

## **1/23/11 Sermon**

“Unitarian Universalism – A Hindu Perspective”

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I was born in India in a Hindu family. My Dad was a judge of the superior court in Bombay – a great intellectual, respected jurist, loved by his community, friends and family, and a total non-participant in any religious Hindu rituals. My mother, on the other hand, was a deeply religious woman, who went to the temple often, went to her satsangs – satsangs are spiritual gatherings where the holy man or sadhu, meets with his followers and prayers are chanted and hymns sung. Mom used to read us stories from the Mahabharat and Ramayan, the two major mythology epics of the Hindu religion. She tried to take us to the temple with her, but with very little success. The few times that I did go was at the insistence of my father. He said I should do so because it made my mother happy. It never occurred to me to ask why he did not go. If my going made her happy, Dad’s going would make my mother ecstatic.

I have had no formal education in Hinduism. What little I knew was as a result of what Mom told us through the stories of the Mahabharat and the Ramayan. India then, as now, is deeply communal. By that I mean, people identify themselves through their religion. I knew we were Hindus, but I had no idea what I did that made me so. I knew we Hindus were superior to those violent Muslims and those crazy Christians, but knew little else about the religion. When I was old enough to start asking questions, I asked my Dad what it meant to be a Hindu. Dad gave me the following tenets:

1. Belief in reincarnation. We lead an endless chain of birth followed by death, with each new cycle starting off where the previous one ended.
2. Belief in the Law of Karma. Karma is the cosmic accounting system where all your thoughts, words, and deeds go to determine your status in your next life. Karma explains away why one can be born in riches, or be blessed with talents, good looks and great supportive families and friends, while others can be born in poverty and despair, devoid of talents, with no loving support behind them.
3. Adherence to the commitment of the Brotherhood of Man. By this, it means that we are all connected to one and other, and that the welfare of my brother is as important as my own welfare. Mankind encompasses every living creature.

Dad said that it was not important that you believed in all three tenets. But the adherence to the Brotherhood of Man was non-negotiable! He also said that if I had any further questions, I should refer to the Bhagavad Gita. He gave me a copy of the Bhagavad Gita translation by Dr. Annie Basant who was at one time the president of the Theosophical Society. He told me to read it, and that it would answer most all my questions.

The Bhagavad Gita is also called the Lord's Song. The armies of the Pandvas, who were the good guys, were set to clash with the armies of the Kurvas, who were the evil guys. Arjuna, the leader of the Pandvas had a chariot driven by Lord Krishna. As the battle is about to begin, Arjuna is filled with remorse and does not wish to go to battle which would result in the killing of the Karvas, who were his cousins. Lord Krishna counsels Arjuna that there are times in ones life when one has to do battle with evil. It was Arjuna's duty to go to war, to have good triumph over evil. The eighteen chapters of the Bhagvad Gita are considered by scholars to be the essence of Hinduism, or essentially the Hindu Bible. It is interesting to note that the Gita is Lord Krishna's discourse with Arjuna, pretty much as the Bible is considered the word of God.

For the next 15 years, I read a chapter of the Gita every night. Initially, I didn't understand any of it. I used to read a chapter every night more as a ritual than any thing else. After I came to the U.S., I quit doing so. Even though I have read the Gita many, many times as an adult, I still don't understand all of it. In many instances, I don't even know if I agree with everything in it. As a matter of fact, in our Spiritual Awakening Group here at UUMAN that meets twice a month, we have been studying the Gita for the last several months. I have learned more about the Gita from these discourses than I did in all my previous readings.

I got my most basic understanding of Hinduism from reading Huston Smith's book on Comparative Religions, which was a textbook in my college.

To those not conversant with the Hindu religion, let me tell you briefly what it entails. Man is composed of body, mind and soul. The body and mind can change and wither, but the soul, called Atma, lives on. The collective soul of all living things is called Parmatma, or super soul, which is also the term used for God.

So what Hinduism believes is that our collective souls make up what we call God. The goal of all humankind is to achieve union with God and become God. You do this by perfecting yourself through a series of births and deaths. Your station in your next life is determined by the collective good or evil you have done in this life.

Nirvana, or the freedom from the endless cycles of life and birth, can be achieved in many ways. In the Gita, Lord Krishna explains to Arjuna that moksha can be achieved through four different ways. These ways are not mutually exclusive. The different paths are Knowledge, Action, Devotion and Meditation.

Throughout the Gita, Krishna insists that life must be lived, not renounced. But it must be lived with detachment from ego, in the service of God.

Meditation is stressed as being a path towards self-actualization, and must be practiced if one is to achieve freedom from the endless cycle of life and birth. While both prayer and meditation are paths, meditation is considered the preferred path, since one is talking to God while the other is listening to God.

The practice of Devotion in Hinduism is quite different from anything we do in Unitarian Universalist services. Among the Hindus, devotion often comprises of singing hymns and chants. But the singing is more rapture-like. UU's are more intellectually grounded. We do not go into raptures singing our living traditions. While I marvel at our choir and Huu Mai's brilliant handling of it, it is an intellectual joy, not a rapture where you are likely to go into a trance.

My introduction to Universal Unitarianism was similarly unscholarly. I had moved to Georgia and was pretty shocked at the mentality of my co-workers who were, to put it delicately, a little bit too extreme right. I was complaining to a Jewish friend of mine about how hard it was to meet people (translate – "girls"). Since I did not drink or hang out at the "meat markets" of that time – anyone remember Sans Souci or the Braves Falcon Lounge? – my friend Max said, "You know what you might find interesting – you should go the new UU church they have built at Cliff Valley. Those guys are all crazy; you will fit right in!"

UUCA was pretty eye-opening for me. I was amazed. Here in Georgia were a group of people who thought like I did and had the same values. I wish I could tell you that I studied UU-ism and found my spiritual home. That really wasn't it. I went to the parties that their 20's-30's group had, went on some ski trips with them, found their preacher Gene Pickett's sermons mentally stimulating and generally had a good time there.

After I moved to Roswell and started a family, I quit going to church. One day, when my twins were 10 years old, came and told me, "Dad, all our friends go to church. We should go, too." I mentioned this at lunch one

day, and my sales manager who was very active in his church asked me, "Didn't you go to the UU church at one time?" Mike took it upon himself to find out where the closest UU congregation was. He told me a new congregation had just been formed in Roswell, and they met at the Primrose Cottage, which was about a mile from my house. He also told me that he had already talked to the preacher, Lauralyn Bellamy, and she was expecting me and the boys that Sunday. So began my association with UUMAN.

As I started to learn more about Unitarian Universalism, I was amazed at how much it had in common with Hinduism. Let's review some of the basics of UUism. We think it is not important what you believe, but how you behave. Hinduism similarly places a very high importance on action; action which is done in devotion to the universe without ego or attachment. Action and doing your duty are considered prime ways to achieve Nirvana.

Let me recite to you the Unitarian Universalist Covenant. Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. To dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

In a similar context, toward the end of the Bhagvad Gita, Krishna tells Arjuna, "The highest path of religion is absolute, unconditional loving surrender unto Lord Krishna, which is expressed by service towards our fellow man, which frees us from all sin, and brings complete enlightenment. This will enable one to return to Krishna's eternal spiritual abode."

Another point of great similarity is the Unitarian Universalism covenant, "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Let's look at this a little bit closer. This is not a principle recognized by most Christian traditions. I remember in the Catholic school that I went to, Father Agiah saying, "God gave man dominion over the Earth. All things were put on this Earth for the enjoyment of Man." If this was in the Bible, and the Bible was written by man, then you have got to admit that it is pretty self-serving. Did anyone ask the animals, or the plants, or the earth if they agreed with this law? Man proclaims himself as the master of the planet and then can do whatever he wants with all things in it.

Hinduism, on the other hand, considers everything in nature divine. The animals, plants, earth, water, fire, all objects material and immaterial are considered divine. Man is part of this earth, just like the animals, plants, the rivers and the seas. There is divinity in it all. This divinity connects us and it connects us to the Supreme.

Another covenant of Universal Unitarianism is the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Because Unitarian Universalism is so intellectually based and appeals to the head rather than the heart, the early UU thinkers had thought that one day all of America would be Unitarian. Of course, we have seen that that's not so. It is a little disconcerting to think that in a country of 300 million plus people, there are only about 250,000 who subscribe to the intellectually-based UU faith.

Hinduism similarly advocates knowledge as a path to Nirvana. Hindus believe that one of the ways to escape the endless cycle of birth and death is through study of the Vedas and the Upanishads. These old texts going back 5,000 years detail the philosophies that guide mankind. Nirvana can therefore be achieved by gyan, which is knowledge.

While there are a lot of similarities, some differences do exist. Bhakti is devotion, and one can attain moksha through Bhakti. In this, there is a greater similarity with the Christian monks than with anything that the UU's have. Somehow, we don't see much value in chanting and praying all day.

Man can therefore achieve his liberation through either knowledge or seeking truth, or by devotion, or by action which is doing your duty.

In summary, the Gita extols the individual to do as follows:

- Control of the senses and purity of conduct.
- Unselfish, but attentive performance of one's duties.
- Cultivate true detachment and an even spirit in the face of success or defeat, joy or grief.
- Vigilant control of the motions of the mind, and elimination of passions that disturb it. The three feelings that must be controlled are lust, anger and greed.
- Periodic turning of the mind inwards, for silent, concentrated meditation.
- Surrendering one's life to God's grace.

When I look at our UU covenants in light of the Hindu teachings, I see a great deal of similarity, and no conflicts. Some have pointed out that UU's put more emphasis on social action, which is not mentioned anywhere in the Gita. Further, it has been pointed out that the law of Karma actually impedes any desire to lift people out of their circumstances to better ones, because people in lower strata are just living out their karma.

Actually, a deeper look into the Gita shows Krishna saying that the highest form of devotion to God is through Action, which is doing your duty. If I am a parent, my duty is to take care of my children. If I am an employer, my

duty is to take care of my employees. If I am a teacher, my devotion to God manifests itself in teaching my students. Through the performance of all these actions, one benefits those around him.

Many years ago, I told our minister that I considered Unitarian Universalism more as a philosophy than a religion. He did not agree with that. He said that UU's had a lot of traditions and rituals which made it a religion. Likewise, I consider Hinduism more as a way of life than a religion. You cannot convert to Hinduism. There is no one out there who will dunk you in a tub, chunk out a portion of your body and declare you a Hindu. Likewise, no one can ex-communicate you because there is no authority which can do so.

Many years ago, I read an article in *UU World* magazine about a village in Northeast India where a bunch of young Hindu college graduates were complaining that while they agreed with the Hindu principles and philosophies, they could not abide by all the prayer rituals and ceremonies which appeared to have no meaning. So they formed a study group to see if they could start their own religion. After studying the issue for a while, the group reported that there was no need to start a new religion. There already existed a religion which embodied all the Hindu principles, but was based on common sense intellectual practices.

Yes, friends, that religion was Unitarian Universalism. So when I am asked what made me give up Hinduism and become a Unitarian Universalist, my answer is, I didn't give up anything. Unitarianism is just Hinduism reformed.

I want to leave you with the words of Mahatma Gandhi:

"After long study and experience, I have come to the conclusion that [1] all religions are true; [2] all religions have some error in them; [3] all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism, in as much as all human beings should be as dear to one as one's own close relatives. My own veneration for other faiths is the same as that for my own faith; therefore no thought of conversion is possible." (M.K. Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers: Life and Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi*, as told in his own words, Paris, UNESCO 1958, p 60.)

Blessed be.