

ON SPIRITUALITY AND ORGANIZED RELIGION :
CONVERSATIONS WITH
Raghu Ananthanarayanan

Source : Traversing the Heart – Journeys of the Inter-religious Imagination; Edited by Richard Kearney and Eileen Rizo-Patron

The following is a transcription of the discussion held at the Bangalore Conference, “Crossing Hearts: The Inter-Religious Imagination” (2-3 June 2007), between yogic teacher Raghu Ananthanarayanan and several conference participants : Richard Kearney, Catherine Cornille, Siddhartha, James Morley, Jyoti Sahi, Julia Feder, Simon Sleeman, Mary Anderson, R. Rajaram, Shelley Hubele, and Kendra Bradner. This piece was kindly transcribed by Jessica Locke.

Richard Kearney : It is an honour to have you with us here in Bangalore, Raghu. As someone who has practiced yoga for decades with the great masters, Krishnamacharya and Desikachar, before becoming a teacher and writer of yoga in your own right, I would like to begin by asking you what you think about the idea of your native India as a “spiritual laboratory”. This notion has been suggested at this meeting by our host, Siddhartha, and several other participants. The fact that India has not had the tradition of dogmatic, theocratic religions, as he says, has meant that it has developed an open-ended dialogue on matters spiritual and religious for millennia. Perhaps your own experience and search are a microcosm of this heritage of tolerance, dialogue and seeking that some would claim is unique to this Indian continent?

Raghu Ananthanarayanan: I will start by telling you a story that has been on my mind for a long time. The story is about a yogi who is sitting under a tree meditating, when all of a sudden two cranes came by and started mating, making raucous noises enjoying themselves. For the yogi it was too much to bear, so he turned around and hurled them an angry look. To his surprise his look burnt them. Exulting over this newfound power, he went to the nearby town where he used to go begging for food, as ascetics are required to do. He went to the home that he usually visited on his

rounds, and the lady of the house made him wait. When she arrived with the food for him, he glared at her, but the woman responded to the yogi's glare with a delightful Tamil phrase, "*Kokena Kandayo Konganava*" ("Oh mendicant, why do you look at me as though I were a crane?"). This comment immediately humbled him. "How did you know this?" he asked. "If you want to discover how I have this ability to perceive," she replied, "go and talk to the butcher down the road." Intrigued, the yogi went to find the butcher in the crowded marketplace. As the yogi approached him, the butcher said, "You're the guy who burnt the cranes with your glare. Later, when a woman looking after her sick husband and cranky child was delayed in bringing you some offerings, you started glaring at her as well. It was she who urged you to come and meet me." The Yogi is completely taken aback by this, and asked the butcher to teach him the art of true meditation.

This is a profound story in that it brings to light an unusual notion of heroism. In different traditions you have different types of people who are regarded as heroes. In the Chinese tradition, the wandering monk is the hero. There is a Chinese classic called "The Monkey" about the adventures of a wandering monk as he comes to India and to collect the ancient texts of the Buddha. The Chinese tradition is full of lovely paintings that show one solitary person walking across a vast landscape. In the West, the hero is typically whoever wins by the sword. But in India, the householder is the hero. And the person who can answer all questions on spirituality is the householder and the king, a *janaka*. *Janaka* is not a title that is given to anybody. A *janaka* is a king who lives in a way that brings together the pragmatic and the philosophical simultaneously. He is a person who can live with all the wealth and power in the world, and yet live in a way that is truthful and honest, in constant meditative awareness. The householder also plays a key role. Take, for instance, one beautiful story from the life of Shankaracharya, the famous Hindu philosopher and saint. The story is about a debate he was having with Mandana Mishra, when suddenly Shankara was challenged by Mishra's wife. He found out he was unable to continue the debate without first living as a householder. Shankara has to go through the process of living as a householder before he could even speak. To me this is a fascinating idea, and I discovered why it's so important to me. When I graduated from college, I wondered what I should do in the world. I had pretensions of being an artist. I had many artist friends who had influenced me. One evening, as I sat alone reflecting about life, I felt

absolutely at peace with myself. I thought I should go away to the Himalayas; but suddenly I heard a voice in my mind that said, “You actually don’t understand because you haven’t lived in the world of *samsara* (the ocean of sorrow and chaos that is the nature of our world).” I now recognize the deep importance of this insight.

Another idea I’m still trying to understand is from the Dhammapada (a book of pithy statements made by the Buddha). There’s a beautiful discourse on how man experiences fear and hurt, and how man seeks to take refuge from fear and hurt. But what are the shelters he goes looking for? Man seeks refuge in wealth, in other men, in knowledge, and in the idea of God. The text goes on to say that the hollowness of the shelters of the first and second kinds becomes apparent very quickly because man discovers that whatever wealth he has will not get him beyond the reach of sorrow, nor will other men get him beyond sorrow. The other two refuges are based on belief, and therefore much more difficult to move beyond. The worst is the idea of God, because it creates deep illusion and provokes violence. It is only when you give up these beliefs, and walks the path of understanding your sorrow directly, that you can touch and alter sorrow. I think this is a profound insight. I keep repeating it to myself in an effort to understand it better. I believe that if more people try to understand this path, we may have a next generation that can live well, and a world in which it is possible to live!

My life has been deeply influenced by some of the remarkable people I have met over the years. I’ve had the tremendous fortune of spending quite a bit of time with J. Krishnamurti, for instance. I met him, Sri. Desikachar, and Yogacharya Krishnamacharya at the same time. This was a profoundly significant time for me. I’d been through a very difficult period in my life – my family had suffered a series of tragic events resulting in the loss of all our wealth and reputation. My first meeting with Krishnamurti was rather unsettling and intriguing. When my wife introduced me to him, he said, “I have just a few minutes to talk to you.” I came to him with what I thought were profound questions. But every time I asked him a question, I already knew the answer because I had read a book of his, or heard a lecture that contained the answer. Every time I asked him a question, he would turn around and say something as simple or down to earth as “What’s your name?” “My name is Raghu.” Again, I’d think of another profound question, to which I already knew the answer, and he would just turn around and say, “Where do you work, sir?” Once I told him

where I worked, he asked, “Do you work very hard?” By this time he was laughing, my wife was laughing, and I was laughing. That was the end of the meeting, and yet what I learned was profound. What struck me was that I didn’t know Krishnamurti at all, and I still don’t. When I read his books, I read my mind into his words, and I say I understand. But what do I understand? I just understand my mind. And every time I read it, I seem to understand it differently. So what have I really understood? After this meeting, I started reading books and listening to teachers very differently.

The second time I met with Krishnamurti he said, “Much of what you’re talking about is just a consequence. Just look at the fact that you felt very hurt and let down by your father. Can you deal with your feeling of being hurt?” Shortly after that meeting I happened to read a statement attributed to Lao Tzu that said, “Listen with a listening in which the other becomes what he is meant to be.” The only time that I’ve ever experienced such listening is when I’ve spoken to Krishnamurti (or Krishnaji as we call him). And it’s really an extraordinary experience. I’ve also been with him in small group meetings. I’ve found this to be rather revealing, because whenever I am with him and have a question that is part of an ongoing conversation, he will answer me. But when he’s talking to somebody else and I have a question, he will not answer me. If I’m not in the here and the now, he’s not there with me. And that’s left me with the constant motivation to get back to that space, and to listen to others in that space.

Two other major influential figures in my life have been Sri Desikachar and Yogacharya Krishnamacharya, my yoga teachers. I met them at a about the same time as I met Krishnaji, and the entire experience has been life changing for me for several reasons. One is that I come from a Brahmin family, but I later found out that I am, more precisely, a *brahma-bandhu*. Being a *brahma-bandhu* means belonging to a clan of people who are supposed to be Brahmins. Later, when reading the *Dhammapada*, I discovered what being a Brahmin meant. Here the Buddha brilliantly describes a Brahmin not as a member of the highest priestly Hindu caste – as is normally assumed – but as a person who is in touch with the ultimate reality underlying all phenomena. Except for Krishnamurti, and maybe a couple of others, I don’t think there are any Brahmins at all in this world. But there are a lot of people who claim to be through some sort of adherence to ritual and tradition. It is part of the Brahmin tradition that a male child at the threshold of puberty is initiated to the ritual practice by going through the *Upanayanam*, or “thread ceremony”. I was put through this when I was

twelve or thirteen years old. My father thought we should take a whole set of people to a very famous shrine on a hill in Tirupathi, not very far from Chennai. I went through the holy ceremony, and I was supposed to pray to the sun three times a day. I kept asking everyone around me, "Please tell me what is the significance of this. If you don't tell me what this means, I'm not going to do this." Nevertheless, I did the prayers for one year – that was my promise. But nobody taught me what it meant, so I stopped doing it, and I stopped wearing my holy thread. I stopped doing it, until I met Sri Krishnamacharya. When I started studying with him, what I found most interesting was talking about the spiritual scriptures with him. He would interpret the *Bhagavad Gita*. He would interpret the *Yoga Sutras*. He would talk about the *Upanishads*. And there was nothing he said that seemed to me to contradict what Krishnaji said. The way he would explain the *Bhagavad Gita* and the way he would look at the *Yoga Sutras* was to show how outer practice in harmony with inner visualization is deeply cleansing and energizing. So I started wearing the holy thread once again for some time and saying all the prayers because there was really a beautiful meaning to it, the way it is done, the structure of it. Ultimately I discovered that it just has to do with how you cleanse your mind, and what you affirm of yourself, and how you meditate.

Another eye-opening experience with Sri Krishnamacharya was this : Mrs.Skelton had brought a group of students from the United States down to India. There were also Muslims who would come to Desikachar's school, and people from all over the world. Somebody raised this question: "When we teach non-Hindus chanting, can we teach them the word *Om*, or not?" The Yogacharya swiftly turned around and asked us, "Do you believe that the word *Om* is a sound that expresses the the divine within, that which is beyond all description and form?" We all said, "Indeed, we do." Then he asked, "Don't you believe that everything under the sun is of this essence?" "Yes, of course." Turning back to the person who had raised the question, he simply replied: "How, then, can you even ask this question, when you know already that you're dealing with a person whose very own essence is the word *Om*?" Intriguing reply, coming from a person like Sri Krishnamacharya.

Yogacharya Krishnamacharya and Sri Desikachar, his son, were my yoga gurus. There were two or three very important yoga teachers who brought yoga back to prominence in India. One of them is Sri Krishnamacharya, and his three best-known students are Desikachar, B.K.S. Iyengar, and Pattabhi Jois -- though each has a

different style. You also have the Brahmachari School, the Yogendra School, the Shivanada School, and the Satyananda School. These are broadly the main schools, but there are all other kinds of variations and distortions. Krishnamacharya was very traditional and well-read, a so-called “Hindu,” representative of one of the sects of Brahmanism. He was a master of *yoga*, a master of *Sankhya*, *Vedanta*, *Ayurveda*, *Visheshika* and *Nyaya* philosophies. Many of his explanations and the ways in which he dealt with the ideas of Indian thought were very rooted in tradition yet refreshingly insightful because they were rooted in a deep understanding of human sorrow and meditative practice.

Another major influential factor in my life has been the experience of working with T-Group learning and Encounter Group learning. How I came to this is curious. When I was doing some organizational consulting with a group of engineers (I am, by the way, also an engineer), a friend mentioned how I ought to get involved with a group of people who were pioneering encounter groups in India. There was an article in the paper by one of the luminaries in this movement at that time on how the ancient Indian philosophy of *Sankhya* and Western psychology were related. I wrote back to him and said, “You have probably studied *Sankhya* in English because you’ve misinterpreted some of the key words.” I didn’t know that he was a professor. So he wrote back to me and said, “Why don’t you come over to this workshop and we’ll have a discussion?” I discovered that his workshop was indeed fascinating – that the *Yoga Sutra*, *Sankhya*, and what these people were talking about were, for me, exactly the same. I began to understand the *Yoga Sutra* and the *Bhagavad Gita* much better by working with what he was saying. Yoga is ultimately about the transformation of the mind – how can I see reality clearly, “as it is”?

Jessica Locke : Could you place the *Yoga* and *Sankhya* philosophies in perspective?

Raghu Ananthanarayanan : These philosophies are not really part of the Vedic tradition, but they’re not really non-Vedic either. They’re somewhere in the middle. In some parts they refute the Vedas, in other parts not, but they are fundamental philosophies. *Sankhya* teaches about what is reality, what is the world. *Sankhya* talks about manifestation and evolution. If I have to place *Sankhya* and *Yoga* in relation to each other, it goes something like this: at a certain point in time, there is a thesis-antithesis-synthesis of doctrines: *Poorva Paksham*, *Prathi Paksham* and *Siddhantham*.

Let's just call them points of view. One point of view, the Vedic point of view, says that this world is not real; the other says the world is real. What I need to do is live in such a way that my next life will be beautiful. I have to sacrifice and do these ceremonies, and there are all these gods and goddesses. If I propitiate them well and gain merit, I will go to the other world and be reborn with all the positive fruits of this effort, and ultimately go to heaven or merge with God.

The opposite view is that there is only what you see. It's a very materialist philosophy, called the *Charvaka* philosophy, which teaches that only what you see is real. There's only earth, fire, water and air. Everything you see can be explained by a mixture of these elements. Since you know that life is going to end with death, the purpose of life is to maximize pleasure. What comes in the way of pleasure is fear, so you must learn how to maximize pleasure and minimize fear. The teacher who best epitomizes this school of thought is *Shukracharya*, while *Brihaspathi* is the great teacher of those who believe in the other world and rebirth. These two worldviews are in some sense perennial! The hedonistic, materialistic, pleasure-seeking philosophy on the one hand and, on the other, a philosophy much like every other sanctioned religion where you have a proxy sitting on top who says, "Show me obedience and sacrifice, and I'll show you the way to God." So *Sankhya* comes in and says, "If it's so easy to go to heaven by just following rituals, then why is the person who is doing all these *yagnas* (fire rituals) wasting his time here? Why doesn't he just jump into the fire so he can go straight to heaven? Does the belief not say that the Fire God is the messenger who takes all the prayers and offerings to the Gods?" And then *Sankhya* looks at the other philosophy and says that there are too many other things materialism cannot explain by just talking about the material mixtures. So *Sankhya* is the first philosophy that says there is sorrow, there is a way out of sorrow, and the way out of sorrow is to develop an insightful discrimination between the tangible, the intangible, and the seer who is distinct from both. The only difference between *Yoga* and *Sankhya* philosophies is that *Yoga* brings in the idea of God. It refers to God as intelligence, whereas *Sankhya* makes no reference to God at all. Yogacharya Krishnamacharya says, "In *Sankhya* there is no mention of *ishvara*, but in *Yoga* there is mention of *ishvara* as intelligence".

Furthermore, my experience with group work has been that it comes very close to the Upanishadic idea of discovering truth. There is a very interesting passage

in the Upanishads, for instance, that describes dialogue. It describes dialogue as *Sakala*, *Sahrdaya*, *Samvada*. *Sakala*, the first term, means that all my faculties are open to receiving. The second, *Sahrdaya*, means a harmony or resonance of the heart. And the third, *Samvada*, means dialogue. So the entire discovery of truth is through this process. What happens in a group setting is the creation of a context in which you can discover your own truth through a process of dialogue. Today I find that I can only really describe group processes through *Sankhya* and *Yoga*. Other ways of talking about it don't convince me as much.

So these are the ideas and practices I'm working with. I apply this inquiry and approach to everything, including organizational development. Most of my ideas in organizational development come from conversations with Ganapathi Sthapati, who is a traditional temple builder. While talking about the essence of his tradition, he once said, "the divine is constantly revealing him or herself through beauty. And every time we human beings discover beauty within ourselves, we touch divinity. You may touch divinity by discovering rhythm and order in words through poetry, in the body through dance, in sound through music, in form through sculpture, in space through architecture, and in thought through mathematics. These are the six paths for encountering the divine through rhythm and harmony. The offering you make in a temple is beauty, just plain beauty." This, to me, is a marvelous way of describing the six ways to the divine, which is much better than the way through the proxy at the top who has to show you the divine. I don't like that path. This way, you don't have to pay anybody or give up autonomy. This makes a lot more sense and is completely compatible with Yoga and self reflexivity¹.

¹ There is one other strong influence I use in my work as an organizational consultant, which is the *Vaastu* basis of design. The *Vaastu* shastras are the traditional Indian approach to design. In the *Vaastu* tradition, the basis of design rests on three anchors. The first is functionality: what is the need-use of this design? The second is aesthetics: what will make the design beautiful? The third is *Ramayam*: what will awaken a meditative, inward evocation? And if a design doesn't have these three factors, it isn't a complete design. This is of interest because when I go into organizations, I'm designing for people, but the entire debate is around effectiveness and efficiency. The person who has to create this effectiveness and efficiency is usually left out. If the third anchor of design – the inner evocation – is not brought in, then whom are you designing for? The entire process becomes dry and instrumental.

Today I'm also reading more and more papers about spirituality and organizations. This is a mixed bag of ethical and humanistic approaches and individual practices. A key criterion, for me, in

Siddhartha: Thanks, Raghu. I think you've given us a flavor of many things that you have been struggling with, reflecting on, bringing in yoga and organizational development. To use the word Hinduism, this is a liberative way of using Hinduism, showing that Hinduism is a space, a spiritual laboratory. It's not a defined religion. I think that what you've said shows one way to carry this process ahead, connecting with the traditions of this country, connecting it with your work with Encounter Groups and organizational development.

Raghu Ananthanarayanan: Just a word on this notion of Hinduism. I have a feeling the problem is very simple. The problem is that in India I don't think we ever make an effort at defining ourselves. We live, and we live in harmony, and we believe in certain things. Most of what is called "yoga" comes from a tradition that says, "the harmonizing of what is *in* the self and what is *outside* is the way". A tradition that comes up with this kind of statement will not leave behind artifacts. Religions that say we must take on some kind of form in order to attract and capture power will continuously create artifacts and rituals, whereas this yogic tradition will only create meditative practices. In meditative practices, in every form, at every level, and in the other, there is God, and I don't have to do anything special beyond this. It may be easy for a Protestant fundamentalist to come along and say, "You haven't given them what they want. I'm going to teach the way to heaven". And if someone comes along and makes all these promises to you in a vociferous way, you're going to give them a chance. So it's very difficult for any original people, any original form of thought, ever to defend itself against what another person who comes along and says about it. Hinduism, and the word Hindu itself, is not even Indian. The word Hindu comes from the other side of the Indus. It was the Jesuits who first codified Hinduism as a religion, when they first came here. It had not been codified before that. What mattered before were only the rules and ethics of being human. So actually the term

designing an organization is that every person should experience creativity. Design is not just about how something works. The whole process (and the output) doesn't work if it doesn't cause a person to become self-reflective. This is not always easy to achieve given the current thinking about business organizations. However, more and more people are becoming inclined to start a discussion on the subject, and a few ideas do get implemented.

sanathana dharma makes a lot more sense than Hinduism. The term Hinduism creates some difficulty because of its political connotations. *Sanathana dharma*, on the other hand, means whatever action will enable life to flourish. That's the closest translation to *sanathana dharma*. The word *dharma* actually means to reinstate that which is fallen and to enliven that which is upright. Of course, the word itself is also used today to refer to religion – Abrahamic religions or whatever – and that's a very sad thing.

Jim Morley: I'd like to go back to the theme of *ishvara* because I think it's central. It's a central theme to your talk because you've selected several ancient and very traditional Indian traditions that are mostly atheistic. You mentioned Buddhism, *Sankhya*, of course *Yoga*, and J. Krishnamurti. Krishnamurti, of all people, was a great renouncer of religion, while at the same time advocating something of an existential philosophy of individual morality. Sort of a rejection of religion is what he went through, right? So his is a kind of atheistic spirituality. Krishnamurti and Desikachar, the yoga teacher, were great friends and were very humbled by each other. They had a very profound relationship, actually, and it was very historic, even. This has been a theme in my work because I'm constantly looking for a bond between religions that unites them but also distinguishes them. And it seems to me that when you get God and theologies and institutions out of the picture, and you focus on what people do, what they practice, especially their relationships to one another, there's a lot in common. And I think what I've also discovered is that yoga is an inter-religion. It's a spirituality that also avoids the complications of institutionalized religions. That's why Patanjali put it together. And *Sankhya*, of course, is a part of that picture. So I wonder if you might address the issue of atheistic spirituality more directly.

Raghu Ananthanarayanan: Let me try. One of the things I've read, and I don't remember exactly where, is that God is a dream of man. There's a line in the *Veda* that says, "Maybe the Gods know, maybe they don't know." A crucial thing about so-called Indian spirituality is that, when it comes to ultimate matters, the meanings of key words and concepts are left quite fluid. Take a word like *Brahma*. As a child, you're given an ideal picture of *Brahma*. Later you are told that "all that is alive and surrounds you is *Brahma*." And later, when you start understanding the world on your own, you realize it simply means "that which is ever expanding." I think that's a

beautiful description of the universe. *Maya* is another key word. *Maya* simply means “that which is born, and that which is dying.” I think that’s a fabulous description of the world as we see it, because the moment we’ve seen the world, it’s already gone.

What I find intriguing about the Hindu scriptures is that everything has the possibility of being understood self-reflectively. Every word has a huge breadth and depth of meaning. So the first time you chant *Om*, you chant it and they tell you, “*Om* refers to tangible and intangible reality.” They tell you this, and also as you go along you are expected to discover what it means. You discover something more, and then the word becomes more profound, and then the word is just a signifier! It points to and triggers an inner state of meditative awareness! You take another word like *lingam*. Okay, what does the *lingam* mean? I have to admit I get angry when people say it is just a sexual symbol. This is not the right occasion to enquire why the “*lingam*” attracts so much sexually associated meanings. There are five *lingams*. What are the five *lingams*? Earth is a *lingam*, because it signifies something much more profound than is beyond itself. Water is a *lingam*, because it also signifies something profound beyond itself. Likewise, fire is *lingam*, air is *lingam*, and space is *lingam*. That’s it. It is simply a signifier of something incredibly more vast and primal. What is it pointing to? I don’t know. It’s a signifier of something way beyond words and imagination—God. What is the easiest way of signifying something? Drawing a line. Some of the temples that depict these *lingams* are beautifully designed. A temple which says “air is a signifier of God” has two lamps in the sanctum. One lamp is absolutely quiet; it’s a steady flame. The other lamp is placed so there’s a slight breeze that comes in, so the light flickers. That tells you there is air – something you can’t see directly but that you know because the flame flickers and it’s a signifier of God.

And what is God? We keep coming up with different descriptions of God. The most beautiful is Krishna. Krishna is a God who grows with you. He is a playful toddler, a mischievous child, a vibrant adolescent, a heroic warrior, and a wise Guru. But when you delve deeper, you discover that the word Krishna simply describes the color of the sky when there’s no moon. It’s the depth of indigo that you see on a dark night : that is Krishna. I think that’s profound. So, does it appeal to the atheist or non-atheist? I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. The idea of God is very meaningful and healing, but you are meant to evolve out of the idea as you grow inwardly. Use it, but go beyond it; don’t get stuck.

Simon Sleeman: Thanks, Raghu. I'd like to say that I didn't find your response atheistic at all. In listening to you decide what to say next, I realized this is a matter of being attentive to something outside yourself which, which I would describe as attentiveness to the spirit. It's that which is likely to lead you to the closest truth, this attentiveness to the spirit. So I don't find it atheistic at all! I think it's profoundly faithful. Also what you say about the six paths, that the divine is revealed in beauty. I think this is absolutely true.

Richard Kearney: My question is along the same lines. The last refuge of scoundrels is God, some say. *Yoga* provides, as you suggest, a way of dealing with sorrow, pain, and wounds – a way which many today embrace as a form of spirituality without God or religion. My question is this : Given the fact that in the world today there are so many billions of people who *do* believe in God or gods and who call themselves religious, is it possible – or feasible, or practical, or fair – to say to these billions of people that your last refuge is the idea of God, even if by doing so you are increasing your (and their) sorrow rather than decreasing it? In other words, is there a way in which one can bring that healing spirituality of yoga back to the religions and restore the life within them, rather than completely evacuating or voiding our contemporary world of the religious? I say this in two respects. One, because in much of Western philosophy, at the moment, there is what is called a return of the religious” *after* the Enlightenment. Not just in the political and practical sense – “We’ve got to understand Islam because we’re bombing and being bombed. We’ve got to learn about Hinduism and Buddhism because there are so many Hindus and Buddhists in the world today!” There’s also the return of a ghost that’s haunting us – a residual, remaindered, formerly repressed phantom of religion. A sense that there may be something valuable in what was being called the “religious” after all, even if we did need to pass through the purgative movements of modern critique and suspicion – Enlightenment atheism. Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, feminism – in order to deconstruct the wounding and violent nature of religion. But we don’t necessarily have to throw the baby out with the bathwater. So my question would be, is there a possibility in something like yoga of restoring the healing possibilities of spirituality to the religious? I ask this because in the West this can sometimes be problematic. For example, there’s a current tendency, certainly in North America, to think of yoga as a freewheeling spirituality without any religious or cultural context, where you develop

a beautiful, healthy body and follow a collective that has now become a multi-million dollar industry. There is much more to yoga than that, of course, but it tends to be a New Age movement in that direction. “Regardless of what is happening in the wider world out there, I pursue my own inner journey and make sure my calves and abs are well toned for my holiday in the Bahamas.” That sort of attitude. So, against such misuses or misunderstandings of yoga, is there a possibility of grafting the liberating and therapeutic side of yoga back onto some form of religion so as to reanimate the good within religion?

Raghu Ananthanarayanan: I don’t really know the answer to this question, but let me just speculate along with you. I come from almost exactly the same position with respect to yoga as you are suggesting. That’s one of the reasons why in our school we teach one-on-one. We don’t teach in a group. This is because each person requires something different, at each point in time, to address his or her particular experience of sorrow at that time. We encourage prayer if the person has deep beliefs, inquiry if they are seekers and questioners, just regular *asana* and *pranayama* if they are not attracted to the deeper aspects of yoga. All of these methods are suggested in the Yoga Sutras (the aphorisms of yoga) as alternatives. The right practice is one that is both harmonious with the person and awakens his or her spiritual quest. That’s the purpose of the one-on-one teaching. At another level, the word religion itself – and Krishnaji has said this many times – is a beautiful word. It means to “bring together as one.” But what we’re discussing as “religion” is politics. And most forms of civilization are answers to fear of death, as you’ve been saying. I’m afraid of death, and I’m afraid of fear, so come and give me an answer. Before I’ve found out that this answer of yours is not real, you’ve made a lot of money, or you’ve made a position or you’ve made a status for yourself. And you hang onto that. Ninety-nine percent of what goes on in organized religion today is just an organized way for dealing with people’s fears, as though the high priests really knew.

When I finished college, I was worried like hell. What am I going to do in life? I was overcome by all of these questions of meaning and the purpose of life. I didn’t want to go to America because if I did, I would have to go to a college that would give me a scholarship, mostly for research related to war, or arms, or something like that! So what do I do with my life? It was a choice I agonized over : what do I put my energy into, what can I bring alive in my life? I don’t think the

heads of these religious bodies know the answers to these questions. The heads of state don't know either. If Blair has made England a great country by selling 30% of his country's arms in the Cayman Islands, don't tell me he doesn't know whom the guns are going to. And why is he doing this? It's not so difficult to see what he's doing; he's contributing to war. If 15% of the GDP of the world is going to war, it's not such a difficult question to figure out how we can get everybody fed. There's no question. Everybody knows the answer. It's like Bob Dylan said, "It's blowing in the wind." It's another struggle we have to deal with along with the idea of God. What do you *do*?

I had a student once who gave me a small book. He said, "Read these statements. Can you tell me where they come from?" I couldn't make out the difference between the Christian statements, the Sufi statements, the Zen statements, and the Upanishadic statements. They all sounded exactly the same. When the prophet started his work in Medina, he had to get a group of people going, believing in themselves, and he did a great job. Other people have used this and constructed all kinds of structures of organized religion around it and now they're the biggest money-spinners in the world. So who's going to stop them? The issue is not the billions who believe. It is the few who cynically manipulate fear and belief.

Julia Feder: I'd like to go back to something you said earlier, Raghu, about your frustration with the interpretation of the *lingam* as a sexual symbol, and I have to say that's a part of the Hindu tradition that I don't really understand. I'm not trying to offend, I just am seeking greater understanding here. If the *lingam* is a signifier of something that is beyond, then what would the meaning of the *yoni* be in that context?

Raghu Ananthanarayanan: Very simple – that's another signifier. Just as you are a signifier, and I am a signifier. *Yoni* means the vulva. There is a whole Upanishad piece that talks about what is ecstasy. It starts by saying that the greatest kind of pleasure a young male can experience is sexual pleasure. And they multiply it by a hundred, increasing it up through various levels. We have no problem at all in Indian art with accepting that sex is a beautiful thing and that sex is human and that sex is God. There's even a whole text in the Shaivite tradition that talks about various points when we can experience the stopping of the mind and transcend it. And one of them is when you have sex without worrying about things and just experience the immense

pleasure of the embrace. There's no guilt, there's no issue attached to it. The other thing that is important to know is that in several of the so-called spiritual texts are a whole set of discussions about topics that would be categorized separately in a modern library. There are discussions about evolution and about the nature of time. And then there are other parts that talk about how to "keep your nose clean," literally. And when Max Muller and other Indologists came to India, they talked about all of them as spiritual texts, and that's the problem, because we haven't categorized knowledge in that way in Indian tradition. We haven't said, "This is science, and this is not." We've simply said that all of this is real, and all of this is the way we look at life, therefore, right living comprises of the following..." Take the definition of time for example. The Yoga Sutras say that there is a subatomic particle that moves from a current position to the immediate next position, and this movement is time. It's called a *kshana*. That's the basic measure of time. But since this time cannot be measured, it goes on to say that the measure of time is based on more tangible movement. The same text then discusses change, impermanence, and sorrow caused by clinging to a mistaken idea of time. So it's not that a sexual connotation doesn't exist. It is not a central idea, yet it is not an impediment to spiritual inquiry or progress either. To me, Hindu thought reflects the belief that sex, as much as understanding all the scientific ideas, is a way to divinity. But calling the *lingam* only a sexual symbol is ridiculous. And *lingam* is a word that comes from *Sankhya*, where it refers to a whole stage of evolution and manifestation.

Shelley Hubele: My question is a bit more conversational, I think. You spoke of religion as a situational phenomenon with someone telling you how to live your life and accepting money in order to do so, or as a way to hold off pain or suffering. I wonder, though, at what point does the experience of religion for those who are actually within the religion become valid, and if the ritual and communal and metaphysical understanding is valid, and the religion as such is spiritual and meaningful for the individual? Is that reconcilable with religion as you've presented it, as an institution?

Raghu Ananthanarayanan: I have nothing against religion in the form of the practices. I practice some of them – I do my prayers every now and again, I do chanting. My wife believes in prayer, and she gets a lot out of it, and she practices

yoga and all of the things I discuss. The issue has nothing to do with religion or religious practice. The issue has to do with organized religion and organized interpretation. I really have an issue with organized interpretation because it actually takes away from religious experience. For example, most Hindu rituals are very simple, everyday facts. I'm sure this is true of all rituals, but it is certainly true of Indian rituals. What you have in an Indian ritual is the concept that the purest fire is the fire of the woman of the home cooks food with. So you actually bring the fire from there and place it in front of your deities. You use this fire in the prayer and rituals. You cook the simplest food that can be cooked in that particular season, and you place it in front of the deity. What is the offering and what is the ritual? The ritual is the quality with which you make the simplest things and the quality with which you offer it. This is blessed, because it is done with a meditative quality, it is just a simple action. That's all. I'm supposed to do my rituals every morning just to remind myself to be able to pay that kind of attention to everything that I do. If I achieve this attentiveness, then all my acts are an offering to the Thou. There are times when people who do not have religion or ritual go through problems, because they do not understand and internalize inner boundaries. So religion as disciplined respectful practice is essential. But if I am left to myself to discover this, if my fear is not compounded by your explanations of how you can get me out of it, I can understand and overcome my fears. But you compound it for me by talking about heaven and hell, and I'm going to get stuck and become dependent on you both for the interpretation of reality, and to be my savior. Once I'm stuck, I suffer and you make the money. That to me is organized religion. I think that's dehumanizing, whereas rituals and religion are not dehumanizing. They're beautiful. They are the source of dance and music!

Catherine Cornille: I'd like to continue this conversation also. Shelley asked what makes religion valid, and I'd like to ask what makes religion invalid. You said it is organized religion, but the phrase "organized religion" is a very imprecise one. What does it exactly mean? I think you being a disciple of Krishnamurti, and him showing you how to look at things, is a seed of organization which, with growth, becomes an organized religion. But then, within Hinduism you have a number of organized religions, and Christianity is an organized religion, even though it's not really, it actually has a number of sub-organized religions. So it's very general to say organized

religion is bad and the rest is good. I would like you to clarify precisely what is bad about organized religion and what, precisely, an organized religion is, because you affirm the importance of rituals, which are provided by organized religion. So where does that ritual that is of organized religion no longer seem to be helpful or constructive? And my question is really a deeper one with regard to Hinduism itself. What has always mystified me is whether there is a critical mass within the spiritual laboratory that is Hinduism. Is everything that is experimented with okay? Is there any kind of criterion within Hinduism that makes a particular guru illegitimate or a particular movement immoral? I'm sure there is no orthodoxy on this matter, so what I'm looking for is a general idea, I suppose.

R. Rajaram: This is one of the most common questions that people who are trying to learn about Hinduism ask. There is, as you say, no real answer, but as a starter I would say that the first thing you really need to know is that even as we say that Hinduism is a great collective of many traditions, there is one category that helps conceptual clarity. It is an amalgam of great traditions and Vedic traditions. When we say great traditions, we do not mean it as an adjective. It is dominant and subaltern traditions. Some people in America say that Hinduism is essentially Brahmanism, and there is no such thing as non-Brahmanic Hinduism. But I think this is inaccurate. There is certainly some rubric of principles that can guide what you are doing within Hinduism, which would be your belief in the oneness of reality with the potential for plurality. And finally, there is this notion of *Jivatma* and *Paramaatma*, which would mean your individual soul and the cosmic soul. Though your perspectives are different, ultimately the goal is finding unity with the *Paramaatma*. Then there are the four stages of life's journey that are certainly notions that could be called Hindu. It's a very irresponsible statement when someone says that in Hinduism "anything goes". But within this rubric, there's a lot of room for diversity of positions and plurality of perspectives.

Raghu Ananthanarayanan: Let me add to what Rajaram has said. The word religion itself is problematic because that word has lost its original meaning. If you stick with the meaning that religion is that which brings the energies of the self together, then I think yoga and religion are the exact same thing. Yoga may be an excellent translation for the word religion and religion may be an excellent translation for the word yoga.

But if I did that, then I'd be getting into a problem. So what do I do? The reason I went into yoga was because I was searching for the answer to some questions: What is Indian? What is India? I searched quite desperately. I traveled, I read a lot of Buddhism, I talked to a few people. What I found was that all of Indian religious thought agrees with the fundamental principles of yoga. Any religious thought you find in India will talk about *yama* (interpersonal ethic), *niyama* (personal discipline), some form of *pranayama* and *samadhi* (contemplation and mediation). There's no Indian thought that doesn't speak about all of this. The fundamental purpose of any of these practices is to be able to get into that state of meditation. What I find very strange is that people who have not experienced that state of meditation talk about what was said by other people in that state of meditation. For example, take Shankara. Shankara, in his state of meditation, explicated what is *advaita*. You have these quintessential statements in the Vedas. Shankaracharya in his state of meditation gave it one meaning, and another sage said another thing in his state of meditation. Do I know anything about it? I don't. But all their followers keep fighting over the interpretation of their particular saint. I don't understand this. So whenever those kinds of orthodoxies come in, I call it religion and I keep it away. To me, organized religion is anything that somebody is talking about which they haven't really experienced. Which is why I call them "proxies".

There is an important rule called *apta vachana* that says you should only listen to that person who behaves and reflects what he speaks about. So in the general Indian public, people don't much care for gods, goddesses, this, that and the other. They actually care more about living things. So they go to anybody who is a wise teacher. They'll go to a Muslim or a Hindu saint because they think that he is someone who reflects truth. They'll go to anybody who has a kind of saintliness about him. So the first rule is: Do you live by what you say? If you do, then I'll listen to you. The second rule is you only take as evidence that which you have experienced directly. Everything else is provisional. So you listen to somebody, and you think that this person is making sense, but unless you experience something for yourself, do not take it as truth.

When I first started working with my teacher, I would not ask any questions. I would just do what he told me to do. He would say, "Do this chanting." I would do the chanting. He would say, "Do this *asana*." I would do the *asana*. This continued until I became ready to ask questions, and finally after I'd been working with him for

four or five years, he said, “Do you have any questions?” So I said, “I don’t understand what the word *prana* means.” So he said, “Okay, I’ll tell you the next time you come.” Then I learned from Desikachar that the Yogacharya actually went and read up in his books again, and he answered me for three lessons. After that, I was extremely careful when I asked him a question. So, I could ask him any question I wanted, but unless I brought a certain quality to it, he wouldn’t answer it. To me, that gives another view on religion. Because if I move my body in certain ways, lift up my arms, put them down again, that is not yoga. It is yoga when I bring a certain quality to it, attention to my breath and attention to my body when I’m doing it. So in a sense it’s not that difficult to distinguish between what, for lack of a better word, we call spiritual and that which is organized religion. Organized religion, to me, is when an external force is telling you all sorts of things and doing things to make you believe. Inner search does not come from the outside. Any human being who calls himself a guru is not a guru. The word guru has nothing to do with the person. It’s the experience of ignorance being taken away. So when somebody sits there and claims, “I’m a guru,” he’s lying. What I find beautiful about Hinduism is that it has many alternative ways and interpretations. It has various methods and practices. It has its great temples and collective forms of worship, but it allows for individual discovery of truth. Maybe the awakening of the individual to walk the path and discover for him or herself is the central endeavor. That’s why I like Siddhartha’s term, “spiritual laboratory.”

Siddhartha: Sometimes there’s a sense that the last two days have had a kind of unreality about them. As a global civilization, we are going headlong into self-destruction and, in a sense, ostrich-like, we are debating all these issues without awareness of what is happening around. Could it be because, at one level, we feel there is nothing we can do about it and we should just take care of our individual souls? This is a valid way of thinking. Perhaps that’s why we’re going about this discussion. We haven’t brought in the possibility that we could potentially self-destruct. We will have millions of global warming refugees in India and other parts of the world in the next twenty years. Perhaps the divisions between religions and all the particularities of each religion are really irrelevant. If religion means something, then it challenges that we can come together to deal with these common issues that we’re up against. And if we can’t come together on these common issues, then these

religions aren't worth their sod. They're just talking about individual souls, and fear, and death, and nothing more. Maybe we should just face the goddess and be humble, and the goddess will say, "Who are you to decide whether the planet should survive or not?" But part of me is seeing the unreality and the total, utter irrelevance of religions if they cannot respond to these challenges. In terms of what Christ stood for, what Gandhi stood for, what Ramakrishna stood for, what the Buddha stood for, it's surprising that we do not see it fit to come together around these pressing issues and work together on the things that matter most. The three issues that I think matter most are personal transformation, social compassion, and ecological connectedness.

Jyoti Sahi: I thought when we first came together for this meeting, we were interested in the thought of certain people like Abhishiktananda or Bede Griffiths, and the relevance they had. And the kind of definition of Hinduism that has been given here means that all that they stood for was complete nonsense. Because if they are trying to connect a Christian tradition or an Islamic tradition with a Hindu one, it appears that there is nothing there to connect. So I agree with what you've said that there are all kinds of falsities that can be found in institutions. I myself have been linked to the Quaker tradition, which tried to get away from institutions yet in the process became an institution. It hasn't happened yet with Krishnamurti, but I've thought that even Krishnamurti schools risk becoming a form of church. They are as good and as bad as we are as human beings. We are embodiments, and that is our problem.

Jim Morley: Jyoti, I have to strongly disagree with you. I think you're being unfair to the Quakers. The Quakers are a beautiful example of an institution that has worked very hard to keep a lot of the spirit without the trappings of institutions. They have not become an institution like other religious institutions have.

Jyoti Sahi: But they have an influence as an institution. We are dealing with a group who call themselves Quakers; I have worked with them, and they are an institution. So if you are talking about institutional churches, they are among them. They might not define it, but there is something in it that is embodied. I feel that to imagine that religions or spirituality could not be embodied is a bit like saying that we all have to be angels.

Jim Morley: You could say that the Quakers are a social body; they're an organization. But they really do not have dogmas and doctrines that resemble in any way traditional Christian theology. And in a way, they actually come very close in practice to the Buddhist and Hindu versions of yoga. But I also want to respond to Catherine's question about what is organized religion. To a professional theologian like yourself, some of our vocabulary may sound amateurish, and I acknowledge that. Let me try this. I'm going back to my old friend, Carl Jung. Jung has some good one-liners and one of them is, the purpose of organized religion is to protect the individual from ever having a sincerely religious experience. This is the same way in which political dogmas protect people from ever having a truly democratic experience. It's an important challenge to dogmatic religion that we have to take up. Organized institutional religion has something inherently dangerous about it.

Mary Anderson: My comment is in relation to what Raghu said, that every time one touches beauty in oneself, one touches the divine. That has been resonating in my mind, and originally it was as sort of a question about what you meant by these two words, oneself and the divine. As I've thought about it, what came to mind was the beauty of that statement having such ambiguity. You don't really know what it means, that to find beauty in oneself is to touch the divine and that they're exactly the same, or that they're being named by different words. Somehow there's a meeting between these two differences. I'd like to hear you talk more about what you understand that sentence to mean. But also following on the discussion of individual religious experience and institutions, I'd like to hold up that phrase and hold up the paradox or ambiguity between a meaning that could separate two things that are, in a sense, the same by the use of words. We seem to be doing that with individual religious experience, somehow attaching that to the mystical, as if it is somehow separate from the institution. But the institution itself can also be thought as the outgrowth of that individual or a larger collective that allows the individual to be an individual. So I'd like to hold that up as a kind of paradox, that if we reject the institutions, we're rejecting something about the individual, or the possibility of institutions to help provide a collective for individuals coming together, and maybe we should not polarize the two. For me, that relates to the idea that when one touches beauty in oneself, one touches the divine.

Raghu Ananthanarayanan: The way a sutra, or any of these specific statement, is supposed to be understood is through a hermeneutic process of *shravanam*, or listening; *mananam*, or thinking about and inquiring into it, and then *nididhyasanam*, which means deepening and developing the inquiry into an embodied practice. I think different statements stir us in different ways, and that has to do with who I am, what I am, what I listen to. But year after year I keep coming back to these lines about touching beauty within. What I've experienced is that there are certain points in time when I spontaneously feel are beautiful. It could be in a relationship or in working, doing something. When I experience that, I don't have any idea of a separation between myself and what is happening. There is a flow, a feeling of being close to tears, it's a lovely feeling. There's a song that goes: "A beam of light will fill my head / I'll remember what's been said / By all the good men this world has ever seen." It's like that. Suddenly you just remember certain lines. These are some insights that just hit you, and you keep finding different meanings of the sutras each time this happens.

Let us struggle a little more with the meaning of organized religion because I like what you've said. For me the question has been: Am I hanging onto something out of fear, or do I have it in me to look at the truth of myself and discover why I am doing something? There's a beautiful Buddhist idea of meditation, which is: "that which I thought was me becomes an object of contemplation." Every time I'm able to make that which I thought was me an object of my contemplation, I have moved a little bit closer to truth, closer to something that's inside. I've heard psychologists talk about this too, "making the subject the object of my subject." Now, I don't think the issue is with a guru or a religion or something like that. The issue is with how I am engaging with it, which is why I have to ask: what am I getting caught up with? Am I getting caught with an external agency, or do I already look into myself to discover truth? Am I getting stuck, or is it just a step? Without institutions, where do I find a proper context for learning? But if I become dependent on a particular priest, teacher, or institution, then I have a problem.

Julia Feder: I'd like to add my voice to the discussion about the positive or negative power of institutionalized religion. When we're talking about a problem as urgent as global warming, for example, do we have the luxury of throwing aside these institutions? I think the best way to affect change is to engage these institutions. If

we're all working as individuals and throw out the idea of proxies...I don't think we have the time to do something like that. I think we have to rely on proxies and the power of institutions in order to affect change.

Richard Kearney: I'd like to go back to Siddhartha's worry that certain meetings like this on religious and spiritual matters can run the risk of evading the real suffering of the world. As I see it, we are engaging in the question of inter-religious imagination as a way of responding to the sad facts of war, poverty, and ecological disaster on a global level, and the fact that many of the violent struggles in the world today have, alas, religious causes (albeit in the sense of perverted religious instincts and ideologies). It's against this tragic world backdrop that we have come to this "Crossing Hearts" meeting here in Bangalore to see if the great wisdom traditions – which this Indian continent has historically fostered in such an experimental and pluralist way – might offer some solution. This is not a conference on world government and politics. If it were on global warming, for example, we should probably have invited people like Al Gore or Gordon Brown, or leaders of the United Nations who are in a position to influence world opinion on this crucial matter. But we are talking here at another level, beneath the political, economic, and environmental, though obviously not oblivious or insensitive to such public domains. We are here to ask the question if there might be another place of encounter in what several of us, from different wisdom traditions, have been calling, by way of an ancient shared metaphor, "the cave of the heart". This refers to a key symbolic place in diverse religions – Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist – a key concept? The cave of the heart – or *guha*, as it is called in Sanskrit – has come up again and again during this seminar as both a wound and an aperture. It signals a special if often neglected place of connection and crossing, a space of tacit inter-animation between opposites and adversaries. For many people, religion properly practiced through meditation, through yoga, through prayer, sometimes also through sacramental rituals, allows an ability to go inwards and find a spiritual resource in the heart of imagination. It opens up what Siddhartha and Siraj have both referred to as a "spiritual laboratory". If the "inner" work of heart excavation is neglected or ignored, then I don't think we are ever, ultimately, going to find a solution to vast "outer" crises of climate change and war. If people aren't "right-minded" or "right-hearted", you can issue all the edicts you want, people will still drive their SUVs in the US and

the UK will still sell its arms in the Cayman Islands. All this will continue unless there is also a change of heart. I think the greatness of Al Gore, incidentally, is that as a world politician he has *also* undergone a change of heart. As did people like Gandhi, Mandela, Martin Luther King, and Aung San Suu Kyi. What I'm saying is that the two levels of change – personal and public, spiritual and global – are *connected*. The cave of the heart is not some escape hatch for beautiful souls. It is not some utopian sanctuary for the feeble and faint-spirited. Even Marx admitted that religion is “the heart of a heartless world”. No matter how abused and disfigured religions can become, there is invariably something beautiful still harbored in most of the wisdom traditions that continues to be conveyed through sacraments, images, stories, rituals, and prayers – namely, through the *religious imaginary*. If we cut that out completely, it's harder to let the wound of the heart be healed. And without that inner healing, no amount of praxis is going to work. I think that the real healing and the giving of life is the ultimate test of any genuine spirituality. And this will always involve some radical translation into action and change. The heart is not separate from life but its very source and well-spring. If there is no giving of life, then we're wasting our time.

Simon Sleeman: One thing that has troubled me at times is the reference to our own efforts. Yoga and therapies and other explorations are helpful. But somehow I feel that the ultimate gesture is the handing over of responsibility for myself and the application of my attention to the guidance of someone else, of the spirit. I don't think that is actually renegeing on my own responsibilities for my life and myself. The organized religion that I have been part of, as a Benedictine monk, has provided me with the space, time, and support to undergo that transformation and that exploration, and I hope that it will continue to provide me with the life and the support that is going to get me there. No matter how loyal or assiduous I am in ritual or anything else, I know I'm not going to make it there by myself.

Siddhartha: Richard and Simon, thank you for what you've said. I think we have enough of an understanding of politics, economics, and society to know what is going on in the world. And we have enough political activists and social activists trying to change the world. And you're very right that unless there is a sense, somewhere inside, that we can lead the world differently, then all these ideas cannot be embodied. There are so many ideas about what's going wrong and what can be done, but

nothing's happening in the way it should. Unless there is a way of life that is different, we cannot change society.

I sometimes use, in relation to spirituality, the idea of the vertical and the horizontal. A lot of spirituality today is about you and your private salvation, you and your god, you and your peers, you and your debt. And I think Gandhi and Christ showed another way, the horizontal way. I'm not saying the vertical is irrelevant, but there's also the horizontal way. The horizontal way refers to you and the *other*, to active and transformative social engagement. And horizontal also means that you are close to the Earth. So this inner bliss and meaning can be confined to a purely vertical plane, or we can try to move it to the horizontal plane where the vertical is also present. Whether it's Christ or Gandhi, there's an ongoing drive to go to the horizontal plane. And I think Christ is about the hope that the horizontal plane is real. The *Baghavat Gita* also talks about hope in a different kind of way, as *nishkama karma*. We have to act without being attached to the fruits of our actions. So we cannot be concerned with whether we will succeed or not, but we must continue to move along the horizontal plane, moving in that direction. Any discussion of spirituality must, I believe, grapple with this horizontal plane. To me, the more spiritual I get, the more the vertical and horizontal planes come together. There cannot be one that does not include the other.

Kendra Bradner: I've been trying to think about how to process the experience of this conference, and, Siddhartha, for me what you've said about the horizontal and vertical planes and the engagement with the world around us is very important. I think that the subject of this conference – an inter-religious one – is crucial to keep in mind. We've spoken a lot about the mystical traditions and going beyond dogmas and particularities of religions, and I'd like to emphasize that I strongly believe in the unity of our various spiritual and mystical and religious experiences. Also, the philosopher Levinas speaks about the importance of engaging the Other in their otherness. And I think if we engage in a dialogue, we need to keep in mind the way that Other present themselves and that real, true spiritual experiences have been experienced in the teachings and practices of particular religions. I'd like to put that out as a comment and not a condemnation of what has been said; I think there's something very necessary to remember about the particularities.

Simon Sleeman: I just want to reflect on the fact that the cross hanging over our Benedictine altar in Glenstal Abbey (Ireland) used to be one with a very long vertical line and a small horizontal one, and we've taken it down and replaced it with one that has two lines of equal length.

Siddhartha: I agree that the horizontal and the vertical are not mutually exclusive; it's a way of clarifying things.

R. Rajaram: In the challenges facing us now, we need all the resources we can get. One of the things that is so crucial about inter-religious imagination is that the resources of one religion are not accessible to another. Religions are often experienced as frozen cultural resources with respect to each other. The challenge is how to make them flow freely and become more porous and available to each other. One of the things that struck me as a teacher is how easily we appropriate our children in religious terms. A child could be only two years old, but he'll be a Hindu child or a Christian child or a Muslim child, before the child ever has a choice of whether he wants to be a Hindu, a Christian, or a Muslim. It's actually a human rights issue, if you really push it further.

Siddhartha: This is why I think it is so important to continue imagining India as a spiritual laboratory for different religious conversations and connections.