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RATIONALITY, SPIRITUALITY, AND HINDUISM

Jagdish N Srivastava

CNS Research Professor Emeritus, Colorado State University,

Director, Institute for the Exploration of Higher Reality,

Antioch, CA 94531

WEBSITE: <higherreality.googlepages.com>

Even though born in a relatively religious family, I developed an atheistic outlook at the age of 16, after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Strong winds were blowing then, proclaiming statements such as ‘you had been told that “religion is the opium of mankind”, but you did not listen’, ‘religion causes hatred, and violence and strife’, ‘a rational person must have a scientific outlook, which religion often contradicts’. As I learnt some more Science, I concluded, ‘I am now a rational man, and must maintain a scientific outlook’. Now, ‘atheism’ means the belief that ‘there is no God’. However, at age 23, I realized that I cannot prove that there is no God; my friends and guides of ‘rationality’ (some of whom were elderly) could not do so either. I was thus forced to divorce ‘atheism’. Now, I courted ‘agnosticism’ (the belief that ‘We cannot know whether God is there; we should ignore God, and instead serve mankind, directly and by developing Science’).

In the mid-1960’s, however, I found that the work of Goedel (a great mathematician and logician) implied that Reality is so vast, that Science can *never* fathom it except in a negligible manner. Thus, my deity, Science, proved to be too trivial and insignificant relative to the Ocean of Reality! I came to know that deeper knowledge often comes by “direct perception” or “intuition”, a fact that the spiritual leaders, the Rishis, had been telling us since ancient times. Indeed, great researches in Science often happen in that manner only. Thus, I was forced to leave ‘Agnosticism’ also. It became clear that so far as Reality is concerned, even the greatest scientists are like babies ‘playing pebbles on the shore’, as Newton famously said. I realized that I, a baby, should go to the mother, Spirituality, play in her lap, be led by her holding my fingers, and get some education!

In the 1970’s, I studied the Indian religions (Hinduism, and its offshoots Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism), as also the western religions and philosophy. Since the topic of ‘direct perception’ had led me to spirituality, I was particularly interested in the study of ‘Consciousness’. In the 1990’s, and 2000’s, I was able to show scientifically that the consciousness of a living person (say, a human being) is independent of time and space. This means that his consciousness continues to exist even after his death, and also that it existed before he was born. Furthermore, the consciousness of the person is not ‘inside’ his head, he only experiences it through his head. This supports the theory of reincarnation, which is a spiritual fact that forms the backbone of Indian religions. I mention this here because many readers would be delighted to know this fact.

Many intellectuals these days are still living in the old theories of people like Marx. They believe a 'rational' person should shun metaphysics, because it is unknowable. However, if something is not known at the present time, clearly, it is wrong to conclude that it is unknowable all through the future as well, because it may possibly become known in the future. A thousand years ago, one may have thought that 'how the surface of the moon feels' is unknowable, but now some people have succeeded in knowing the same firsthand. On the other hand, there is a lot of information about spirituality already available to man; this should be examined and further explored. It is likely to give information on issues that should be of greatest interest to all. As the author discusses in his articles on the subject (see the website), actually the spiritual path is really the most rational path. Einstein, being a great scientist, was clearly a 'rational' person. But, he said: "He, who has not tasted spirituality, has wasted his life". Notice that he did not say: "He who has not studied Science has wasted his life".

Hinduism is blessed with the fact that its sages were really very spiritual, and hence very scientific, minded. They endowed it with a great deal of in depth knowledge of spirituality. But, what is spirituality? It is the fundamental experience of man. It is all over the world, though in some places people have advanced in it much more than in some other places. It is not something tangible. It is the knowledge of some of the deeper aspects of Reality, and how to obtain such knowledge. 'Rationality' means 'consonance with spiritual knowledge'. All religions are intertwined with spirituality. Even an atheist can be spiritual. Spirituality is the same in all religions, so that in a sense it is correct to say that all religions teach the 'same thing'. But, on a particular topic, one religious text may be different from another and present spirituality in a different manner or to a different degree.

Spirituality teaches us to do unto others as we would like them to do unto us. It asks us to reduce our attachments, aversions, and worldly desires, and rise above greed, anger, lust, and conflicts. We need to curb our ego and rise above selfishness. We need to enter the inner space, which would be seen to be vaster than the seeming physical space around us. The less ego and selfish desires and activities we have, the more the consciousness is likely to grow. The more spiritual we are, the more freely effective our will would be. Spirituality is not merely intellectual knowledge. Spiritual practice is necessary to acquire spiritual knowledge. The deeper such practice is, the more the knowledge that develops.

Here we illustrate with Hinduism, particularly the Bhagvad Gita. The great American thinker and philosopher Henry David Thoreau said: "Every morning I bathe in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita, in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial". The problems of our world have only gotten worse since Thoreau's time two centuries ago. The need for paying attention to the Gita is greater.

The renowned writer from Oxford, Juan Mascaró, said: "The greatness of the Bhagavad Gita is the greatness of the universe." Clearly, there is a treasure here that can help us in fundamental ways in solving all kinds of problems. Let us not ignore it under the mistaken thought of 'I should be rational and should keep out of blind belief', for spirituality is above religion and beyond belief-systems. Ancient India has a lot to offer to mankind-perhaps the greatest of all gifts, namely, spirituality. It is our duty to spread spirituality, whether originating in India or elsewhere, all over the world.

We should listen to Nobel Laureates from the past as well. Let us remember Tagore: “Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high/ Where knowledge is free/ Where words come out from the depth of Truth/ Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection/ Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit / Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.” Let us hold our head high and walk in freedom.