

Religion Vs Spirituality – Is there a choice?

By Swami Sarvanandaji

The two words Religion and Spirituality are being used interchangeably quite often in the world today. This causes a lot of confusion. Do they mean the same thing? If not, the question arises – is it advisable to be religious or spiritual or both? In the Indian context being Religious could mean going to a temple, doing Yoga (just Asanas), praying in front of a deity for a few minutes, just believing in God (s), putting a mark on the forehead like kumkum, Vibhuti or Chandan, doing something fire rituals either by oneself or by taking the help of a priest, just performing one's duties (karma yoga) etc. The problem arises when many of the above activities are confused with "Spirituality", as is the case many a time. For example a person just going to a temple or just putting something on the forehead without anything beyond that, praying every day or even doing some Yoga (Asanas), could call himself Spiritual. Is it proper to do that? Why should the words religion and spirituality not be used interchangeably? What may be the dangers/pitfalls and what does one lose by doing so? Are religion and spirituality connected or independent? For answers to these questions, we need to properly understand the meaning of both the words, the realm of relevance of Religion, the realm of application of Spirituality, the overlap, the interconnectedness, how Religion leads to Spirituality and the necessity of each of them. It is very important to understand this because that is what Indian culture is resting on. Being unclear about their relationship keeps us firmly in limited/time bound existence also called the cycle of repeated birth and death while having clarity leads me towards immortality or liberation. The choice purely rests with each one of us. And ignoring one at the cost of the other is at our own peril.

Religion – In the Indian context it pertains to any activity performed by the physical body (hands, legs etc), organ of speech or the mind, with faith in the almighty/higher power/Creator, with the expectation of a some result/benefit to myself as a separate Individual, my family, relatives or acquaintances, the environment (like praying for rain) or the society or Country one belongs to. In fact this is the main topic of the Vedas and related texts. Religion would also include various customs and rituals performed by tribal anywhere in the world, not directly connected to any of the major "religions"

Spirituality – The word means anything one includes in his/her understanding of themselves that is not limited or constrained to only the body, mind, sense organs or the intellect. In short it just pertains to the Knowledge/ Truth of the Self that is obtained through enquiry. And finally this Self is understood to be not just limited to the body but is the truth of the universe. That is, I (each one of us) am immortal, birthless, deathless, changeless and in fact I am the truth. The primary question here is, is there such a thing that I should waste my time on? Aren't there better things to do in life like becoming richer, more famous or for that matter anything that would give me a more tangible result? The unambiguous answer is definitely YES. On the contrary all that is tangible, is by its necessary definition short lived, temporary or ephemeral. The Indian spiritual tradition considers that gaining the knowledge to this question alone is the purpose of human birth and the most worthwhile thing to do.

Can we be spiritual without being religious or vice-versa? Why should we not just concern myself with Spirituality or Self-knowledge instead of wasting time on religious matters? This is exactly the predicament of Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. The short answer is it is possible but it is also good to enquire why I have a resistance to religion. If it is because of some prejudice or bias then I need to find out if it is justified. Another criterion is, if I am really sufficiently evolved and ready to only concern myself with Self enquiry. Pure Self enquiry is not as easy as it seems. The fact is, religion helps and is necessary to prepare me for Self Knowledge. If I am not sufficiently prepared mentally, Self-Knowledge in terms of purely intellectual understanding, is not very helpful. A religious life style that is also conducive for such preparation becomes extremely essential. This is where a religious lifestyle helps in terms of not avoiding what is not helpful for Self Knowledge. The answer to the question of whether I can be religious without being Spiritual is that it is definitely okay but I can do it at my own peril. Because religion without spirituality is incomplete. Increasingly spiritualising one's life is the way to go.

Reasons for resistance to religion – Many times it would appear to be easier and better to consider ourselves Spiritual and not religious. Being religious appears old fashioned, primitive and out-dated. In today's world it is fashionable to call oneself Spiritual and not religious. Because religion brings with itself a certain set of necessary beliefs and dos and don'ts that may be considered restrictive/dogmatic/constraining or intrusive. Spirituality without religion appears to give me more freedom which is definitely true. But does that allow me to completely trash religion? No, it doesn't is the definitive answer.

Is there a need to be religious at all? Yes, there is because it gives a structure and direction to my life if done with the right attitude. Religion (at least as it applies to the Hindu tradition) is a beautifully developed system for the growth of the Individual and the others around. In Indian Spirituality (Vedanta) a lot of emphasis is placed on our lifestyle. Everything we do is considered religious if we do it with a certain attitude. And it is repeatedly emphasised that we need to only spiritualize our everyday activities. Hence any activity can be made spiritual. Spiritualizing is only in terms of our attitude towards what we do and the result expected. If one is able to insulate myself from being affected by the result, positive or negative, it helps in one's mental preparation for Self Knowledge. If not, the activity just remains religious without giving me any spiritual benefit.

Why should religion be given a spiritual orientation? Religion without spirituality makes me a selfish, egoistic and a self-centered individual. Having a spiritual orientation helps avoid all of that and evolve into a better human being viz. in terms of managing emotions like anger, hatred, jealousy, fear, complexes, stress, tension etc, having the right attitude towards myself, be composed in victory and defeat, gain and loss, praise and criticism, society, environment, become more compassionate, unselfish, composed, contented, improve the quality of my relationships, living a purposeful life. In the Indian tradition Self Knowledge is the only worthwhile pursuit of every human being and every little activity should only sub serve this goal. Just sticking to religion keeps me restricted to the mundane and monotonous while spiritualizing religion liberates and expands me. Spirituality gives meaning to all religious practices. Religion without Spirituality is incomplete and Spirituality without Religion is just a dry intellectual exercise and absolutely pointless. Both are incomplete without each other. It is not one at the cost of the other.

In fact this is the main difference between Hinduism and other Religions. The essential requirement of Spirituality is that there should be freedom from bondage right here, right now while all other religions only talk about salvation after death. And also only in terms of going to some heaven.

Which of the two is more important? Can one be given more importance at the cost of the other? There cannot be a generic answer to this question because each individual has to decide for himself/herself. Spirituality involves enquiry and contemplation. Whether one is ready for that or not depends on one's natural inclination and temperament. But the fact remains that Self Enquiry/Spirituality comes later and Religion has to lead to Spirituality.

The next question is how does one learn about spirituality? Do I need to explicitly educate myself at all? Is it not automatic as is very widely assumed? A widespread opinion is that Spirituality need not be learnt and can be self learnt from “experience”. And also that it does not need any outside help and can be done by oneself. This argument is fundamentally flawed because any experience is subjective and at the relative level and any number of experiences cannot teach me anything new. I make sense of my experiences based on what I already know. For knowing myself I need a means of knowledge that is unfolded in a systematic and logical way. In other words through a proper teaching methodology. Both are inevitable. This teaching methodology, has been preserved over thousands of years and still available intact. This is the primary reason one needs to seek out a teacher. Unfortunately this is not true of other religions because they are not Spiritual as defined by their own clergy.

When does one start learning about Spirituality? The earlier in one’s life it is started, the better it is. This is where a religious life is helpful because it helps introduce spirituality through one’s everyday activities and when enquiry starts it becomes seamless and easier. In other religions because there is no spirituality religious life is useless because one just gets stuck pointlessly to some non-verifiable dogma.

To conclude, there is a choice only with regard to the proportion and that varies from person to person. Both religion and spirituality are complementary to each other. And are not at loggerheads with each other.

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