

## Hinduism and Social Ethics

<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep181/>

Michael Egnor:

Welcome back to Mind Matters News. This is Mike Egnor. I have the pleasure and privilege of having as my guest, Arjuna Gallagher. Mr. Gallagher is a Hindu, he's from New Zealand. And he is the creator of Theology Unleashed, a YouTube channel, which is a wonderful YouTube channel. I encourage everyone to go to it. There's great discussions there. And also, he put together a fantastic documentary called The Persecuted Saints You've Never Heard Of. And please also watch that documentary. I started watching it and I couldn't stop watching. It's a great documentary. Welcome back, Arjuna.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Michael Egnor:

So we've talked about a lot of stuff, about theology and metaphysics and ethics and science. And I just wanted to get into some cultural, contemporary issues. What's your feeling about cancel culture that's going on now in the Western world?

Arjuna Gallagher:

So I think cancel culture is a bit of a worry. I mean, this idea that we should punish somebody for something they put on Twitter 10 years ago is really childish. Also, I'm a big fan of Jonathan Haidt, who did ... I think it was his co-author went through a period of depression, and then studied cognitive behavioral therapy to get out of it. And then went back to working as a professor.

Arjuna Gallagher:

And they came to realize that the principles of cognitive behavioral therapy that teach you how to be resilient and happy and successful, they're totally contradicted by this woke culture. That if you were to understand cognitive behavioral therapy and want to make people unhappy, unresilient, and unsuccessful, then wokeism is basically the philosophy you'd teach people. We can get into that more, or we could just point people to Coddling the American Mind, by Jonathan Haidt.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah. I mean, the wokeism, there's so much bad in it. And a major part of the bad is that there's no way in wokeism that anybody gets any happier or any better. It just leads to more anger and more fighting and more losing. And it's just a terrible way to run a culture.

Arjuna Gallagher:

I think what's happened with a lot of these social justice movements is they were fighting genuine problems, and they won those battles. And after winning those battles, they then had to continue to

justify their own existence. So they were no longer fighting genuine battles, they were just justifying their own existence and actually creating problems.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah. I totally agree. I think the whole social justice thing really is a branch of Marxism. I think of Marxism as distilled evil. It's what you get when you bring everything evil into one place at one time.

Michael Egnor:

How do you feel about a lot of questions of social ethics nowadays? For example, abortion, euthanasia, a lot of the life issues. Are there viewpoints in Hinduism that reflect on that? Or do you have personal viewpoints on that?

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah. I don't know if I can speak for Hinduism, broadly. As I said earlier, Hinduism is like a category. It's like saying the Abrahamic tradition. So we wouldn't ask, what do native American religions, or what do Abrahamic religions say on this particular social issue? Even within Hare Krishnas, you're going to get a diversity of views. But the general view you would get on abortion, say, is that abortion is murder and it's not okay.

Arjuna Gallagher:

There's one Hare Krishna thinker, known as Dr. Howard Resnick, who I've had on my channel a few times. I've listened to him give a talk on it. And I quite like his views, which is that in some extreme cases, abortion would be all right, where either due to the mental health of the mother or due to medical reasons, the abortion could be necessary. So it's not that we should ban all abortion. But the other thing is you could also ask a question of ... actually, Tulsi Gabbard, she's got a Hare Krishna background and . . .

Michael Egnor:

Oh, she does, really? Okay.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Her view is actually a little bit anachronistic from the Hare Krishna tradition, but she gives a good argument for it and I think it's justified. Which is, if the government can tell you today that you can't have an abortion, then tomorrow it'll be able to tell you that you must have an abortion. And this is not the kind of power we want to give to the government. So just because we think something is wrong and shouldn't be done, doesn't necessarily mean that the government should go around policing it.

Michael Egnor:

That's true, and that gets to the personally opposed argument in abortion that Mario Cuomo, the former governor of New York said years ago. That he was personally opposed to abortion, but he didn't believe that it should be legislated. The problem I have with that is that I could certainly see the personally opposed viewpoint, for example, in flavors of ice cream. That is, that I'm personally opposed to strawberry ice cream, because I don't like it, but I don't think there should be any laws regarding whether you can have strawberry ice cream or not.

Michael Egnor:

But abortion is a fundamentally different thing. To be personally opposed to abortion, but feel that it should be legal, is like being personally opposed to rape, but thinking that it should be legal. That is, that there's something intrinsic about abortion that's not just a matter of personal preference. There's another life involved. So if abortion is wrong, it's wrong for everyone. Or if it's not wrong, it's not wrong for anyone.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah. I would go to consequentialism here, which would be to ask the question of, if we do have abortion laws, are people in general, better off? And if we don't have abortion laws, are people worse off? And there might be a certain happy balance somewhere ... or maybe it's never a happy balance. But there might be somewhere in the middle where it's better. Like in New Zealand recently, they brought in really liberal abortion laws. Which are basically, up until like two weeks before the baby's born or something disgusting, that you can do an abortion. I don't know exactly where they draw the line.

Arjuna Gallagher:

But a lot of countries will have it up to like 26 days or a certain number of days from conception, I don't know how they work that out, when conception was roughly based on the size when they do the scan. And that's obviously less sinful, if you've got basically a near fully formed baby and you're killing that, that's obviously worse. But it could be the case that having blanket no abortion laws actually means that a lot of women go and get dodgy abortions from dodgy clinics. And that might be worse than just having somewhat moderate abortion laws.

Michael Egnor:

Sure. I speak on the abortion issues at my medical school, and it's a rather controversial issue, as you can imagine. What I've come to believe is that the pro-abortion viewpoint depends critically on what I really feel are misrepresentations of the scientific and social facts about abortions. So what I try to do with the medical students is move away from the ethics a little bit and just talk about the science and the sociology. For example, I think a powerful scientific argument can be made that life begins at conception. That saying that an embryo is not a new human life, just doesn't make any scientific sense. So life begins when the sperm and the egg meet.

Michael Egnor:

And there's no question that historically abortion, at least in the United States, discriminates racially. A black child is three times as likely to be aborted as a white child. Around the world, girls are aborted at a much higher rate than boys are. There's actually a bit of a femicide in Asia of about a hundred million girls over the past 50 years. And disabled children are selectively aborted.

Arjuna Gallagher:

That might be turning though with increase of work culture and men getting discriminated against. Maybe it'll flip the other way.

Michael Egnor:

It could ... maybe. But so what I try to do in discussing abortion is just ask that we stick to the facts. And when the facts are laid out there, it's an awfully hard thing to defend. Defending abortion, basically

presupposes that you don't really understand it, I think. Because if you really understand it, most people would say it's terrible.

Arjuna Gallagher:

I think being honest about these things would really help. Like some abortion clinics that ... or places that women go when they're pregnant and they know what to do. They show them the ultrasound and show them that they can see the form. And then they think, oh, I couldn't kill this.

Michael Egnor:

Sure.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Or just explaining to them the facts, about women who have had abortions, often this is the psychological effect it has on them, versus women in your situation who haven't had abortions, this is what their lives have looked like. And just give them the facts so they can make up their mind. As opposed to being politically motivated and saying, we're going to hide all the downsides of abortion or hide all the downsides of not having abortion because of our political motivation. And we want to persuade them of a predetermined viewpoint.

Michael Egnor:

How do you feel about euthanasia? And is there any sense in Hinduism, any Hindu perspective on euthanasia?

Arjuna Gallagher:

So euthanasia is rejected. It's even rejected for animals. We have a couple of cows on our property, we've got 10 acres here. And cow protection is a big thing for Hindu culture, and it's particularly for Vaishnavas. And you don't kill the cow, even when it gets old, whereas in the West, when the cow gets to a certain age, you just kill it because it's frail, it's old. And so if you have an old cow up by the road and people see it, they don't see old cows, they'll think that this is animal abuse. But they wouldn't think that about your grandma. They wouldn't think, oh, you're keeping this lady still alive. She's so old and fragile. This is grandma abuse. It's just this disconnect on how we look at animals from how we look at people.

Arjuna Gallagher:

But the understanding of why not to kill them or why not to commit euthanasia is that we have a certain amount of karma that we need to live out. And if we don't live it out in this life, we'll have to take birth again in a similar body so we can fully live out the karma. So if someone's suffering from a horrible disease or mental disturbance, there's some reason why that's happening and there's some lesson they need to learn from that.

Arjuna Gallagher:

However, there is some scope for suicide, but it's only in a certain way. And it's only if your body is ... a Hare Krishna in Mayapur had cancer a few years ago. And the cancer was going to kill her. She had months to live, and she was suffering. So she fasted until death. So instead of suffering for a couple months in bed, ridden with cancer, she fasted to death. And then it just only took a week. And this is a

prescribed method that Vaishnavas can fast until death. And even ... there's observations of cows doing something similar. That if a cow is really sick and going to die anyway, they'll go and sit in a cold river until they die.

Michael Egnor:

I think even in the Catholic tradition, that in the terminal stages of life, if taking nourishment is uncomfortable or painful and it only serves to prolong the process of dying, I think not taking nourishment is considered an acceptable thing. As I understand Catholic ethics. It's not acceptable in the Catholic ethic to do it, to try to die. That is, with the intent of dying. But if it's to relieve suffering, accompanied by receiving nourishment, I think it's considered ethical.

Arjuna Gallagher:

It's funny, I just thought about it that we've gone from having a more balanced view that ... well, at least in India. Animals are sacred, you don't just kill them. And people are sacred, but you don't extend their life unnecessarily. But now we want to extend humans lives as long as possible, to the point of spending millions of dollars keeping them on life support. And the moment an animal shows the first signs of being sick, we kill it.

Michael Egnor:

Right, right.

Arjuna Gallagher:

So we've taken our desire to prolong animals' lives and put all of that on humans. I watched a documentary a little while ago in which ... the Hare Krishna presenting the documentary, or maybe the documentary itself was asking the question of, is all we're doing with a lot of these medicals procedures, just prolonging the process of dying? Or are we actually helping people? Because you see some of the ways some of these cancers are treated and some of the cancer treatments are excruciating. And then in many cases, the person still dies.

Arjuna Gallagher:

So there's this idea in the Hare Krishna tradition that death is inevitable, it's going to come sooner or later, so we should die gracefully. And actually the purpose of life, is to die in a particular way. And the goal is to ... the Sanskrit is [ante narayana smrtih 00:13:07], to remember God at the time of death. And that gives us a good destination in the next life. So one way it's described is that only God conscious people can leave gracefully. Other people who aren't God conscious, they'll tend to be very upset and angry and so on, when the time comes for them to die.

Michael Egnor:

My understanding of Catholic medical ethics is that there are two kinds of treatments that patients receive, ordinary and extraordinary. Ordinary treatments would be food and water and shelter and clothing and things like that. And hygiene. And extraordinary would be medications and ventilators and operations and things like that. And that in Catholic medical ethics, it's acceptable to refuse extraordinary means of operations and medications and things, if it only serves to prolong the process of dying. But it's not acceptable to refuse ordinary things, as such as nourishment and water and shelter and hygiene and so on.

Michael Egnor:

So basically, it's okay to take a patient off a ventilator if they have no prospect of survival and it just prolongs their suffering to be on the ventilator. But it wouldn't be okay to starve them or to dehydrate them, or to leave them in their waste or something. Ordinary care is something that every human being has a right to, and it is suicide to refuse ordinary care. However, to refuse extraordinary means is not suicide and can be quite ethical in the appropriate circumstances.

Arjuna Gallagher:

I would put some medical procedures and drugs in that category too, where the evidential basis for them is really strong and they have a high success rate.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah, sure. Yeah, yeah. Right, right. Right. Exactly. If it's just a matter of taking an antibiotic that doesn't have much side effects that would save your life, correct.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah. Or some surgeries. You just remove something and the problem goes away and it's not going to come back. I'm sure you know of some of those within ...

Michael Egnor:

But we face this a lot in patients who have, for example, metastatic disease. If you're full of cancer, you could have operations until you die. You just take out every metastasis, but that doesn't really serve any purpose. It doesn't help anyone. It doesn't make them better. It just, it puts them through a lot of suffering in the last part of their life.

Arjuna Gallagher:

There's a famous story in our tradition of a great king who, he was cursed to die in seven days by a snake bite. And he was a very powerful king. And he had some mystic ... he could have overturned the curse. He had a deep connection with God and so on. But he didn't, he just saw it as God's mercy that he knows exactly ... Most people have no idea when they're going to die. So we can't prepare our consciousness to think of God at the time. It could come at any moment. So therefore we have to spend our whole lives trying to think of God. But he was very lucky that he knew the moment he was going to die.

Arjuna Gallagher:

And instead of getting angry and thinking, I'm going to remove all the snakes from the kingdom, I won't be killed by a snake. Instead of doing anything like that, he thought, this is God's mercy on me, and I'm going to think of God. So he went to the bank of the Ganges and he heard from a great Sage for seven days and seven nights without stopping to sleep ... without stopping to eat or drink. Just heard nonstop, while fasting, about God and asked questions and was coherent the whole time.

Arjuna Gallagher:

That's obviously a terminal lucidity thing, of having some lucidity to survive the body falling apart from not eating. And yeah, this was his response. So that is an appropriate response in some cases. That's an

underlying attitude we should have, that when the time comes, this is my time, and it's meant for me to go.

Michael Egnor:

Well, I started out as an atheist, or at least an agnostic. And I really didn't convert to Christianity until about 20 years ago. And part of the reason for my conversion was a friendship I had with a Lutheran pastor at the hospital. He provided a lot of the counseling there for patients who were dying. And one night, during the atheist part of my life, I was in the intensive care unit, in the pediatric intensive care unit. And there was a six year old who was dying of a brain tumor, that I was taking care of. And it was a pretty horrible death. I mean, the kid was just, the tumor was just destroying him.

Michael Egnor:

And it was like midnight, and this pastor and I were sitting in the nurses station, just talking about what this child and his family were going through. And I said to the pastor, I said, "I'd like to believe in God, but I can't understand why God would let something like this happen. I mean, this is a nice little kid, his family's lovely people. And he is just going through hell." And the pastor said, "Well, God never said that life wouldn't be without tragedy, that life wouldn't be without suffering. He just said that when it happens, he'll be there with you." That's when we're close to him, is when we suffer.

Michael Egnor:

Because at least in Christianity, our understanding of God, who is Christ, suffered for all of us. So suffering is redemptive, of sorts, despite its horror. And that stuck with me. That really changed my understanding of suffering in a very profound way. I felt that when you suffer is when you're closest to God. That changed the way I saw things.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Right. Yeah. One thing that could be said is the real tragedy is that we are separate from God, or experiencing separation from God. And the tragedies that happen in life are opportunities to remember God. And if they weren't there, we might just happily go about our lives and never take shelter of God. So that would be an even greater tragedy.

Michael Egnor:

Absolutely. When you look at just ordinary human lives, not even considering God, I don't think anybody can make a credible case that a person who lives much of their life without any adversity, who gets everything they want is a better person for it. That is that there, while certainly suffering can break a person. My experience has been that some degree of suffering is necessary for maturation and for becoming a decent human being. The offspring of incredibly wealthy parents who gets everything he wants and never has any kind of adversity doesn't usually turn out to be a pretty good human being.

Arjuna Gallagher:

That brings up the question of microaggressions. That somebody did a microaggression against me, and I'm going to get really angry about that, rather than use it to deepen my personality.

Michael Egnor:

Right, right, right. It's a kind of arrogance and self-centeredness, that is not really healthy.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Well, it's turning the whole thing on its head. It's the idea that things that don't kill us make us stronger. That's anti-fragility. So it's not just that we don't break, it's that we actually become stronger through adversity.

Michael Egnor:

Sure.

Arjuna Gallagher:

And of course, there's a limit to that. When you're raising your kids, you let them do somewhat risky things, let them climb trees or whatever. But you don't let them injure themselves in a way that's going to affect them for life.

Michael Egnor:

Right. Profound stuff. I thank you, Arjuna. My guest has been Arjuna Gallagher, who is the creator of the YouTube channel, Theology Unleashed. He is a Hindu, and this has been a fascinating discussion, and I thank you so much. And please, everybody, be sure to go to his channel and to watch this documentary called The Persecuted Saints You've Never Heard Of. Thank you, Arjuna.

Announcer:

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