‘It’s possible to be an atheist and practise a religion ... many religions get along quite well without gods’

Peter Heehs, an American historian based in Puducherry, writes on Indian history, spirituality and religion. His latest work ‘Spirituality Without God’ is a global study of “godless” spirituality. He spoke on the subject to Vikram Zutshi:

What is the basic premise of this book?

I have always been fascinated by the diversity of spiritual traditions and have tried to bring this out in my book. Many people think that religious and spiritual paths are necessarily theistic, that is, based on belief in God but in fact many traditions do not accept the idea of God, or give it little importance. In my book I have given most of my attention to these non-theistic traditions because they tend to be overlooked. My aim is not to shake the faith of readers brought up in a given tradition, but to give them a chance to learn about traditions that differ from their own.

On the other hand there are now many people, even in India, who did not receive a religious upbringing or who rejected the religions they were born into. My book will give such people an introduction to paths of self-development that do not require theistic beliefs.

How do you differentiate between ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’?

The distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ is relatively recent. Until around 1870 the two words were more or less synonymous. At that time many people began to lose interest in traditional religions, but many remained interested in the inner side of religious experience. People felt the need for a word to stand for this inner, non-institutional side of religion and some found ‘spirituality’ was a good choice. Today, spirituality has come to mean not just the inner side of religion but virtually the opposite of religion, as in the common catchphrase ‘spiritual but not religious’.

Can you describe some of the non-theistic traditions in India, China and elsewhere? How do you distinguish between ‘godless spirituality’ and atheism?

In India, Jainism and some forms of Buddhism reject the idea of a creator God. Charvaka, about which we know too little, was openly nontheistic. Among the six orthodox Hindu philosophies, Samkhya, Purva Mimamsa, and
early Vaisheshika were nontheistic. Vedanta and Yoga are theistic, but their idea of God is not that of devotional Hinduism – with the obvious exception of the theistic schools of Vedanta. Only Nyaya is unreservedly theistic.

In China, Confucianism and philosophical Daoism are nontheistic. In ancient Greece and Rome, the Epicureans and Sceptics were non-theistic or more precisely took no interest in the gods. In modern Europe and America, thinkers like Spinoza, Emerson, Whitman, and Dewey proposed non-theistic religious or spiritual paths. More recently, philosophers like Andre Comte-Sponville and Ronald Dworkin wrote books on religion or spirituality without God. In one of his books the Dalai Lama insisted on the necessity of moving “beyond religion”.

Properly speaking, ‘atheism’ means the same thing as ‘non-theism’: non-belief in God or gods. Many religious people connect atheism with materialism and an aggressive denial of God, but this is a mistake. Non-dogmatic atheists do not deny God: they simply do not believe in him or her.

It is possible to be an atheist and practise a religion and there are many religions that get along quite well without gods.

**What are examples of modes of spiritual thought and practice that may appeal to people who are irreligious or sceptical about the existence of God?**

Many forms of meditation do not depend on belief in God. Among Buddhists there are practices such as vipassana and zazen; among non-religious Adwaitins, there is meditation on the question, ‘Who am I?’ Philosophical Daoists and Confucians have their own modes of non-theistic meditation. In the West, neo-Stoics have revived practices such as premeditatio malorum (meditating on the worst that could happen in order to free oneself from fear). Physical practices such as hatha yoga or tai chi can be parts of a well-rounded spiritual life. In fact any form of physical and psychological discipline can be put to spiritual use. Waking alone in the forest or by the seashore is known to have positive spiritual effects.

I may add that non-religious people may include religious practices (chanting, visualisation of divine beings, and so forth) in their spiritual life. The world of spirituality is very wide and there is no need to set up an artificial division between ‘non-theistic’ and ‘theistic’ practices.

**Would you call Yoga an essentially theistic philosophy?**

It depends on what you mean by Yoga. The Yoga philosophy of Patanjali is technically theistic in that it gives a place to “dedication to the Lord of Yoga”. But it defines the Lord of Yoga as “a distinct form of spirit unaffected by the forces of corruption” – in other words as an individual purusha that is free from attachment to prakriti. This is not what people usually think of when they think of God. It certainly is not necessary to believe in God in order to practise Yoga.