

# Contours of Atheism

**Virali R. Pande**

Assistant Professor, Rai School of Management Studies, Rai University, Gujarat

## ABSTRACT

Religion, Spirituality and faith are very complex phenomenon to understand first and secondly to follow. The subject is relevant today, but it was neither irrelevant before a decade or two nor after a decade or two. Religion, faith, belief, atheism, apostate, and agnosticism are the paraphernalia to bring the different hues of the inner self of humans from the static life. Religion is not a new phenomenon to discuss. It has been practiced for centuries and has also been opposed to centuries. Undoubtedly the ways to oppose have been changing over time. Religion, spirituality, atheism, agnosticism, this is the descending order maybe human kind moving towards.

**Keywords:** Atheism, religion, spirituality, agnosticism, faith, belief

## 1. Introduction:

**“The oldest profession is not prostitution. It is the priesthood.”**

- **V. S. Naipaul**

“I think religion is the greatest curse on mankind. It has killed more people, destroyed more property than any other thing.” (Naipaul, 1990, p. 488). The subject is relevant today, but it was neither irrelevant before a decade or two nor after a decade or two. Religion, faith, belief, atheism, apostate, and agnosticism are the paraphernalia to bring the different hues of the inner self of humans from the static life. Religion is not a new phenomenon to discuss. It has been practiced for centuries and has also been opposed to centuries. Undoubtedly the ways to oppose have been changing over time.

There is a phenomenon that can be discussed parallelly with religion – science. Yes, there is a thing called science which believes only the concrete proofs. But apart from science, any intellectual person can see the history can evaluate the events that what it was which brought the number of genocides, loots and fraud and deception – Religion. Why a person who can understand that religion has taken more from what it has given would believe in such a thing? What is the extraordinary substance religion is providing and science and art and other innovations of human beings cannot provide? Why a person seeks something which is beyond the human mind and what it would do to the present life?

Questions! but there can be another set of questions in contradiction with the above ones.

Why a human had initiated such a thing which is not understandable for him? Or why a human believes in such a thing which cannot give any kind of proof of its existence? Or if people are not getting any kind of consolation or peace or the thing for which they move to it why they still keep believing? Because futility does not last for centuries. Then what it is which brings the religion where it is today particularly in the context of India. Because in India history and religion are not separate but intermingling singularities. Thus, you cannot judge one without giving reference to the other.

The reason behind put these questions here is that if there is an unexplainable quest that leads to the faith then there must be the force or quest beyond the faith which leads to atheism. Atheism is not a new

phenomenon in the Indian context. The theory of *Charvaka* also known as *Lokayata* is a philosophical school of Indian materialism. Brihaspati is considered as the founder of *Charvaka* or *Lokayata* philosophy around 600 BCE. Buddhism and Jainism were raising at the time and opposed the logical theory of *Charvaka*. The notion of the doctrine is the clear rejection of the concepts of immortality, afterworld, liberation, and the authenticity of the Vedas. Indian civilization is knowledge-centric. But spirituality never accepts logic and rationale. Here, it lacks. The new and upcoming generations do not bother about metaphysics. They believe what they can percept and experience.

## 2. Role of Religion

The fear of unknown and unforeseen, supernatural forces led to religion. Perhaps when hominids began to overcome this fear by offering some gifts and rituals to that force. So, it is a debatable argument that the origin of religion is just a reason for human psychology and not anything concrete. But contemporarily social systems such as in India, one does not need to be imparted that what it is to be religious and what is not. Their birth and the traditions they grow with taught them that what religion is. Religion generally speaking, “refers to those practices of any society that are attentive to what is believed to be sacred, unique or extraordinary element or quality of human experience.” (Clark & Clanton, Jr., 2012, p. 03). It is not about an individual but the society itself. As most of the time society does not demarcate what is considered sacred from what is not sacred. This leads to the ambiguity in the rational mind of a child. Unfortunately, this ambiguity turns into blind faith as time passes, and logic is replaced by the charming practices of religious traditions.

Another aspect of religion is it gives human life a static position where he/she can feel the belongingness or the roots. It provides the preaching which simply becomes the principles in one’s life. The irony here is, those principles are so rigid that people cannot change them over time though it is needed. They become stale. Roots are roots but leaves should fall and grow again. This happens rarely with much antagonism and disagreement in society. As Amartya Sen said that silence is a powerful enemy of social justice, it resulted in disharmony in society. Secularism is also a theory and anti-religionism too. India served as a shared home for Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsees, Sikhs as well as atheists and agnostics. And India as a Hindu majority nation allows the Hindu Indian to be just Indian, to be non-Hindu, to be non-believer, and to be an atheist. This freedom of religion states that to believe or not to believe is a choice and not an identity. To consider something sacred and others are not logically unacceptable. The origin of religion might have the reasons which are lost now. And atheism also had its reasons to find home amidst the so-called religious society and till then it is finding the meaning and logic behind the supernatural, traditional, and ritualistic aspects of the religion.

Religions set some norms which are hard to accept especially for the intellectual lot of the new generation. In Ramayana, there is a Pundit called Javali who gives a piece of logical advice to Ram, “Follow what is within your experience and do not trouble yourself with what lies beyond the province of human experience.” (Sen, 2005, p. 26). Here, religion fails to convey the true message of originality, arguments, logic, and rationale. Religion is one of the tools of identification. It blocks the vision of a person beyond the faith.

The intention here is not to demean or disrespect any religion but the true sense of religion has been lost with time and gets hollow from inside. Religion is a thing that should lead a person to solace, out of his solidarity, find the light and peace. But unfortunately, now it has its darkness to fight with. In the name of it, so many rituals and customs are practiced which are harmful to the physically and mentally healthy

human society. The two religions, if their motive is to show the true path to the seeker, on earth, and find salvation after death then they must be reconciled rather than confront each other in the name of their messiahs. This materialism of religion leads a person to atheism. Religion should bring harmony in society through the traditions or rituals but unknowingly or knowingly spreading hatred, jealousy, violence, and whatnot. Defects and flaws in any religion are not a new phenomenon, from the distant past there always have been an entire group having to confront ideologies with the religions. It may be exaggerating to state that culture is not a part of religion, religion is a part of the culture. And we do not want to create a culture that is rooted in mystery and not on solid ground on which one can grow a healthy and sustainably growing human society.

### 3. Religion versus Spirituality

If religion is a complex system of beliefs and practices, spirituality is a coherent way to find the answers one is seeking through religion. If religion is the performance of the set of practices the spirituality is to feel those practices in heart and make sense of them. Spirituality leads to the depth of yourself. It helps to get answers to the questions of your existence. Religion may help a person to lead a conflict-free life with society, while spirituality may help a person to have a conflict-free mind and heart.

In a broader sense, all the sets of principles of all religions ultimately need to have a spiritual experience for salvation from worldly matters. Spirituality helps to answer the questions which belong beyond life. It helps to create peace within oneself. And as I stated above the new generation is not at all interested in metaphysical matters. Thus, it creates a conflict between beliefs and logic, between traditions and modernity, between old ways of doing things and technology, between god and mind.

Yes, God and mind. It's an age-old, unsolved, and great puzzle that either mind has created god or god has created the creature with the mind. Whatever it is both exist in their individuality if anyone believes or not. It is indeed so that if someone does believe in God, he does not start existing and if someone does not believe, God does not cease to have existed. The way people who call themselves the messengers of God portray Him according to their perceptions. However, everyone cannot accept the other's perception. Believer turns to God or the priests or spiritual Gurus to fight with the life's complexity while an atheist peeps into his own heart and mind for peace. Both can reach the height of spirituality differently. Thus, the power of the mind is everything according to atheists.

### 4. Atheism and Agnosticism

India has a presence of heterodoxy in terms of religions. And along with this heterodoxy, it also caters to perhaps the ancient times the skepticism. For just a reference Indian has numerous religious texts, a very wide range of religious scriptures is available. It indicates the religiosity of the nation. The Vedas – mostly known as “song of creation”, puts the radical doubts at the end: “Who knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterward, with the creation of the universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen? – Whence this creation has arisen – perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not – the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows – or perhaps he did not know.” (O'Flaherty, 1981, pp. 25-6). Thus, skepticism is an indigenous part of Indian religiosity.

Simply saying, do not believe in the existence of God is atheism. Above we discussed some of the reasons behind disbelief or hatred towards religion. An Atheist experience that whatever he/she is going to seek from the religion is already there inside his/her being. Atheism believes in explanations, that

everything in the universe can be explained reasonably without taking the help of God in the explanation then there is no sense in asserting God's existence. The entire universe can be explained by evolution and scientific cosmology. We do not need the existence of another entity called god.

The path of atheism is not coming from agnosticism. Agnosticism is according to me the result of ignorance towards the existence of an unseen force. The term 'Agnostic' or 'Agnosticism' is coined by T. H. Huxley, "he said that he originally invented the word "agnostic" to denote people who, like (himself), confess themselves to be hopelessly ignorant concerning a variety of matters, about which metaphysicians and theologians, both orthodox and heterodox, dogmatize with the utmost confidence." (Philosophy, 2017). What it is when actually somebody claims that 'I am an atheist'? The answer is when he/she must have experienced the non-existence of God, or he/she could not get the answers which he/she seeking from religion or spirituality. And what it is when one says that 'I am agnostic'? An agnostic remains indifferent about whether god exists or not. He/she simply does believe in neither God's existence nor his non-existence. Some scholars put the term in the category of the psychological term rather than philosophical. It is a state of a person rather than an ideology. Atheism is not a new phenomenon but from the past few years, it is getting significant space in philosophical, psychological, and academic researches. A very remarkable community of researchers, thinkers, and intellectuals who identify themselves as atheists is an exploration of the implication in theologies and philosophies.

## 5. Conclusion

Though the subject is philosophical, talk much philosophically does not solve the issues. But before that is it an issue to be solved? Isn't it the choice one should make by his/herself? Belief is something which one can get by experience and not because every other person around him/her having it. The ground level reality should be dissected, concerned, and acted upon. The article discussed very basic reasons behind atheism. The roots of religions are not discussed in religious gatherings. Necessity is to reach to the core of the substance named religion, belief, faith. We are not denying its existence as stated above that futility does not last for centuries. Then what it is which making people unsatisfied or not providing them the content in a said term.

## References

1. Clark, T. R., & Clanton, Jr., D. W. (2012). *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge.
2. Naipaul, V. S. (1990). *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. London: Vintage classics.
3. O'Flaherty, W. D. (1981). *The Rigveda: An Anthology*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
4. Philosophy, S. E. (2017, August 02). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/>: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/atheism-agnosticism/>
5. Sen, A. (2005). *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History, and Identity*. London: Penguin Books.