

Soli Sorabjee

Former Solicitor General of India

'Sometimes I pray for comfort'

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Soli Sorabjee, former Solicitor-general of India.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is about dwelling with matters that are beyond the material realm, which may never be explained by a rational or a scientific approach, though I would accept them. But I cannot identify it with religiosity, especially as too often I equate the latter with people refusing to question the religious doctrine. It is so easy to accept the doctrine the way it is instead of questioning it and finding one's own answers. Also, I have issues with attributing moral qualities to God. Most of the time, people conceive God as both omnipotent and benevolent. But with all the suffering we witness everywhere, either He is benevolent and not omnipotent, or omnipotent and not benevolent, which would both be problematic.

On the other hand, there are important ethical values conveyed by religions, which are important in the moral construct of people. And if I had to mention one I am more attracted to than the others, I

would choose Roman Catholicism. Indeed, I feel it is important, if one believes in the message of the Christ – that he came to this world, died and resurrected to save humanity – that there would be a centre of authority. Someone must interpret the belief and we cannot let every individual come up with his own reading. Otherwise we end up like Protestant Christianity, with an infinity of streams, groups and denominations. So if one believes in the basic tenants of Christianity, Roman Catholicism seems logical. Besides, the fact that it has lasted for the last 2,000 years speaks volumes about its strength.

Of course I am also close to Zoroastrianism as I grew up in it. Its philosophy is more about the goodness of life and about enjoying it, rather than about abstinence, fasting and so on. It simply insists on good thoughts, good words, good deeds, with a particular emphasis on charity. When I was a child, my grand-mother and mother loved seeing me reciting my prayers every day. I later stopped though as I could not understand the words I was uttering, it was mere recitation for me.

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

I am not sure about it, but I would not rule it out. There are in any case certain forces that material and scientific explanations cannot elucidate. So sometimes I pray to God, with no great conviction, but I guess at least for some comfort.

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

Of course there is a special mission and purpose to life. First of all, it is about making it worth it! Making it meaningful. The vast majority of people don't, either because they are merely surviving, or because they do not attempt to find the meaning. The other thing I see as a mission, or rather that I am very keen about, is to fight the growing rise of intolerance in my country. No criticism or questioning of a spiritual or historical leader can take place these days without threats and violent reactions. If there is a deliberate or malicious intention to hurt the religious feelings of others, of course it is wrong. But the argument of hurting some people's feelings cannot overrule all the others. If we were to only go by it, how could we ban untouchability and other practices of the kind? Those are ancient entrenched religious beliefs.

Now why did I choose law for a profession? It is not that I always knew I would be a lawyer. My father died when I was 19 and I had to make a choice. Government service was completely out of the question, never ever could I have dealt with all the intrigues and politics it entails; the way I saw my maternal grand-father and uncle succeed in business did not inspire me either, with all the fixing and manipulation involved. On the other hand, I had some oratory skills, and I liked the idea of defending the fundamental rights as inscribed in the Constitution. So I went for law.

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

To see that the values of truth, goodness, and beauty be appreciated, implemented and preserved. Today, spirituality and its values are often mixed up with Victorian moralistic views. To me it is not about that – for instance knowing if someone is having a mistress or not – but about fundamental ethical values, like a person deceiving, or lying. When it comes to experimenting beauty, nature, music and literature are most essential to me. I grew up in Bombay as a lonely boy. I came to my father when he was already 50, as my mother had a number of miscarriages. So music and books were my friends. Later on, I would go for days to our house in Matheran. Everybody thought I was taking a girlfriend when in fact I was alone with my real friends – books and music – and enjoyed it so much. Shelley and Keats would never let me down, unlike many so called live friends would.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

Honesty and truthfulness, and not as empty artificial words – rather in a very practical way. Corruption for instance is not simply reprehensible as a breach of the law, but more importantly as a denial of the socioeconomic rights of the people to get proper roads, schools, hospitals and so on.

Can you share a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?

I had a very close friend, an English Christian girl who died at the age of 49 of cancer. She was the finest human being I knew, a giver, intelligent, fond of literature, music, nature. I could not accept the fact that she died so young. It put me off. How could God let such a thing happen? It was too unfair. But on the longer run, I had to reconcile myself with it and I still say prayers of gratitude to God from time to time, for all I have and all I was given. I guess those are remnants from my education – thanking the power that be, even if there may be no one out there.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

The Jesuit fathers I came into contact with in school and college. I was transformed by them. I could see the life they led; I could admire their intellect and moral integrity. That is how I imbibed those things. Plus of course the atmosphere at home, which was somewhat religious. My parents would do their prayers in the morning, my father would put on his Zoroastrian clothes.

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

I would want to be a musician, if possible [jazz clarinetist] Benny Goodman.

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

Why can't You see that evil and suffering be diminished if not abolished? Why can't You make sure that people who obey the law would not suffer?

What is your idea of happiness?

First, making sure that envy and jealousy are out of my system, and that I can find contentment with whatever I have. And at the same time being able to spread some cheers and laughter around.