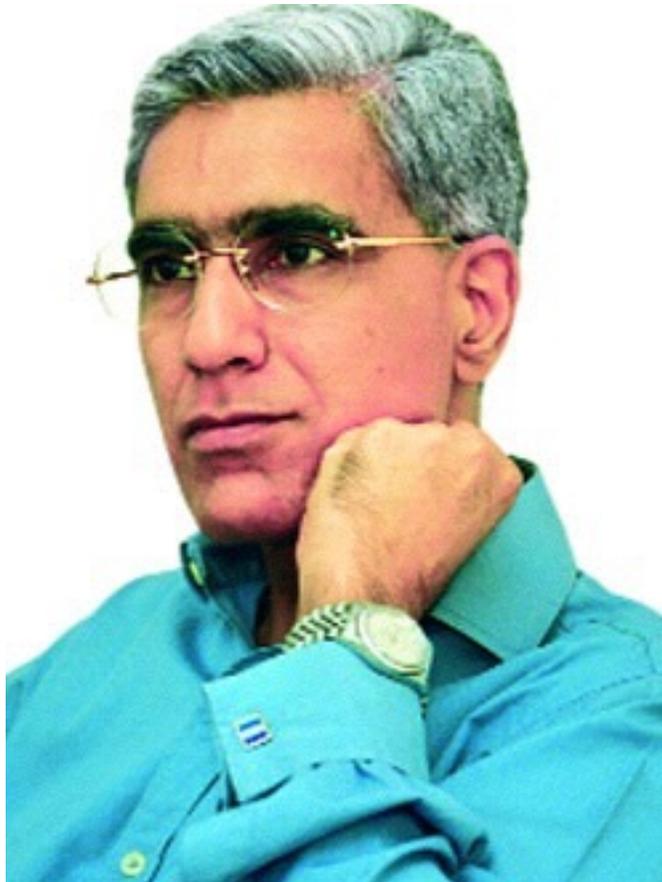


Karan Thapar

Journalist

'There may be a God'

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Karan Thapar is a veteran journalist, television anchor and columnist.

What does spirituality mean to you?

A belief in something bigger than myself, in a factor that guides me, in a spirit that exists, symbolizes hope, comfort, assurance – all of that in a loose way is what the term spirituality suggests to me.

Do you believe you are guided and protected by a superior force?

I believe there may be a God. When I was younger, maybe because I was less sure of myself intellectually or embarrassed, I would deny the existence of God. It was then the fashionable thing to do. But the truth is that even at that stage, I did believe in the Lord. It was mostly a form of superstition, but still I did not want to offend Him in case He existed. Especially at times of exams, I would get into

deals with Him: I would give up things I loved in exchange for an excellent result. I was putting pressure on Him, believing He was morally bound as I kept my part of the bargain.

When I grew older, I realized what intellectual hypocrisy this was. I was escaping from the fact that I felt the need to believe in what you may call God, or a force. And I have had this need to this day. It is not a belief anchored in religion, I do not know the rituals of the Hindu faith, my prayer or worship are not defined by any custom or practice. But this belief fulfils a need – and why should I deny it to myself?

Do you believe you have a special mission or purpose in this life?

I do not believe in any form of predestination, and knowing if I am part of some greater plan or not does not matter to me. I think it is a question of talent, and luck. I ended up in this career by a series of accidents. In school I wanted to be an academic. Later in Oxford I decided to be a journalist, and wrote to six British newspaper editors saying pompously that I was the right choice for them. Four did not reply, one told me off, and the sixth actually rang the number I had given. He said he was astonished to receive such an audacious letter, and was tempted to meet me. He proceeded to invite me for lunch. It happened to be Charles Douglas-Home, Foreign Editor of the Times of London. A week later I was hired.

Charley played an incredibly inspiring role in my life, of course not one I would call spiritual, but definitely that of a traditional guru, much more in an Indian sense than in a British way.

To begin with, I had to spend some time abroad, in Lagos, Nigeria. I had not been trained as a journalist, I had never been one. Instead of filing my pieces to the desk, Charley had me send them to him. Every single night for three months, around 11 or 11:30pm, he would hold a tutorial and talk me through the piece on the phone, teach me my job. What an incredible and generous thing to do! And he did not even know who the hell I was! I was a complete stranger who had written him an arrogant letter. He just took me on, and protected me.

Fourteen months later, as the Nigerian government was displeased with a couple of my articles and removed my accreditation, I moved back to London and joined the Times there. A few months later, Charley asked me to do leaders, the unsigned editorial pieces that go out as the paper's opinion. I was only twenty-nine years old, and two years before I had not even written one article. But Charley pushed me. So for the next nine years, the Times' opinion on India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and so on were written by me.

Charley gave me all the confidence because he saw some spark in me which he was prepared to risk and nurture. I did not get everything right, but he covered up, supported me and helped me. Though many people viewed him as arrogant, extremely opinionated, with aristocratic airs, I saw him as someone tremendously inspirational. And I told myself that if I ever am a boss with younger people working with me, I should do the same three things: spot talent, nurture it, and have the courage to stand by that person when he or she is making mistakes.

Today, when I look at my profession and what I do, I love doing one-on-ones, I enjoy discussion programs, but I'd like to do more documentaries, more audience related television shows. I would like to make my programs more serious and have them shed light rather than generate heat. Programs that generate heat become a spectacle, they are very watchable but they do not actually take the

argument further. Programs that shed light are demanding of your attention and concentration, they can be boring if you do not care about the subject but I think they are more rewarding.

So I would like to push the balance towards shedding light and less towards generating heat. At the moment I end up generating a lot of heat. My commissioning channels see a certain aggressiveness and argumentativeness as my USP, as something that attracts attention. They believe that the audience concentration span is very short, if you demand too much from them they will switch to another channel, so one should keep it at the level of a fight. I personally think it is not right. I am sure that when audiences begin to get what they are not getting, they will learn to like it. But you cannot ask people to like what they have never experienced! And in any event I do not think current affairs on television should be popular, in the sense of being on par with entertainment. It ought to be for those who care, with minimal standards of quality bellow which one should not go just to attract eyeballs.

At some point I could be tempted to write a book, but it would not be academic. I can pretend to be intelligent, because interviewers do, but I am not an academic. There is indeed a certain pretense of gravitas, knowledge, analysis, judgment and wisdom that an anchor needs to take on, even though he may not always know so much.

Politics would have also tempted me, if the terms of entry would permit people like me in, allowing me to be myself, stand up for my beliefs without compromising them, succeeding even though I am not the son of some renowned politician. At the moment it is not possible in Indian politics and so those doors are closed.

What is spirituality for you in your day to day life?

My sense of God is not defined by any custom or practice, but I do have one ritual. I keep on my bedside table a few miniature statues of Gods given by my mother. I always take them when I travel, along with a small photograph of my wife Nisha. Once though, I was travelling to Sri Lanka and I forgot them. While on a brief stopover in Bombay, a friend gave me instead a tiny crystal Ganesh. On my last day in Colombo, the hotel was bombed. I was lucky to escape with only a few stitches. The room was destroyed, the ceilings were falling apart – the only thing that survived intact was the wee little crystal Ganesh. I have not forgotten those statues ever since again.

What is the role of spirituality in your life as a journalist?

There are two regular instances I can mention: the last thing I say to myself five seconds before an interview begins is "God help me"; and when the cameraman starts the countdown "five, four, three..." and a show is about to start, I tell myself the same, "God help me". I know it is partly superstition, but it is enough to give me a sense of assurance, comfort and courage, as if looking at something greater than me that somehow determines and guides me.

Can you tell us about a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?

In 1989, my wife Nisha suffered from encephalitis, a viral fever attacking the brain. She fell into a coma and died a month later. With my habit of bargaining with God, I made the biggest promises ever during that month, ready to give up everything. But that one time, the bargain did not work. And I finally told myself it was a stupid way of behaving: I could not spend my life making deals with the Lord, hoping He will keep His side of the bargain, just because I do. I can still express the need to believe in Him, or some force, but not be that stupid and make those deals. And I have not made one

ever since. So in a way, Nisha's passing away helped me grow up. It did not make me doubt the Lord altogether though. I accepted it as something that had to happen.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

At home, the atmosphere was completely secular, there was neither religiosity nor rituals. Neither of my parents are overtly religious, though they may believe in their heart. One person I may mention is Father Terry Billfeather who married Nisha and I. Nisha was a Catholic and there was no way I would convert. But Father Terry made me understand it did not matter and married us with a full communion. He is my idea of a good priest – an extremely understanding man, utterly human, with the broadest mind, not a narrow bigot diminished by religion, and with a revolutionary ecumenical understanding of faith.

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you like to be reincarnated as?

Reincarnation is not something I ever think about. It is beyond the realm of my mental thinking.

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

Do You exist or are You a manifestation of an inadequacy we all feel?

What is your idea of happiness?

Happiness, or contentment, are about a number of things working out properly – enough money not to be hungry or dissatisfied, achieving something and being rewarded for it, fulfilling one's skills, seeing those who matters to me being happy. No matter what though, I am on the overall an optimist. I do not get thrown by things going wrong, I do not get depressed or pessimistic for long, I have the capacity to put the unfortunate behind me and get on with it. I see the silver lining no matter how gray or black the clouds are. Often I actually see the lining and not at all the clouds – there may almost be a delusory element in me.