

Is Evil Necessary in God's World? (Part 2 of 2): Varadaraja V. Raman

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Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

VV without a God being good or bad, how do we then set a moral standard?

Varadaraja Raman:

We set a moral standard because we are not God, we are human beings and our scale these things do matter, that is the story of man who once encountered God and God said, a billion years is a second for me, a billion dollars is a cent for me, a billion worlds is just a small world for me. And the man said, oh God, can you give me just one cent and God said just wait a second. So... the idea is if you are going to the scale of God, it becomes very different and like again there is another to explain, to illustrate the logical, that this is not that difficult logically. There is a criminal who was convicted and he said it's not my fault your honor, it was so ordained, this is what it says in my tradition and that is all decided by God. And the judge said, well I'm going to give you 10 years in prison, remember it's not my will, this is how God had done it. So you see that these things will come on our scale we cannot transfer the absoluteness that we attribute to God.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But still there is a standard that sets our future role in the karmic flow, in the reincarnation whether do better or do worse... that's not a standard that comes from us, that's a standard that exists outside in reality.

Varadaraja Raman:

Absolutely and the point what I'm trying to make here is that it does not follow from the Hindu vision of God that there is no such thing as good and evil or sinful and virtuous and so on, quite the contrary. What it says is we run into contradictions when we transfer these enormously significant related categories to the Almighty and to the Divine. So it is as long as we are in the fin... on the finite plain, as long as we interact as humans in society, we do need these differentiations which are good and bad. But we will, it'll be in vain that we try to apply these same things to what we regard as God and that's where the trouble is (unint.) the philosophical or the theological perspective.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But there is a standard that is set by the cosmic consciousness of good and evil, it's just that we're not able to apprehend that with our limited understanding?

Varadaraja Raman:

Yes, we cannot transcend the... the limitations to which are subject, to reach a level at which these have more absolute values.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So as you look at your world view, the fact that there are horrible evils in the world on a personal and global scale, does not in anyway interfere or leach out your belief in a cosmic consciousness?

Varadaraja Raman:

It does not because I do not regard cosmic consciousness as necessarily dictating the affairs on earth. The Burman concept is not a he God or a she God who rewards good behavior and punishes bad behavior but it rather an undergirding spiritual reality that is present, ever present. And so that notion of the divine in the Hindu world is very different from the anthropomorphic God to which one is often accustomed, even in the Hindu world, in the non-spiritual traditions we do have gods doing... engaging in fighting evil and so on in the (Unint.), the tradition. But the spiritual traditions this notion is beyond that and that's what I was trying to explain.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But still there has to be a standard that is set beyond humans, so whereas God is and I'm searching to try to appreciate this so I can feel it, so whereas God is not setting the good and evil, yet there is a standard that is set that will determine our reincarnation in future lives?

Varadaraja Raman:

Yes, but that standard that (unint.) is related from the Hindu perspective to the notions of good and evil that are inevitably associated with the what you may call the created world of the world of societies and civilizations. And essentially what it means is that when we talk about our standards of right and wrong, they are products of society and culture. And within this framework if we want to explain consequences, then of course we access the law of Karma and so on. So whether those ideas of right and wrong are universal in the sense of transcending human nature and culture, is a very difficult question and I don't know, between the laws of natures which are universal and the statutory laws which are local within different countries, that is this unexplored or intriguing moral law, the world of moral law. And whether they exist in the universe independently or they're part of this complex web of human culture, is an interesting question. So within the Hindu tradition depending on the context in which we explore these things, we have different answers.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

VV in searching for the meaning of God, one of the things that I have to be confronted with is the fact that there are very diverse religions in this world. How do we look at that diversity, what are the common factors, if that means anything, and then what are the differences?

Varadaraja Raman:

Well I think that are essential differences between the various religions that cannot be denied, all we need to do is to go through the scriptures and the basic doctrines and tenets of religion, it will make it clear to anyone that each religion is based on a different set of assumptions or revelations or whatever it is. However, it is important to recognize that there are a few commonalities not in the details but in the essence of religions. For example, practically all religions believe that there is something more than the physical material world, most religions believe there is one kind of God or another, by whatever name. Most religions believe that there is some supernatural agency in the universe and most of all, all religions search for some kind of a connection with the whole, every religion is an expression of the longing that is in the human spirit whether it came from biological evolution, cultural evolutions, a different thing. But the fact remains that these are expressions of that longing. Having said that, our question therefore of great interest, especially contemporary interest in the modern world, is how are we going to cope with these differences? Now there is something called radical universalism which is propagated by many Hindu thinkers in the late 18th... 19th, early 20th century which said that all religions say the same. This of course is certainly not valid by any means, however, what the Hindu religion says is that we need to understand the basic fact that even though there maybe but one God, that God is described in different ways by different people. And once we recognize this, we then begin to respect different approaches to the unfathomable mystery, if I may so. And it is ultimate mutual respect and understanding that we can... establish some kind of a religious harmony which is badly needed in today's world.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Nobody disagrees with that, this has been a quest that goes on as far as human history is concerned and we hope to make progress. I think one of the ways to make progress is to understand the particularisms and what are the aspects of each religion that they hold unique. From the Hindu tradition, what would you say are the overarching principles that are unique to Hinduism?

Varadaraja Raman:

Well... I have tried to formulate three or four or five essential things which are probably unique to Hinduism if not unique they're certainly character (unint.). One of them is a dichotomy between two kinds of realities, one the physical reality, the reality of which we become aware to our perceptual senses and our analytical modes and our intellects which is an extraordinarily important kind of reality. But there is also another kind of reality, there are technical terms in the Hindu world (unint.) and (unint.) where it is... a kind of reality that is transcendental and efforts to grasp that transcendental reality through the analytical molds are often futile if not always. And that is one of the

tenets of the Hindu world. The other is that there is... it is possible to get glimpses of that world beyond through this spiritual disciplines of meditation and the like. And another is that there are multiple paths to the recognition of that spiritual truth and the paths include atheism if that's what one want. Because the meaning there is we find meaning and purpose and fulfillment as human beings by these different molds and once we recognize that, we also are (unint.) as it were to respect the different (unint.) and all of this is based incidentally on another important recognition and that is the finitude of the human mind. The human mind is enormously powerful and it is finite and therefore its grasp of the infinite is limited.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

If there are these diverse paths to truth, is anyone or any series more privileged than the other, being a better way?

Varadaraja Raman:

That is exactly what I would call exclusivist perspective and that is, if I may say so, the ailment from which many religions, if not all religions, have suffered over the ages.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Well I would say the exclusivism says not that there are multiple ways, but there's my way and then there's the highway.

Varadaraja Raman:

Exactly. Exactly.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And it's either my way is right and everything else is wrong...

Varadaraja Raman:

Exactly.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

What I hear you saying about the Hindu tradition is there are multiple ways and I'm just saying do they say that there are multiple ways but one maybe better or more effective than others?

Varadaraja Raman:

Well it is one of those logical paradoxes because of the multiple ways, the one which says there are multiple ways is the privileged one, you see, you better... so it makes it... a little difficult in that way to argue for it, but from a... there are people... Usually those who say they are not many ways, multiple paths, are the ones who regard their own path as exclusivists. So there is nothing wrong in this within traditions, it is a lot like... if somebody on the planet earth is asked which is the most important star, is there such a thing as the most... of course, it is the sun. But from that to conclude that there are no other stars and that people living in other planetary systems should regard our sun as the most important, would be somewhat ridiculous if you have a cosmic perspective. So it was somewhat like that, this exclusivist approach to religion at least from my personal perspective and from... I think from the larger Hindu perspective is precisely this that without diminishing the importance and significance of the many different faith systems in the world, one can still argue that to regard one of them as superior or inferior to another, is somewhat shortsighted. And more seriously could lead to the kinds of confrontations that we often find in the world.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But in Hinduism, one certainly sees different Hindu sects which seem to claim a similar kind of particularism that Western sects and Christianity do, so I don't think anybody's immune to that kind of superiorism...

Varadaraja Raman:

Absolutely, absolutely not, I was going to add that not when we're talking about universalism, particularly in religion,

I was going to add, not just amongst religion, but even within religions, amongst the sects and sub-sects which characterize practically all the great religions of the world, there are fundamental differences. The question is, how far the practitioners of the faith go beyond that and recognize that the essence of these religious quests is what matters, not the particular doctrinal differences that become relevant within historical and geographical and cultural contexts.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

I would think that very few serious adherents to religions to all cultures have that view.

Varadaraja Raman:

I am afraid that is a historical fact and I think...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

A contemporary fact...

Varadaraja Raman:

Yeah and also historical because there have been all the persecutions between different sects in any of the great religions, that are attributable to this somewhat naïve, to me it seems, conviction that our own path is the only right one. It maybe the only most fulfilling one for ourselves, which is fair, but to say that others should follow the same path is where... And this unfortunately is something from which even some atheists (unint.) because they too are convinced that their own path is the ultimate truth. So we need to develop that sensitivity for other (unint.) insofar as they do not hurt and harm others because that's very important in terms of respecting all paths to fulfillment.