at a time when Muslims ruled over most of India and there was a strong wave of Hindu saints who emphasized a devotional approach to spirituality. There are strong similarities and differences between Hinduism and Sikhism in terms

⁸³ Indian history is relevant because over 80% of India’s population is Hindu and over 90% of Hindus live in India.

of theology and religious practice. Culturally, however, there has been a very close affinity among Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs. When the Sikhs fought the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in the 17th CE to defend Hindus' religious freedom, the bonds between Hindus and Sikhs were strengthened. It became common in Punjabi Hindu families for the eldest son to practice Sikhism and Hindu families often prayed at Sikh *Gurudwaras*. Sikh discontent in recent decades reflected political issues rather than any form of religious discrimination.

In addition to the religions born in India, India has provided a home for followers of other world religions too. They have been an integral part of Indian society, made great contributions to the building of modern India and have been prominent leaders in government and business. The world's largest populations of Baha'i and Zoroastrians, and the second largest population of Muslims live in India.

- India has among the oldest surviving Jewish communities in the world and is said to be one of the few countries that has never seen any anti-Semitic persecution. Waves of Jewish migrants came to India more than two thousand years ago, following the destruction of the first and second Jewish Temples. They were welcomed by Hindu rulers and flourished ever since.
- Christianity came to India from its earliest days, perhaps as early as Apostle St. Thomas in 1st CE. Portuguese settlers came in the 15th CE and were allocated land and trading rights by local rulers. The early Christians who were later persecuted by the Portuguese in India were protected by Hindu rulers. However, as Christian missionary activity grew under British colonial rule, it caused distrust. Violent conflicts between Hindus and Christians have arisen in protest against religious conversion or reflecting ancient rivalries among competing social groups that have adopted different religions.
- Muslims came to India in 8th CE both as traders and as rulers. Some Muslim rulers were open-minded on religion; some levied a religion tax, encouraged forced conversions and destroyed temples, replacing them by mosques. The legacy of these actions against Hindus has been continued social tensions between Hindus and Muslims in India that are easily fanned into violence by political forces.
- Zoroastrians took refuge in India in about the 10th CE, fleeing from persecution by Muslims in Iran. They came to an amicable arrangement with the Hindu rulers and have flourished since, preserving their ancient religious practices.
- India's connection with the Baha'i faith goes back to 1844, before the Bahauallah proclaimed himself as the Promised One. The first Indian who became Baha'i in 1909 was a Hindu and there are now more than a million Baha'i in India.

While Hindus readily accept the validity of other religions as spiritual paths, they are offended by claims of exclusivity or dogmatic assertions by which a religion rejects the validity of Hindu religious practices. Missionaries have long been active in India, sometimes with official encouragement and always with substantial funding from overseas. Sometimes their proselytizing zeal takes advantage of economic deprivation or lack of education among poorer

sections of Hindu society. Hindus generally view these activities as a form of coercion and some groups have resorted to violence. But this has not altered the fundamental ethos of co-existence among the diverse religions in India.