The Spiritual Scientist
An ezine for those who think!

When God Manifests Out Of Love

Question: Is the temple murti (image) a symbol of God or is it God Himself?

Answer: Let's understand the two kinds of symbolism - ascending and descending. Ascending symbolism means that we ascribe a concrete, tangible symbol to an abstract, amorphous concept. For example, the flag of a nation is the ascending symbol for the concept of nationhood. It is much easier to invoke patriotic feelings on seeing the flag than on thinking of the concept of nationhood.

But God is not abstract or amorphous; He is a person with a specific, concrete form. With respect to the flag, the only connection between the object (flag) and the concept (nationhood) is the connection created in the minds of the citizens. That's why the citizens can choose one flag today and can choose another tomorrow, if they feel that the new flag will better evoke patriotic feelings. Some people erroneously think the same about the Deity (murti) : "I like this form of God and so I will worship it; if you like some other form, you can worship that. And if I like another form tomorrow, I will worship that form." This leads to the extreme error of imagining that any form as per one's fancy can be worshipped as God. This is ascending symbolism; we by our imagination projected upwards to God ascribe some symbol to Him.

But this sort of symbolism doesn't work for persons. For example, the philosopher-saint Bhaktivinoda Thakura explains that a person has his own original form and a photo of that person is in actuality connected with that person in the sense that it depicts his form. So when we feel affection on seeing a photo of a person, that affection is for the person, not for some abstract concept.

But a Deity of the Supreme Being is much than a photo of an ordinary human being. The person himself is not consciously connected with his photo; when we look at the photo of a person, he is not aware that we are remembering him. But when we worship the scripturally made Deity of the Lord, the Lord being present everywhere manifests Himself as the Deity to accept our worship - out of love.

The great devotees, out of their love for the Lord, long to serve Him personally. And the Lord, due to His love for His devotees, longs to reciprocate with their love. The nature of love is such that one wants to use everything one has - even one's own senses - to serve the beloved. So the Lord manifests as the Deity to give us sensory experience of the divine.

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