

Atheism as a Value System

by Ankur Betageri (June 2015)



Affe mit Schädel (Ape with Skull) by Hugo Rheinhold

We atheists, children of reason and science, have been judged harshly and unfairly. We have been seen as monsters and brutes: as coldblooded unemotional psychopaths out to destroy the wise, dreamy and intuitive landscapes of faith. As a child this is exactly how I saw atheists in relation to religion. I saw atheists as defilers of the sacred. Growing up in Basavanagudi, that stronghold of ancient tradition and faith of cosmopolitan Bangalore, this was natural. Even now the remembered image of *aarti* –flames lighting up the contorted bronze figure of Hanuman in that dim-lit temple in Gandhi Bazaar fills my mind with astonishment and awe. I was, as a child, obsessed with Hanuman, always asking my mother to *fetch* him for me. And it was not a statue of Hanuman that I wanted; I wanted the real, living Hanuman. I still remember how badly, madly and desperately I wanted to see and meet Hanuman. It was a most intense longing, a longing so primordial and profoundly affecting that it can only be called mystical. It is indeed a reversal of monstrous proportions if today, the same person, calls himself an atheist. (*Same person, that's some presumption on my part after reading Deleuze.*) Such a claim would have been dubious and inauthentic to say the least, if, in my being an atheist, I had not understood the meaning of my childhood longing. In Hanuman I had glimpsed the primordial image of man himself; man as a primate, as hominid, as a cousin of the apes. While watching a documentary recently featuring Kanzi, the bonobo, I accidentally rediscovered my forgotten longing for Hanuman. It was an 'aha!' moment. Looking at Kanzi's face I found my face *melting* with empathy and love. It was indeed a fantastic moment: I had finally found the living Hanuman!

Dogmatists who twist the spirit of knowledge live in a fortress of dogma, and like all fortress-dwellers they let their power do the talking. While we try to reason and have conversations the dogmatists use the brute force of traditions, rituals and festivals to enforce their dogma, their prejudices and their perverted sense of who deserves to live a good life and who does not deserve it. Atheism in India is not like it is in the West. In India the very existence of God and his cosmic social categories attach stigma to certain people born to certain parents. These caste and racist prejudices have existed for centuries now and it is not so easy to get rid of them. To understand them one has to go to the very source of these prejudices. And that source is the religion of Hinduism. I use the word 'racist' informedly:

The varna system of Hinduism divides the society into savarnas (literally 'coloured') and avarnas ('colourless'). Unlike in the West, in India the 'coloured' people, the savarnas, are the ones who consider themselves superior. They belong to the four-fold varna system, and so they are the gentry. Those outside the varna system, the avarnas, are something like the working class for the dirty jobs. They were not touched before, but now they are treated as though they are mentally retarded, primordially dirty, uncivilized and therefore beyond the pale. I have been appalled to see these racist sentiments expressed routinely by General category candidates (those who are not beneficiaries of Indian government's affirmative action) towards the Reserved category candidates (beneficiaries of affirmative action) at interviews in Delhi University. How do the 'colourless' avarnas live with this kind of virulent racism? On the face of it they appear quite stoic but one only needs to hear them presenting a paper on Ambedkar to see how angry and distressed they are inside. Who has the right to make them so angry? The racist sentiments are often attributed – and thereby rationalized – to the epidemic of unemployment in India and the frustration and insecurity that it engenders among those who do not get any leverage in the appointment process through affirmative action. That there is a need for affirmative action which has been asserted time and again by the different committees set up by the Government (the last such being the Mandal Commission of 1979) as the reserved seats are not filled up by Governmental institutions is beside the point. The point however is that there is no excuse for racism. Because if racism is okay, well, then *anything* (paedophilia and cannibalism included) is okay.

The endless mythification and stereotyping of women and their systematic subjugation in Hinduism and Islam is another strong reason to pick up cudgels against the dark forces of dogma. The general attitude of orthodox Hindus and Muslims towards women is so unrelentingly sick that after a while one doesn't even know how to react to it. A Muslim friend of mine now working in Dubai, justifying the Muslim personal law which allows Muslims to have up to four wives, spoke so demeaningly of women that I was left speechless. He spoke to me of the varying sexual capacities of men. "Some men," he said, "can satisfy two, three or even four women. And it is not just about giving them sexual satisfaction," he paused dramatically, "having so many wives means being able to take care of their food, clothing, jewellery and so on. There are not many Muslim men who can afford this. And, as I said, for me, and perhaps for you, *jhelna*, putting up with, one woman, and providing for her, would be a tall order. But there are a few men with greater capacity, the law is for them. But it is not just about having more money. I just came back from a sex bar. I paid hundred dirhams, f***ed a prostitute, and my whatdoyoucallit, *josh*, for the week, is satisfied. But marriage is not about just having sex with many women, you have to take care of them, say good things, see that the wives don't quarrel among themselves—that's not everybody's cup of tea." What about the woman? I wanted to

ask him, but didn't. In his world woman didn't have a voice. She was just a passive decked up doll created to satisfy manly urges, and the greater a man's urge and the larger his wealth, the more Barbie dolls he could pick up from the market. But *more* meant four, because that was the limit decreed by the Qur'an. The Qur'an has decided, once and for all, the measure of woman in comparison to man. Four is equal to one, it says. And this is the word of Allah, the unquestionable truth. This is the 'straight path' to goodness, and to heaven, a heaven where it only gets better for men. In heaven, one worthy Muslim man is equal to many virgin houris; and one Muslim martyr (and the martyr, it is assumed, is always a male) is equal to seventy one houris. The hadith Shahih Bukhari describes the houris as being so pure and transparent that 'the marrow of the bones of their legs will be seen through the bones and the flesh.' And they all look alike, and resemble their father Adam who was sixty cubits tall. (Sixty cubits, that's 90 feet! Does the Muslim man also grow to that height once he reaches heaven? Because otherwise having sex with a houri would be as difficult, or impossible, as having sex with a dinosaur.) 'They all look alike,' this is the phrase that really struck me. How Barbie doll-like that, I thought, when I first read it. And my first impression was right. Woman is seen and treated like a beautiful 'glittering' commodity in the Islamic faith. One shouldn't be too biased here and forget the ever present demi-monde figure in the West, the Bollywood stereotype of the same demi-monde figure and the bust-exhibiting, midriff-and-navel-revealing Hindu goddesses of television Ramayanas and Mahabharatas. But one should also not be blind to the difference, which is significant. The idea of woman as a beautiful commodity for the pleasure of man has been naturalized in the Islamic faith and this cosmic stereotype has not been questioned, challenged and upturned as much as it has been in the West thanks to the recurrent 'waves' of feminism. Freedom is a universal value. All human beings thirst for it. The Muslim woman thirsts for it too, but her thirst is criminalized by Islam. She has to learn to live under man's thumb, and find happiness – and I am quoting the Qur'an here – *at the feet of man*. When we call this an insult to human dignity we are quickly branded Islamophobes. An Iranian poetess, studying in the UK, who shared with me her unbearable frustration and anger about the killing of innocent Palestinian children ('by heartless Jews'—the traditional antagonism was not expressed but implied), and who doubted my humanity when I said that the problem was complex and it was not easy to take sides, called me an Islamophobe the very first time I drew her attention to the imperfections in her own faith. She was willing to talk critically about Christianity but when it came to Islam all her critical faculties turned outward, as it were, to become actively hostile. Her religion was another name for her own heart; it had its irrational ways but its impulse was always divine. It was a divine impulse which conceived woman as a commodity. And it is the divine impulse in Islamic tradition which keeps the Muslim women modest in a chador and good under a man's thumb. We atheists were laying a 'liberal trap' by measuring the Islamic way of life by Western standards. I could

just not see how happy and fulfilled a Muslim woman felt at the feet of a man. I was a bloody infidel after all, what did I know of the purity and richness of Islamic culture? Thus I, and my critical and rational faculties, were bundled and cast away, with the use of one ultra-spiteful word: Islamophobe. She thought she was giving me a death sentence, she didn't know that the very word activated a long dormant 'truth-gene' in me.

Atheism for me is the institution of a new value system. A value system at the core of which is the Spinozist insight, 'Man is a God to man.' I am inclined to take it a little further and say that *only life responds to life*, and this response is magical, and real, at the same time. (One can also make the non-life, inanimate matter, respond to life. That is what the enterprise of art is all about. With art one can make a human connection with the wind and the thunder and the blueness of the sky. The lesson of science is that the blowing of the wind has nothing to do with us. Art is about living in a way that makes the blowing of the wind a part of our life.) Why does one have to strengthen the delusion of communicating with a superpower, or with an abstract Idea, when one can experience the magic of response from a living being? As it is, God, no matter how much the believer weeps and prays for him, never responds. He has never responded to anybody's prayer anywhere in the world. We read of the doubts of some of the most pious believers, like Mother Teresa. It is indeed sad to see believers trying to connect to a non-existent superpower while remaining dead to all the life, and all the wonderful human beings around them. One, of course, understands the need to whisper one's secrets and confess only to a non-existent being, one also understands the need for calm and poise that believers come to think of as existing only within the confines of cloistered cells. The need for solitude, reflection and inner calm are very human, and are inalienable parts of the secular human world. There is nothing especially religious about these human tendencies; religion in fact disrespects these tendencies by bringing those who exhibit them under a totalitarian cosmic system and imposing an unnaturally harsh disciplinary code. Love, compassion, tenderness, a life of simplicity and austerity—if these evoke the picture of a religious life it is because religious life has been stereotyped. In the same way, being part of the secular world does not mean attending parties, watching cricket matches, living a life purely in pursuit of physical pleasures and being part of the flippant and vulgar crowd. Being secular means embracing the totality of one's nature in the light of reason, and this means creating a life beyond all stereotypes.

[Madness of Being Human](#) (Poetrywala, 2013) and *Bhog and Other Stories* (Pilli, 2010). He is a currently a PhD candidate at IIT-Delhi working on the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze.

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