

The Call Beyond



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The Difference Between Religion and Spirituality

Every religion has four components. First, and most important is its underlying spiritual philosophy. Religions differ from each other the least with respect to their spiritual philosophies. Second, each religion has an ethical code. The ethical code of each religion is what was considered the best by its founder in view of the local conditions at that point in history. Accordingly, there are some differences between the ethical codes of different religions. However, the similarities between the ethical codes of various religions are far greater, and far more important, than the differences. Third, each religion has some myths and legends associated with it. Fourth, each religion has its own rituals and ceremonies. The myths, legends, rituals and ceremonies of each religion are unique, lend a religion its distinct identity and are its most visible part, but these are the least important part of the religion. The most important part of any religion is its spiritual core, which is essentially invisible. Thus, one might say that spirituality is the inner churning aimed at establishing a conscious contact with the Divine. It has no rituals, ceremonies or outer symbols. Spiritual quest and practice are the same in every individual irrespective of the religion the person is born in. A religion, on the other hand, has a lot that is visible outside, and what is visible differs with each religion.

The approach in spirituality is inside-out, i.e. inner change gets reflected in outer life. The reflection in outer life means that the person does his work better and with greater dedication, the person becomes more loving and compassionate, and the person does not lose his temper easily. The approach in religion is outside-in, i.e. the visible religious practices are expected to lead to an inner change.



In short, spirituality is more inside than outside; religion is more outside than inside. Since it is easier to begin with a religion, and then go beyond it to spirituality, religion has been called the kindergarten of spirituality. It is often the absurdity of some religious rituals, the irrationality of many religious practices, and frustration with the divisive and sectarian character of religions that prompts many people to move away from religion towards spirituality.

Reproduced from 'Understanding Spirituality ... and Living it 24x7' by Ramesh Bijlani. Sri Aurobindo Ashram – Delhi Branch, New Delhi, 2019, pp. 80-81



Patience is a form of wisdom. It demonstrates that we understand and accept the fact that sometimes things must unfold in their own time.

Jon Kabat-Zinn ('Full Catastrophe Living', p. 34)

Anybody who is imitating somebody else, no matter who it is, is heading in the wrong direction. It is impossible to become like somebody else. Your only hope is to become more fully yourself.

Jon Kabat-Zinn ('Full Catastrophe Living', p. 36)



Why is the World Moving Away from Religions Towards Spirituality?

Dr R Hemamalini

I wanted to ascertain if it was really true that people are preferring spirituality over religion? So, I asked my friend Google first and discovered that the world did seem to be heading in this direction, largely. A Pew Research Center survey, published in November 2018, revealed that millennials are less attached to organized religion than their parents or grandparents were at the same age. However, the same survey revealed that about 80 percent of millennials believe in God and increasing numbers identify with statements like “I feel a deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being” or “I experience a deep sense of wonder about the universe.”

According to Dr Ryan Howell, eminent psychologist and the Director of the Personality and Well-being Lab at San Francisco State University defines spirituality as a search for something sacred. He also says that the realm of spirituality can be approached through religion, meditation, yoga, and even personal reflection.

So, is religion being increasingly replaced by spirituality and has religion really become redundant? I recall a conversation with a friend who said that her family was spiritual but not religious. But then I asked myself the same question. Am I religious or spiritual? Which do I prefer?

My formal introduction to spirituality came through the yoga course that I did at Sri Aurobindo Ashram – Delhi Branch in 2019. Here, I was nudged to go deep within myself and reflect. I was guided towards spiritual experiences of others and literary works on spirituality. I found a deep connect with everything that was discussed. Far from being something esoteric and out-of-the-world, it seemed very close to my being.



Now, let me rewind to the time when I was introduced to religion. Religion came into my life very early, but my awareness of it as a necessary evil came when I was about six-year-old. My father insisted that I sit down every evening with him to learn verses from the '*Vishnu sahasranamam*'. I would have much rather played with my friends, Mickey, Bunty, Lakshmi, Sukanya and little Diya. I must have said as much, for promptly the condemnation came in the form of, "What a *naastik* (atheist) has been born in our house!". That was the year 1985-86. Today, I know those 200-odd verses by heart. I also perform ritualistic poojas (worship) on important festivals, making elaborate prasads (food offerings), to please the gods sitting in my little private mandir (temple). So, religion was successfully beaten into me.

What is the biggest need for a human manifestation? In a recent article in the *Times Life*, Chetan Deshpande, a digital expert, says, "As human beings our biggest need is to be understood, or better still, not to be misunderstood....." 'I' is the sweetest word in the dictionary to the human ear, and it virtually determines all our actions. Even when we help others, apparently for a self-less cause, it is because the 'I' within feels good. The inherently self-centred human being, finds spirituality appealing. It helps to take our mind away from the worldly problems and focus on that which we love so much – the 'self'. The essence of spirituality is to discover the divine by knowing ourselves better. It also accepts a person unconditionally without the protocol of any religion.

How do we identify religion in our daily life? May be, from a dress code, a religious symbol, or some other overt signs? All religious behaviour is based on the assumption that observance of religious signs, symbols and ceremonies would take us towards a deeper, higher and wider view of ourselves and the world. **So, we could view religion as an external framework,**



which guides us towards God. It is an outside-in approach. Ironically, although religion is a framework for reaching God, the followers of religions often hug the framework strongly but neglect the ultimate goal. Adherence to the framework itself becomes the goal! We see teeming millions going for Haj year after year, and long queues of devotees at the Tirupathi Balaji temple. This popular obsession with religion has also paved the way for commercial interests creeping into religion and the development of the 'faith-industry'. Even in abodes of God, we see the vulgar play of materialism – money, power and practices clearly inconsistent with the pursuit of the sacred. Queues are longer or shorter, depending on the value of the tickets we purchase. The self-appointed agents of God compete with each other in attracting clients for karmic rites at the ghats in Haridwar, Banaras and Gaya. I am not an atheist, but I have failed to experience any extra presence of God in my visits to 'holy' places; it may be my own incapacity, though.

At the dawn of human civilization, religion probably had a purpose. As Sri Aurobindo has said, the overall influence of religions on mankind has been positive. But in the present times, the identities conferred by religion are of little value. If anything, they only create divisions and have been the cause of serious trouble in societies. Apart from the potentially divisive influence of religions, the rigidity that a religion might impose could lead to fear. Those who enforce religious codes threaten that any deviation from prescribed norms would invite the wrath of God. Until recently, I have heard children in my family being threatened that God would gouge out their eyes if they did not follow the religious instructions that their elders told them.

In contrast, the very fabric of spirituality is personalized and democratic. Its dictum is that the roads may be many, but all



roads lead to God. How do we identify a spiritual person? This is a difficult question because unlike religion, spirituality does not have an obligatory overt element attached to it.

It may seem from the foregoing description that religion has outlived its purpose in modern times. After all, aren't the most successful nations in the world today full of either atheists or believers in spirituality? However, religion does have a purpose. For instance, a five-year old child may be taught to sing hymns or chant mantras but cannot be taught to go within in search of God. Religion, therefore can be viewed as training for spirituality. One cannot go to college before going through school.

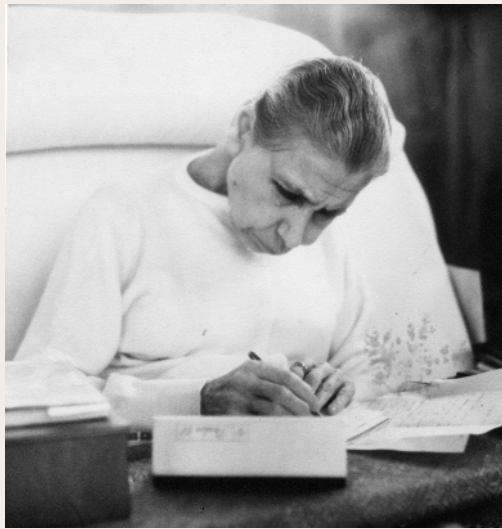
I can't imagine how I would have been if I had never been initiated into religion. In spite of that initial input, I had my share of pain and disillusionment. Without the religious anchor, I would have perhaps been worse off. But now I am able to understand what spirituality has done to me. I feel much better equipped to deal with pain and suffering. Here I am, may be the same me, but one who made peace with many conflicts that raged within me for years. I can accept failure more gracefully. I laugh heartily despite everything. Above all, I have learnt to be grateful, for everything that I have, for everything that I am able to give, and for everything that I do not have. That is what spirituality has done to me.

This article was submitted by R. Hemamalini as one of the requirements for a Course on Teaching Yoga at Sri Aurobindo Ashram – Delhi Branch, which she did in 2019.





Absolute Sincerity



If you are not absolutely sincere, not only with others but also with yourself, if at any time you try to cover up your imperfections and failings, you will never make any progress, you will always remain what you are throughout all your life, without every making any progress. So, even if you only want to grow out of this primitive unconscious state into a progressive consciousness, the most important thing, the one absolutely important thing, the one absolutely important thing is sincerity. If you have done something which you ought not to have done, you must admit it to yourself; if a less-than-admirable movement has occurred in yourself, you must look it in the face and tell yourself – “It was not good,” or “It was disgusting,” or even “It was wicked”...

It is only when you look yourself in the face, in the light of your highest consciousness, that whatever you want to eliminate from your nature will disappear. Without this striving for absolute sincerity, the defect, the little shadow, will stay in a corner biding its time to come out. ...

“Things are not beautiful, the world is nasty, people are not pleasant.” It goes sometimes to this length: “The food is not good,



yesterday it was excellent.” It is the same but today it is not good! This is the barometer! You may immediately tell yourself that an insincerity has crept in somewhere. It is very easy to know, you do not need to be very learned, for, as Sri Aurobindo has said in Elements of Yoga: One knows whether one is happy or unhappy, one knows whether one is content or discontented, one does not need to ask oneself, put complicated questions for this, one knows it! – Well, it is very simple.

The moment you feel unhappy, you may write beneath it: “I am not sincere!” These two sentences go together:

“I FEEL UNHAPPY.”

“I AM NOT SINCERE.”

Now, what is it that is wrong? Then one begins to take a look, it is easy to find out.

The Mother ('The Great Adventure', p.62-63)

All the pages of The Mother's work, 'The Great Adventure', in Tara Didi's voice, have been uploaded on the YouTube channel of Sri Aurobindo Ashram – Delhi Branch. The link to the playlist is: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLbJ59iL6vu-UXeufBeKQlUTwGf3GhZ9LJ>



The soul belongs to the Divine, and to the Divine alone owes obedience and service. If it is the Divine who commands it to work for family, for country or humanity, then that is all right and it can do so without being imprisoned. If the command does not come from the Divine, then to serve these things is only obeying social and moral conventions.

The Mother



Pitiless Tests and Luminous Denials



. Imagine not the way is easy; the way is long, arduous, dangerous, difficult. At every step is an ambush, at every turn a pitfall. A thousand seen or unseen enemies will start up against thee, terrible in subtlety against thy ignorance, formidable in power against thy weakness. And when with pain thou hast destroyed them, other thousands will surge up to take their place. **Hell will vomit its hordes to oppose thee and enring and wound and menace; Heaven will meet thee with its pitiless tests and its cold luminous denials.** Thou shalt find thyself alone in thy anguish, the demons furious in thy path, the Gods unwilling above thee. Ancient and powerful, cruel, unvanquished and close and innumerable are the dark and dreadful Powers that profit by the reign of Night and Ignorance and would have no change and are hostile. Aloof, slow to arrive, far-off and few and brief in their visits are the Bright Ones who are willing or permitted to succour. Each step forward is a battle. There are precipitous descents, there are unending ascensions and ever higher peaks upon peaks to conquer. **Each plateau climbed is but a stage on the way and reveals endless heights beyond it.** Each victory thou thinkest the last triumphant struggle proves to be but the prelude to a hundred fierce and perilous battles... But thou sayest God's hand will be with me and the Divine



Mother near with her gracious smile of succour? And thou knowest not then that God's grace is more difficult to have or to keep than the nectar of the Immortals or Kuvera's priceless treasures? Ask of His chosen and they will tell thee how often the Eternal has covered his face from them, how often he has withdrawn from them behind his mysterious veil and they have found themselves alone in the grip of Hell, solitary in the horror of the darkness, naked and defenceless in the anguish of the battle. And if His presence is felt behind the veil, yet is it like the winter sun behind clouds and saves not from the rain and snow and the calamitous storm and the harsh wind and the bitter cold and the grey of a sorrowful atmosphere and the dun weary dullness. Doubtless the help is there even when it seems to be withdrawn, but still is there the appearance of total night with no sun to come and no star of hope to pierce the blackness. Beautiful is the face of the Divine Mother, but she too can be hard and terrible. Nay, then, is immortality a plaything to be given lightly to a child or the divine life a prize without effort or the crown for a weakling? Strive rightly and thou shalt have; trust and thy trust shall in the end be justified; but the dread Law of the Way is there and none can abrogate it.

Sri Aurobindo ('Essays Divine and Human', CWSA Vol. 12, pp. 155-156)



He who has done even a little good to human beings, though he be the worst of sinners, is accepted by God in the ranks of His lovers and servants.

Sri Aurobindo



He Was a Light in the Darkness

P. Raja interviews Manoj Das

The recipient of several awards, including the Central and state Sahitya Akademi Awards, Professor Manoj Das teaches English at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry. He is an optimist who believes in a transformed future for mankind and his writings exude this faith.

Here are excerpts of an interview with him:

Of all spiritual masters, why did you choose Sri Aurobindo?

It is not that I chose Sri Aurobindo; it was he in his infinite grace who chose me! But answering your question in a less mystifying way, I should say that I 'evolved' into Sri Aurobindo's world. My quest for the meaning of life, for the destiny of man, led me to him. Had it not been for his grace, I might be still beating about the bush in the world of religions and philosophies.

What is the relevance of Sri Aurobindo today?

I should say his relevance is for today and tomorrow. Sri Aurobindo came at a time when mankind was groping in darkness for all its favourite resorts – religion, politics, science – seemed to have reached dead ends without bringing to man any sense of "liberation", any sense of having arrived! Sri Aurobindo was the only one to diagnose the impasse as an "evolutionary crisis" which had engulfed humanity. He shows us the way to cross into a new phase of evolution, into a gnostic tomorrow.

In the selection from Sri Aurobindo 'The Hour of God' which you have edited for the Sahitya Akademi, what aspect of Sri Aurobindo have you highlighted?



His vision of human destiny as he has presented it through a penetrative look into history, philosophy, social developments and last but not least, through his spiritual insight.

Did Sri Aurobindo influence your writing in any way?

Certainly. **His vision of the future of man sustains my zeal for writing.** He has taught me to look at man from angles about which I was not conscious earlier.

Sri Aurobindo had a fine sense of humour, rare among yogis. What have you to say about this?

A. If Ananda (delight) is at the foundation of this Srishti (creation), how can the yogi, who is in union with that creative consciousness, be bereft of that trait? Sri Aurobindo's humour is the most subtle, most intelligent I have ever known.

Have you ever regretted that the genius of Sri Aurobindo was not taken note of by the Nobel Prize committee?

Never! Sri Aurobindo should not be read by people because he received this award or that. One's quest and quest alone should lead one to him.

Courtesy: The Statesman

Excerpted from 'The Call Beyond', Vol. 23, No. 2, 1998, pp. 32-33.



This is a miracle that men can love God, yet fail to love humanity. With whom are they in love then?

Sri Aurobindo



No Salaam Sahab

During the British Raj, if a government servant met a Britisher anywhere, it was the former's 'duty' to salute the latter. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, as a Deputy Magistrate, was a government official, but was unaware of such duties, and was perhaps happy to neglect them. Once he met a Britisher while taking a walk, but did not greet him. Here is this episode in Sri Aurobindo's words:

"Walking in Eden Garden he [Bankim Chandra Chatterjee] chanced across Munro, the Presidency Commissioner, a farouche bureaucrat with the manners of an Englishman and the temper of a badly educated hyena. Bankim examined the queer curiosity, as one might any queer curiosity, with a certain lazy interest, but no signal of respect. He was unaware at this time that to Salaam any stray European you may meet is the highest privilege of a Hindu and the whole duty of a Deputy Magistrate. But he was soon to receive instruction: for His Hyenaship was off in a rage to the Government and by a little private roaring easily got Bankim transferred to Jahajpur in Orissa."

Sri Aurobindo ('Bankim Chandra Chatterjee'. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2014 reprint, p. 16)



The difference between Yoga and hypnotism is that what hypnotism does for a man through the agency of another and in the sleeping state, Yoga does for him by his own agency and in the waking state.

Sri Aurobindo



In this column, we try to answer three types of questions: those related to spiritual quest ('aspiring high'); those related to psychological issues ('feeling low'); and those related to physical health ('frailties of the flesh'). It is needless to say that the identity of the person asking the question is kept confidential if the question is about a sensitive issue. The questions may be sent to callbeyond@aurobindoonline.in.

Which is a Better Prayer: Secret or Seen?

M wants to know whether Pranaam or Prayers to the Guru or God should be done silently from within, or in a way that may be seen by those around us?

Answer:

That is a very good question, and one of those to which two mutually contradictory answers can be both correct. The answer below is in the context of a practice such as Pranaam (bowing down, prostration) or Prayer in a place of worship or before a meal.

1. If the motive behind doing it silently or secretly is to avoid being seen as a 'good person' by others, it is better than doing it in full view. If the thought behind doing it silently or secretly is that one feels shy of being humble even in front of God, then it is egoistic. It is better to kill one's ego and do it in full view.
2. If the motive behind doing it in full view is to set a good example, especially for the younger people around, it is better than doing it silently or secretly. If the motive behind doing it in full view is to advertise one's devotion, then it is egoistic. It is better to kill the ego and do it silently or secretly.
3. If the motive behind doing it silently or secretly is to save time, or to avoid the practice getting reduced to a duty that has got to be done every single day at a fixed place at a fixed time, then it is good to do it quietly, varying the time and place, and sometimes even missing the practice altogether, if necessary, without feeling guilty about it.



4. If one prays openly, but without making a big deal of it, as a routine at mealtimes while eating with the family or friends, it helps in synchronizing the activity, makes the meal more peaceful and enjoyable, and helps in inducting the youngest members of the family into the practice. Even those less than a year old soon learn that they don't have to pounce on the food as soon as they see it! Children learn much more from what they see adults around doing than from being told what to do.
5. If one is meditating at home, one might let others know it, or discover it, to avoid being disturbed by others in the family.
6. If one is open to doing it either way – sometimes silently and secretly, and sometimes in full view – depending on the situation, that is perfectly alright. For example, if there is an event of devotional music or a discourse in a place of worship, and one reaches there a few minutes before time, it is alright to do it in full view to get full satisfaction from the practice. But if one reaches there late, it is better to do it silently. One may just sit quietly at the back, disturbing others as little as possible, instead of disturbing and distracting everyone by somehow reaching the altar and doing the pranaam in full view.
7. Even at the cost of digressing a bit, one might add that if anything is done exactly in the same way day after day, year after year, there is a grave risk of its getting reduced to a mechanical ritual. Hence, while a prayerful attitude embodying gratitude, sincerity and humility should be constant, the form that it takes may vary; in fact, it should vary from time to time, as a result of reflection, introspection, and one's current state of consciousness.
8. In short, there is no right or wrong answer to the question. It is not what is done, but the motive and the thought behind the action that matters. This general statement applies to everything we do, including Pranaam and Prayer.



Contact us

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Note

In view of the Hundred and Fiftieth Birth Anniversary of Sri Aurobindo on 15 August 2022, the Ashram is expanding its mailing list to reach out to more and more who may benefit from the teachings of the Master and the Mother. To get included in the Mailing List, please go to <http://erp.saaonline.net.in/addcontacts.cfm> to fill in a form, which will take you only a few minutes.



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