

# OH MY GOD!

Re-answering the Questions

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First Printing: 24th Feb 2012, 1000 copies

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Dedicated  
To

My many spiritual teachers,  
who patiently answered my countless questions,

&

My many friends and readers,  
whose unending questions keep my life exciting

## Introduction: How a monk wrote a book about a movie

“Oh My God!” was the first movie that I watched after nearly fifteen years. After doing engineering from the Government College of Engineering, Pune, and working in a multinational software company, I became convinced that I could best serve society by studying and sharing spiritual knowledge. Wanting to dedicate myself fully to this service, I became a monk in 1998. Since then, my spiritual study, teaching and writing left me with no time or interest for watching movies.

Nonetheless, I did stay in touch with the movie world. As I frequently answered questions on my website *www.thespiritualscientist.com*. I was sometimes asked questions about movies that had some connection with spirituality, for example, *Om Shanti Om* that depicted the reincarnation of its hero and heroine. But never was I asked as many questions about any one movie as about *Oh My God*. Normally, when I am asked to comment on a movie, I read its reviews and get an adequate idea of the plot and the thrust. I did the same with OMG and got a fair sense of the questions that it raised. In response, I gave audio answers and wrote an article. But several friends suggested that as this movie raised so many questions, it merited a more elaborate, book-length response. They also insisted that to address those questions effectively, I needed to understand the emotional appeal of OMG, and for that I had to

watch it.

That's how I watched a Bollywood movie after fifteen years. Some people had warned me that OMG was blasphemous, but I didn't see it that way. I firmly believe that when we start labeling reasonable arguments as blasphemy, we start slipping towards fanaticism. And many of the arguments made in OMG were definitely reasonable, some even excellent. When Akshay Kumar playing as Krishna says, "*Main Bhagavan hu isliye chamatkar kartaa hu, na ki main chamatkar kartaa hu isliye Bhagavan hu!*", he states the relationship between God's identity and miracles brilliantly.

I not only appreciated OMG's logic, but also connected emotionally with the courage and rage of Kanjibhai. I remembered how in my teens I had worshiped Ganesh for doing well in a particular exam. But when the results didn't turn out as well as I had expected, I became so angry that I tore apart a picture of Ganesh and threw it away. My mother who had encouraged me to do that worship watched on in silent horror. From her past experience with my fits of rage, she knew better than to try to stop me at such times. Soon after that incident, I became an atheist. In Kanjibhai's rage at the destruction of his shop, I could see an enlarged version of my teenage rage.

If I was like that just a few decades ago, why am I today a monk trying to share God's message with others? It's a long answer

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<sup>1</sup> I am God, so I do miracles; not that because I do miracles, so I am God.

and this book is not the forum for that. But the essential cause of my transformation was education. Over the years, I have found answers to many questions that I had considered unanswerable. In the Vedic wisdom-tradition I have found a coherent and cogent worldview that provides intellectually satisfactory answers to life's fundamental questions. That's why I felt inspired to dedicate my life to studying and sharing this knowledge.

Education has two core parts: to know *that* we don't know and to know *what* we don't know. OMG highlights the first part of education; it raises many valid questions that demonstrate how we know so little about religion. In this book, I focus on the second part of education by striving to answer those questions.

I use the words 'strive to answer' because several of the answers are not just about conceptual understanding but about practical living. I am striving to live according to the time-honored spiritual principles that I explain in these answers. The godmen indicted in OMG make a mockery of these principles and I have no intention of defending them. In fact, I enjoyed the exposure of their arrogance, hypocrisy and peevishness.

However, the danger of OMG-type depictions is blanket generalization. Many spiritual teachers are purely and selflessly devoted to God; they work tirelessly to help others as a part of their devotion to God. I don't mean to imply that I am one among them; that would be presumptuous. But I do know that many of

my spiritual teachers live close to this saintly standard; I am their student and servant, trying to emulate their glorious example according to my small capacity. Nonetheless, the point to emphasize is that the ideal of saintly devotion to God does exist – definitely in principle and limitedly in practice.

And isn't this the way people are in all fields? A rare few are ideal; most are average and some are abysmal. Consider the field of medicine. Doctors selflessly devoted to treating others at the risk of their own lives are a rare few. Doctors seeking a career that also provides a life long avenue for helping others are in the majority. And doctors who use treatment as a masquerade to fleece their patients as much as possible are the bottom abysmal few. If these worst of the ranks of doctors were depicted as the typical, doctors would have a right to feel wronged, wouldn't they?

When some pathetic godmen – the worst of the ranks of spiritual teachers – are depicted as the typical, don't spiritual teachers have a right to feel similarly wronged? OMG does try to avoid this extreme by depicting one of the gurus, the Pujari played by Arun Bali, as humble, considerate and conciliatory? However, that attempt is undeveloped; OMG quickly reduces him to the role of a cheerleader for Kanjibhai – a cheerleader dressed in saffron.

The godmen are pathetic in both their behavior and in their answers to Kanjibhai's questions. But do all spiritual teachers have to be like that? If an intelligent person like Kanjibhai can learn a

few things by using his basic common sense and by studying the Bhagavad-gita for two months, then couldn't others like him have learnt more by studying it much longer? Might there exist saintly people who combine the sincerity of the Pujari and the logicity of Kanjibhai? I have met many. On their behalf, I write this book.

Part of the charm of OMG is the middle-class status of Kanjibhai; everyone can relate with him. You can if you like consider me to be a middle-class monk. On the lower side are roadside beggars who don ochre robes to increase their alms; on the upper side are charismatic gurus who have thousands of followers. I am somewhere in between – an ordinary teacher and writer on spiritual topics. I like more to think and write in private than speak in public. I have no charisma, no extraordinary abilities – just a desire to share what I have learnt from my teachers.

A middle-class monk answering the questions of a middle class man. Poetic justice at work? I don't know. Maybe you can decide after reading this book.

Actually, OMG doesn't just raise questions; it also claims to give answers. These answers are given explicitly by Kanjibhai in his answers to the questions he is asked in a TV talk show and implicitly by Kanjibhai through his actions that he chooses with the approval of the movie's Krishna. These answers raise serious questions about several specific religious practices as well as the generic role of religion in society. This book addresses such issues raised by

those answers, hence its subtitle: re-answering the questions.

I have written this book as a series of question-answers to make it easily accessible. You can go directly to any question that interests you. However, as every successive question builds on the previous QAs, you may gain a clearer understanding if you go from the start to the end. As OMG was in Hindi, I have sprinkled bits of Hindi throughout the book to highlight its relationship with the movie. If you are unfamiliar with Hindi, I have given the English translations of the Hindi statements as footnotes.

I hope this book will help you find a healthy balance between blind belief and blind disbelief.

Chaitanya Charan Das

## *Contents*

1. <i>Do we need middlemen to approach God?</i>	1
2. <i>Does God help atheists and oppose godmen?</i>	2
3. <i>What is the definition of religion?</i>	7
4. <i>Is religion made by man or by God?</i>	9
5. <i>Is religion meant for loving God or fearing God?</i>	11
6. <i>As we wouldn't chant "Papa, papa" if we wanted a chocolate from our father, why should we chant "Krishna, Krishna" if we want something from him?</i>	13
7. <i>Are rituals needed in religion?</i>	15
8. <i>Why should we offer our hair to Balaji?</i>	18
9. <i>Why do temples provide special queues for quick darshan to those who give more donations?</i>	21
10. <i>Why do temples spend so much money on expensive religious rituals when beggars are starving outside the temples?</i>	23
11. <i>Isn't the idea that religious rituals provide happiness just sentimental imagination?</i>	26

- 12. Aren't some rituals like those in which the offered milk gets drained into a gutter wasteful?* 28
- 13. Why has religion become an exploitative business in the name of God?* 30
- 14. Doesn't the institutionalization of religion kill its spirit?* 32
- 15. When God is in our heart, why do we need any guru to come between us and him?* 35
- 16. What qualifications should we look for in gurus?* 37
- 17. Do godmen who live in luxury represent God?* 39
- 18. Doesn't religion make people violent?* 42
- 19. Doesn't religion make people feel helpless?* 44
- 20. When priests tell people about future sufferings and make them do rituals, aren't they acting like hooligans when threaten people to extort money?* 46
- 21. Does hell exist? What about the hell menu card?* 47
- 22. Are earthquakes acts of God?* 48
- 23. Doesn't the Bhagavad-gita (9.8) state that God is the destroyer?* 50

24. *What is the cause of earthquakes?* 52
25. *Why do bad things happen to good people?* 55
26. *Why do we need big temples when God doesn't need them?* 57
27. *When God is present everywhere, why should we worship him in the temple images?* 60
28. *How can a stone image be God?* 62
29. *The stone image is limited, whereas God is unlimited. How can it be God?* 65
30. *How can a stone image that can't even wave away a fly on its face be God?* 68
31. *Is image worship meant for less intelligent people?* 72
32. *Do we need to discard everything material connected with God to avoid idolatry, as is depicted at the end of OMG?* 75

## **1. Do we need middlemen to approach God?**

Even if for discussion's sake, we assume that we don't need middlemen, then who will tell us that we don't need any middlemen? In OMG, Kanjibhai takes up that role. By thus giving us the message that we don't need any middlemen, he ends up acting as a middle-man. Therefore, those who convey the idea that no middle-men are needed to approach God are making a self-refuting statement because by stating this they are themselves acting as middlemen.

Even if we argue that in OMG Kanjibhai rejects the role of a middleman by beheading his own image that people were about to worship, still even in that rejection, he is acting as a go-between by telling people that this is not the way to worship God.

Even if we listen to atheists and reject the existence of God entirely, we can't avoid middlemen; we are letting those preachers of atheism become our middlemen. But these are middlemen who meddle in our relationship with God and push us far away from him.

So rather than futilely denying the need of middlemen, we will be much better off investing our intellectual energy in finding out the right kind of middlemen – those who are actually close to God and will help us come closer to him.

## **2. Does God help atheists and oppose godmen, as OMG depicts?**

God helps everyone, but he doesn't force his help on anyone. He respects our free will. So he helps us to the extent that we seek and accept his help. The Bhagavad-gita (4.11) states that as we approach God, so he reciprocates.

To understand how God reciprocates, let's look at the three broad categories of people in their relationship with God, as depicted in OMG. These three categories are:

### **1. Sentimental believers:**

In OMG they are represented by Kanjibhai's wife Susheela, his neighbor Mahadeva and the general people. Majority religious believers fall in this category. They have some faith in God, but they don't use their intelligence to seriously enquire about him. God provides scriptures to enlighten all human beings. The relationship of sentimental believers with scriptures is limited to respect. Their reverence for scripture is often accompanied by ignorance of its import. As they don't study scripture seriously, they don't know the proper process for worshiping God. So they take up whatever religious practice they learn from their upbringing or culture or by word-of-mouth – anything that feels good and seems to suit their needs. As they base their religious practices on feelings and not on intelligence or

scripture, they are especially susceptible to exploitation by godmen.

## **2. Exploitative godmen**

In OMG they are represented by Leeladhar Swamy, Siddheshwar Maharaj and Gopi Maiyya. They are materialistic opportunists who mint money and gain prestige by exploiting the gullibility of sentimental believers. They talk about God, but they are not actually interested in him. For them God is just a tool to fulfill their own materialistic agendas. As they don't want God's help, he doesn't interfere in their lives. But because they often misrepresent him and his teachings and because they mislead those who have faith in him, God ensures that they get the just consequences of their misdeeds.

## **3. Intelligent nonbelievers**

In OMG they are represented by Kanjibhai. God appreciates those who use their intelligence – even if they are presently nonbelievers. After all, he has given them their intelligence and he doesn't want it to be kept in a showcase; he wants it to be used. So with their intelligence if they get questions about life, they have a right to ask for answers. And if they don't get answers, they may conclude that the only intelligent thing to do is to become skeptical or even

atheistic. However, if they assume that just because they haven't found the answers, the answers are nowhere to be found, then they err and become close-minded atheists.

To answer the questions of everyone, God has provided scriptures. And he appreciates inquisitiveness, as he demonstrates through his own example in the Bhagavad-gita – therein, he answers all of Arjuna's questions. Moreover, many question-answer sessions between sincere seekers and intelligent teachers stand out in the pages of the Vedic scriptures. And most importantly, the Vedanta sutra (1.1.1: *athato brahma jijnasa*) specifically urges all human beings to become inquisitive spiritually.

If those with intelligent questions remain open-minded and continue enquiring sincerely, God will help them. He will guide them to his genuine representatives who will answer their questions. Then their skepticism will become just one passing phase in their intellectual evolution – they will graduate through it and become intelligent believers.

In OMG, Kanjibhai undergoes this evolution as he progresses from being an intelligent nonbeliever towards becoming an intelligent believer. But his progress requires something extraordinary: the personal intervention of Krishna who miraculously protects and heals him.

OMG portrays that Krishna guides Kanjibhai alone. Were there no intelligent people before Kanjibhai? Certainly there were. Would Krishna not have guided them towards becoming intelligent believers? Surely he would have; his love is for everyone – not just for Kanjibhai. Then could Krishna not have used these intelligent people to guide other intelligent seekers? He certainly could. Moreover, wouldn't these intelligent people themselves have wanted to help others along the journey that they have taken? Naturally they would have. This is evident from the example of Kanjibhai, who at the movie's climax forcefully admonished people about how not to worship.

In OMG Krishna disappears at the end, implying that he doesn't want to give to everyone the special favor that he gave to Kanjibhai. Then how does Krishna want others to become wise like Kanjibhai? Presumably through Kanjibhai's guidance? If so, then couldn't there have been predecessors to Kanjibhai who could have guided him? Naturally there could have been. These people comprise a fourth category of people, a category not depicted in OMG: intelligent believers. These are sincere seekers who have asked questions, found answers and have become genuine seers.

OMG requires Krishna's miraculous intervention to guide Kanjibhai because it doesn't depict intelligent believers who could have guided him. Do such people exist? They do indeed, declare the Vedic scriptures. There exists a succession of such seers. This succession extends back into antiquity and originates in Krishna's

personal instruction to the first seer. And there exists not just one but several such successions which are called paramparas. The Padma Purana explains that there are four such paramparas: Sri, Brahma, Rudra and Kumara. These paramparas have living seers even today and all of us can gain God's help through them.

### 3. What is the definition of religion?

Love.

A Sanskrit word that roughly corresponds with religion is dharma which comes from the root *dhr* which means to sustain. So, dharma refers to that which sustains our existence, that which is our essence, that without which we would not be *we*.

That essence is love.

Love is our innermost longing, our deepest need, our greatest thirst. Movies, novels and songs constantly glorify love. And we all dream about it. Without love, life wouldn't be worth living.

Sadly however, our longing for love is rarely fulfilled. We often don't find a person whom we feel inspired to love wholeheartedly. Even if we do, that love ends heartbreakingly with unavoidable death. And to the extent that we have rejoiced in love, to that extent we lament in bereavement.

Is our longing for love meant to be doomed?

A love affair is sure to be doomed if either of the lovers ceases to exist or ceases to love the other. But the same love affair can go on perpetually if neither the lovers ceases to exist or ceases to love. Is this really possible? Yes, declare the scriptures. They explain that we are at our core eternal spiritual beings, souls. So our longing for love is meant to be directed towards an eternal object: God.

God is not just an abstract all-pervading principle but the supreme all-attractive person who has all lovable qualities in their highest perfection. That's why he is supremely lovable. When we learn to love him, our longing for love becomes eternally and perfectly fulfilled, and we attain everlasting happiness.

So, to be more specific, our dharma is not just love, but eternal love for God.

#### 4. Is religion made by man or by God?

Religion can refer to various things.

If by religion we refer to the Sanskrit word *dharma*, then that is definitely not man-made; that is our intrinsic nature, the very fabric of our being.

However, we normally don't understand religion this way. To gain a sense of its normal meaning, let's analyze the word etymologically and functionally.

Etymologically, or in terms of the roots of words, religion refers to "respect for what is sacred, reverence for God," or "obligation, the bond between man and God." These roots indicate that religion is the means by which we bond with God in love. Religion provides us tools for inner transformation by which we can learn to love God. So it can be said to be a type of treatment – a treatment for the soul. This spiritual treatment cures the misdirection of our love and enables us to love the eternal instead of the temporary, God instead of the world.

Religion as a spiritual treatment is not so much a set of dogmas or rituals as a set of universal principles. These principles are intrinsic to existence, as is say gravity. We may call gravity by different names in different languages; we may or may not comprehend the origin or cause of gravity; we may or may not know the mathematical equations that describe it. But still gravity exists and acts. The

same applies to the principles that comprise religion. Just as the universe is made by God, so are these principles that govern our destiny in the universe. So, when by the word “religion” we refer to these principles, then again it is definitely made by God, not man.

Functionally, we often use the word ‘religion’ to refer to different religions like Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. These great religions have usually begun with a primeval revelation in which God shared the knowledge of the principles of religion. So, at their roots, these religions are God-made. However, over the course of centuries, they have undergone many changes. Not all the forms that they have taken are geared towards helping people to love God. Many concocted ideas and practices have been added in it. So, much of what goes on in the name of religion today is man-made.

Therefore, to the extent that today’s religions are in accordance with the words of God, to that extent they can be said to be made by God. To the extent that they deviate from those divine words, to that extent they are man-made.

## **5. Is religion meant to teach us to love God or to fear God?**

Religion is ultimately meant to enable us to love God, but most people are not ready to love God. To help such people become ready, the scriptures offer four broad levels for approaching God. These levels are non-sectarian; they can be found in all the religions of the world. These levels are fear, desire, duty and love.

### **1. Fear**

Some people fear, "If I disobey God, then he may punish me for my wrongdoings. So better let me go to his temple and pacify him by my worship." This sort of worship is certainly better than atheism, but it is based on a very limited and a somewhat negative conception of God as a stern judge, as a cosmic punisher – not as an object of love.

### **2. Desire**

Some people think, "There are so many things I want; if I pray to God, perhaps He will give them to me." Here the conception of God is more positive, as a potent desire-fulfiller. But still the relationship with him is utilitarian, based on give-and-take rather than love.

### **3. Duty**

Some people reason, "God has already given me so much

– life, body, health, food, clothing, shelter. It is my duty to go periodically to His temple and thank him.” Here the relationship is based on gratitude for what has already been given and not on greed for what one wants to receive. So it is a somewhat steady relationship. However, duty can over time become a burden. Moreover, the focus in this level is still on what God has done for me, not on God himself.

#### **4. Love**

This is the purest level of approaching God, where a devotee feels, “My dear Lord, you are the supreme object of my love; I have been offering my love to so many people and things, but that has never made me happy. Now I simply want to love and serve you eternally and I do not want anything worldly in return for my service; I simply wish to love you and to be loved by you. Just as a parent takes care of the child without the child having to ask them for anything, I know that you will similarly take care of me. I will accept whatever is your plan for me and keep serving you no matter what happens in life.”

Today most people are primarily interested in worldly pursuits: they want to avoid some misfortune or to attain some fortune. When they worship God to fulfill these ends, they do so at the levels of fear and desire. By education, they can all progress to the level of loving God, which is the ultimate purpose of religion.

**6. As we wouldn't chant "Papa, papa" if we wanted a chocolate from our father, why should we chant "Krishna, Krishna" if we want something from him?**

The actual purpose of chanting the names of God is not to ask something from him, but to awaken our love for him.

We are the children of God, but we have forgotten this because we are suffering from spiritual amnesia or forgetfulness. *Hum bhagavan ke khoye huye bacche hai.*<sup>2</sup> For curing amnesia, patients are often exposed repeatedly to stimuli from their forgotten life. So for curing our spiritual amnesia, we need to expose ourselves repeatedly to spiritual stimuli. The most potent of all such stimuli is the holy name of God because God is our closest spiritual relative. So chanting his names repeatedly is the most powerful treatment. Thus the scriptures recommend chanting because they want to cure our spiritual amnesia.

However, most of us are not interested in that cure; we are interested only in worldly things. So to induce us to chant, the scriptures also promise that our worldly desires will be fulfilled by chanting. This promise is like the promise of parents to their children that they will get a sweet if they take a medicine.

Initially when we approach God at the levels of fear and desire, we chant because we want something from him. Later, as we learn about the level of love by education and rise towards it, then we

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<sup>2</sup> We are the lost children of God.

chant to awaken our love for him. And finally when we truly love God, then we chant because it helps us to easily remember our beloved.

## **7. Are rituals needed in religion?**

Rituals are integral not just to religion, but also to every part of life. For example, during a birthday celebration, we blow candles. What is this if not a ritual? Most people who blow candles on birthdays don't even know what is its purpose. They just do it because it feels good or because that's how they have seen birthdays celebrated. Similarly, in a spectator sport, clapping is a ritual for expressing applause. In daily life, shaking hands with friends is a ritual for greeting.

In general, rituals provide a template to guide our emotions and actions according to situations. Thereby, they bring a sense of familiarity and order in our life.

Rituals serve a similar purpose in religion. They provide us with time-honored means for expressing and experiencing appropriate devotional emotions. Lighting incense, singing sacred songs, ringing bells, playing musical instruments, chanting the holy names of God – such rituals help make our experience of God tangible and real.

Imagine a cricket match in which no one claps, no matter how brilliantly a batsman hits a sixer. The game may go on, but cricket lovers would feel something significant missing, wouldn't they?

Wouldn't the devotees of God feel the same way if devotional festivals were to be done without religious rituals? Aren't they entitled to their rituals just as cricket lovers are entitled to their

ritual of clapping in a match?

Additionally, many religious rituals are far more deeply and meaningfully connected with their corresponding occasions than are secular rituals. For example, no intrinsic connection exists between a birthday and the blowing of candles. If we feel happy while blowing candles on our birthday, that's not because the blowing of a candle has the intrinsic capacity to produce happiness. We feel happy due to an external convention that associates the blowing of candles with the birthday celebration which is considered to be an occasion for happiness.

But when we go to a temple and bow down before God, that bodily ritual intrinsically promotes the appropriate emotion of humility. To understand how, I suggest you try out this simple experiment.

Sit relaxed on an easy chair, put one leg across the other, place your arms behind your head and lean backwards. Now try to feel humble.

Difficult, isn't it? The very posture induces the feeling of bossiness. The same principle applies conversely to how the bodily posture of bowing down fosters humility.

This psychophysical or body-mind correlation is a subtle science. Based on this science, the Vedic wisdom-tradition prescribes various rituals that help us relish divine emotions. All such rituals have significance, that is, they signify something deeper and greater.

And they all have a purpose, that is, they awaken the corresponding devotional emotion.

To understand the significance and purpose of various rituals, we need education. If we perform the rituals without knowing their significance and purpose, we may still get some benefit. But if we do them with proper understanding and sincere devotion, then we get the full benefit. A ritual imbued with the right spirit is *spi-ritual*.

Of course, this is not to imply that all rituals are spiritual. Many unscrupulous people have exploited the widespread ignorance about the purpose of rituals. Such people have concocted many rituals that are not rooted in the scriptural tradition and don't serve any spiritual purpose. One common example of concocted rituals is the repeated recitation of the names of some self-styled spiritual teacher as if those names were as potent as the names of God. The prevalence of such concocted rituals again highlight the need for education.

By proper education we can avoid the two extremes of rejecting all religious rituals as blind faith and accepting all rituals as if they were spiritual.

**8. Why should we offer our hair, a dirty part of our body, to Balaji? And as this hair is later sold, *kya ye shraddha ka dhanda nahi hain*<sup>3</sup>?**

We offer our hair to Balaji to express our love for him.

Love is expressed in two ways: by what we give to our beloved and by what we give up for the sake of our beloved. For example, children can show their love for their parents by studying well and giving them a glowing report card. And they can also show their love by giving up playing before exams so as to focus on studies. Similarly, we can express our devotion for God by giving him precious things like jewels and also by giving up for his sake those things that distract us from him.

One prominent distraction is hair. Though we may say that hair is dirty, we consider it dirty only after it is cut off from the head. As long as it is on the head, we consider it a sign of beauty – a part of our hairstyle. We often obsess over it, arranging it, combing it and peeking frequently into a mirror to see if it needs to be re-arranged. Our obsession with hair makes us more infatuated with our body and thereby distracts us from deeper spiritual contemplation.

That's why the Vedic-wisdom tradition urges us to curb this distraction. In keeping with this guideline, monks shave their heads permanently. The rest of us are recommended to at least shave our head when we go on a pilgrimage. By this, we express our devotion

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<sup>3</sup> Doesn't this make a business out of our faith?

to God by giving up for his sake that which is so dear to us: our beloved hair. For women especially, this is no small sacrifice.

When we shave our head thus at Tirupati, what does Balaji see when the door to his house opens? He is not *baal-graahi*; he is *bhaava-graahi*<sup>4</sup>. He doesn't see *kale baal*, *saphed baal*, *dandruff waale baal*<sup>5</sup>. He sees the sacrifice, the devotion, the faith that is expressed through that hair.

Even a swan can separate milk from water and accept just the milk. God is the supreme *hamsa*, the *paramahamsa*. Why can he not separate the devotion from the hair and accept the devotion? If we think he can't, then that's probably because we can't see beyond the dandruffs to the devotion.

Does this ritual make a business out of our faith? Not at all.

Anyone with even introductory knowledge of Indian traditions knows that the tradition of offering hair at a pilgrimage long predates the modern business of mass-producing wigs. Due to the popularity of wigs in today's world, discarded human hair is in great demand. If the hair that for centuries was just being brushed away as waste can be easily recycled to gain money for opening schools, hospitals and orphanages, then what's wrong with that? As it is, many modern people are going to spend money on wigs. Why not let that money come to God and through him go to the needy? It

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<sup>4</sup> He is eager not for hair, but for devotion.

<sup>5</sup> He doesn't see black hair, white hair, dandruff-infested hair.

is not that the ritual of shaving the hair was **created to** make money by selling hair. Such a notion arises from one's ignorance of history.

So the practice of cutting hair is primarily meant to give us an opportunity for expressing our devotion to God by sacrificing something dear for his sake. The money that is made out of the hair is just an incidental byproduct.

*ye shraddha ka dhandha nahi hai, ye waste ka dhandha hai. akalmandi ki baat hai<sup>6</sup>.*

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<sup>6</sup> This does not make a business out of our faith. It makes a business out of waste matter. It is an intelligent thing.

**9. Why do temples provide special queues for quick darshan to those who give more donations? Shouldn't everyone be equal in the house of God?**

God is definitely equal to all. But his equality is not the equality of a dead stone that has no regard for what anyone does to it. His equality is the equality of a living, loving person who naturally reciprocates with those who love and serve him. The Bhagavad-gita (4.11) states that God rewards all people according to how they approach him. So if someone renders him more service, then naturally God reciprocates more with him. Offering that which is very dear to us – money – is one important way of rendering service to him. So those who donate money are also rendering service to him. Naturally God reciprocates by giving them some special facilities.

We may say that such a preferential darshan arrangement is made by temple priests who want more people to give big donations. Even if that is true, the practice of making such arrangements is not wrong; it is in harmony with God's reciprocal nature.

The important point to note is that God doesn't reserve his blessings only for those who give donations. Nor does the fact that those who give donations and get quicker darshan mean that they necessarily get greater blessings. God ultimately sees the attitude of our heart. If someone gives a big donation and goes proudly in front of God that person will not get as much blessings as some other person who waits humbly in a queue for the turn to take darshan.

If we can't offer him much money, we can still offer him something just as valuable: our time. By waiting patiently in the queue to have his darshan, we are offering him our time. God notices and rewards this offering too. So just because some people get quicker darshan doesn't mean that they alone get God's blessings and others don't. God blesses everyone.

Money and time are both ways of offering our devotion to Krishna. Some people may offer more money and less time; others, less money and more time. God accepts the offerings of both. *Jiske paas jo hota hai, ve vo de sakte hai. Bhagavan to bhaava-graahi hai. Jo hum bhava se dete hai, ve vo svikaar karte hai*<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Whatever people have, they can offer that. God is eager for our devotional attitude. Whatever we offer with devotion, he accepts.

**10. Why do temples spend so much money on expensive religious rituals when beggars are starving outside the temples? Wouldn't God be more pleased if his starving children - those beggars - are fed?**

It's certainly sad to see anyone starving. If the social culture were more spiritual and less materialistic, the state officials as well as the wealthy would have a spirit of compassion and a system of charity to care for the needy. And they would also have gorgeous worship of God in temples.

Certainly, the needy should be cared for, but are caring for them and opulently worshiping God mutually exclusive? Is the worship of God really causing starvation among the poor?

If we are truly concerned about starving people, then why do we target expensive religious rituals alone? Why not target the billionaires and trillionaires who spend millions on their wardrobes and perfumes? Outside their mansions also beggars are starving. Why not target theatres, casinos, race courses, malls, sports tournaments and the like where huge amounts of money are spent on entertainment? If even a fraction of that money was used for feeding the needy, starvation could be wiped out from the entire planet. Singling out religious rituals amounts to emotionally manipulating public opinion against religion.

And actually, the gorgeous worship of God far from causing starvation decreases starvation in several ways. Such worship is

an essential part of a comprehensive spiritual culture that fosters self-mastery among people. If people started living according to this spiritual culture, they would become vegetarians. They would never kill other children of God – the animals – just for satisfying their own tongues. And this shift to vegetarianism would decrease starvation globally. How? Large quantities of fodder need to be fed to the slaughterhouse animals to get just a small quantity of flesh. If people became vegetarian, all the land used to grow fodder would become available for growing grains to feed human beings. Many surveys have shown that the land required to feed one non-vegetarian person can feed three or more vegetarian people<sup>8</sup>. If everyone in the world became vegetarian, the world's starvation problem would be substantially reduced, if not entirely solved.

Similarly, if people participated in an authentic spiritual culture, they would give up drinking alcohol. To produce alcohol, so much land that could be used to grow grains is used instead to grow sugarcane. If people stopped drinking alcohol, all that land would become available for feeding starving people.

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<sup>8</sup> “A typical diet requires up to 2.5 times the amount of land compared to a vegetarian diet.” (Zollitsch, W., Winckler, C., Waiblinger, S., and Haslberger, A. 2007. Sustainable Food Production and Ethics. Wageningen Academic Publishers). “A farmer can feed up to 30 people throughout the year with vegetables, fruits, cereals and vegetable fats on one hectare of land. If the same area is used for the production of eggs, milk and/or meat the number of people fed varies from 5-10.” (Pachauri, R.K., Chairman IPCC 08.09.08. “Global **Warning!**The Impact of meat production and consumption on climate change”.)

*maas khate samay aur sharab pite samay hume bhikaariyo ki yaad kyo nahi ati hai<sup>9</sup>?* Many times that's because the desire to enjoy eating meat and drinking liquor is too strong and irresistible.

Spiritual culture enables us to relish a higher happiness. This happiness empowers us to break free from the desires for lower materialistic pleasures like meat-eating and drinking, thereby freeing resources for food production. That's how even from a practical perspective the various rituals contribute to decreasing starvation.

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<sup>9</sup> Why don't we remember the beggars at the time of eating meat or drinking alcohol?

## 11. Isn't the idea that religious rituals provide happiness just sentimental imagination?

*Daru pine se kya khushi milti hai*<sup>10</sup>? The pleasure of drinking alcohol is also a sentimental imagination. In fact, it is worse than a sentimental imagination; it is a self-defeating imagination. It makes people behave disgracefully like lunatics. It also leads to drunken driving, ending in numerous accidents, many fatal. And it triggers so many health problems, even fatal diseases.

By comparison, the religious rituals, at the very least, don't harm. They provide a higher happiness that frees people from the desires for pleasures like meat-eating and intoxication that are harmful to others and harmful to themselves. How can this happiness be considered imaginary when its effects are real: freedom from addictive and destructive desires, freedom that is otherwise extremely difficult to gain? And these effects are not just real, but repeatable. Many surveys have demonstrated that religious people are healthier and happier than their nonreligious peers<sup>11</sup>.

For argument's sake, let's assume that this pleasure is just the sentimental imagination of people with blind faith in their tradition. Then why is this same pleasure sought by millions of people all

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<sup>10</sup> What happiness does one get by drinking alcohol?

<sup>11</sup> In the *Handbook of Religion and Health*, published by Oxford University Press, Harold G. Koenig, MD; Michael E. McCullough, PhD; and the late David B. Larson, MD, carefully review no fewer than two thousand published experiments that consistently demonstrate the positive correlation between religious belief on one hand and physical and mental health on the other hand.

over the world – people who don't even know about this tradition, leave alone having blind faith in it? Kirtan is becoming increasingly popular in the West as a means of relieving stress, gaining peace of mind and promoting spiritual growth. Thousands of people from various parts of the world become so inspired by the joy that they find in kirtan that they come to India as spiritual tourists to find out more about the culture that gave birth to kirtans. Many such seekers are often seen in holy places like Haridwar, Varanasi and Vrindavan. If the happiness from kirtan were just a sentimental imagination due to blind faith in tradition, why would people whose tradition is entirely different relish that happiness and come halfway across the world to learn more about it?

Actually, this happiness is not sentimental; it is factual and universal because it is innate to our higher spiritual nature. All of us, whatever our religion, nationality or race, are souls and by our nature are *sat-cit-anand*, eternal, knowledgeable and blissful. At present, we have forgotten our spiritual identity and have alienated ourselves from our innate joyfulness. Through practices like kirtan, we reconnect with that intrinsic joy. The Vedic wisdom-tradition explains logically and philosophically how and why we experience this sublime happiness – and also how we can maximize our connection with that happiness. By studying Vedic wisdom, we will understand how this happiness, far from being a mere sentimental imagination, is life's supreme happiness – an experience of our highest spiritual nature.

**12. Aren't some rituals like those in which the offered milk gets drained into a gutter wasteful? Wouldn't it be better if that milk was offered to beggars instead?**

Not all the rituals that go on today are based on scriptural wisdom. To highlight those rituals that seem wasteful, generalize from them and malign the entire spiritual culture may well be manipulative and disingenuous.

The normal scriptural standard is that food is offered to the Lord and then the sanctified remnants called *prasada* are distributed to people. By this standard, the milk offered to God being *prasada* is accepted and distributed, not poured down the drain. In adherence with this standard even today scores of temples provide free *prasada* to people in the vicinity. Distributing free *prasada* to people is the mission of ISKCON's food relief program generically known as *Hare Krishna Food for Life*. This is the world's biggest vegetarian food relief program. It has served billions of free meals to people all over the world. Presently it serves 1,500,000 free meals daily. That is 173 meals per second.

Such massive welfare work has sprung from the same spiritual culture that we want to malign as wasteful. This is the culture that many millennia ago gave the world the insight that we are all one family: *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*. It is a culture of caring and compassion for one and all.

Over the centuries certain flaws may have crept into the culture. If so, then they need to be rectified – not that the whole culture be maligned and rejected. When the eyes get infected with cataract, the cataract needs to be removed – not that the whole eye be plucked out and thrown away. That would render the patient blind. Similarly, if we just reject the whole culture, people will be rendered spiritually blind.

By systematic education, we can understand what the original culture was and how the present culture can be cleansed of the many contaminations that may have come into it.

### **13. Why has religion become an exploitative business in the name of God?**

Because of some unscrupulous people who have exploited the religious sentiments of the general public.

Religion is like a medicine meant to cure us spiritually. Just as the field of medicine can become a breeding ground for quacks or false doctors who are unqualified and who can't cure patients, the field of religion can become the breeding ground for godmen who are not spiritually qualified and who can't help people spiritually.

In fact, religion can be much more easily exploited because most people don't even know what the purpose of religion is. They often treat as a holy person anyone who wears a sacred-seeming dress, utters some ancient-seeming hymns or does some wise-sounding wordplay.

Seeing this naiveté and gullibility of the people, many unscrupulous people enter into the field of religion and become self-styled godmen. And if these godmen happen to have some charisma and some sleight of hand to perform 'miracles', then they become anointed as incarnations of God. They invent some rituals for their own worship and fleece their dotting worshipers of hard-earned money.

These godmen are not interested in loving God or in helping others to love God. They love only their own bellies and bank accounts

and egos. Such people have perverted much of what goes on in the name of religion into an exploitative business in the name of God.

Nonetheless, there are still those who practice religion for the sake of loving God. By proper education, we can learn to identify those sincere religionists and with their association develop love for God.

#### **14. Doesn't the institutionalization of religion kill its spirit?**

Not necessarily. In fact, without institutionalization, religion will not be able to share its spirit with society and so won't be able to benefit people at large.

Let's understand this with an analogy. The spirit of religion is love of God. If we compare the flow of our heart's love towards God to the flow of a river towards the ocean, then the institution is like the river bed.

If there is no river bed, only those rivers that have an exceptionally strong flow will reach the ocean. Rivers with a weak flow will, when faced with obstacles, stagnate and dry up. Similarly, if there is no institutional support, only those people who have an extraordinary religious urge will attain love for God. Those with average religious urge will, when faced with obstacles, stagnate and give up.

Just as several gently-flowing tributaries unite to comprise a forcefully-flowing river, several people with average religious urge unite to generate an above-average religious current that carries all of them forward swiftly. Just as a forceful river shapes a bed for itself as it keeps flowing, these people organize the necessities and facilities for their steady and smooth religious progress. Over time, this organized infrastructure takes the form of a religious institution.

Just as a river may be dammed by self-interested individuals, a religious institution may be damned by materially-minded people who are interested more in appropriating its facilities than in actualizing its purpose. To prevent such misuse, religious institutions need to have:

1. Systematic philosophical education so that its members become instinctively self-aware that their destination is not the dam (material aggrandizement) but the ocean (non-material devotional enrichment)
2. Regular religious practices so as to generate a powerful spiritual current that either exposes the materialism of self-seeking people, thereby pushing them to the sidelines, or purifies them of their materialism, thereby pulling them into its onward flow.

Some people may presume that they don't need any institution because their religious urge is strong enough for a solo journey. However, they usually underestimate the materialistic tug of their surroundings and overestimate their own resistance power. Consequently, their religious progress tends to be at best sporadic, being at the mercy of their unpredictable inner moods and uncontrollable outer circumstances. If they can just summon the humility to acknowledge that their solo trip is becoming more of a camp than a journey, then they will see the wisdom of joining those who are steadily on the move. And just in case these seekers are among the rare few who are genuinely self-motivated, then by

joining an authentic religious institution, they will be able to guide and inspire other less self-motivated religious seekers.

So, vigilant institutionalization is essential to make the spirit of religion accessible and beneficial to society at large.

## **15. When God is in our heart, why do we need any guru to come between us and him?**

The guru doesn't come in between us and God; he removes whatever lies between us and God.

Though God resides in our heart, can we feel his presence there? No. A huge wall of misconceptions blocks our access to him. These misconceptions are of two types: conceptual and practical.

Conceptually, we may have many doubts like 'Does God actually exist?' and 'If God is good, then why is there evil in the world?' Such doubts make it difficult for us to even believe in God, leave alone love him. To remove these doubts, we need systematic philosophical education. The guru provides this education and thus breaks down the wall of doubts that stands between us and God.

Practically, we may have many desires that distract us from devoting ourselves to God. The guru guides us about how to balance between the mundane and spiritual aspects of our life, and how to cultivate love for God even while living in the world. Without such guidance, we will either postpone devotion for a tomorrow that never comes or will neglect our worldly responsibilities in the name of devotion. By such actions we let the wall between us and God remain intact. That's why, if we are serious about breaking that wall, we indispensably need the guru's guidance.

The role that the guru plays is conveyed by the two parts of the word

'guru': *gu* and *ru*. *Gu* refers to the spiritual ignorance that we are in. *Ru* refers to the radiance of spiritual knowledge that dispels this ignorance. Thus, the guru is the one who dispels the darkness of our spiritual ignorance by illuminating us with spiritual knowledge.

## 16. Whas qualifications should we look for in gurus?

*Haa! Ye huin na baat. Aise savaal puchhne chaahiye<sup>12</sup>.*

As gurus are meant to act as spiritual doctors, let's understand their qualifications by looking at the qualifications of medical doctors.

Firstly, doctors are not self-made, but are certified by a pre-existing panel of doctors that educates and trains medical students. Similarly, gurus are not self-made, but are certified by a pre-existing panel of gurus known as the sampradaya. The sampradaya is like a spiritual university that educates and trains seekers. The most diligent seekers after years, even decades, of study and practice become seers. These seers become certified to serve as gurus. In learned spiritual circles, it is a foundational principle that if one is not connected with an authorized sampradaya one is not even a proper seeker; leave alone a seer. The Padma Purana, an important text in the Vedic tradition, states *sampradaya vihina ye mantras te nishphala matah* "Without a sampradaya, the practices like chanting of mantras will not bear fruit."

Of course, certification alone doesn't guarantee that the doctors are competent; they should be able to cure others. And a preliminary evidence of their capability to cure is that they themselves should be healthy. As is rightly said, "physician, heal thyself." By this standard, the gurus should not just be coming in a parampara but should also be capable of curing others of the disease of misdirected love;

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<sup>12</sup> Bravo! These are the kind of questions one should ask.

they should be able to inspire people to love God instead of worldly things. And a preliminary evidence of their capability is that they themselves should be devoted to God and shouldn't be attached to worldly things. This requirement of proper conduct on the part of gurus serves as an inbuilt safeguard. Even if gurus become certified in a parampara but later act improperly, then they are no longer be considered qualified. Thus their qualification is based not on frozen certification, but on living conduct.

Underscoring this point of living conduct, the Chandogya Upanishad (1.2.12), an ancient scripture in the Vedic wisdom-tradition, states the qualifications of the guru thus:

*tad-vijnanartham sa gurum evabhigacchet*

*samit-panih shrotriyam brahma-nishtam*

“To learn that science (*tad-vijnana*), one must go to a guru who is learned in scriptural knowledge (*shrotriyam*) and is fixed in spiritual realization (*brahma-nishtam*).”

Seen in the light of the doctor metaphor, this verse states that the gurus should have the scriptural knowledge that is necessary for offering spiritual treatment and should themselves be spiritually healthy, being fixed in the spiritual reality.

## 17. Do godmen who live in luxury represent God?

Not usually. However, what defines God's authentic representatives is not the presence or absence of luxury, but the presence of devotion and dedication to God.

Those devoted to God are not attached to material things, but neither are they averse to them. Their defining characteristic is not poverty, but unceasing devotion to God. The Bhagavad-gita (9.14) states that they constantly speak about God and tirelessly strive to serve him. They lead lives of devotional discipline wherein they wake up early in the morning to engage in spiritual practices (sadhana) daily and diligently. From the time of waking till the time of sleeping, they fill every moment of their day with service to God, and service to all of his children.

Those who are truly devoted to God don't need worldly things for enjoyment. The Srimad Bhagavatam (11.2.42 - *bhakti pareshanubhava viraktir anyatra ca*) indicates that bhakti has an internal symptom and an external symptom. The internal symptom is that bhakti enables us to experience God (*para + isha + anubhava*: experience of the transcendental Lord). This experience is so fulfilling that it leads to the external symptom of detachment from all pleasures that are not connected with God (*viraktir anyatra ca*). The primary among such worldly pleasures are meat-eating, gambling, intoxication and illicit sex. Actually, abstaining from these indulgences is preliminary to authentic spiritual life. *Yeh to*

*sirf entry pass hai*<sup>13</sup> If those supposedly representing God indulge in these pleasures, then we can infer that their own connection with God is tenuous and so their capacity to connect us with God is questionable. *Aachaara nahi hain, to prachaar ka kya phayda?*<sup>14</sup>

Their devotion to God is also reflected in their dealings with others, as the Srimad Bhagavatam (3.25.21) states: “The saintly people are tolerant, merciful and friendly to all living entities. They have no enemies; they are peaceful; they abide by the scriptures; and all their characteristics are sublime.” They don’t look down upon others, but see everyone as children of God and strive to make them happy by re-connecting them with God.

Because they find fulfillment in their devotion to God, they don’t need anything for their own material enjoyment. Yet they don’t reject everything worldly – especially those worldly things that can be used in the service of God. As they want to share God’s message in our modern world, they may use modern facilities like cars and cellphones. These are not luxuries, but functional necessities. They don’t need these things for themselves; they are satisfied in their own connection with God. They use these things just to connect us with God more effectively.

As God is the Supreme Being, he deserves the best of everything including residences. That’s why traditionally his temple would be the biggest building in the city, bigger even than the king’s palace.

<sup>13</sup> This is actually the entry level qualification.

<sup>14</sup> When there is no practice, what is the use of precept?

To keep this tradition alive, authentic spiritual teachers may build magnificent temples, but those temples are not for themselves; they are to glorify God and to attract people to visit the temple and receive God's blessings. Even when spiritual teachers live in grand temples, their purpose is not to enjoy the comforts but to share God's message with those who visit the temple. They are equally content living under a tree.

Simplicity for themselves, opulence for the Lord – that characterizes their use of material things.

Thus, those who represent God are characterized by continuous service to God, eagerness to benefit others by connecting them with God and use of only those worldly things that are useful to serve God.

## 18. Doesn't religion make people violent?

If religion was the cause of violence, then all the places in the world where there was no religion would be free from violence. The two places where atheism was tried out on a mass scale in recent history are the former USSR and China. And what was the result? The number of people killed in these two countries during their atheistic regime was nearly three times the casualties during all the wars of the twentieth century<sup>15</sup>. So rather than religion, it is the absence of religion that breeds violence.

Apart from violence in general, let's look at wars in particular. In the two biggest wars in recent memory, the two World Wars, religion was hardly an issue. The same holds true for many other wars like the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Indochina war and so forth.

When people are self-centered and power-hungry, they wage wars and incite others using whatever means are convenient, including ideological means. Such people exploit religion as a convenient ideological tool.

To prevent such misuse of religion, we need to provide philosophical education on a mass scale to help people understand what true

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<sup>15</sup> See *Lethal Politics: Soviet Genocide and Mass Murder Since 1917* by R.J. Rummel, New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1990. The victims of the Marxist governments amounted to 95,200,000. By comparison, the battle-killed in all foreign and domestic wars in this century total 35,700,000.

religion is. If people truly became religious, they would become devoted to God, see all living beings as their brothers and sisters in his family and thereby promote harmony, not violence.

Even practically, the number of people who are inspired to acts of service and compassion by religion is far, far more than the number of people incited to violence by it. Millions of people are inspired by their belief in religion to be charitable towards others. However, because most such acts are inconspicuous, they rarely make it to the news. In sad contrast, acts of violence, even if far less in number, being sensational make it to the news far more frequently. When we over-rely on the media that reports only sensational facts, we end up with a distorted picture of the effects of religion on the world.

True religion enables us to attain inner happiness, which is the prerequisite for peace. We are all souls, who are the lost children of God. Due to not finding inner happiness, we have become filled with desires for external enjoyment and are forced to fight with each other for the scarce resources necessary to fulfill our desires. So, as long as we seek happiness externally, we cannot end wars. And the best, in fact the only, way to find inner happiness is through sincere religious practice culminating in the supreme fulfillment of love of God.

### **19. Doesn't religion make people feel helpless by teaching that everything is destined and nothing is in their hands?**

This is not the true teaching of religion, but is a caricature. If that were its actual teaching, then why would religious scriptures urge us to do certain things? If nothing were in our hands, then even doing the things enjoined by the scriptures wouldn't be in our hands? The Bhagavad-gita was spoken to inspire Arjuna to do something – and something quite assertive at that. So, it's teaching obviously couldn't be that nothing is in our hands.

And as regards making people feel helpless, it is the opposite belief – everything is in our hands – that fosters helplessness. The fact of life, whether we like it or not, is that many things in life are not in our control – we might get infected by an incurable disease or entangled in an irresolvable misunderstanding or trapped in an irresistible storm. By imagining that we are in full control of such situations, we only set ourselves up for feelings of frustration.

In the Vedic wisdom-tradition, these two ideas are known as *karmavada* (everything is in our hands) and *daivavada* (nothing is in our hands; everything is destined). These ideas are the two extremes of the pendulum of human imagination. The reality is the steady middle state: success requires both our endeavor and favorable destiny.

Let's understand this with the example of agriculture. A good

harvest requires both diligent plowing and timely rains. Plowing represents endeavor and rains represent destiny. Despite plowing, no harvest can result if it doesn't rain. Similarly, despite our best efforts, we may sometimes fail due to adverse destiny. When people don't know about the role of destiny in determining results, failures make them feel hopeless ("I am good-for-nothing") even when they have the potential to perform in the future. Consequently, they suffer unfortunately and needlessly from mental problems like inferiority complex, low self-esteem, depression and self-pity.

Though we alone don't determine the result, we do play a significant role in determining it. Going back to the farming analogy, the farmer must plough the field for favorable rainfall to produce crops. Similarly, we must endeavor for destiny to deliver results.

Thus, a proper philosophical understanding far from making us feel helpless inspires us to work wholeheartedly. Additionally, such an understanding also decreases our feelings of helplessness when things are beyond our control. We understand that God is in control of those things and that he is our greatest well-wisher. Faith in him empowers us to accept that the seemingly bad situation is for our greater good, just as a surgeon's cuts though painful promote the health of the patient. By praying to God, we get the inner strength to go and grow through the difficulty.

Thus, the materialistic understanding breeds frustration, whereas spiritual understanding engenders hope.

## **20. When priests tell people about future sufferings and make them do rituals, aren't they acting like hooligans when threaten people to extort money?**

Not necessarily. They could be acting like doctors who alert patients about how they will become sick in future if they don't take treatment now. Their statements could be warnings, not threats. To understand the difference, we need to ask: who is causing the suffering? In the case of extortion threats, the hooligans are themselves the cause; they will inflict sufferings on those who don't give money. In the case of sicknesses, the doctors are the helpers in preventing the sufferings caused by something else like germs.

Similarly, the Vedic scriptures inform us that various sufferings come upon us due to the law of karma. This law is basically an expansion of the law of cause and effect that we intuitively accept in our daily life. All of us carry past karmic infections that will cause us to suffer in due course of time. An educated eye is needed to see how certain symptoms are precursors to future problems. The difference between seeing the symptoms of physical diseases and the signs of karmic consequences is just the difference in the kind of education needed.

Certain religious ceremonies help us atone for what we have done in the past. At the same time, not all religious rituals are necessary, just as not all medical prescriptions are necessary. Some doctors may give unnecessary prescriptions to inflate their earning and so may some priests. Just as we need to educate ourselves and choose our doctors carefully, so too with priests.

## **21. Does hell exist? What about the hell menu card?**

Hell is essentially a place for reformation - like a prison. Just as a country is ruled by the national government, the universe is ruled by a universal government. Just as the national government sends those who break the state laws to prison, the universal government sends those who break the universal laws to hell. Just as the ultimate purpose of the prison is to reform the prisoners and the punishments in prison are meant as an impetus for reformation, the ultimate purpose of hell is to reform the errant souls and the punishments in hell are meant as an impetus for reformation.

Just as the government may deter people from crimes by telling them about the rigors of prison life, the so-called hell menu card – the description of various sufferings in hell – is meant to deter people from breaking God’s laws.

This kind of deterrence is a part of religion at the level of fear. Some religious leaders who don’t have love for God and are unable to inspire love for God among others may repeatedly refer to hell to use fear for pushing people towards morality and compliance with scripture.

However, if we aspire to love God and lead our lives according to that aspiration, then we don’t have to bother about such things, just as citizens aspiring to get the Bharat Ratna and leading their lives accordingly don’t have to bother about being sent to Tihar Jail.

## 22. Are earthquakes acts of God?

*Aap sawal hi aisa puchte ho ki jawab deneke pehle hi bhagavan doshi saabit ho jaye<sup>16</sup>*

This question is framed in such a way as to set a trap, not to seek an answer. It is like asking a person: “Have you stopped beating your wife?” If he says no, he’s trapped: “What a shameless guy! You are still beating your wife.” If he says yes, he’s still trapped: “See! You have yourself admitted that you used to beat your wife earlier – and have only now stopped beating her.”

The only way to respond to such trap-setting questions is to challenge their underlying presumption: “What is the basis of this wife-beating allegation?” Or in our case: “What is the basis of this allegation that earthquakes are acts of God?”

Is it that all acts beyond human control are acts of God? If so, then why only the bad acts? Why not the good acts? Both the earth’s quaking and the earth’s not quaking are beyond human control. So, if one thing beyond human control is ascribed to God, then the other thing should also be ascribed to him. If God is to be penalized whenever and wherever the earth quakes, then he should also be paid whenever and wherever the earth doesn’t quake. If he has to pay for the one time when Kanjibhai’s shop was damaged, he has to be paid for all the times when Kanjibhai’s shop was not damaged. If he has to pay for the damages caused to Kanjibhai’s shop, then

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<sup>16</sup> My dear Sir, you ask such questions that even before replying God is held guilty.

he has to be paid for the fact that no damages were caused to Kanjibhai's house.

Just because one happens normally (the earth's not quaking) and one happens occasionally (the earth's quaking) doesn't make any difference; neither is in our control. And if the assumption is that God controls what is not in human control, then he controls both the good and the bad. We can't blame him for the bad and not give him credit for the good.

### **23. Doesn't the Bhagavad-gita (9.8) state that God is the destroyer? So isn't he the cause of earthquakes too?**

Let's look at the verse carefully:

prakritim svam avashtabhya visrijami punah punah

bhuta-gramam imam kritsnam avasham prakriter vashat

"The whole cosmic order is under me. Under my will it is automatically manifested again and again, and under my will it is annihilated at the end."

This verse doesn't talk only about destruction; it also talks about creation. So to selectively take just one part of the verse is to misrepresent its meaning.

Even if we put the creation part aside and focus only on the destruction part, still the verse doesn't say 'God is the destroyer'; it says 'Destruction happens under his will.' That the difference between the two is significant becomes evident in the next verse (9.9): "All this work cannot bind me. I am ever detached from all these material activities, seated as though neutral." In this verse, God clearly states that he is neutral.

Neglecting an important part of the same verse and also neglecting an adjoining verse that conveys a contrary message raises serious questions about the way scripture is being quoted. Either the person quoting the verse is highly biased and doesn't want to look

at any verses that don't support his preconceived ideas. Or he is myopic and doesn't understand the Gita's explanation of God's role in the world. Either way, this verse certainly doesn't support the claim that God is the destroyer. So God can't be held responsible for the earthquakes.

## **24. What is the cause of earthquakes?**

Unfortunate events like earthquakes are karmic reactions to our own past misdeeds; God merely sanctions the law of karma to deliver the appropriate reactions for our actions. He has nothing against anyone, as the Bhagavad-gita (9.29) states. He is neutral, as was mentioned in the previously quoted Gita verse (9.9) and allows nature to take its own course, just as an impartial judge allows the law to take its own course.

When a person touches a live wire and gets a shock, we can't hold the electricity board responsible, even though it supplied the electricity that led to the shock. That person was responsible for touching the live wire.

Similarly, when we do misdeeds and get reactions, we can't hold the universal government responsible, though it supplied the energy that led to the earthquake. We are responsible for engaging in misdeeds.

The principle underlying the shock and the quake is the same: we sow, we reap. The difference is in the time lag between the sowing and the reaping: instantaneous in the shock, delayed in the quake. That difference is because different actions bring reactions after different time durations, just as different seeds fructify after different time durations. For example, grains harvest after two or three months, some fruit seeds produce fruits after twenty years and some seeds after hundred years.

Similarly, we can observe that actions produce reactions after different time durations. A person who eats several ice creams at night may wake with a running nose – the reaction comes after several hours. A child who eats too many chocolates may find her teeth spoiled by teenage – the reaction comes after several years. A person who starts smoking in teenage may get lung cancer by late middle-age – the reaction comes after several decades.

Just as the action-reaction time lag may range from near-zero to several decades, it can extend to before this life and even beyond this life, because it is the same person – the same soul – continuing from one life to the next.

Why may a reaction be so delayed as to come in the next life? Because some reactions may require certain circumstances for fructification. To understand this, here's an incident associated with the Mahabharata.

*After the bloody Kurukshetra war, Dhritarashtra asked Krishna, "I had hundred sons and all of them were killed in the war. Why? Krishna replied, "Fifty lifetimes ago, you were a hunter. While hunting, you tried to shoot a male bird, but it flew away. In anger, you ruthlessly slaughtered the hundred baby birds that were there in the nest. The father-bird had to watch in helpless agony. Because you caused that father-bird the pain of seeing the death of his hundreds sons, you too had to bear the pain of your hundred sons dying.*

*Dhritarashtra thought about it and then asked, "But why did I have to wait for fifty lifetimes?" Krishna answered, "You were accumulating punya (pious credits) during the last fifty lifetimes to get a hundred sons because that requires a lot of punya. Then you got the reaction for the papa (sin) that you have done fifty lifetimes ago."*

The Bhagavad-gita (4.17) informs us *gahana karmano gatih*, that the way in which action and reaction works is very complex. Taxing our brain to find the specific karmic seed that caused the present reversal is futile. The Bhagavad-gita (4.17) emphasizes that the intricate workings of karma are too complex for the human mind to comprehend. This incomprehensibility can arise from several reasons like several karmic seeds fructifying together as one event or one karmic seed fructifying as a series of events

Therefore, some reaction may come in this lifetime, some in the next and some in a distant future lifetime.

## 25. Why do bad things happen to good people?

Here's an analogy to understand the answer. In villages, grain is often stored in huge vertical containers; fresh grain is poured into the top, and old stored grain is taken out from the bottom. A farmer may have produced poor quality grain of, say, brand Z for the past four years and stocked it in his container. This year he produces high quality grain of, say, brand A and stores it at the top. He is therefore exasperated when he finds grain of brand Z coming out from the bottom. This illustrates how seemingly innocent people suffer in this life: they have been doing good things in this life, but have earlier done bad things whose reactions are coming to them now.

What makes the workings of karma difficult to appreciate is that most people have a karmic record that is neither white nor black, but shades of gray. That mixed record leads to reactions that often appear arbitrary. A question that vexes many when they see bad things happening to good people is: "If these people were really so bad in their earlier lives, how could they have been virtuous in this life for so long?"

There are several possible answers. We often see even upright people occasionally succumbing to temptation and perpetrating abominable misdeeds. Of course, their virtuous nature rectifies them quickly, but still the fact remains that they did commit a greatly

sinful act and are therefore liable for a reaction. So the wrongdoing, like an ugly black spot on their otherwise clean karmic slate, will result in a severe reaction in an otherwise happy future life. Shift this scenario one lifetime backwards and we have the answer to the above question. The harsh affliction coming to a good person may thus be due to an occasional but grave transgression in a previous life.

Also, our behavior in this life is not determined only by our tendencies in the previous life; upbringing and association in this life also play a significant role. So if people with bad inclinations are born into a good family because of some good karma, their congenial upbringing and surroundings may empower them to shed their baggage of negative propensities. Thus they may become moral in this life, but their misdeeds from previous lives will make them suffer despite their rectified conduct now.

Thus the principles of reincarnation allow us to view life with a much broader perspective—not from the standpoint of one brief lifetime, which is nothing more than a flash in time, but from the standpoint of eternity. With this broader vision we can understand how each of us individual souls is alone responsible for what happens in our life.

## 26. Why do we need big temples when God doesn't need them?

God doesn't need them; we do. By expressing our love to God, we deepen our relationship with him, just as a child by giving a birthday gift to the parent deepens that relationship.

And the gifts need to be offered according to the stature of the person. We spend millions of rupees to arrange for the reception of the President of America when he comes to India. Then if the President of all Presidents, the Supreme Person God himself descends, shouldn't we offer him a reception befitting his stature?

And the temple is not just a place for religious worship; it offers many valuable services to society. These services can be summarized in the acronym TEMPLE (Tranquility Education Medication Purification Love Engagement):

1. **Tranquility:** The temple atmosphere with its soothing vibrations of holy chants and the sanctifying presence of the Deity serves as a tranquil retreat center. It offers essential refreshing breaks that empower people to face the stresses of life. To get similar breaks, many people seek entertainment, which is an industry costing millions. When we don't object to the money spent on arranging for that sort of breaks, then why object to money being spent on arranging for spiritual breaks that offer similar and arguably better refreshment for many religious people?

2. **Education:** The temple serves as a center for higher spiritual education wherein people learn principles and practices for leading a life of moral and spiritual integrity. This education in foundational values enables people to use all their other education for socially beneficial purposes. When we consider establishing new universities for material education a sign of national progress, then why not similarly celebrate the building of a university for spiritual education?
3. **Medication:** The temple acts like a hospital for the mind. The medication it provides heals the diseased mentality that impels people to addiction and criminality, both of which cause an enormous drain on the national economy. If we recognize as a social necessity the building of hospitals that heal the body, then why not similarly recognize as a social necessity the erection of hospitals that heal the mind?
4. **Purification:** The temple purifies the hearts of those who visit it regularly. This purification inspires talented people with leadership potential to blossom into pure-hearted, selfless, principle-centered leaders. When leaders with character are acutely needed in every organization from the family to the government, then why not welcome an institute that can produce high-quality leaders?
5. **Love:** The temple offers us a glimpse of the kingdom of

God, where we are all together as family members in God's family. In a vibrant temple, people learn to form relationships at the spiritual level. This leads to the experience a profound God-centered love that provides them deep satisfaction and dramatically improves their relationships. When relationship conflicts are causing unprecedented misery in society, then why not support an institution that can provide a solid foundation for lasting relationships?

6. **Engagement:** The temple provides people various satisfying engagements that preserve our national culture, and also productively channelize their talents and energies. When our national culture is being lost at an alarming rate, then why not help a forum that is not only protecting but also reviving it?

And if one institution can offer all these six benefits simultaneously, why should we oppose? The bigness of the temple is not a gaudy luxury, but a functional necessity; it has big roles to play, big services to offer. To serve as an effective university for spiritual education, it needs seminar halls, conference rooms and libraries. To serve as a vibrant cultural center that can properly serve the thousands of people who crowd it on festivals, it needs a large temple hall, a large prasad hall and a large discourse hall. Thus the temple provides essential even indispensable services to the society and so dynamic temples are one of the greatest needs of our times.

(Extracted from the the author's book *Why do we need a temple?*)

## **27. When God is present everywhere, why should we worship him in the temple images?**

Certainly, God is present everywhere, but is he accessible to us everywhere? Water is present everywhere in the air as water vapor, but can we just hang out our tongue and access that water whenever we feel thirsty? No; we need to go to a tap. Similarly, though God is present everywhere, we need his accessible form as manifested in the temples.

The need for an accessible manifestation of God is indispensable. Even in the imaginary storyline of *OMG*, God appears before Kanjibhai in a materially visible form and protects him in miraculous ways. Only on seeing this form does he get converted. Thus, even a skeptic who rejects all material manifestations of God needs a material manifestation to develop his faith.

In real-life, unlike in *OMG*'s imaginary storyline, God doesn't appear personally to each one of us – at least not till we are adequately purified. Then how can we access God? To help us, those saintly people who have seen him as he actually is in his transcendental form have described that form for us. Moreover, the scriptures tell us that we can and should depict God according to that description, for if we worship him devotedly he will accept our worship.

A movie scriptwriter may fictitiously make God speak that Deity worship is unnecessary, but that statement expresses the opinion of the scriptwriter, not the will of God. To know God's will, we have to

refer to the scriptures. And the scriptures strongly and repeatedly endorse Deity worship. For example, the Uddhava-Gita (Krishna's instructions to Uddhava) comprises the largest philosophical section of the great devotional classic, the Srimad Bhagavatam, and it includes one full chapter (11.27) on Deity worship. Thus here the same Krishna in whose mouth OMG puts words condemning Deity worship speaks his actual will, enjoining Deity worship. Many other Puranas glorify Deity worship. And the Pancharatras are an entire library of books that systematically elucidate the principles and practices of Deity worship.

## 28. How can a stone image be God?

Can we stop God from manifesting through a stone image if he so desires? He is omnipotent; he can convert matter into spirit and can transform a stone image into a divine manifestation known as the *archa-avatara* (the incarnation for receiving worship). Contemporary Vedic savants refer to this manifestation as the Deity to differentiate it from ordinary stone images.

In fact, those who claim that God cannot manifest himself through matter are limiting God and depriving him of his omnipotence. Does matter have so much power that it can counter God's omnipotence and prevent him from manifesting through matter? Obviously not.

They may argue that matter is impure, whereas God is pure. But is the impurity of matter greater than the purity of God? Wouldn't that imply that the potency of matter is greater than that of God? That would be a logical absurdity. Therefore, the correct understanding is that, God, if he so desires, can surely manifest through matter. And when he does so, he never becomes impure by contact with matter; rather, by his contact, matter becomes pure.

So, if we want to understand Deity worship, we have to stop obsessing on the obvious fact that the image is made of stone – everyone knows it and no one denies it. Yet why do people – and not just ordinary people but even many of the greatest saints and the greatest spiritual scholars – worship that image? Because they can see something more than the obvious fact. They can see in

action the profound truth of God's omnipotence.

And because it is God's will that makes Deity worship possible, it is essential that we worship the Deity according to his will. This means that we should fashion the stone image according to his will as revealed in the scriptures, and not according to our own imagination.

God doesn't manifest in an image fashioned as per our imagination. Such an image is a mere lifeless statue, like the statues of politicians that we find on many street squares. Such a statue may help people remember the politician, but beyond that it has no connection with the actual person. That person is a soul who if alive is residing in his or her own material body or if dead has gone to some other body according to his or her karma. Worshiping such a statue as if it were divine is a form of idolatry and should certainly be given up. That's why, as depicted in OMG, Kanjibhai is perfectly justified in lopping of the head of his own stone image and vehemently forbidding that kind of worship.

What is unjustified, however, is to extrapolate from the rejection of that kind of worship and reject all forms of image worship. Such unwarranted extrapolation limits our access to God. Why? Because presently we can perceive the world only through our material senses. As these senses cannot perceive spirit, our current perception is limited to matter and material things. So, if God does not manifest himself through matter, then we will never be able to

perceive him. And without perceiving him, developing our love for him will be extremely difficult. That's why out of his kindness he makes himself accessible to us as the Deity.

The Deity is different from an ordinary stone idol in two significant ways. Firstly, the form of the Deity is fashioned precisely according to the description of the form of God given in the scriptures. Secondly, God's presence is invoked as the Deity through the scripturally prescribed ceremony called the *prana-pratistha*. During this ceremony, the great devotees of God request him to manifest as the Deity and to thereby provide them the opportunity to see and serve him. Mercifully responding to their prayers, God manifests as the Deity. Thereafter, any worship offered to the Deity form directly reaches God just as a letter placed in an authorized letter box reaches the destination. In contrast, just as placing the letter in any ordinary box is futile, worshipping any ordinary statue is futile.

So it is not that any ordinary stone image is treated as God; rather, God manifests through a specially designed and sanctified stone image to help us love and serve him.

## 29. The stone image is limited, whereas God is unlimited. How can it be God?

By this argument, even the form of Krishna that Kanjibhai saw in OMG is false, because even that form was limited. In fact, by this argument, no one will be able to see God because none of us can see anything unlimited. Our eyes forever limit what we can see. Thus, this argument, if true, will create a permanent, unbreakable barrier between us and God.

That's why the argument needs to be critically examined. It is true that God is unlimited but does that necessarily imply that he can't manifest in a limited form? Such an idea superficially seems to preserve God's unlimitedness, but actually ends up limiting him by making him incapable of doing something: manifesting in a specific form.

The Vedic wisdom-tradition explains that God manifests himself in many forms: as an all-pervading impersonal light called *Brahmajyoti* and as an all-attractive person called *Bhagavan*. If God didn't have both these manifestations, then he would be incomplete and so would not be God.

To understand why, let's first look at the definition of God. The Vedanta-Sutra (1.1.2) defines God as the source of everything. *Janmady asya yatah*. Another ancient text, the Brahma-Samhita (5.1), defines God similarly as the cause of all causes *sarva karana-karanam*. This concise definition of God is essentially in agreement

with the understanding of God given by all the theistic traditions of the world. So, if God is the source of everything that we see in this world, then he should possess the essential attributes of everything, else he would be lesser than his creation. In this world, there exist both personal beings and impersonal forces, so both these aspects should be present in God. If God were not a person, then he, who by definition is the Complete Being, would be incomplete. Another simpler way of putting this is: if we as the children of God are persons, how can our father, God, not be a person? So, those who say that God is not a person are actually limiting him, by divesting him of what his creation has.

Now let's consider the question: do personality and form not limit God? The Vedic wisdom-tradition helps us understand that what causes limitation is not form, but matter. Due to the very nature of matter, all material objects are limited, whether they have form or not. When we think of God's form, we subconsciously project our conceptions of matter on the form of God and so think that a form would limit God. But God is not material; he is entirely spiritual. Spirit has characteristics different from matter; that which is spiritual has the potential to be unlimited, irrespective of whether it has form or not. So God's form being spiritual does not limit him. This is how, due to his being spiritual, God is a person with a form and is still unlimited.

Now let's consider the question: can God manifest in a stone image that is a limited material form? God's unlimitedness requires that

he be able to do anything; if there is something that he can't do, that would limit him. So his inability to manifest as a stone image would limit him. But then his manifesting as a stone image would also limit him to a limited form.

The way out of this dilemma is again by God's omnipotence. He preserves his unlimitedness not by becoming unable to manifest in a limited form, but by manifesting in unlimited such Deity forms. The Brahma Samhita, an important scripture, confirms this. *advaitam acyutam anadim ananta rupam* He has no peers; he never falls; he has no beginning and he manifests in innumerable forms.

The fact that the unlimited manifests in so many limited forms in various parts of the world as the temple Deities is an expression of his unlimited love for all of us limited beings.

**30. The stone image can't even wave away a fly on its face. It can be broken by vandals. How can such an image be God?**

When God manifests himself through any material manifestation, the divinity of that manifestation is demonstrated not by its potency to break material laws, but by its potency to bring about spiritual transformation among the sincerely devoted.

To understand this, let's consider another material manifestation of the divine: the scriptures. Many of those who object to the practice of Deity worship still consider the scriptures sacred. Frequently they even worship those sacred texts as if they were divine. Yet can those sacred texts not be torn or burnt by the faithless? Obviously, they can be. But does this make them any less divine? Not at all. The divinity of these texts cannot be experienced by defiantly tearing them apart to check whether they miraculously save themselves. Their divinity can be experienced only by reading them with a devotional service attitude. The same principle applies to the Deity.

Can the Deity not wave away the fly? He can, but he doesn't. Why? Because the Lord does not manifest himself as the Deity to prove his omnipotence. In fact, the Lord generally does not manifest his omnipotence in this material world. Why? Because this world is provided as a facility for those souls who want to enjoy separate from God. All of us were originally with God in his eternal spiritual kingdom, but we wanted to enjoy by imitating him instead of serving him. By this desire, we exiled ourselves to this material

world to play out our fantasies of becoming the best – of becoming God. But God being supreme is eternally the best in everything. If he were to manifest his omnipotence in this world, then nobody would have any chance to play God. So, he graciously facilitates our desire to enjoy separate from him by not directly manifesting his omnipotence here.

God waits patiently for us to learn our lessons. He wants us to realize for ourselves that, no matter how big and powerful we become, we can never be happy without loving him. So, he allows us to love whatever we want. But he also tirelessly waits for us to turn to him. As soon as we get the slightest such desire, He starts providing us facilities to love him again. One of the most important of such facilities is the Deity. The Deity offers us what no other divine manifestation does: the opportunity to serve God personally by beholding, bowing down, praying, touching, bathing, dressing, decorating and offering food.

At the ordinary levels of religion – the levels of fear and desire, people worship God and demand protection and prosperity in exchange for the worship. Deity worship offers the opportunity to worship God at a much loftier level of love wherein the devotees consider themselves servants of God and want to offer him everything they possibly can – including protection.

Therefore, devotees consider it their prime duty to do everything to prevent the Deity from being vandalized. God manifests himself

as the Deity not to prove his omnipotence to those bent on defying him, but to give a facility for those eager to serve him. When the faithless try to desecrate the Deity, the Lord simply unmanifests himself from the Deity so that they can inflate their illusion by imagining that there is no God in the Deity. Of course, defiant acts like desecrating the Deities or desecrating sacred texts will eventually lead to grievous karmic consequences. Do such acts demonstrate the absence of God in the Deity? Not at all to those who understand the purpose of the Deity manifestation. To them, such acts only demonstrate the utter absence of genuine God consciousness among the vandals.

Coming to the fly question, how should we respond on seeing a fly near the Deity on the altar? Philosophically, we should understand that the Deity has allowed the fly there to graphically show how we are neglecting our service to the Deity, how we are not keeping the altar clean. Practically, we should hasten to remove the fly and make arrangements by which flies will not disturb the Deity again. The point is that the devotees see the Deity as a special, invited divine guest and so feel duty-bound, in fact love-bound, to offer the Deity the best possible service.

Although God can never be insulted, that he manifests himself in forms that can apparently be disrespected is a sign of his extraordinary love for us. This is beautifully expressed by Pillai Lokacharya, a great South Indian saintly teacher: "This is the greatest grace of the Lord, that being free He becomes bound,

being independent He becomes dependent for all his service on the devotee... In other forms, man belonged to God. But behold the supreme sacrifice of Ishvara [Krishna] in the form of the *murti*, for here the almighty becomes the property of the devotee.... He carries the Lord about, fans him, feeds him, plays with him-yea, the Infinite has become finite, that the child soul may grasp, understand, and love him."

**31. Is the worship of Deities a tool meant for less intelligent people, a tool that should be given up once one becomes spiritually advanced?**

Not at all.

It is true that Deity worship is especially essential for those who are spiritually under-evolved. As they can't perceive that God is present everywhere, he manifests within their sense perception as the Deity. Thereby they can at least begin their God consciousness by respecting him as the Deity.

But the fact that Deity worship is essential for the under-evolved doesn't imply that it is meant only for them or that those more evolved should give it up.

To properly understand the relationship of Deity worship with spiritual advancement, let's first understand how the Srimad Bhagavatam (11.2.45-47) classifies devotees based on the level of their God consciousness:

- **Kanishtha-adikhari** (third level): Devotees at this level perceive God only in the Deity and nowhere else. The spirituality of these devotees is limited only to the temple or the home-altar; they can't perceive God's relationship with other people and aspects of their life.
- **Madhyama-adhikari** (second level): Devotees at this level understand that their God consciousness depends not only

on how they see the Deity, but also on how they relate with the things and people of the world. Accordingly, in addition to worshipping the Deity, these devotees befriend other devotees, help the uninformed and avoid those inimical towards God.

- **Uttama-adhikari** (first-level): Devotees at this level are so advanced that they can perceive God's presence everywhere. This does not mean that they worship everything as if it is God or that they give up worshipping the Deity as if it is not God. It means that everything in the world reminds them of God just as everything reminds a lover of the beloved.

So, whereas the third-level devotees *need* the Deity to remember God, the first-level devotees don't. But this doesn't mean that the first-level devotees neglect or reject the Deity. Not at all. Rather, due to their great love for God, they serve the Deity with even greater devotion.

The notion that Deity worship is for the less intelligent is a misconception propagated by those averse to serving the Deity. To mask their aversion, they self-servingly claim that they are more intelligent and so don't need the Deity worship that is meant for less intelligent people. But the fact is that even the less intelligent or the third-level devotees can perceive God's presence as the Deity and so are inclined to serve the Deity. Those who can't see God's presence as the Deity are below even these third-level devotees.

If only they would open their mind to understand the profound philosophy underlying Deity worship, then they would realize how the Deity manifestation is a great blessing of God for all levels of spiritual aspirants; everyone's remembrance of God becomes enriched by beholding and serving the Deity. Otherwise, though they may claim to be more intelligent, they will, unfortunately, remain less than less-intelligent.

**32. At the end of OMG, Kanjibhai throws away Krishna's keychain to avoid idolatry. Do we need to similarly discard everything connected with God to avoid idolatry?**

This incident is a classic example of how scripturally uninformed logic ends in iconophobia, the irrational fear of material representations of God.

The underlying thread of such logic is valid, but its conclusion isn't. The valid thread of logic is as follows: When we worship a material representation of God, we will over time focus only on that material representation and forget God whom we were intending to worship. Thus, the logic goes, the material representation will become a competitor to God and will take for itself the worship that was meant for God. That's why, the logic concludes, no such representation should be worshiped and if it is already being worshiped then that worship should be stopped.

This course of events may be a logical possibility, but it is not a universal necessity. It won't happen when there is proper education about the nature of Deity worship. This education informs us that God is spiritual and the ultimate goal of life is to rise to the spiritual level of consciousness and enter into the ultimate spiritual reality: God's eternal world of love. With such a spiritual-centric understanding, the Deity is never seen as material and is never regarded as something separate from God. So the Deity never becomes a competitor to God; all the worship offered to the Deity

automatically goes to God. Devotion to the Deity doesn't distract us from devotion to God, but enhances our devotion to God. In fact, such devotion becomes non-different from devotion to God.

Education can provide us a similar spiritual vision of things connected with God. Those things can remind us of God and nourish our devotion to him. That's why far from rejecting them we should cherish them. The Srimad Bhagavatam (11.6.46) glorifies their purifying potency: there the great devotee Uddhava speaks to Krishna, "Simply by decorating ourselves with the garlands, fragrant oils, clothes and ornaments that you have already enjoyed, and by eating the remnants of your meals, we, your servants, will indeed conquer your illusory energy."

The iconophobia demonstrated in rejecting Krishna's keychain ends in logical absurdity. If the keychain can lead to idolatry, then even the vision of Krishna when he manifests himself can also lead to idolatry. Just as the keychain was limited, so was the form of Krishna that was revealed to Kanjibhai. And both were manifest to material vision. So, if one has to be rejected, then why not the other? And if Kanjibhai had to actually adhere to this iconophobia, then just as he threw away Krishna's keychain, he would have had to push away Krishna too when Krishna first came to his rescue. Because if there had never been any icon, any representation of Krishna through matter, then Kanjibhai would never have known what Krishna looked like. So when Krishna himself appeared before him, Kanjibhai would not have known that this was Krishna. Due

to the dogmatic belief that nothing material can represent God, he would have had to consider Krishna himself to be some material representation of God. And like all other icons, he would have had to reject Krishna. Then what would have happened to Kanjibhai?

To conclude, this final incident is a perfect metaphor of the danger of OMG-type critiques of religion: they intend to expose the bad within religion. And there is much that is bad in religion as it exists today, blind faith in self-serving godmen being a tragic example. Such blind faith must be eradicated. By raising sound, sensible questions about issues that most people unthinkingly accept, OMG has forced many people to think and thereby given a boost to the drive against blind faith. The problems it has underscored are real and grave. But their solution lies not in rejection of everything religious but in education of the actual purpose of religion so as to arrive at the balance of intelligent, discriminating belief.

When fake currency circulates in the economy, the government warns people about it. But if the government depicts all currency to be false, then it does a disservice. It needs to educate people to distinguish genuine currency from fake currency. Similarly, much of what goes on in the name of religion today is fake in the sense that it doesn't fulfill the purpose of religion. The movie tells about the 'fake religious currency.' But someone has to tell about the actual currency – the real purpose of religion. This book, I hope, will make a small contribution towards that much-needed education.

## Afterword

Let me sign off with one last example. An episode of the TV serial *Satyam eva Jayate* drew attention to the malpractices in the medical profession. Suppose that program had concluded with a message: “Health is good, but doctors are bad. Better seek health without going to doctors.” Such a message would be practically useless. How can sick people become healthy without doctors and treatments? The more rational and beneficial message is: “Beware! Not all doctors and not all treatments are good. Get yourself educated to separate the authentic from the unauthentic.”

The same principle applies in the field of religion too. If people are told, “God is good, but religious teachers are bad,” then it leaves them with no practical way to connect with God. So their experience of God will stay hallucinatory, as would sick people’s experience of good health. The idea that we don’t need any support systems to approach God reduces faith in him to a phantasmagoria that has little reality, potency or utility. The more rational and beneficial message is: “Beware! Not all people who assume the role of religious teachers are good. Get yourself educated to separate the authentic from the unauthentic.”

That’s why rather than mere critiques, we need systematic education so that we can separate the good from the bad in today’s religious world.

I hope this book helps you in some small way in finding your way to God. If you have any questions, you are welcome to ask them on my website [www.thespiritualscientist.com](http://www.thespiritualscientist.com). I will try my best to answer as promptly as possible. I also welcome your feedback there.

My best wishes and prayers for you on your journey towards God.

Chaitanya Charan Das

## Acknowledgements

My thanks to HG Radheshyam Prabhu, my spiritual mentor and publisher, whose selfless and tireless dedication is an enduring inspiration.

My fatherly spiritual mentor HH Bhakti Rasamrita Maharaj encouraged me wholeheartedly to write this book. He has inspired and facilitated me to devote myself one-pointedly to the service of writing for Krishna. I am forever grateful to him.

I thank my beloved spiritual master, His Holiness Radhanath Maharaj, whose depth of realization, magnanimity of heart and vigor for outreach are enduring sources of amazement and inspiration.

His Holiness Jayadvaita Maharaj, my “writing guru”, is world-famous for his precise and penetrating answers to questions. I hope this book written in a QA format following his inimitable example will please him.

My very special thanks are due to Manish Vithalani P for suggesting and insisting that I write this book – and for being a consistent partner, almost a mid-wife – in the delivery of this book.

In finalizing the book, I was helped by a new editor, Avatari Chaitanya P. His enthusiasm and intelligence made working with him a joy, a joy that I look forward to in future books.

Acyuta Pr, an expert Canada-based editor, is fast becoming one of my closest friends and colleagues. His thoughtful suggestions helped the book immeasurably.

Madhusudan Vishnu P stretched himself at the last moment to design the cover page. Arjun Sarthi P did the same with the layout promptly and competently.

Trivikrama P helped with proofreading. Vishnuloka P got the book printed in record time. Many others including Sridham Vrindavan P, Siddharth P and Panca Pandava P helped in various ways.

My heartfelt thanks to them all.

Chaitanya Charan Das

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