

# Reexamining the Sacred

from “Religion, Cults & the Spiritual Vacuum”

Introductory chapter to *The Guru Papers*

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## Introduction

The human mind is not comfortable with large areas of caprice, uncertainty, and disorder; it is continually structuring experience to make the unknown known. In the past, and still today, religions have been the vehicle that brought order and certainty to the most uncertain and arguably most important facets of life: Where does life come from and where does it go? How should I act toward others? What is really important? Can I touch into something that can move me beyond the inequities, pains, and suffering of life, as well as beyond the endless demands of the self for self-enhancement? Can I touch into something

pure that can make everything O.K.?

Religions have been (and for many still are) the main vehicles through which the unknown was made at least to seem more known. They each offer a worldview containing explanations of the basic elements of existence, namely, how all things, including human beings, came to be (creation); what life is about (meaning, continuity, and preservation); how and why things cease to be (death and destruction). Within Hinduism, these categories are overtly portrayed as the three personas of God: Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer.

## Religion and Morality

Morality is the glue that holds civilization together; and within complex accumulation cultures, religion has been the foundation or underpinning of morality, and thus of civilization itself. Since there is a need for the rules about how to treat each other to be considered not merely arbitrary, they had to be grounded in some higher authority. Historically religion, as the only purveyor of presumptive absolute truths, had the right to dictate what's right. Religions gave meaning and direction to life by positing the existence of a higher power or authority whose purpose could at least be dimly known. Morality, the abstract concept of goodness or right human action, came to be defined as being aligned with that higher

purpose. Presumed divinely inspired human intermediaries, or the divine in human form (Christ), delineated what to do and how to be.

Religions have thus presented themselves as the bridge to the spiritual via their formalized codes and traditions. Basically they put forth rules of acceptable behavior that temper self-centeredness. They also channel expressions of self-centeredness into areas of acceptability, legitimizing them through the concepts of "rights," and deserved privileges. So if God gives humans dominion over all other life, this gives humans the right to use what is considered "lesser." Using others without regard for their well-being is one expression of self-

centeredness. Through rights, rulers could use vassals, and husbands use wives. To facilitate this, the major extant world religions all promulgate a "renunciate" morality wherein one is expected to renounce and sacrifice self-interest to a designated higher good. They all present self-centeredness in its different forms as the villain keeping people away from what religion designates as important. To be spiritual, one must surrender one's will to the will of God or to the laws of karma, which usually involves some kind of self-sacrifice.

This used to work in imposing and maintaining order and stability, if not social justice. Idealizing sacrifice and placing selflessness at the pinnacle of virtue did to an extent temper the way people treated each other--at least within societies, if not between them. On the other hand, the seemingly benign ideal of selflessness, which includes self-sacrifice, masks the way organized religions have provided a morality that supports social and religious hierarchy by justifying the use (and abuse) of the higher over the lower. This includes tacitly and even overtly legitimizing the whatever violence the higher deems necessary to keep the lower low, and outsiders outside. Another way renunciate religions support the power structure is by viewing hardship as either deserved (original sin), or as part of a morality play whose purpose is to give lessons to learn, and to test for righteousness. This way of framing both powerlessness and abuse make it easier for people to resign themselves to their often not very pleasant lot. It also makes it easier to be inured to the lot of others.

Traditional religious worldviews attempt to assuage humanity's basic fears of the unknown, of chaos, and of death. They all

promise some form of continuance after the body dies, with those who do the right thing (as they define it) getting a better deal. Belief in and obedience to religion's precepts bring the kind of peace that only comes from unwavering certitude. Faith is the coin necessary for certainty, which brings the cessation of (at least conscious) doubt and fear.

Evil is explained by most Western religions as a necessity, for it alone gives the freedom of moral choice; choosing good over evil is the only way to prove one is worthy of salvation. Much of Eastern religious thought, on the other hand, views "evil" as a product of the illusion of separateness--it, too, being ultimately an illusion. Here evil is considered ignorance, a lack, as opposed to an autonomous force. The spiritual path becomes the march away from ignorance towards enlightenment. Although seemingly different, in both the East and the West, religions make the cruelties and tragedies within the human drama appear a necessary part of a higher plan, with either a personal or impersonal higher intelligence firmly at the helm.

Reward and punishment, guilt, shame, and forgiveness--this is the stuff religions use for control. Since it is obvious that the virtuous do not always benefit and sinners do not always suffer, to make this system work it is necessary that the major rewards and punishments take place in an afterlife. This is how immortality (whether heaven or a better next lifetime) became the foundation of morality. Insofar as this life is made subordinate to some conception of an afterlife, sacrifice within this life not only becomes justifiable, but is a key part of any renunciate morality that controls behavior through fear of cosmic reprisal after death.

*The last section of the chapter:*

## **Reexamining the Sacred**

The yearnings to connect with something more profound than our individual lives may be called a religious or spiritual impulse. Religions have long been the way societies have structured this impulse. We do not question the need for people to connect with something more profound than their own personal dramas. We do question the viability of religions that present this world as a stepping stone to some other more important realm. Once this occurs, it is inevitable that religious experts delineate how to reach this other realm, and what must be sacrificed in this world to do so. This always includes renouncing self-centeredness--an endless task.

Once the spiritual impulse is channeled into any renunciate worldview, it makes those who share a belief in that structure connected. But this involves creating walls between "us" and "them," which historically has been the easy way to become mechanically bonded and fill the vacuum of meaning. This is especially tempting now that feelings of disconnection are rife. Uniting with each other and bringing meaning to existence in a way not based on a narrow group identity is one of the vital challenges of these times.

Because the power of traditional religions comes from furnishing unchallengeable answers about the unknown, they are inherently authoritarian. Religions deflect examination by ordaining faith and belief to be sacred, while maintaining that no ordinary person can know enough to take issue with the beliefs they put forth. A further hindrance to the intelligent examination of religious tradition is the social taboo against doing so. We do not question people's right to believe what they

will. But the concept of religious tolerance is commonly extended to include not criticizing others' beliefs. This is partially because beliefs that are non-rational are considered not subject to rational examination. This may be true about the contents of a belief, but is not true about what effects operating out of a given belief have on the world. If a belief that sends children to war with the promise of a special paradise cannot be challenged as harmful, that concept of tolerance is for us intolerable.

We define tolerance simply as not trying to impose one's views on others through coercion. We also consider any view of tolerance that cuts off examination of anything the human mind can inquire into basically authoritarian. Why should religion, whose power is monumental, be exempt? We view ecological uncaringness, overpopulation, and uncared-for children as major threats to survival. In our conception of morality, structures that promote these are immoral. This, of course, is debatable, as it should be. Should a religion that makes birth control a sin not also be subject to examination and debate?

Indeed, the very act of making sacred certain actions, institutions, or ways of being is authoritarian, as it ensures that there can be no questioning. The potential for great abuse is inherent in any ideology closed to reason, feedback, or change based on changing circumstances. Officially placing something in the category of the sacred indicates that it needs protection and shoring up because of the fear it cannot stand on its own. Traditional concepts of the sacred set up an inherent dualism between what is sacred and what isn't. The hidden function

of the sacred has been to get people to sacrifice to it. This has been a part of the same polarity that separated the spiritual from the worldly, which is the basis of all renunciate moralities. What most urgently needs to be reexamined in these fateful and dangerous times is, above all, that which has been held sacred.

It is fashionable among some to say that truth, if it exists, cannot be known because all statements about it, and views of it, are couched in a language and cultural context which are essentially subjective. This is an understandable reaction against authoritarian absolutes and universals that masquerade as objective, while hiding self-interest. The downside of relativism is that it itself is a disguised absolute that inhibits even exploring whether there are or can be perspectives that go beyond the subjectivity of culture.

We hold that there are historically embedded pan-cultural truths that can reflect, however dimly, more than just the fabrications of vested interest, personal preference, or even cultural constructions. For us, one such truth is that the human species is now at risk because its new technological capacities for leveraging power have gone far beyond the constraints of the old moral systems. The truth of this can, of course, be challenged. But, nevertheless, the perception that the path humanity is on now risks extinction is either true or not. We cannot envision a more important topic for inquiry. People can only answer for themselves whether truth can be found and what it is. For us, humanity's hopes lie in the possibility that truth, whatever it may be in this time of crisis, will shine through.