

Humanism and Hinduism: an exchange of letters between Jay Lakhani, theoretical physicist and director of Hindu Academy and Peter Cave, chair of the Humanist Philosophers group and author of *Humanism: a beginner's guide* (Oneworld 2009)

Dear Peter

At first glance it would appear that there can be no common ground between Hinduism with its 330 million Gods and Humanism without a God. Let me unpack some of the key features of esoteric Hinduism to reveal a natural resonance in the approach as well as aspirations of both these enterprises.

This may come as a surprise to many (including the Hindus) that [when we go to the heart of the matter](#), Hinduism cannot be classed as a *religion*. The classical definition of religion is an enterprise that aims to re-align God with Man. The equivalent term in the Indic traditions is: *Dharma* derived from [the](#) Sanskrit root *Dhar* meaning 'that which *holds everything together*'. Dharma simply aims to come to terms with the laws that govern the world we experience (both external as well as internal). One chap who does not appear in this definition is God. If I were to offer this definition to a Physicist or to an Anthropologist, they would both claim that this enterprise belongs firmly in the field of their expertise. By definition Hinduism cannot disagree with the findings of both hard and soft sciences. It can disagree with some of the conclusions of these sciences, but cannot challenge its findings. For example Hinduism is in broad agreement with the theory of evolution and the theory of the big bang.

One may immediately ask 'But then what about all these Gods of the Hindus? How do they come into the system?' The answer is that Gods come into the picture as an anthropocentric ploy. Vivekananda, a modern proponent of Hinduism commented, 'God does not create man in his image; man creates God in his image. If we were camels we would have conjured up a super camel in the sky. If we examine ancient Greek or Vedic ideas we discover that both these cultures had a habit of personifying forces of nature in order get their minds around subtle principles. The human mind has always used such ploys to get around abstract ideas. This should not be viewed as human failing, but as human innovation. Apart from personifying the forces of external nature, we also personify some of the most endearing human traits. Features such as: Compassion; Thirst for knowledge; Power. We exaggerate these to an infinite degree and project them onto a super-personality called God. The religious enterprise then turns into building a relationship with this super personality, by reflecting more fully the very human attributes we found endearing in the first place. We as human beings can only exhibit limited power, knowledge, and compassion but the God we conjure up must reflect these qualities in a limitless manner. So far so good, but then we come up with [the](#) strong philosophic challenge which reveals the limitation of such an anthropocentric exercise. The challenge is simple: If God is all powerful and all loving, [why](#) all this suffering? And we are not just talking about human suffering; we are talking about suffering in the whole living kingdom. This simple question reveals the limitation of an anthropocentric approach.

Esoteric Hinduism recognises the philosophical shortcomings of [a](#) monotheistic God, hence the search that was classed as *searching for that one that holds everything*

together advocates a non-theistic mode. The non-theistic approach defines that which holds everything together or underpins everything as *Brahman* ~ a cosmic principle (from Sanskrit root *Braha* meaning cosmic). This principle underpins everything, including our mental and intellectual realms. Hinduism claims that this Brahman is neither material, nor mental nor intellectual. How did the Hindus discover this? They claim it is through sharp introspection. There is a popular scientific saying: The secrets of the far flung galaxies can be revealed if we probe the heart of an atom. Why should the secrets of the universe not also be revealed through a focused introspection of our mental realm? This claim of esoteric Hinduism is that this *Brahman* or underpinning becomes manifested as the physical universe we experience, and becomes more visible as living things. The clearest manifestations of *Brahman* are men and women. This is called *Spiritual Humanism*. (For the lack of better word in English we are using the word spiritual). Vivekananda offered a differentiation between *Materialistic Humanism* and *Spiritual Humanism*. The first claims that we are material beings aspiring to spiritual ideals to improve our material status; the latter claims that we are essentially spiritual beings caught on a material journey.

Claiming that the universe we experience is underpinned by some principle that is crucially invisible may sound like poetry but the greatest ally to this idea is found at the cutting edge discoveries of modern sciences. Let me touch on one of these. The most important discovery in Physics in the last hundred years is called Quantum. In a nutshell it states that: If we thought that we can explain the world in terms of sticks and stones or smaller versions of sticks and stones then we are in for a disappointment. The claim of Quantum is that the primary building block of the universe is *non-material*. Though I am not claiming that this on its own is enough to suggest that Quantum Mechanics is rediscovering the *Brahman* of the Hindus, it clearly points in the same direction.*

Esoteric Hinduism has always claimed that what religions were searching for as a super-personality in the highest heaven is very visible here and now. It becomes visible in the eyes of every living thing we come across and becomes most transparent as men and women. The most comprehensive worship of this entity is not tinkling bells in front of deities but seeing and serving God in man. Hindus are very good theoreticians but poor practitioners of this marvellous idea. Modern India, which continues to tolerate the vast difference between the haves and have-not's, is not the best example of Spiritual Humanism in practice. One place where human dignity is valued and given highest status is in modern Britain. Under the umbrella of a mature democracy, a civic system, this nation is practising what the esoteric Hindus have been preaching ~ *Spiritual Humanism*.

Jay Lakhani, Hindu Academy

* Quote from Walter Moore on Schrodinger's (one of the founding fathers of Quantum Mechanics) *Life and Thought*: The unity and continuity of Vedanta are reflected in the unity and continuity of wave mechanics. In 1925, the world view of physics was a model of a great machine composed of separable interacting material particles. During the next few years, Schrodinger and Heisenberg and their followers created a universe based on super imposed inseparable waves of probability

amplitudes. This new view would be entirely consistent with the Vedantic concept of All in One.

Dear Jay

Many years ago, a reconciliation occurred between mainland China and Taiwan, courtesy of Dr Kissinger. 'There is only one China,' they agreed. Mind you, mainland China meant the China run by Mao – and the American-backed Taiwanese meant the exiled government in Taiwan. Reconciliations can come about through sleights of hands or, at least, of words. So, while I welcome your fascinating project, I wonder what agreement there really is between mainstream Hinduism and Humanism, if we dig into what is meant. Of course, maybe Esoteric Hinduism is a long way from the mainstream.

Let us divide the question into one concerning understanding the workings and nature of the world and another about how we human beings morally ought to deal with one another and the world.

'Principle' seems to be the key term, if we are thinking of a Hindu-Humanist bonding concerning the world's nature. The universe, you say, is underpinned by some cosmic principle. Well, if that means regularities in nature exist – and possibly scientists could discover one day a unity behind those regularities – then humanists agree about the regularities and some, no doubt, anticipate the unity. Yes, scientists successfully understand the world deploying concepts far beyond those of the seventeenth-century understanding of matter; and, doubtless, concepts even more wondrous will be used in the distant future.

None of the above provides any reason to think that an underlying principle or underpinning possesses the features traditionally associated with God or gods – such as purposes, concern for humanity, or being a 'super personality in the highest heaven'. None of the above suggests there is any sense in talk of building a relationship with a 'super personality'.

If I am reading you correctly, you do not believe in a super personality. Maybe your position is that many Hindus do believe in such a personality, but it should be understood as a picturesque way of talking about the world (including human beings) that scientists investigate. Perhaps this latter is what makes your Hinduism 'Esoteric'. If so, then I assume that millions of Hindus would disagree with Esoteric Hinduism – but maybe I am mistaken.

The above comments are, though, separate from the second question of how we should treat each other. Humanists typically do not believe that the regularities in nature – be they understood in Newtonian or Einsteinian or Quantum terms – tell us how we morally ought to live. They are not the sort of things to be 'worshipped' – though we may well feel awe and wonder at sunsets and raging oceans – and, indeed, a good champagne. Once again, I am not clear of your position. At one point, you speak of our needing to come to terms with the 'laws that govern the world'. I am unsure what that means. At another point, you seem to be endorsing the idea that we should 'worship' regularities in nature.

Focusing on the moral question, we humanists turn to our common humanity whereby humans do usually recognize concepts such as justice, benevolence and

forgiveness, and we do recognize that we ought to be concerned with people's welfare and flourishing – and indeed the welfare of other creatures

This leads many of us to be pretty liberal minded, respecting other individuals to get on with their lives as they choose so long as not harming others. This leads many of us to stress the importance of improved welfare provision for the dispossessed – and so on. This also leads us to wonder what is going on with, for example, the caste system which is favoured, I gather, by many, many Hindus. It certainly does not seem to be a system recognizing, for example, equal rights.

Democracy is usually favoured by Humanists – though we should note that democracy is not simply a matter of decisions courtesy of majority votes. The majority may vote to persecute minorities, be they the dispossessed, asylum seekers or wrongly dressed; be they homosexuals or Jews or, for that matter, Hindus – or atheists. Democracy requires vetoes as well as votes – to protect minorities.

You end with support for Spiritual Humanism. If this, in the end, means that some features of the world around us may fill us with wonder, then I can go along with you. If this, in the end, means that we should be concerned about other living creatures, then I can go along with you. But if this means that there is some purpose underpinning the world which, if only we discovered it, all would be well – well, that is where I must leave you to travel alone.

With best wishes for our bonding in humanity,

Peter Cave

Dear Peter

Before I offer a more detailed response, let me remove some misconceptions that are visible in [your](#) analysis. Despite appearances, Hinduism is not a polytheist enterprise (with many Gods). It has always been a pluralistic enterprise that recognises that there are many ways of relating to spirituality. *Pluralism* allows theistic, non-theistic and even non-religious modes for invoking spirituality. *Pluralism* in a theistic mode translates as plural ways to perceive a personalised God. So the pointed question asked of all world religions, “Which of your Gods is for real?” is put to rest by this analysis because it says that there are not many Gods but many ways to perceive personalised spirituality i.e. different ideas about God.

Religious pluralism is a potent idea well suited to address the needs of a modern pluralistic society. It offers [a](#) prescription [to](#) how many faith communities can co-exist with integrity and in harmony. *Pluralism* is a broad concept that also recognises spiritual exploration in a non-theistic mode (Buddhism being a classic case) and even in a non-religious mode (as with some Humanists). So what appears as a weirdness of Hinduism – Polytheism – when understood correctly becomes a powerful concept – *Pluralism* – [which](#) offers a synthesis between many world-views. *Pluralism* is the best prescription for community cohesion in modern society.

The second misconception about Hinduism that I continue to fight against is the issue of *hereditary, hierarchical caste system*. The idea of *Caste* appears in the Hindu scriptures of authority *only* as [the](#) division of labour based on age and aptitude. Over time, this sensible concept (which all modern civilised societies use to stream their youngsters), became corrupt, and degenerated into a hereditary, hierarchical stratification of society. Hierarchical caste can best be described as an atrocity committed in the *name* of Hinduism; it is certainly not Hinduism. I have been fighting the education system in this country for fifteen years to ensure that they stop promoting this divisive system as Hinduism in schools. I have repeatedly challenged the QCA and examination awarding bodies on this issue. Thankfully they are beginning to relent.

In response to the criticism: “To what extent are some of these ideas *mainstream*?” The answer is: *They are as mainstream as they can possibly be*. The *Upanishads*, the scriptures of authority of Hinduism, hardly mention Gods, they develop concepts like: *Atman* (spiritual underpinning of everyone) and *Brahman* (spiritual underpinning of everything). This is non-theistic Hinduism. At the same time, let me clarify that this is not an attempt to undermine theism or ignore its role and relevance for mankind. [The](#) majority of mankind needs this personified approach in spirituality to relate to this highly abstract and crucially invisible dimension we class as *spirit*. A lot of science can be done using Newton’s laws of gravitation, even though Newton’s gravity is just an approximation of a more majestic theory expressed as General Relativity. In the same manner theistic religions should be viewed as a workable ploy used by majority of mankind to get a handle on an abstract spiritual underpinning to everything.

Hinduism does not define the term spirit or spirituality merely as a novel way of saying: *A sense of wonder or as worshipping the laws of nature* but as something that is profound and comes into focus when we try and grapple with the nature of

reality through the findings of modern science. The three areas where a *spiritual* underpinning is very visible are:-

- Quantum Mechanics in Physics: This discovery affirms that the underpinning to the material world is essentially non-material. Matter has to be viewed as an epiphenomenon of Quantum. Werner Heisenberg, the father of QM says, 'Quantum is reality while matter is a paradox.' Atoms as the material building blocks of the universe are a ploy that works for all practical purposes but is not reality. For quantum to become a material reality there arises a need for something that has to be essentially non-material. For the material world to come into being one requires a conscious observer. The only way to avoid consciousness appearing in Physics is to adopt a multi-verse scenario which requires the universe to break into infinite copies of itself every infinitesimal moment of time! Occam must be turning in his grave because this is the most uneconomical model of the universe and yet mainstream physics is happy to accommodate this rather than allow consciousness to become an essential ingredient for the material world to come into being.
- The puzzle of consciousness in Neuroscience: No slice of the brain produces consciousness and yet it seems to be everywhere and no where in the brain. All attempts to come to terms with it like: Equating consciousness to 'awareness + short-term memory' are ploys replacing one unclassified concept with another. Hinduism offers an interesting insight into consciousness suggesting that it is neither a material nor a mental phenomenon – but reflects our essential spiritual dimension.
- The definition of a living thing: Though Hindu philosophy has no problem with the theory of evolution or the theory of Big Bang it has a different take on how to classify living things. Living things are not seen as the extension of the material world. Life is defined as something that is in defiance of nature rather than in compliance with it.

The cutting edge discoveries of science are suggesting what Thomas Kuhn would classify as a paradigm shift in the making. A strictly materialistic world-view is beginning to crack up. As Schrodinger puts it: *What we observe as material bodies and forces are nothing but shapes and variations in the structure of space. Particles are just schaumkommen (appearances).*

Despite appearances, matter is not the building block of the universe, nor does it help explain the source of consciousness, nor does it give us a clear handle on how to define life.

Morality as a commercial transaction between two material beings has limited appeal. However, morality based on the recognition of a deeper spiritual unity binding the living kingdom is far more appealing.

Humanism is no doubt highly attractive but whether it should be *Materialistic Humanism* or the *Spiritual Humanism* promoted in esoteric Hinduism is something I have tried to explore through this interaction. Reconciliation may be possible if we

recognise that *Spirituality* is not confined to *Religious institutions or pursuits*, nor is *Humanism* an exclusively *Materialistic* discipline.

Jay

Dear Jay

Many thanks for your response to my reply. Maybe, for the sake of clarity, it is best for me to run through your key comments in the order presented.

You seem to believe that I hold a misunderstanding of Hinduism through believing the religion to be committed to many gods. I make one reference to gods, namely, in my use of the expression 'God or gods'; hence, I was leaving that matter open. I have no knowledge of the exact rendering of Hinduism; I happily confess to ignorance. However, you do write that your Hinduism is committed to the thought that there are many ways to perceive personalized spirituality. That may well be so; but before I can comment, I need to know what you mean by a 'personalized spirituality'.

If 'personalized spirituality' is a way of expressing the fact that human beings can feel awe and wonder at the world, at sunsets and roaring oceans and the kaleidoscopic experiences of love, of fellow feeling, then, yes, humanists are with you, even if we find the terminology a little odd. Thus, humanists are not materialists in the sense of being concerned only about material prosperity. If, though, 'personalized spirituality' is meant to point to some transcendent personal being, then humanists ask: why ever believe there is such? Whatever value could it have? And why would it require worship? – as some religions require of such a transcendent personal being. From what you write later, it seems that your 'personalized spirituality' is not my first suggestion, but also not my second. I shall turn to what you say about spirituality in due course. I'll continue to follow the order of your comments.

You stress the value of pluralism. Yes, indeed, humanists are very keen on a society being organized in a secular or neutral way, so that individuals are free to live their lives as they wish, be they committed to certain ways of understanding God or gods, be they committed to certain religious rituals – or be they atheists or agnostics. That pluralism is fine: it allows people to create meaning for their lives. That pluralism, though, demands the strong caveat that individuals should not force their religious beliefs, or non-beliefs, on others. That pluralism requires space for people to disagree, without certain believers prohibiting disagreement on the grounds of their religion. I hasten to say that I am not suggesting that your Hinduism would seek to silence those who disagree with you. The point being made is simply that 'pluralism' does require some restrictions, namely, on those who seek to harm others because they challenge their beliefs.

With regard to the caste system, well, I welcome the fact that you understand the practice of it, in recent centuries, as being an atrocity. I have no idea whether your understanding is the one accepted by most Hindus or at least most Hindus who write on such matters. Still, we are in agreement in that, in as far as so-called Hindus do promote the caste system and do promote many gods, then we should reject such promotions.

Returning to personalized spirituality, I remain pretty baffled. Some humanists are defenders of scientism; they believe that consciousness in some way is reducible to those features of the world investigated by physics – be it at the level of quantum

mechanics or not. By the way, very few humanists, with knowledge of philosophy, would these days talk of 'matter' as casually as you imply; they would speak of 'physicalism', seeking to understand the world via the concepts of physics, concepts which, of course, do evolve. Scientism, of course, does not deny that we have fellow feeling, can feel awe at the world and possess a sense of morality. It is an 'ism' about the correct analysis of such; it is not a denial of them.

In contrast to scientism, some of us, as humanists, are inclined to think that however much scientists may learn about the brain or, indeed, about quantum mechanics, they will still miss out on grasping what consciousness is. Perhaps your claim that consciousness is an essential spiritual dimension is just a way of saying that it is irreducible to entities that science investigates; but I suspect that is not your position. I remain baffled, by the way, when you say that consciousness is not a mental phenomenon.

At heart, possibly you are wanting to see an underlying unity between individuals, a unity that grounds morality, that grounds how we should treat each other, presumably a treatment requiring compassion, fairness and an interest in people flourishing. We humanists probably can secure a grip on that, as a way of making the point that human beings do typically possess fellow feeling, are concerned for each other – and indeed for animals and the environment. That is, of course, a good feeling to have – and it is not a commercial transaction. Fellow feeling is not grounded in selfishness. Perhaps you are seeking to make the point that morality is in contrast to selfishness by your talk of spiritual unity.

With regard to talk of spiritual unity though, I doubt whether encouraging concern for others is helped by saying that behind human beings exists such a spiritual unity. I doubt whether it is helped if only because, for many people, that will be read as meaning that some sort of supernatural spirit exists. That can quickly lead to religious dogma and blind obedience to authorities who claim to know what that spirit demands of us. And, as we know, that generates the danger of some horrendous demands, when in the mouths of some religious authorities – demands backed by a so-called supernatural spiritual agency. So, instead of taking that risk, why not focus on the fellow feeling within humanity, a feeling not needing reference to some spiritual underpinning? Why not simply announce oneself as a humanist?

With feelings of humanity

Peter

Dear Peter

Thank you for your response because this allows me a further opportunity to bring to light deeper insights offered by esoteric Hinduism and its concept of spiritual Humanism.

By *Personalised spirituality* Hindus do not mean a feeling of awe and wonder – such a definition would suit the needs of new-agers. In Hinduism this term denotes recognition of an anthropocentric framework through which we are forced to operate. We cannot jump out of ourselves to relate to anything including concepts of spirituality. Hindus claim that God did not create us in his image; we humans make him in our image. We create an exaggerated human, incorporating endearing human aspects such as compassion, the thirst for knowledge, and empowerment. These we exaggerate to an infinite degree and ascribe it to an invisible being that has to be all-loving, all-powerful and all-knowing. It is hoped that in the process of building up a relationship with this infinite being mankind invoke these features more fully in their lives. Esoteric Hinduism confirms that a super personality (God) with exaggerated endearing human features is a **ploy** to make us better human beings! Ploys are not necessarily bad if they fulfil a utilitarian role. Thus non-theistic Hinduism plays along with theistic Hinduism.

Your positive comments on the role and relevance of pluralism are music to my ears. I have been pushing this term so robustly in the religious education system that I am called an evangelical pluralist. You may feel uncomfortable to see the term *evangelical* linked with the idea of pluralism. Let me come clean; as long as there are evangelists pushing exclusivist agendas there is a need for an evangelist pushing an inclusivist agenda.

On the caste issue, I am ensuring that the Hindus as well as non-Hindus are made aware that this is an atrocity committed in the name of Hinduism and not Hinduism. As said earlier I had to fight the religious education system in this country tooth and nail to make sure they stop teaching caste as Hinduism.

Dr Ambedkar born of an outcaste family rose to the position of being one of the key architects of Indian constitution recognised this anomaly and affirmed that hereditary hierarchical caste system was not preached by religion, so it cannot be preached out by religion! Only the changing socio-economic landscape of India will finally demolish this atrocious stratification of society. The divide between the first and the third world is an example of a hereditary, hierarchical caste system operating on an international scale. A child born in the first world has everything laid out for him while a child born in the third world cannot expect to get clean water to drink. By birth, he is enslaved to work for the benefit of the first world for a pittance. This is hereditary, hierarchical caste system on an international scale.

I agree with your analysis of all -isms. It is one thing to appreciate the scope of all -isms but it is equally crucial that we recognise their limitations, or we stop progressing. At the moment theoretical physics is struggling because some of its practitioners do not recognise this aspect to all -isms including physicalism or materialism. Let me offer a concrete example, Sir Roger Penrose, who in my opinion, is the best physicist in the country, has been hitting his head on a brick wall trying to produce consciousness in the microtubules of the neurons! This fixation on

matter does not allow him to think beyond matter. Einstein, one of the greatest minds, too struggled with quantum mechanics. He, like Penrose, could only relate to a world of substance and its attributes and could not think beyond. Consciousness remains a hard problem in quantum mechanics as well as neuroscience. It is not just that it is irreducible; it forms a crucial link between physical and life sciences. Recognising and dignifying consciousness as something different from matter or mind (which nowadays is defined as a process in the brain) or their by-product is essential if sciences want to converge, else they become divergent in the most explosive manner. The two best examples of this explosive divergence are: The universe breaking up into infinite copies of itself every infinitesimal moment of time and super-strings dancing in an 11 dimension space-time where infinite versions of universes are available. This would no doubt include a Harry Potter version of the universe!

Why am I so fixated on Consciousness? Not just because Hinduism defines it as an expression of the *Spiritual*, non-material foundation to everything including ourselves, but because it offers convergence in our world-view: not only convergence between branches of science; but convergence between religious and non-religious world-views. Wittgenstein's legacy of allowing different world-views to sit side by side with their own self-consistent truth claims is no longer satisfactory because it results in a schizophrenic world. We require a world-view that is both coherent as well as **complete**. For this to happen we need a deeper understanding and appreciation of both science and religion. Esoteric, non-theistic Hinduism claims that religions are expressions of a dynamic spiritual experience that allowed the practitioner a deeper glimpse into the nature of reality. What they experienced is not that different from what science is discovering at its cutting edge. The science of today is affirming that the material world we experience is not reality but an appearance and that consciousness is crucial for this appearance to come into being. This brings me back to the initial claim of the Hindus. *We are not material beings conjuring up ideas of spirituality to improve our material status but essentially spiritual beings on a material journey.* This idea is encapsulated in the term *Spiritual Humanism*. This term offers highest dignity to humanity. It affirms that we are neither sinners to be saved by a super personality nor are we the extension of the material kingdom.

Sincerely
Jay Lakhani