

Swami Agnivesh

President of the World Council of Arya Samaj

'Religion is a soul-saving industry'

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Swami Agnivesh is known for his campaigns against bonded labour, alcoholism and female foeticide. He is also the President of the World Council of Arya Samaj.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is about relating to the Creator through the Creation. It is a relationship.

It also implies as a human being to maximize my ananda, happiness. How do I do this? With the happiness of people and creatures all around me. So spirituality is a way of life, and a universal one. In that sense it is the opposite of religions, which are divisive, territorial, related to a book, or a prophet or rituals. Ideally spirituality should have no rituals and be completely universal. Diversity ought to be celebrated, instead of being feared and or considered to be a threat. Because every particle of the universe is both the messenger and the message.

A couple of years ago, I was invited by the government of Iran to a conference in Isfahan, with representatives of a number of religions. The furore over the Danish cartoons was then at its peak. There were riots among Muslims all over the world. When asked to share my views, I asked: 'who do you hold greater, Allah or Muhammad?' Spontaneously the Muslim clerics said, of course, Allah; Muhammad was only the Messenger. So I pursued: "if someone caricatures Muhammad all the Muslims get so agitated, but if Allah is defiled or caricatured, I haven't seen anybody demonstrate and get agitated!" There was a stunned silence in the audience. "Air, water, earth are all created by Allah, by God. They are being polluted every single day which means Allah's creations are being defiled. But

I have never seen any devotees of God getting agitated or doing something about it." They were completely taken aback.

I also explained that according to the Vedas, I equally subscribe to the idea of one God, the Truth is one. Yet, to be a Muslim, one has to say "Allah is One and Muhammad is the Messenger", while according to the Vedas I would say "God is One and every particle of the universe is Its Messenger". We hold every particle as the Messenger and do not have to wait for someone in particular.

There has been so much caricaturing of God along the centuries. People forget there is beauty and music in the Creation and that every particle is sacred. Relating to this Creation is like relating to the Creator, no matter what you call it. So spirituality in that sense is that profound relationship one should establish in celebrating the integrity, the beauty, the diversity of Creation, the Oneness, as much as truth, compassion and justice, which are all attributes of the Creator.

Those values are all pervasive and God is formless since It is everywhere. It can be experienced any time. We do not need to go out and pray or do anything to feel truth, love, compassion. Just experiencing them within is experiencing God. The more we do so, the more empowered we feel to take on the forces of untruth, hatred, violence, injustice from without.

This is basically the story of your life?

Yes, this is what brought out activism in me. As a human rights or social activist, I never visit a temple, a mosque or a gurudwara. I never practice rituals. I just try to relate.

But do you have special moments of the day to connect with the divine?

Yes, I celebrate life in me and all around and then try to understand what is this life in me. If I breathe, who is breathing? Am I breathing or is breathing happening to me? It is never a conscious effort. So what is that force or power breathing for me, taking oxygen outside, cleaning it and feeding with it billions of cells? Realizing and reflecting on that compassion makes me feel there is something great. I don't have to look for any miracle to have faith in that Creator. Every breath is enough.

How did you get to this understanding, coming originally from an orthodox Hindu family?

Yes, we are born in a certain religion, caste, race, nationality, gender etc. And those are the root causes of discrimination, injustice and violence all around. Those are like boxes.

I was born into a very high Brahmin caste in Andhra Pradesh. I lost my father at the age of four. My maternal grand-father, who was like the prime minister of a small princely state then took care of me. I grew up with him, worshipping gods and goddesses like in any orthodox Brahmin family, never allowed to ask questions, to doubt, or reason out. Dogma. I had simple questions in my mind – how does this god with three heads sleep? Which mouth does he use for eating? I was always rebuked and told not to ask such questions.

Similarly, the caste system was all-pervasive. Untouchability for instance: the labourers working on my grandfather's land were mostly bonded labourers. I have been fighting for the cause and liberation of bonded labourers for years, and can remember so clearly their faces, darkened by the sun, half naked, standing in the courtyard after the sunset. Whatever food would be left by the family, I was told to go and give them, without ever touching them, just throwing it at them. So I would dutifully go,

throw it and come back. This untouchability was not confined to them. My mother and older sister would be untouchable a few days a month. I wanted to ask why my uncle or grandfather were never untouchable, and was always told to be quiet.

At night I was afraid of ghosts and would chant the Hanuman Chalisa. My siblings would ask me to chant it for them. So very early in childhood I learnt that in religion you can delegate things. And I realized over time that this whole industry of religion rests on this: people are praying for the soul of others, not for their own. I call it the multi-billion dollar soul-saving industry, all those religions. There were also so many superstitions: crossing a black cat's path, sneezing were considered inauspicious. All those taboos, dogmas, rituals were enmeshed in my childhood and I was never allowed to question. It felt so suffocating. Then, when I went to Calcutta for my college education, I encountered the Arya Samaj movement, of Swami Dayananda, which influenced me tremendously. He was a rebel against orthodoxy, Brahmanism, idol worship, casteism and so on. And he laid a very strong foundation based on a rational approach to understand God, the soul etc., based on the Vedas. There I imbibed the three D's that I celebrate in my life: doubt, debate, and if necessary dissent. I consider these three the spiritual pillars. To be really spiritual, one should never accept anything as the given truth. No one should be allowed to walk away with the monopoly of truth. I have to decide what my truth is. I cannot mortgage that autonomy to anyone else. It means I am responsible. So praying has no place. Prayer at best should be preparation for action, to be strong and do things. Chanting and thinking that there will be peace in the world does not work.

So when I came to this movement, it had a tremendous influence on my thinking and I started shedding off the layers of being a Hindu, a Brahmin and so on. And began feeling I simply am a human being. Religions, castes, nationalities that divide human beings so much – I gradually got liberated from all this. God and religion became demystified and simplified. It was also saving so much time and energy by not having to go to temples and through endless rituals every day! Just a few moments of silence, to go within are needed.

If God is truth and I am being truthful, let's start with the truth about myself, trying to find out who I am. Is this body and name "me"? The more you reflect, the more you realize "me" is an illusion. Just for the sake of convenience we have a name. At the age of 29 I was initiated as a Swami and my name changed. But we get so stuck with it and it feeds the ego. Over time I wiped out the illusions that I am Agnivesh, this man in a saffron turban.

But still, you have kept the name, the turban and the colour – why?

There is a very good reason for this.

In one's lifetime everyone should try and transcend the self as much as possible — first when we marry and transcend ourselves for our spouse, then for our children; later on in life we transcend the family for some community work, and in the fourth phase we prepare ourselves for the final journey. There we must transcend everything and are initiated as a Swami, taking sanyas. When administered this oath, we take three vows, meant to help transcending the narrow self: the desire for children and family has to be left behind and the whole world becomes your family; property and relationships are left behind and one becomes decasted, and declassed: the third is to leave behind the name one was known by until then, and a new name is devised.

I happen to have jumped the second and third phase and went straight to the fourth one. Trying to live those values and transcend the self, it helps to have this saffron colour, which is like fire. And my name

as well: my teacher allowed me to choose it and I love the symbol of fire. We are supposed to consign to the fire our so-called worldly desires and move around like a flame, purifying everything around, without discrimination.

Now why hold on to this name and attire?

I have found over time that the concept of swamihood has been highjacked for some very narrow political ends by all sorts of parties and groups like the RSS, the VHP, the BJP and so on. They have done it great harm. A swami is not supposed to have any religion. He or she has to be purely universal. So you cannot have a Hindu swami. And these people call themselves Hindu swamis. Also, religious bigots and all sorts of people are dressed like a swami but in fact are social parasites. There are millions of swamis in this country, but most are not carrying those values and engage in anti-social work. So in order to confront these fake swamis, I thought that I must continue. At times I feel like giving it up because I am seen as a Hindu, whereas I do not consider myself as such. But I still use it to confront those people.

You went from teaching law into swamihood, why such an extreme choice?

Actually, first came the decision to become a full time political activist. When I was teaching in Saint-Xavier College, around 1966-7, the Naxalite movement had started in the upper reaches of West Bengal. In very famous colleges like Presidency College or Scottish College, young men and women were taken by that struggle, embracing Maoism, Chairman Mao, the Red Book, Che Guevarra and so on. They wanted to bring about change and their thirst for justice impressed me very much. I was teaching business management law, serving as a junior to a great lawyer who then became the Chief Justice of India but within me I was wondering why there was so much disparity all around me. Why are justice and equality so absent in society? Religions had no answer, including my own Arya Samaj where many colleagues were not disturbed by it all. A tinge of Marxist ideology had in fact penetrated me.

But I could not accept the Naxalites' embrace of violence. I could not go that route. Besides, the Naxalites considered everything of ancient Indian heritage, including the Vedas, Ramayana and so on as bourgeois culture. Religion and spirituality had no place for them. They wanted to bring out radical change and erase everything. But I felt they were missing out on things. They treated chairman Mao as their ultimate guide and his Red Book as their Gita. Many young men and women would get married reciting passages from it. They basically replaced one dogma with another and were resorting to reckless violence, criticizing all sorts of great people, breaking their statues and so on. But I felt there is great wisdom in some of the ancient people and literature and we can draw much inspiration from it, while conveying all along the message of revolution and radical change.

So the only alternative left for me was to create a new space for non-violent struggle.

I wanted to explore how it could be done. So I left my job and came to the villages of Haryana, joining swami Indravesht. Together we started a new movement, based on Vedas and socialism. This was the basic urge. Because of our agitation for farmers and other basic issues, we were jailed. We were fighting against liquor distribution for instance because alcohol was creating so much domestic violence, crime, accidents and so on. Mostly rural women were supporting us because it ruined so much their family and village life. We first assembled in Kurukshetra and walked for 18 days to the Red Fort. In every village we got tremendous welcome and support.

But every time we would take up any of those issues, the government would come heavily on us. So we thought we should create a party and become the government itself. On April 7, 1970, the day we were initiated as swamis, on the same platform, we announced we were not running away from the struggles of life and instead, would create a political party to bring about political change and through that, social change.

In 1977, I joined as a MLA, we then merged our party into the Janata Party under the leadership of Jay Prakash Narayanan, a great Marxist turned Gandhian. In 1979, I was minister for education in the government of Haryana. Then one day, there was police firing in Faridabad. The chief minister, in order to please the industrialists had imposed section 144 for the whole year, barring meetings larger than five people. It had been a peaceful procession, the police fired and twelve people were killed. I protested in the Cabinet and was told to keep quiet. But I gave a press conference condemning the police firing and asking for an inquiry on my own government. And I resigned. I was in any case very unhappy with our government – none of the reforms we had promised were being carried out, corruption and nepotism were as rampant as in the previous Congress government. I was very disenchanted. And decided to devote myself completely to the cause of bonded labour.

So politics cannot be an instrument for social change?

This has been a constant internal debate for me. Politics can be very spiritual as they pose the challenge of living up to your values. Outside of politics it is quite easy to be truthful, practice justice and so on. But when there, using that power for the real social and economic change is another story. I would have loved to see Gandhi become Prime Minister and see how he would have practiced those values. That is the real challenge, the real test. Rather than saying "I won't hold any position of power because I am clean"...

So you developed a sort of social spirituality?

Yes. Justice and equality are the greatest messages we get from the Creation and Creator. There is no racial difference between the earth, the moon, the sun and so on.

In those moments of disillusion and challenges, where would you get the energy?

Actually, the more I had such moments, the more energy I got. I started with a lot of fire and anger in me. Over the years I have mellowed down and in a sense grown more mature. But at the same time I feel more energy, as I can relate to more people and struggles all over the world. That gives me much energy. Also, I find more sustenance in the fact that while we need to keep the struggle on, it is important to wait for the right moment, when the inner contradictions play themselves up. For instance, Communism died in the late 80's and there was a sense of triumphalism for capitalism. But this global meltdown is a clear message of the death of capitalism. Greed cannot be the real force to sustain development. The plunder of nature, Darwinism are causing climate change, another huge crisis. Every day we lose species. This is a wake-up call. So the economic meltdown and climate threat, plus the global threat of terrorism are the challenges we must face now. And at the same time, I see in the last fifty years that some kind of a momentum has taken place: it was not just decolonization, but see the Dalits and how with their right to vote it is changing the entire social and economic profile of the country. I am not saying it is all perfect, but it is a great change. No one could have imagined a Dalit woman as Chief Minister of UP, with a Brahmin under her. This is very inspiring. Also, the women and how they have changed: my mother was a widow at a young age and could have never thought of remarrying. Today widows are much better off. Women in general are in a better place. The women

force is far ahead of what used to be in previous generations. So in the last 50 years we have witnessed a quantum change. This sustains me and inspires me. Those global revolutions and deep, deep changes can happen.

What about coincidences and synchronicities in your life?

In every unplanned event, I see a larger plan at play. Whenever I have time to reflect I can see it. For so many things I managed to do, there is no way I can understand how it happened. So necessarily there was some larger force helping me.

There were no moments of doubting that force?

No, rather of reinforcing that force.

Does each one of us have a specific mission in life?

We have a spark – the soul has a divine, very tiny, invisible spark. Every human being's challenge is to let that potential unfold, in a very natural way, and not obstruct it, enriching oneself and the world outside with that unfolding.

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you choose?

I would love to be born a woman, and fight it out.

If there were one question you could ask God, what would it be?

Sometimes I feel like asking the Creator what will I be born as, so that I can prepare myself. Or if there was a way of knowing what leads to what: a little more guidance could help, especially it would help create more righteousness. Can God help us to establish a link between the present and the so-called future?

Did you ever have recollections of past lives?

No.

What is your idea of happiness?

It is a deep sense of peace and thoughtlessness. Whenever I experience that, it is an ecstatic feeling. Happiness is also related to my not having desires. I try to be without desires, as much as possible.

But when you see so much suffering around, how can have peace and no desire for change?

It is not an anger that burns and destroys from within, rather an energy that empowers you. Righteous indignation is something that keeps me alive. Whenever I have spoken truth to the powerful, I have felt immense happiness, especially inconvenient truth. I get a kick out of it! When I identify myself with the most defenseless and most voiceless like child labour, tribals, bonded labourers and so on, then I feel great. My heart cries and I feel great. And I have a sort of peace. I have real happiness. Because it helps me transcend and forget myself.