

INTERTWINED CONCEPTS

# UNTANGLING RELIGION FROM SPIRITUALITY

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MIKE GEORGE

Religion and spirituality have long been two intertwined concepts. But, whisper it quietly, no self-respecting religion can make a claim to be spiritual. Religions are based on the past and old belief systems originated in days gone by. Their beliefs about spirituality tend to be exactly that, beliefs. To say, "I believe", is to say, "I don't yet know". Besides, 'beliefs' tend to be collective but knowing is always individual.

Beliefs and belief systems are then inherited by the generations that follow. The relationship of the 'religious person' with any belief that they hold tends to be one of attachment. Often followed by self-identification with that belief. I am a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist, are obvious examples of attachment to, and identification



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with, a religious belief system.

Attachment to anything or anyone, visible or invis-

ible, tangible or intangible, is the cause of fear, as any self-aware person will confirm; fear of loss or damage

or threat. And fear, being a distortion of the energy of consciousness, is the antithesis of authentic spiritual-

ity. Spiritual people do not believe this, they know this from their own experience. Calling oneself by any reli-

gious name means projecting beliefs and defending a belief system. Projecting and defending means the pres-

ence of fear. Resulting in the loss of the ability to express spiritual attributes such as caring, kindness and compassion to name but a few. Replaced by anxiety, worry and tension, all faces of fear. All because of attachment to, and identification with, 'my beliefs'.

An increasing number of people are awakening to this insight. It is probably one of the reasons mainstream religions are losing members in certain places. Religions and their members tend to have agendas, such as attempting to prove to others 'our beliefs are truer than yours'. Or making sure 'my personal identity' is defined by 'my beliefs'. Or ensuring 'our' religion's place in the world is not confused with other religions, or politics or science. Or that 'my' religion has the most magnificent properties.

And yet we know, perhaps deep in our heart, authentic spirituality has no agenda. It has nothing to prove. If the truth is, spirit is what 'I am', then fear is impossible as the true self (spirit) wants nothing, holds on to nothing and cannot be threatened. Some even remind us that nothing is real and fixed after 'I am...'. There is simply change and

transience, including the physical form we occupy. The authentic spiritual person is therefore unconcerned and never threatened by others' beliefs.

It follows that 'institutional spirituality' is probably an oxymoron. Those that gather under the roof of the 'institution' are there because they believe they are members of the institution. They subscribe to the ideas and beliefs imparted under that roof. Religious institutions teach ancient and fixed ideas and beliefs, which followers are encouraged to use to build their sense of 'who I am'.

Perhaps that is why so much conflict in history has arisen from such institutions. They are easily threatened. There is the presence of fear. So, defensiveness and aggression seem inevitable. Whereas true spirituality is fearless and free as it holds on to nothing. The authentically spiritual individual has ended any habits of creating a false identity and knows that belief is an admission of ignorance. There is no shame in saying, "I don't know".

Mike George is the author of *Untangling Religion from Spirituality - 101 Differences Between Spirituality and Religion*.

INNATE NATURE

## Things that help us remain spiritually centred



DR. PRATAP MIDHA

On the path of self-improvement and spirituality, remaining centred helps one progress fast. Whatever we may be doing, including routine tasks such as cleaning, washing, and cooking, our state of mind should be so elevated that it inspires others when they see us. Spirituality is not something separate from our daily life, confined to a few hours when we meditate or study. When our inner life of thoughts, emotions and intentions is the same as our outer life of action, our words and behaviour will reflect our spirituality. This is called integrity - the principles we espouse and hold dear should be visible in our life. If we say one thing and do something else, we may start to carry guilt and regret within us, and when this happens repeatedly, we lose heart, and some people give up the spiritual path, thinking that it is too difficult.

Having a strong point of reference, an inspiring ideal that keeps us stable during challenging times, helps us bounce back from adversity. We may lose our peace and get disturbed when we see someone who has been unfair to us, or when things do not go our way, or when the body gives us trouble. At such times it helps to remind ourselves that peace is our innate nature, it is so intrinsic to the self that all we need to do is access it when



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needed. Sometimes there may be desires and expectations that are not fulfilled, which makes us restless or disappointed. Silent introspection helps to identify the roots of the desires and remove them. Silence brings inner peace, which empowers the soul, and our spiritual power increases further when we share what we have. Sharing does not just mean speaking about what we have learned, it can be as simple as smiling at others, having good wishes for them, and being empathic. Sharing without expecting any return not only brings joy and contentment but also develops our generosity and altruism.

Having good company also helps. We cannot choose the company we have at work or at home, but our closest companions are our thoughts. Paying attention to the quality of our thoughts, and consciously

creating good and powerful thoughts enriches us internally and keeps us mentally and emotionally healthy. We are then in a position to share our positive ideas with others and give them hope, courage, and joy. It also protects us from the harmful influence of negative individuals and environments. A lot of people in the world are looking for positive role models. When people see someone who is paying attention to the quality of their thoughts, feelings, words and actions, it helps them bring about a shift in their consciousness.

Food can also enhance our spiritual power, as it nourishes both body and soul. Plant-based food, cooked in a happy, pure state of mind, and accepted similarly, with gratitude for the sustenance it provides, has been found to play a major role in keeping the mind calm and pure, and the body light and active.

Another quality that keeps us on an even keel while navigating life's vicissitudes is enlightened disinterest. One who has set out to enrich their inner world knows that a lot of what we see outside is superficial and devoid of value. The mental clarity that comes from regular spiritual practices, such as meditation, enables them to discern what is worth devoting their time and attention to and what is not. Even when they get involved in a task, or are responsible for its completion, they do not get attached to the work or identify with the role they have been given. They put in their best effort and move on, and having learned from their experience, seek new lessons from engaging in new tasks.

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TRANSFORMATION

## The spiritual process of renewal



B.K. GEETA

God is believed by many to be omnipresent - existing everywhere at all times and seeing everything, to ultimately judge us for our actions. This belief stems from the idea of God being an all-powerful being who knows everything. His omnipotence and omniscience are extrapolated by the devout to attribute omnipresence to Him.

Does God really exist everywhere? This belief can be put to a simple, logical test. Every person or thing influences its immediate surroundings, even if just subtly. This is why different kinds of atmosphere exist in the homes of different people - created by the quality of thoughts, words and behaviour of those living there. A happy family's home has a light atmosphere while homes where the inhabitants are stressed, fearful or angry are not very nice places to be in. Even non-living matter has a similar influence. Fire spreads heat and light, water cools its surroundings, and roses announce their presence by their fragrance.

If God, the ocean of peace, love, compassion and purity were omnipresent, His qualities should be abundantly in evidence everywhere. But



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when we look at the state of the world, what is striking is the absence of any proof of God's presence. What we see instead is the omnipresence of evil, with anger, greed and selfishness pervading human minds. Vices dictate people's behaviour in so many subtle and gross ways that it is rare to come across someone who acts selflessly, out of a pure wish to help others.

The harm that mankind is doing to itself and the planet is visible in the form of depressed, unhappy individuals, dysfunctional relationships, breakdown of social bonds, people's attempts to fill their inner void through consumption, which in turn is fuelling materialism and causing an ecological catas-

trophy. Humanity appears to be on a downward spiral from which there is no escape. In this gloomy scenario many look to God help to be free from their suffering and sorrow. They resort to prayer, fasting, penance and service of their fellow humans in the belief that these will take them closer to the Divine. Not knowing God, their efforts are like trekking to a place one knows nothing about - neither the name nor the location, direction or distance.

But the mere act of making such effort gives comfort and hope to many. At the same time, the unscrupulous among them make false claims to divinity, drawing credulous individuals with

the promise of easily finding peace of mind and happiness. The deception of such 'god-men' only serves to drive a lot of people away from the spiritual path and fuel cynicism and despair.

It is at such a time, when moral and spiritual darkness prevails, that God intervenes, as has been mentioned in the Gita. He reminds His children of their true identity, telling them that they are souls - eternal beings who have played various roles in different bodies through successive lives.

He tells them about their relationship with Him, the spiritual bond of love that makes every soul a rightful heir to the Father's treasures - His virtues, powers and knowledge. He tells them how, by remembering Him, they can claim their purity and peace.

Souls thus empowered by God can help their brethren undergo similar rejuvenation. This triggers larger changes as the enlightened souls relate to other people and nature with compassion and generosity, discarding their old, selfish ways. As a result the elements of nature begin to be revitalised.

This spiritual and subtle process of transformation marks the end of one cycle of time and the start of another. It ushers in an era of peace and happiness, the period that is remembered in many cultures and faith traditions as heaven or paradise.

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### A THOUGHT FOR TODAY

The social construction of identity means that I am who I think I am because others have told me this is who I am. Identity, in today's world, is often based on the body - my gender, my skin colour, my bod-

ily size or shape. When I meditate, I recognise myself as the quiet subtle energy that lives in a body. In a time when identity polarises people, this spiritual vision is the most inclusive vision we can have of others. Inside

the body, independent of colour, size, gender or nationality, is a human spirit. Today let me expand my awareness beyond the body and relate to others through a spiritual identity.