

Shashi Tharoor on Hinduism's Origins

Why I am a Hindu?

The obvious answer to this question is, of course, that's because I was born one. Most people have little choice about the faith they grow up with: it was selected for them at birth, by the accident of geography and their parent's cultural moorings.

But what does being a Hindu mean?

Many of us began having to interrogate ourselves in the late 1980s when the world media first began to speak and write of Hindu fundamentalism. This was odd because we knew of Hinduism as a religion without fundamentals.

No Founder or Prophet, no organized Church, no compulsory beliefs or rights of worship, no uniform conception of the good life, no single sacred book.

My Hinduism was a lived faith. It was a Hinduism of experience and upbringing, a Hinduism of observation and conversation, not one anchored in deep religious study, though, of course, the two are not mutually exclusive. But none of these constitutes an obligatory credo for a Hindu, there are none.

We have no compulsory dogmas. This is, of course, rather unusual.

A Catholic is a Catholic because he believes Jesus was the son of God who sacrificed himself for Man; A Catholic believes in the Immaculate Conception and the Virgin Birth, offers confession, genuflects in church and is guided by the Pope and a celibate Priesthood. A Muslim must believe that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is his Prophet. A Jew cherishes his Torah or Pentateuch and his Talmud; A Parsi worships at a Fire Temple; A Sikh honors the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib above all else.

There is no Hindu equivalent to any of these beliefs. There are simply no binding requirements to being a Hindu, not even a belief in God.

But another reason for my belief in Hinduism, is for a lack of a better phrase, its intellectual fit. I am more comfortable with the tenets of Hinduism than I would be with those of the other faiths of which I know. I have long thought of myself as a liberal, not merely in the political sense of the term or even in relation to principles of economics, but as an attitude to life – to accept people as one finds them, to allow them to be and become what they choose, and to encourage them to do whatever they like, as long as it does no harm to others, is my natural instinct.

As a Hindu I can claim adherence to a religion without an established church or priestly papacy, a religion whose rituals and customs I am free to reject, a religion that does not oblige me to demonstrate my faith by any visible sign, by subsuming my identity in any collectivity, not even by a specific day or time or frequency of worship. There is no Hindu Pope, no Hindu Vatican, no Hindu catechism, not even a Hindu Sunday.

As a Hindu I follow a faith that offers a veritable smorgasbord of options to the worshipper of divinities to adore and to pray to, of rituals to observe (or not), of customs and practices to honor (or not), of fasts to keep (or not). Its capacity to express wonder at Creation and simultaneously skepticism about the omniscience of the Creator are unique to Hinduism. Both are captured beautifully in this verse from the 3,500 old Rig Veda, the Nasadiya Suktya or Creation Hymn:

*Who knows whence this creation had its origins?
He, whether He fashioned it or whether He did not,
He who surveys it all from the highest heaven,
He knows – or maybe even He does not know.*

“Maybe, even he does not know!” I love a faith that raises such a fundamental question about no less a Supreme being than the Creator of the Universe Himself.