

Intuition, Belief and Lostness

by Ankur Betageri (October 2015)

A fact that never ceases to amaze me is how some of the most celebrated religious texts of the world, which claim to be the very word of God, borrow many of their central percepts, doctrines and ideas from the founding texts of anti-theism, atheism and deism! Many important verses of *The New Testament*[\[i\]](#) for example and the Seven Deadly Sins of the Christian church[\[ii\]](#) are either directly taken from, or at least inspired by, Lucretius' *The Nature of Things*, the anti-theist, materialist poem which actively denounces belief in the gods and the supernatural. The *Bhagavad Gita*, widely perceived as the central text of theistic "Hinduism," borrows its single most important doctrine of the nishkama karma (desireless action) from the deistic philosophy of Yoga and the atheistic philosophy of Samkhya.[\[iii\]](#)

Are the believers who worshipfully read these books and who believe in the supernatural gods described in them not aware of the dubious origins of these religious texts, or, are they, as the saying goes, blissfully unaware? Many religious people, though well-aware of the ahistoricity of their religious narratives and far-from-divine origins of their holy texts still cling to them, I think, out of habit and because of the genuine comfort and solace they derive from suspending their rational faculties. Belief, for them, is nothing more than a matter of custom and habit, and they go to temples and churches like people go to banks and post-offices.

There are, of course, others who are swept away by what can be called as *the poetry* of religion and religious texts. This poetry, they claim, is superior to the "epiphany" that secular literature offers; it contains that "something extra" which directly puts them in touch with "the absolute." Yes, religion has its passion, its sacrifices and struggles, and even atheists and agnostics are sometimes moved, to tears, by the sheer enormity of the effort of those who seek religion's poetry, and what they understand to be the absolute. But, in almost every instance, the act of reaching, and crossing over human limits, which is of the highest significance to every human being, has absolutely nothing to do with

institutionalized religion and its incredible supernatural narratives. Religious narratives can only provide *equivalences of experience* of those who crossed their intellectual and emotional limits, and tried to make sense of it by talking about it in a supernatural hyperbole—the only kind of narrative which perhaps does justice to the extraordinary intensity of their experience. So even a nonbeliever can empathize and understand the emotional excessiveness and extra-rational significance of religious experience. It is much like the obsessive “insanity” of the lover possessed by an ardor over and above himself: only he knows what it means to be at the centre of this whirlwind, to experience its unrelenting intensity, to experience the madness which can, in fact, totally destroy him. Such is the “divine madness” of some religious people; they are like lovers, overwhelmed by something of extraordinary significance that they see in an ordinary person or thing, and while this “ordinary person” is the beloved for the lover, for the religious person it is god, the prophet, the son of god or the god-in-human-form celebrated in religious narratives. But often the lover and the religious person ask of themselves the very same questions: *What is the meaning of this overwhelming love that has so taken possession of me? Am I mad or is there a meaning and reason behind my madness? Does the “beloved” who so chokes me with emotion bear in his/her “person” a quality that can be called divine or is it all in my imagination? Are my senses deceiving me – is this the play of my emotions – the sublime dream-theatre of my hormones? Could it be that “the divine” is merely the dream-work of my inescapable need to love and believe?* And both the lover and the believer, not being able to answer these questions satisfactorily, experience a profound helplessness and lostness in the world which makes them not only disturbed – but disturbing – subjects. One does not know what to make of them; one wonders whether they are mad or the recipients of special grace denied to ordinary mortals. This uncertainty at the heart of obsessive love and religious ardor is also what makes them so mysterious and seductive.

But this mystical intensity in believers is as rare as it is in lovers, but it is this kind of believer who is most interesting. Mystical believers harbor a deep and genuine suspicion about the ability of intelligence to grasp the true nature of reality, a position that we see articulated systematically by the philosopher Henri Bergson. Bergson believed that *intelligence* was a special ability acquired by the human species in the course of evolution—an ability to think about the material world in a way that helped man to build and invent

tools. Intelligence, he said, was the logic of the solids. *Instinct*, which he understood as the ability to use a bodily organ like a tool, and therefore associated with the torpor of the body, on the other hand, was something that the human species shared with other living beings. And between intelligence and instinct there evolved in humans a special ability: the capacity for *intuition* which Bergson understood as disinterested instinct. While Kant understood intuition as sensuous, that is infra-intellectual, Bergson saw intuition as the continuity between sensuous experience and intelligence, but unlike Kant, he saw in intuition the possibility of a supra-intellectual perceptibility. If this ultra-intellectual intuition exists, then sensuous intuition, which is in continuity with it, can ("provided that we brought to it certain indispensable corrections") put us in touch with the absolute itself [\[iv\]](#), the absolute here meaning reality as it is (numenon) and not as it is given to us (phenomena). And Bergson says such an ultra-intellectual intuition exists because there is a "consciousness" and "life" between "physical existence spread out in space, and non-temporal existence, which can only be a conceptual and logical existence" and we perceive this continuity of life between physical and conceptual existence when we place ourselves in duration, the changing flow of time in which we ourselves are constantly changing.

So the mystics, like Bergson, seem to believe that human intelligence can only understand and conceptualize a certain kind of reality, and that there is, most definitely, a crucial dimension to our sense-experience, which our intelligence barely understands, or not at all. This mysterious "largeness" of the world can be better understood through *intuition* which Bergson sees as a kind of disinterested instinct. But what has this intuitive understanding of the world got to do with religion? The answer to this is both everything and nothing. A common feature of all institutional religion is the conviction that there something more to the world, and ourselves, than our intellectual understanding of them but religious understanding of the world and man, instead of being a mode of exploration investigation and understanding with the faculty of intuition, becomes a matter of adhering, without doubt and questioning, to religious descriptions of the world and man which are either dated, fantastical or factually incorrect. So though religion as the expression of our intuitive abilities occurs as a natural phenomenon it becomes blind faith by ossifying certain experiences as unchanging truths and becomes fanaticism when it projects these truths as unquestionable and divinely ordained. And by the time it demands

total surrender of our faculties to these truths invoking a cosmic superpower it is already fascism, the very anti-thesis of intuition which is the “reflection which reverses the normal work of thought in the present and turns it towards the past, an effort which enlarges the consciousness beyond the present in order to make the past progress towards the present into an image.”[\[v\]](#) In other words, while intuition reverses the normal work of thought leading to creative action and an expansion of consciousness, religion by demanding total conformity to religious dogma shrinks our lived universe and consigns us to a zombie-like existence in a cage of blind beliefs. So, though natural religion comes into being as an expression of our intuitive ability, religion itself, due to its insistence on unquestioning belief and dogmatic faith, has nothing to do with intuition. But if religion can sometimes inspire us it is because it is the product of intuition, a faculty that puts us in touch with the “largeness” of the world, but if religion mostly oppresses us it is because instead of activating our own intuitive powers it forces us into blind belief, preventing us from experiencing the “largeness” of reality even as it is experienced by our senses.

[\[i\]](#) Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*, trans. A.E. Stallings (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 124, 154, 250, 253.

Matthew 13:3-9, Mark 4:3-9, Luke 8:5-8 and the famous Matthew 6: 28-29 from The Sermon on the Mount are some of the verses which are directly inspired by the lines in *The Nature of Things*.

[\[ii\]](#) Ibid., 148, 252.

[\[iii\]](#) Anonymous, *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Laurie L. Patton (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 26-27, 29-31. See, especially, the following verses: 2:37-39, 2:40, 2:47-48, 2:50-53, 2:55-58.

Mikel Burley, *Classical Samkhya and Yoga: an Indian metaphysics of experience* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), 3, 17.

[iv] Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: The Modern Library, 1944), 391-393.

[v] Leonard Lawlor, "What Immanence? What Transcendence? The Prioritization of Intuition over Language in Bergson", *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 2004, 35:1, 24-41, DOI: 10.1080/00071773.2004.11007420.

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