



Book Review

Why I Am a Hindu by Shashi Tharoor

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Shashi Tharoor's *Why I Am a Hindu* is a personal account, a short history of a world religion, and a political argument dressed up as scholarly writing. The book is written in Tharoor's fluent, idiomatic English and invites readers into a conversation that is part memoir and part cultural intervention. Its goal is to take back the word "Hindu" from a narrow, exclusionary political project and to present a vision of Hinduism that is plural, questioning, and cosmopolitan. The book came out at a time when there were hot public disputes in India regarding identity, majoritarian politics and what secularism means. This backdrop is important to the book's goals and reception. The book is simple in form and smart in how it uses language.

It is the work that combines autobiography with intellectual history and political analysis. It is neither just one man's personal account of his religion, nor merely an introduction to Hindu philosophy, but also a conscious intervention in India's current debates around religion and politics. Spelled in Tharoor's typically elegant English, it aims to reclaim Hinduism as an open, plural, and humane tradition, one which differs significantly from the narrow, rigid ideology of Hindutva that increasingly pervades public life.

The book came out in 2018, a time when questions of identity, nationalism, and secularism had become fused together in opposition in India. Tharoor, an elected representative and public thinker for over three decades, undertook to demonstrate that it was possible to be Hindu without being committed to the politics of exclusion or majoritarianism. In attempting to do so, he sought to reclaim the meaning of the term "Hindu" from those who had politicized it as an ideological slogan.

The book is structured in three distinct sections. The initial section presents a nuanced and very individualized description of Tharoor's own Hindu upbringing and also examines the broader philosophical and devotional traditions of the faith that make up the religion. Here he

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describes such ideas as dharma, karma, moksha, and the complexity of the ways – bhakti, jnana, and karma yoga – in which they come together to exist within Hinduism. His intention is to demonstrate that the religion's strength is precisely its unwillingness to be confined to any one dogma. Diversity, argument, and freedom of interpretation, he maintains, are at the core of Hindu thought.

The second half traces the development of political Hinduism, or Hindutva, and the ideological origins of this movement in the early twentieth century. Tharoor explains how individuals like V. D. Savarkar and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) attempted to make Hindu identity into the foundation of a monolithic national identity, in comparison to the plural and adaptable religious culture he is celebrating. He is scathing about this trend, maintaining that Hindutva perverts the nature of Hinduism by submitting it to the demands of politics and by presenting it in terms of opposition to other communities, especially Muslims and Christians. For Tharoor, this is not merely a treason to the religion's philosophical heritage but also a threat to India's constitutional democracy.

The third part of the book looks to the future and prescribes how liberal Hindus may reclaim their tradition. Tharoor's contention is that it is possible to be a devout Hindu and yet stand up for secularism, pluralism, and minority rights. His appeal is for Hindus to accept their religion without letting it be weaponised. The book's structure – going from testimony to diagnosis to prescription – lends it coherence and clarity and makes it available to general readers as well as of use to students of religion and politics.

Central to Tharoor's argument is the notion that Hinduism is a religion of moral imagination and not fixed dogma. He emphasizes three motifs that appear again and again in the book: freedom of conscience, humility in the face of complexity, and cultural strength. The ability to choose one's own way, the embrace of paradox, and the tradition's capacity for assimilation over centuries all show him, he says, the richness of Hindu thought. They enable him also to relate abstruse metaphysical issues to issues of citizenship, democracy, and social justice in the present.

Strength of the book is in how it connects philosophy to contemporary issues. Tharoor glides smoothly from personal reminiscence, classical allusions, to political observation. He remembers his father's piety at temples not to sentimentalise ritual but to humanise it. He brings great men of the Hindu tradition not just as historical figures but as moral role models whose lives throw light upon contemporary problems. The narrative voice is clear, engaging, and often witty, allowing readers unfamiliar with Hinduism to grasp complex ideas without feeling overwhelmed.

However, the book also has limitations. While Tharoor does touch upon caste and other social injustices, his treatment of the subject is argued to be too cursory and moralistic by critics, missing the material and structural nature of oppression. Dalit and leftist scholars have also noted that liberal reclaiming of Hinduism threatens to minimise the actual experiences of the marginalised groups. For them, the destruction of Hindutva cannot be dissociated from addressing caste as a pervasive social system.

A further limitation is inherent in the book's very scope. In trying to encompass philosophy, history, politics, and theology in a single book, Tharoor necessarily skimps on elaborate debates. Those seeking exhaustive scholarship on Hindu scriptures or on social history might find the arguments too brief. But this very accessibility is responsible for making the book widely read, especially by younger Indians and foreign readers who want an introduction, not a magnum opus.

The reception of *Why I Am a Hindu* registers these tensions. Numerous reviewers greeted it as a timely and brave intervention, applauding its peaceful but resolute claim that Hinduism must not be identified with Hindutva. Others received it as politically driven or too complacent regarding the harder truths of hierarchy and brutality in Hindu society. Even these criticisms highlight the book's importance: it managed to instigate controversy regarding the definition of Hindu identity in modern India.

We might also add that Tharoor then supplemented this book with *The Hindu Way* (2019), in which he further elaborated some of the same themes while more consciously proposing Hinduism as a cultural asset for living in the modern age. The two books can be read together as an attempt to define a liberal, pluralist Hinduism resistant both to religious fundamentalism and to the decline of secular values.

For non-Indian readers, the book provides a concise and accessible introduction to Hindu thought, showing how an ancient tradition can remain relevant in modern debates regarding democracy and identity. For Indian readers, it is a reminder that pluralism and tolerance have always been part of Hindu tradition, and that these ideals need to be asserted in public life.

Ultimately, the book's worth is in its courage and lucidity. Through the synthesis of memoir, philosophy, and politics, Tharoor enlivens Hinduism as a living conversation — one that has always had to respond to the calls of justice, equality, and human dignity. Even those who do not share his conclusions will discover in the book a thoughtful voice that invites

reflection. Why I Am a Hindu is an appeal for religion without fanaticism, for belief without exclusion, and for a politics that respects India's plural soul.

References

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