

WHAT RELIGION IS TO ME

I was born and brought up in India. When I was at school, once a year the teacher asked the class to respond to a classification. On my first time, he called out “Muslims,” and some of my friends stood up. Suleyman was my best friend and he stood up. As I believed that I belonged to whatever he did, I naturally got up and stood with him. The teacher looked at me with unbelieving eyes and asked me to sit down. I could not understand this high handedness that separated me from my best friend, but, respecting the teacher’s arbitration, I sat. “Christians!” the teacher shouted next. This time I saw that my good friend Peter was standing up. As I did not want to lose both Suleyman and Peter, I stood up again, and again the teacher told me to sit down, this time with a note of annoyance. At this point I decided I did not understand what game the teacher wanted us to play. Finally he said, “Hindus!” Next to me sat Paramesvara, the carpenter’s son. He stood up, but, as I had never joined him in any of his endeavors, I sat where I was. The teacher looked fiercely into my eyes and shouted at me: “Stand up you stupid ass. You are a Hindu!”

This made me think “Hindu” was another name for an ass. I knew that I was not an ass; how then did I classify as a Hindu? When I returned home I told my mother that my teacher had ruthlessly characterized me as a Hindu, which seemed synonymous to an ass. When my mother confirmed that I was indeed a Hindu, I felt crestfallen, but she continued by explaining that Hindu did not mean ass, but referred generally to the majority of Indians who did not go to churches on Sundays or mosques on Fridays. In those days there was no temple nearby and I did not see the inside of one until Mahatma Gandhi came to our village to open a temple for all Hindus. For a long time the word Hindu was a contemptuous term in my mind, and Christian and Muslim were horrifying categorizations that segregated many of my friends, at least on certain days or hours in a day. This experience of mine is shared in varying degrees of shame or horror by at least the three-fourths of

the population of India who are financially deprived and are considered socially taboo.

After considerable exposure to education and religious display, I have come to terms with my Hindu grass roots and I have taken pains to understand the philosophy, mythology, ritual, ethics and above all the psycho-cosmologic dimensions of this mammoth, ancient culture which is at once dynamic and lethargic, universal and parochial, impersonal and individualistic, transcendental and exploitive. In spite of my devoted study of the vast Hindu literature and that of its aftergrowths—Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism—I am still as much an outsider to Hinduism as I am to Christianity, Islam, Judaism or Shintoism. The main reason for such a sad alienation from my own hereditary grass roots is the natural aversion and anger that has grown in me towards the cancerous social observance of caste and all the anomalies connected with it. No one who cannot accept the caste system will ever become an ardent protagonist of Hinduism.

This deep, agonizing conviction of the otherness of the very unconscious to which my mythic and archetypal emotions belong, is not a solitary freak incidence with me alone. There are millions of well-meaning, educated Indians who feel a natural abhorrence to the claims that Hinduism makes upon them. However, this gives little or no impetus to show love or sympathy for other religions. There is, of course, the glowing exception of Dr. Ambedkar, who sought refuge in Buddhism out of sheer exasperation, though history proved this to be a false step which was suicidal and self-defeating. Fortunately Hinduism is not felt in the average Indian life as an organized monolithic institution, even though many politically ambitious fanatics have, time and again, tried to exploit the people's emotional affiliation to it for the purpose of building up a Hindu fundamentalist India. This has not succeeded and will not succeed, because a more genuine and immensely valuable spirit prevails upon the Indian mind. This is none other than India herself.

India is a unique country of calm and serene contemplative insight, and her children are deeply embedded in her unarticulated

commitment to the search and realization of a truth without frontiers and of a beauty that manifests universally in the very music and poetry of life. It is this genuine Indianness that has created such worthy sons and daughters as Mira Bai, Kabir and Tagore.

Such an open and dynamic sense of belonging to the essential spirit of India more than compensates me for any spontaneous or studied aloofness from all religions, including Hinduism. The adherence to or the avoidance of religion of any sort does not affect in the least one's spiritual growth and dynamic acceptance of the truth and value of perennial philosophy, irrespective of its source being the Upanishads, the Enneads, the Gospels, or Buddhist lore. A human being is primarily and ultimately human, and there is nothing more tragic and shameful than if his religion should cripple him into being a creedist or a cultist.

Nitya Chaitanya Yati 12-8-1981