

# Is God a "Person"?: Varadaraja V. Raman

Source URL: <https://www.closetotruth.com/interviews/2867>



## Transcript - Long

### Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So is God a person or does God have a nature? V.V., in trying to really discern what God is all about, one of the important questions in western tradition is the nature of God's personhood, is God a person. What that means is does God have things that we have in our mental life, like beliefs, like desires, like purposes? So in the Hindu tradition when we think about God, is it legitimate to even ask the question is God a person?

### Varadaraja Raman:

Yeah, that's a very important and significant question. And in the Hindu tradition it is answered, if that's the word, in the following manner. Suppose I want to prove to a student that the three angles of a triangle together make two right angles. I could say the following. Consider the triangle ABC and extend the base BC to a point of D and draw a parallel from the point C to the side AB. If I keep continuing like that, the student will be utterly lost. However, if I go to a blackboard and draw the triangle and draw all these lines, then the student can follow it a little better. In the same way, the Divine is an abstract principle and in order to understand, appreciate or apprehend it we need symbols, and that is in the nature of the human mind or its limitations of the human mind. So what one says in the Hindu tradition is that the Divine has the physically, visualizable dimension and the abstract dimension. It is not to whether God is a person but that God or the Divine has a personal dimension through which we can better appreciate and experience the Divine. So there is a Sanskrit of horism (ph.) or a statement which says [HINDU LANGUAGE]. Using the icon, or what they used to call idols, is the first step towards recognizing the Divine. And then it goes on to say that ultimately the next one is by chanting, and ultimately it is by meditation on the abstract, on the universe as a whole. So these are different steps in the recognition. Now, needless to say, some people drop out after high school and some go further and so on. Likewise, there are many people who are content with what is sometimes called "icon worship" or "idol worship" as it is sometimes said by the Abrahamic traditions. It is not idol worship; it is the more the worship of the cosmic whole in the format of an idol because, like for the elementary student we draw a triangle on the board, it is easier to grasp. Well, that is the way to... So the personal dimension is more a dimension of the Divine than the nature of the Divine itself.

### Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So we have the person reflecting the nature of the Divine, and that nature of the Divine is the more abstract. And I would assume that's the—that's the more real version. Now if we focus on that real version, can we ask is that real version, the abstract version of God, a person in the sense of the definition of having beliefs and desires and purpose like a person would?

### Varadaraja Raman:

That idea is this abstract divine principle, often called the "spiritual undercurrent (ph.) of the universe", is what one calls "Brahman" (ph.) in the Hindu tradition. And that Brahman, again, is said to have two natures or two levels. One of them is called "nilgunna (ph.) Brahman", meaning the Brahman without attributes. It is infinity without attributes. It is a spirituality that cannot be described in the words—with the words and adjectives we are familiar with. But there is also the saggunna (ph.) Brahman, a Brahman with attributes. And these attributes are usually the highest forms of the attributes normal humans have. That means qualities of mercy and kindness and goodness and power so the—the—or being present here and there (ph.). They're triple quant—qualities of omni presence (unint.) and omni persons (ph.). All these things are part of this saggunna Brahman, the Brahman with qualities. And those qualities are there for simply the pictured as the very highest of what we humans do. So perhaps if there was another planetary system where there are conscious entities, then they would, of course, be picturing the saggunna Brahman in terms of the qualities that they might possess in their particular state of conscious evolution. We don't know.

### Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But the abstract version of Brahman would be, in essence, the highest form because it's a form that cannot be

described by any attribute.

**Varadaraja Raman:**

Exactly. And that abstract Brahman is described as the cosmic experiencer (ph.). And so that is a term that we may explore further if you want, but it's a very important concept (inaud.).

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

Please ex... This is a cosmic experiencer.

**Varadaraja Raman:**

Yeah.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

It sounds like that's an active process, that experience that the experiencer does has some generative powers?

**Varadaraja Raman:**

Well, it is not necessarily the generated powers as the awareness powers. When... As human beings, we are aware of many things that are happening all around us. We see objects, like a table or a book or a chair. They are not aware, as far as we know, of what (inaud.) is happening in this room. But as conscious entities, we are aware of that. Now this awareness, our awareness, is limited in space and time because of the (unint.) nature of our being. Now the Hindu vision is that that is likewise your grander experiencer which has been there from the first tick of cosmic time, from the very first big bang of (unint.) has—or even prior to that. But this cosmic experience is what one calls Brahman and it is an awareness and it has—it is pure (ph.) awareness or pure consciousness, as one would say.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

In the Abrahamic religions one of the primary purposes for having God to be a person is to enable this relationship that we are to have with him, whether it's prayer or providence or some of these kinds of—of—of personal concerns. How does that work in Hinduism?

**Varadaraja Raman:**

In the Hinduism—in the Hindu world it is precisely the same except that the tradition, or the wisdom of the sages of the traditions say that this kind of a personal relationship is only one dimension of spirituality. It is a necessary one in the initial stages. It is a useful and powerful one, but it is still getting only partial vision of what this cosmic experience is all about. So through meditation and through other spiritual exercises we experience the oneness with the universe which is very different from the kinds of personal interactions. Without diminishing its value, we recognize that it is only one aspect of spiritual life.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

One of the arguments in the western religions concerning the nature of God is that—is that if you say that God has a nature, you are limiting God in that process. How does that...

**Varadaraja Raman:**

Yes, certainly. It is... As I was using the word "dimension", it is like moving. If we are on a plane, on a—on a two-dimensional surface, and we draw pictures there, we are limiting, as you were saying, in the—in the Abrahamic traditions. We are limiting in the sense—not in the sense of limiting God but in the sense of limiting our own experience of the Divine. Every time we constrain ourselves to one plane of the spiritual experience, as being whether to a particular historical religious tradition for example, there is nothing wrong with it but it is only giving us one glimpse of something which is far more powerful and intrinsically more substantial or fundamental in the universe. So that is the Hindu way of looking at it. Yeah, the idea is not, I won't use the word, limiting. I would rather say it is recognizing only one aspect of it. It's like seeing a three-dimensional object and looking only at two dimensions. So it is true that in these ways we are getting a glimpse of the Divine but we are not getting the total view of the whole thing.