

Question and Answer Session about Hinduism at Maclay School Religion Class

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Guest: Thayumanasamy Somasundaram, practicing Hindu

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- **Q: Which Gods are you devoted to?**

A: I am not devoted to one particular God. In fact, I worship all of them. Typically, Hindus visit temples devoted to Shiva, Vishnu, Durga, Ganesha, and Murugan, etc. The temples are built in sacred places that have a special significance. However, every Hindu has a favorite God or a temple that they visit often due to habit, proximity, or a belief that there is a special connection to them.

- **Which God do you follow on a day to day basis and why?**

I may have already answered this question. But, I was born in a Saivite family (devotees of Lord Shiva) and therefore, more often than not I will visit a Shiva temple. But, we have idols of Shiva, Vishnu, Murugan, Ganesha, and Durga in our own home, which we worship. My hometown has big Shiva temple and Durga temples.

- **Do you have a household shrine?**

Yes. It is a small cupboard in our kitchen. Back in India, we had a larger cupboard and in one of our houses we had a small room. In the cupboard, we have some idols, pictures, and oil-lamps. My grandfather, my father, and I used to have stone Ganesha which we would pray to every day. Typically, Hindus get up early in the morning, before sun rise, have shower and bring some flowers, light the lamp and put the flowers and spend a minute praying before they do their daily routine. I do somewhat similar to this routine. What is my prayer: I pray that "my family and I should be good people, the day should be a good one, good things should come to both my family and my relatives, please forgive us if we have forgotten to remember you".

- **Do you practice yoga? What kind?**

No, neither I nor do any of my family practice Yoga. Yoga is more popular in the West than India proper. However, Hindus recognize Yoga to be part of their life and but don't devote lot of importance to it. Instead, they do regular sports and physical exercises. Due to changing circumstances in India (becoming very busy) may be we have to go back to Yoga.

- **What is your opinion on the caste system?**

If there is one thing that I don't like in India is the caste system, it is, however, getting better. India is an old society and so the change comes slowly. The original idea of the caste (based on the work you did rather than the family you are born, is not bad by itself). Due to arranged marriages, restricted movement of people, family-centric custom the caste system is kept in place. *Elaborate if needed.*

- Do you believe in life on other planets or galaxies; if so, can reincarnation happen there?

I have never thought about it in terms of Hinduism. As a scientist, I expect and believe that life can and probably do exist in other places. So, if God is Omnipotent and Omnipresent he/she should pervade all galaxies and planetary system and therefore reincarnation can happen there too.

- When did you start practicing Hinduism/Did you grow up as a Hindu?

Like many Hindus in India, I was born into a Hindu family, and so I was born a Hindu. My parents took me to temples when was little. India is predominantly Hindu (78%). So as a young boy, I never even knew or thought about other religions. As I grew up, I learned about Islam, Christianity, and later about Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism. As I went to college, I learned about Judaism, Shintoism, and orthodox Christianity.

- When do you know that you have accomplished your dharma?

Dharma, interpreted as, righteousness, I believe is not accomplished in certain time period. Rather, you conduct yourself the right way throughout your life. Live a good life, do good deeds, and perform what are required of you as a son, a student, a spouse, a father, a citizen, and a human being. I think it is a life long process.

- Is there any way to get rid of karma?

Karma, interpreted as, deeds, I believe can't be gotten rid off. It can't be off-set. You can't trade it off. Rather, like Newton's third law of motion, your good deed gets you good karma and bad deed do the opposite. So, a true believer tries to avoid doing bad things to begin with so that they don't have to accumulate bad karma. Having said that I also believe that everyone should be encouraged to do good things whenever possible. *Elaborate, if needed.*

- Is there any sect of Hinduism which believes in samsara, karma, dharma, but not the gods?

There are atheists in India. But by definition, if you don't believe in God you are not considered a Hindu. So I think that answers the question.

- How do people usually choose a god as their favorite?

As I mentioned before, I was born into a Saivite family (devotees of Lord Shiva) and therefore, more often than not I will visit a Shiva temple. Similarly, if you are born into a Vaishnavite family one is more likely to visit Vishnu temple, etc. What determines whether you are Saivite or Vaishnavite? I guess, the family, the area you are born, and general practices of your neighbors. Sometimes, if after visiting certain temple (or usually the pray to certain deity for certain wishes), if they get their wishes Hindus will visit that place more often. It is considered very bad to pray and not visit the place. *Elaborate, if needed.*

- Do certain yoga positions practiced in the West connect with the yoga types of Hinduism?

I don't think I can answer this question correctly since I am not familiar with the subject. Good Yoga teachers who understand its role in Hinduism probably follow the same routines taught in India. Remember that Yoga tries to bring calmness and concentration to one's mind while trying keep your body fit.

- What is the most significant part of Hinduism?

Difficult question to answer. But I think Hinduism is very tolerant. It is non-proselytizing. It is pacifist. The core tenet that there can be more than one way to achieve truth is very powerful and comforting, as a scientist.

- What inspires you to believe in Hinduism rather than consider it fake and an illusion?

I have already mentioned some of the reasons in the last question. From a practical point of view, religions always have a social component. As a scientist and accumulated data show that power of prayer and belief have tangible benefits but yet unknown processes. So if it were to be fake by now it would be found out.

- What is the most significant part of Hindu worship?

Visiting temples. For several centuries kings and nobles have built temples with strategic advantage. It usually has the best water source, green space, wide and open area, and tranquility. So when you visit temples you are both awed by the presence of God's grace and calmness the surroundings brings to you.