

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Sex and the Sacred: Biology is Divinity

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Hello and welcome everyone. I hope you're having a wonderful day wherever you are in the world.

It was interesting because as I thought about what I wanted to say today, I found myself much more interested in the subtitle of this talk than in the question of sex and the sacred specifically. Since everything is sacred, it goes without saying that physical connection between two human beings is sacred as well, depending on how they hold the experience.

Anyone who's visited the caves in India at Khajuraho and seen the extraordinary sculptures there, depicting every possible form of coitus under the approving eyes of the gods, knows that in cultures such as the Hindu culture, where God is seen as part and parcel of spiritual life, sexuality is viewed as potentially a sacred aspect of being. Shiva and his consort Parvati make no secret of their passion for one another in Hindu lore, nor is physicality considered a lesser form of love, as long as we remember who we truly are and to remember also to honor the other as ourselves.

So, the question of sex and the sacred is kind of a foregone conclusion. There are religions that ban different kinds of sex, of course, as if God cares who we slept with or what kind of sex we have with one another. But I'm going to trust that most of the people in The Seekers Forum are a little more open minded than that and don't necessarily subscribe to reactionary moral views laid down by churches and temples and mosques.

I want to talk to you about the question of biology and divinity and what they have to do with one another, because this question goes to the core of our understanding of where we stand in the universe. Do we believe that as human beings in mortal bodies we're fundamentally separate from God? Or do we believe that such separation is, in fact, impossible?

As Hamlet, the seeker, might put it, to be divine or not to be divine, that is the question. Let me read you something from Sri Aurobindo, a revolutionary Indian master, who was educated at Cambridge and worked with Gandhi and came to be considered one of the most forward-looking Indian sages of the twentieth century.

He was responding to a question about whether the divine exists in the world and to do so, he used the metaphor of the avatar, which is God appearing in human form, as Christians believe happened with the birth of Jesus, and other religions attribute to different figures.

Aurobindo put it this way: "All here is God. Far from the infinite being unable to take on finiteness, the whole universe is nothing else but that. Far from the spirit being incapable of form or matter or mind, and assuming the limited nature of a body, all here is nothing but that. The world exists only by that connection, that assumption."

Isn't that great? "Far from the infinite being unable to take on finiteness, the whole universe is nothing else but that." I remember reading that passage for the first time and having a serious epiphany. It's one thing to make vague blanket statements like "God is everywhere," and quite another to invert our Western understanding of the separation between God and man and claim

that there's nothing here but God, that everything we see and taste and touch and hear and make love to are divine, including the sad and the painful and the ugly.

That God is not only formless but also in form, that the things of nature aren't less divine because they live and die and are imperfect. This requires us to really expand our definition of what divinity is and what qualifies as being of God. And that's where the trouble arises when we start to expand that definition of what God is and is not, because if God exists at such close range, how can it allow such terrible things to happen in the world? What does God mean if it doesn't stand for some sort of protection? Is God so fickle or weak or nearsighted to create such a world as this only to step away and allow devastation? How can that possibly be, we ask ourselves.

And finding no plausible answer in standard religions, many people have turned away from faith altogether in favor of the sense-making rational mind, because as human beings, we like to know things for certain. We like boxes and categories and divisions that help us create order in sometimes random reality.

We keep things separate, at least in our minds so that we can better navigate our lives. In devising a spiritual belief system, particularly if you want to control people, it's much simpler to split reality in two, between God and creation, and to keep our concept of God pure and off limits. Also, to ensure that we don't get too big for our britches, to keep ourselves in check by projecting a punitive, judgmental, black or white character onto our image of the divine.

Unfortunately, we have swallowed this divisive idea hook, line, and sinker and felt small, sinful, and separate. And even though this makes us unhappy, our ordinary unhappiness is less threatening to us than the alternative, that all here is nothing but the divine and that there's no distant theological God with the power to rescue us from above as long as we obey its rules.

This leaves us with the choice to accept our greatness, the God within, and look at the world through the eyes of the divine, or to judge ourselves as unworthy sinners in need of some external divine redemption that's unlikely to ever come. Instead, a grownup approach to spirituality means realizing that the choice is ours, to love or to judge, not some external God's and that choice is at the center of the seeker's life.

To believe that biology is divinity requires that we release this rescue fantasy and the confusing idea that the good in the world is due to God and the evil is all about human failing. It means rejecting the myth of original sin as well, this idea that incarnation is some kind of spiritual demotion from dwelling in the heavenly realms.

This negates the idea that the flesh itself is evil and the source of our problem and that only by transcending it and in believing in an invisible God in the sky can we hope to redeem our sinfulness and attain some sort of postmortem state of perfection.

But this change of mind is no small feat, because it means rejecting the paternalistic approach to spiritual life that's dominated in the West for three thousand years. This view splits the Father

God from his lowly creation and it makes transcendence the object of spirituality rather than embodiment.

Only by balancing this fragmented view with one that integrates the feminine can we hope to heal the false division and bring the sacred into the physical world. No more fantasies about going to heaven or about getting off the wheel of samsara as they say in Buddhism, which also comes from a paternalistic history (so that we don't have to incarnate again).

Instead we want to embrace life in all its dimension as a manifestation of the divine, wherein the same way that a mother would be proud of a child instead of scorning it for having been born. Just consider those two different ways of looking at creation: looking at birth as a mortification, as a sending out of the garden from the garden, or looking at it the way a mother would look at her child, bringing her child that she's brought into the world.

Those are antithetical ways of seeing our existence and understanding our connection to the divine. As Aurobindo put it, "If there is to be a future, it will wear a crown of feminine design." Andre Malraux, the French poet, put it differently. He said, "The twenty-first century will have to be mystical or not at all," meaning that it will require a unified vision of reality to survive the damage that we are doing to the world by cleaving it in two, by cleaving it in two between the divine and the merely human or the merely physical.

When we do that, when we imagine that the life of the body, the global body and the personal one, is less than divine, then it's impossible to bring sacredness to our lives or to treat the world and other people with the care that they deserve.

We've talked before in The Seekers Forum about expanding our ideas of what happiness means, to include not only the pleasant and desirable things that happen to us, but also the undesirable things. Nothing less than accepting it all can put us at ease in the war that we carry on with reality, embracing this and pushing that away, calling that happy and other things unhappy or outside our sphere of what happy could look like.

Today we're talking about doing the same thing with God. Instead of dividing the world between God and Satan, and keeping ourselves on the path of conflict, we want to unify these two ideas. Otherwise, we only set ourselves up for hypocrisy, when we reject the things that we don't want to call us and embrace the things that we do, or reject the things we don't want to call God and embrace the things that we do. It sets us up for hypocrisy, personal and spiritual.

When we imagine that our shadow is a separate entity, we not only lie to ourselves by holding onto some sanitized version of who we'd like to be, but we also weaken our ability to address our faults by pushing them out of sight. With each subtraction of what we don't like, we become smaller and more delusional, more rigid, less capable of confronting the contradictions of life.

And similarly, with our conception of God, a sanitized version of the divine only shrinks our faith and leads to ignorance.

Here's another story from India. I remember the first time I was in Benares, which is now Varanasi, and coming out of my little hostel and bumping into a funeral procession in the street carrying a dead body on a litter. The tea vendors were washing their cups and the merchants were selling their wares and people were walking on the sidewalks. Business was going on as usual, and there was a corpse in their midst on its way to the burning ghat on the river.

I was fascinated. I was sort of stunned and watched them from a distance and followed them down to the river and watched as they set the body on the pyre and the Brahmin priest did the ritual and the fire was lit. The body was burned and then a mallet was used to smash the bones once the flesh had gone up in smoke.

There was nothing unusual about the sight, nothing ghoulish or macabre. It showed me vividly how repressed and naïve we are in the West, how childish and scared we are of hiding death from view. Why else do we conceal the sick and the infirm and keep our elderly people in holding pens in this country, out of sight and out of mind, except to avoid confronting the point where life and death meet.

When we do look at this meeting point, we begin to notice the permeability of the divide between life and death. How, when something or someone dies, something changes, and something doesn't change, and how there is a continuity.

Imagine how our sense of self could shift if we weren't so afraid to reveal how close form and formlessness actually are, how easily flesh turns to smoke. Then we would see that biology is nothing but the divine and that energy is indissoluble, that we are the indestructible parts of the whole that never actually die but simply change form as aspects of the divine.

As the Roman philosopher Lucretius put it, "Nothing is ever annihilated, but simply dissolved into its first bodies," which means reduced to its essence.

In mystic traditions there's a clear understanding that flesh and spirit are one, that dark and light are different aspects of the same divine circularity. In Christian mysticism, this is known as the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the sacred marriage of opposites. The mystic path teaches that just as love moves us toward God, so does the awareness of hatred and cruelty move us toward God. The experience of the ungodly, of evil, becomes part of the complete initiation into nondual awareness. The acceptance of ugliness is part of our capacity to experience beauty and our ability to know ourselves in the whole.

When we stop labeling good and bad, God and not God, acceptable and not acceptable, sacred and profane, we clear the dust from our eyes and begin to see reality as a continuous stream of contradictory elements joined together. And when we do that, it's balm to the spirit, to finally relax into contradiction and relax into human messiness and to recognize the mess as holy.

When we approach the contradiction of the mess being holy with our minds, it seems impossible, the mind rejects it. But with the body and the spirit, it's not nearly as bad. So, what if life is messy and mortal and unfixable? Who cares if we have clay feet that will be that way until the day we die? Only the mind cares, the mind with its idea of self is what suffers over imperfection.

It's also what holds itself separate from God – this is a truly important point – because the mind can't conceive of or create connection, least of all with the divine. But the body and the spirit can. The body knows what it's made of, dust from the stars. It knows that it is celestial at its core and that nothing else could possibly be true. But the mind rejects that. The mind doesn't want things to be that simple.

So, ask yourself, do you believe that biology is divinity? Do you believe that reality, exactly as it is, is none other than God in earthly form? Or does this sound like blasphemy to you? Does God cease to have any meaning to you when you make it more familiar? Do you need that distance, that altar, in order to feel devotion?

Do you need to hold God separate from yourself and above yourself in order to feel devotion? Or, can you have devotion to life itself?

Can you even bow to yourself, not narcissistically, but as an aspect of God, the way strangers on the street in the East join their palms together in Namaste? The divine in me salutes the divine in you. When we can do that, we act as sacred beings in the world and when that happens, awakening truly does become possible.

That's what I wanted to say to you today about biology and divinity. I'd like to put a question out to you, which is, do you need to see God as separate from yourself in order to feel devotion? Do you need to separate yourself from the divine, to look up to the divine in order to have the spiritual sense aroused in yourself? Or, are you able to bow to life as it is, and feel that infusion of gratitude and recognition?