How to Become a Hindu
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INSIGHT

How to Become a Hindu

The remarkable personal stories of men and women who entered the Hindu religion, shrugging off the myth that says "You must be born a Hindu to be a Hindu"

Conversion remains a vital issue and a potent topic in the press today. On one hand, Hindus continue to lament the impact of Christian missionaries in India On the other hand, Hindus are criticizing Hindus about the lack of rights given to tribals who are converted back to Hinduism (page 59). But, as an undercurrent during the last two decades, a little known trend has been gaining momentum. People are becoming staunch, proud Hindus, not by birth, not by coercion, but through ethical conversion.

Here are true histories of individuals and families who formally entered Hinduism over the years. These inspiring real-life stories have been excerpted from How to Become a Hindu: Stories of Ethical Self-Conversion, by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami ($27.95, 496 pages, Himalayan Academy, 2000). Their tales illustrate the six steps of ethical conversion as detailed in the book. They are: 1) joining a Hindu community; 2) creating a point-counterpoint of the beliefs of Hinduism and one's previous religion; 3) severing from former mentors; 4) legally adopting a Hindu name; 5) having a

namakarana samskara, the traditional Hindu name-giving ceremony and 6) publically announcing the severance and name change. Each story is written from a delightfully different angle and describes one or more of the six steps. The second testimony tells the tale of how a born Hindu strayed from, then rediscoverd his religion. In addition, the book was sent to 86 Hindu religious leaders and scholars around the world. The book inspired spontaneous commentaries revealing their views about conversion to Hinduism. Their messages are included at the end.

I'm So Proud to Be a Hindu

Asha Alahan, 44, lives in the East San Francisco Bay Area, California. She formally entered Saivism in 1985 at Kauai Hindu Temple. Asha, whose husband and children are also Hindus, is a wife, mother and housewife and a home-school teacher to all her children.

My mother was a devout Catholic, and my father had converted to Catholicism right before they were married. I was a happy child, believing in God, loving God and doing as I was told. But when I reached my teens, I started to question the beliefs and became disillusioned with the Church. So I left and became nothing!

At eighteen I moved away from my parents' home to live with my older sister in Santa Barbara, California. I loved God and knew that something was really missing, but did not quite know where to begin searching. My subconscious was so

programmed that it was the Catholic Church or nothing. As children we were not even allowed to enter other places of worship; it was considered a sin. So I just did nothing! It wasn't until I was twenty-one that I knew my life was on a down-hill spiral and I had to do something. I returned to my parents' home and tried going to the local Catholic Church again. But I still felt that their religion did not hold the answers for me.

It was not long after that I was married to my wonderful husband, and he introduced me to Hindu teachings. It was all so new and exciting. The words were so true. It was a whole new way of perceiving the world and beyond--almost a little scary, as my subconscious mind kept trying to remind me of all the previous programming from early childhood and the Catholic school I had attended.

We continued our studies and proceeded to follow the steps towards severance. I had been confirmed in the Catholic Church so I needed to go back to the original parish where this had taken place and talk to the priest, have him understand my position and ask if he would please write a letter of severance for me. By the time I had finished speaking with him, he was unsure of what to say to me. He denied me the letter and suggested that I speak with the Archbishop of that diocese. I felt since I was going to a higher authority than the local priest that this should be easier. I was wrong. The Archbishop was not at all happy (even on the verge of anger) and totally refused to let me explain myself. So I left, wondering where I might go next.

In the area where we lived there were some old California

missions that were still functional (as places of worship) so I decided to speak with a priest at the nearby mission. I knew the moment I walked into this priest's office that I had been guided by divine beings--he was the one to speak with. He had symbols of the major world religions hanging on his walls. We spoke for a while, and then he wrote me a letter stating that he understood that I wished to sever all previous ties with the Catholic Church and would soon be entering the Hindu religion and then wished me well.

I came to Kauai's Kadavul Hindu Temple to have my namakarana samskara. It was magical. At the time I don't think I realized the deep profoundness of that experience, finally finding the place where my soul knew it belonged. I am so proud to be a Hindu. Jai!

How I Became a Hindu

Sita Ram Goel, of Delhi, is a well-known renaissance writer on Hindu issues. He is associated with the Voice of India, a publishing house which guides understanding through enlightening tracts, books and articles. His testimony below was excerpted from his book, How I Became a Hindu. His friend, Ram Swarup (1920-1998) was a distinguished social observer, author and spokesman of renascent Hinduism which, he believed, can also help other nations in rediscovering their spiritual roots. The Word as Revelation, Names of God is Swarup's best known book.

I was born a Hindu. But I had ceased to be one by the time I

came out of college at the age of twenty-two. I had become a Marxist and a militant atheist. I had come to believe that Hindu scriptures should be burnt in a bonfire if India was to be saved. It was fifteen years later that I could see this culmination as the explosion of an inflated ego. During those years of self-poisoning, I was sincerely convinced that I was engaged in a philosophical exploration of cosmic proportions. How my ego got inflated to a point where I could see nothing beyond my own morbid mental constructions is no exceptional story. It happens to many of us mortals. What is relevant in my story is the seeking and the suffering and the struggle to break out of that spider's web of my own weaving.

In my family, our women did keep some fasts, performed some rituals and visited the temple and the Sivalinga, but the menfolk were mostly convinced about the futility of image worship and did not normally participate in any rituals. The brahmin priest was not seen in our homes, except on occasions like marriage and death. I remember vividly how lofty a view I took of my own nirguna doctrines and how I looked down upon my classmates from Sanatanist families whose ways I thought effeminate. I particularly disliked their going to the annual mela (festival) of a Devi in a neighboring town. God for me was a male person. Devi worship was a defilement of the true faith.

But as my moral and intellectual life was preparing to settle down in a universe of firm faith provided by Mahatma Gandhi, my emotional life was heading towards an upheaval. I started doubting if there was a moral order in the universe at large and in the human society in which I lived. The sages, saints and thinkers whom I had honored so far were sure that the

world was made and governed by a God who was Satyam (Truth), Sivam (Good), Sundaram (Beauty). But all around me I saw much that was untrue, unwholesome and ugly. God and His creation could not be reconciled.

This problem of evil arose and gripped my mind, partly because of my personal situation in life. In spite of my pose of humility, learned from Mahatma Gandhi, I was harboring a sense of great self-esteem. I was a good student who had won distinctions and scholarships at every stage. I had read a lot of books, which made me feel learned and wise. I was trying to lead a life of moral endeavor, which I thought made me better than most of my fellow men. Standing at the confluence of these several streams of self-esteem, I came to believe that I was somebody in particular and that the society in which I lived owed me some special and privileged treatment.

Now I was in a desperate hurry to get a good knowledge of the doctrine of socialism. A desire to read Karl Marx now became irresistible. First, I read the Communist Manifesto. It was simply breathtaking in the breadth and depth of its sweep over vast vistas of human history. It was also a great call to action, to change the world and end exploitation and social injustice for all time to come.

At the same time I concluded that God as a creator of this world could be conceived only in three ways--either as a rogue who sanctioned and shared in the roguery prevalent in his world, or as an imbecile who could no more control what he had created, or as a sannyasin, who no more cared for what was happening to his creatures. If God was a rogue, we had to

rise in revolt against his rule. If he was an imbecile, we could forget him and take charge of the world ourselves. And if he was a sannyasin, he could mind his business while we minded our own. The scriptures, however, held out a different version of God and his role, one that was supported neither by experience nor by logic. The scriptures should, therefore, be burned in a bonfire, preferably during winter when they could provide some warmth.

Four years after leaving college, I was ready to join the Communist Party of India. I conveyed my decision to my friend Ram Swarup, whom I had met after leaving college and who was to exercise a decisive influence on my intellectual evolution. He wrote back immediately: "You are too intelligent not to become a communist. But you are also too intelligent to remain one for long."

This was a prophecy which came true. It was only a year and a few months later that I renounced Marxism as an inadequate philosophy, realized that the Communist Party of India was a fifth column for the advancement of Russian Imperialism in India, and denounced the Soviet Union under Stalin as a vast slave empire.

The promise made by Sri Aurobindo, on the other hand, regarding the ultimate destiny of the human race was far more stupendous than that held out by Marx. Howsoever vague and inchoate my vision might have been at that time, I did feel that Sri Aurobindo was talking about fundamentally different dimensions of the universe and human life. The gulf between my mundane interests and the grand aspirations dictated by

Sri Aurobindo's vision was very wide, and I could hardly muster the care or the courage to cross over. But in the inner recesses of my mind, I did become curious about the nature of the universe, man's place in it and a meaningful goal of human life.

I was present in the Second Party Conference of the Communist Party of India which was held in the Maidan at Calcutta in February, 1948. My friend Ram Swarup suddenly appeared on the scene and expressed his intention to stay with me for quite some time. I was very happy because he was my nearest and dearest in the whole world. I did not know that he had by now come to regard communism as a great evil threatening to engulf the future of mankind. After I failed to put my three best communist friends against Ram Swarup, I had to face him myself and all alone. The discussions spread over several months. Most of the time I repeated party slogans, sometimes very vehemently. Ram Swarup dismissed them with a smile.

Finally, I was back to square one. My faith in Gandhism had lost the battle to Marxism. Now I was no longer a Marxist. I asked myself again and again: Where do I go from here?

It was at this time that I fell seriously ill and lost a lot of weight. A Catholic missionary whom I had known earlier came to visit me. He was a good and kindly man and had a strong character. The Father, as I called him, found me in a difficult condition, physically as well as financially. He felt sure that it was in such times that Jesus Christ came to people. He asked me if I was prepared to receive Jesus. I did not understand

immediately that he was inviting me to get converted to Catholicism. My impression was that he wanted to help me with some spiritual exercises prescribed by Christianity. Moreover, I had always admired Jesus. I had, therefore, no objection to receiving him. Only I was doubtful if someone was really in a position to arrange my meeting with Jesus. I became aware of the Father's true intentions as I traveled with him to a distant monastery. He asked every other missionary he met on the way to pray for his success.

At this monastery, which was a vast place with very picturesque surroundings, I was advised by the Father to go into a retreat. It meant my solitary confinement to a room. I was not supposed to look at or talk to anyone on my way to the bathrooms or while taking my morning and evening strolls on the extensive lawns outside. And I was to meditate on themes which the Father prescribed for me in the course of four or five lectures he delivered to me during the course of the day, starting at about 6:30 in those winter mornings. I was not used to this way of life. I had never lived in such solitude by my own choice. My only solace was that I was allowed to smoke and provided with plenty of books on the Christian creed and theology.

I tried to read some of the books, but I failed to finish any one of them. They were full of Biblical themes and theological terminology with which I was not familiar. Most of the time they made me recall Ram Swarup's observation about mere cerebration. Or they were simplistic harangues to love Christ and join the Catholic Church. They had a close similarity to communist pamphlets which I had read in plenty. The Father had asked me again and again to invoke Christ and meditate

upon him. But he had not told me how to do it. I had no previous practice in meditation. I did not know how to invoke Christ, or any other godhead for that matter.

During a lecture about creation, the Father said that God in His wisdom and kindness had made all fishes and animals and birds for man's consumption. I immediately rose in revolt. I told him very emphatically that I was a Vaishnava and a vegetarian and that I had absolutely no use for a God that bestowed upon man the right to kill and eat His other creatures simply because man happened to be stronger and more skilled. I added that in my opinion it was the duty of the strong and the more skilled to protect the weak and the less wily.

The Father also suddenly lost his self-possession. He almost shouted: "I can never understand you Hindus who go about seeking a soul in every lice and bug and cockroach that crawls around you. The Bible says in so many words that man is God's highest creation. What is wrong with the higher ruling over the lower?"

On our way back to the big city where his mission was housed, he became his old normal self again. There was not a trace of bitterness on his face or in his voice as we talked and joked and discussed several serious and not so serious matters. Now I took my courage in both my hands and asked him my final question: "Father, am I not already a Christian? I do not normally tell a lie. I do not steal. I do not bear false witness. I do not covet my neighbor's wife or property. What more can a man do to demand God's grace and kinship with Christ? Why should you insist on a formal conversion which in no way helps

me to become better than what I am?" His reply was very positive and it estranged me from the Christian creed for good. He said: "It is an illusion that you can become a Christian if you practice Christian virtues. One cannot claim to be virtuous unless one is baptized in the Church of Christ. He is the only savior. No one outside His fold can claim salvation. The only thing the heathens can look forward to is eternal hell-fire."

My new job in Delhi gave me a lot of leisure. But what mattered most was that I could now spend all my evenings with Ram Swarup. He was now spending long hours sitting in meditation. His talks now centered round the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Gita, the Mahabharata and the Buddha. In the long evenings I spent with Ram Swarup I compared with him my notes on the Mahabharata. But Ram Swarup's way of looking at the Mahabharata was quite different. He related it directly to the Vedas. He expounded how the mighty characters of this great epic embodied and made living the spiritual vision of the Vedic seers. What fascinated me still more was Ram Swarup's exposition of dharma as enunciated in the Mahabharata. To me, dharma had always been a matter of normative morals, external rules and regulations, do's and dont's, enforced on life by an act of will. Now I was made to see dharma as a multidimensional movement of man's inner law of being, his psychic evolution, his spiritual growth and his spontaneous building of an outer life for himself and the community in which he lived.

The next thing I did was to read and reread the major works of Aurobindo and discuss his message with Ram Swarup day after day. Aurobindo would have remained an abstract philosopher for me had not Ram Swarup explained to me how this seer was

the greatest exponent of the Vedic vision in our times. Aurobindo's message, he told me, was in essence the same old Vedic message, namely, that we are Gods in our innermost being and should live the life of Gods on this Earth. He made me see what Aurobindo meant by the physical, the vital, the mental and the psychic. He related these terms to the theory of the five kosas in the Upanishads.

I now requested Ram Swarup to initiate me into meditation. He told me that I could sit and meditate with him whenever I liked, wait and watch, go within myself as far as I could manage, at any time, dwell on whatever good thoughts got revealed in the process, and the rest would follow. I acted upon his simple instructions with some measure of skepticism in my mind. But in the next few days I could see some results, which encouraged me.

One day I meditated on ahimsa, which had remained an abstract concept for me so far. After a while I found myself begging forgiveness from all those whom I had hurt by word or deed, or towards whom I had harbored any ill will. It was not an exercise in generalities. Person after person rose into my memory, going back into the distant past and I bowed in repentance before each one of them. Finally I begged forgiveness from Stalin, against whom I had written so much and upon whom I had hurled so many brickbats. The bitterness which had poisoned my life over the long years was swept off my mind in a sudden relaxation of nerves. I felt as if a thousand thorns which had tormented my flesh had been taken out by a master physician without causing the slightest pain. I was in need of no greater assurance that this was the way on which I should walk.

One day I told Ram Swarup how I had never been able to accept the Devi, either as Sarasvati or as Lakshmi or as Durga or as Kali. He smiled and asked me to meditate on the Devi that day. I tried my best in my own way. Nothing happened for some time. Nothing came my way. My mind was a big blank. But in the next moment the void was filled with a sense of some great presence. I did not see any concrete image. No words were whispered in my ears. Yet the rigidity of a lifetime broke down and disappeared. The Great Mother was beckoning her lost child to go and sit in her lap and feel safe from all fears. We had a record of Dr. Govind Gopal Mukhopadhyaya's sonorous stuti to the Devi. As I played it, I prayed to Her.

My progress was not fast; nor did I go far. But I now felt sure that this was the method by which I could rediscover for myself the great truths of which the ancients had spoken in Hindu scriptures. It was not the end of my seeking, which had only started in right earnest. But it was surely the end of my wandering in search of a shore where I could safely anchor my soul and take stock of my situation.

The soul's hunger for absolute Truth, absolute Good, absolute Beauty and absolute Power, I was told, was like the body's hunger for wholesome food and drink. And that which satisfied this hunger of the human soul, fully and finally, was Sanatana Dharma, true for all times and climes. A votary of Sanatana Dharma did not need an arbitrary exercise of will to put blind faith in a supernatural revelation laid down in a single scripture. He did not need the intermediacy of a historical prophet nor the help of an organized church to attain salvation. Sanatana Dharma called upon its votary to explore his own self in the first instance and see for himself the truths

expounded in sacred scriptures. Prophets and churches and scriptures could be aids, but never the substitutes for self-exploration, self-purification and self-transcendence.

I had come back at last, come back to my spiritual home from which I had wandered away in self-forgetfulness. But this coming back was no atavistic act. On the contrary, it was a reawakening to my ancestral heritage, which was waiting for me all along to lay my claim on its largesses. It was also the heritage of all mankind, as proved by the seers, sages and mystics of many a time and clime. It spoke in different languages to different people. To me it spoke in the language of Hindu spirituality and Hindu culture at their highest. I could not resist its call. I became a Hindu.

My Whole Family Became Hindus

Isani Alahan, 46, has for the past three years lived in Chennai, India, where she worked in the home, cooking South Indian ayurvedic meals for her family of five, and did home-schooling with her youngest daughter. She also studied Carnatic music, Sanskrit, hatha yoga and the Kerala health system known as Kalaripayattu. She returned with her family to live in Kauai in June, 2000.

I was introduced to Hinduism in 1970 through a local hatha yoga class in Carson City, Nevada. As time went on, I read more about yoga and the wonderful benefits for the body and mind. At this time I decided to become a vegetarian. I was sixteen years old. In 1972 my interest in meditation

manifested. I attended weekly satsanga in Virginia City, Nevada. During the first satsanga, I had a memorable vision of Lord Siva Nataraja on the banks of the sacred Ganga. My life had changed.

In 1975 I married my husband of 25 years. My husband was accepting of my beliefs, but wasn't interested in studying. I continued on my own, and in 1980 I legally changed my name to Isani Alahan from Ardith Jean Barton, but kept my husband's last name, Pontius.

In December of 1982 I completed my conversion to Hinduism. I prepared a statement of apostasy and took it to the local priest. He looked at it and agreed to sign my formal release from the Catholic Church. As I took a deep sigh of relief, he hesitated and asked me to leave the room. When I returned, he had changed his mind. He told me he had called the Bishop in Reno and was told he could not sign the paper. Later I learned this was not true, and the Bishop had been out of town. I tried another priest in the town where I was born. He was understanding, but also declined. Within a few weeks, I called the Bishop to make an appointment to meet with him. He told me to go back to the original priest, who would sign my declaration of apostasy. I returned to the local rectory and met a priest of Chinese descent. He was very warm and accommodating. He explained how he understood the Hindu concept of ethical conversion. He signed my declaration and wished me the best.

I had my namakarana samskara at Kauai's Hindu Temple on December 25, 1982, with my two-year-old daughter, Neesha.

Then we were off for six weeks of pilgrimage, visiting temples and ashrams throughout Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu, India. It was a fantastic spiritual experience that continues to reverberate in my mind.

At the time, my husband was not a Hindu, but our three daughters were given Hindu first names at birth, while keeping his family name. We raised the children according to Hindu Dharma and our guru's guidance. In 1984 we moved to the Seattle area. During the ten years we lived in Seattle, my children and I gathered with the other local Hindus for weekly satsanga. We also met with the local Hindu community for festivals. We studied Bharata Natyam and Carnatic vocal music. My children attended Hindu summer camps in Hawaii.

All through these years, with his permission, I prayed that my husband would become a Hindu. Then, in 1993 my husband formally adopted Hinduism, legally changed his name from Victor Dean Pontius to Durvasa Alahan. He became a vegetarian, stopped smoking and gave up catch-and-release fishing, which was his favorite hobby. He had his namakarana samskara in 1994.

In November, 1996, my husband and eldest daughter went on pilgrimage to India for a month. My daughter was interested in studying Bharata Natyam, and my husband left my daughter in India so that she could attend Kalakshetra College of Fine Arts and get a diploma in Bharata Natyam. She started college in June of 1997, and the rest of the family, my husband, myself and two younger daughters, moved to Chennai, Tamil Nadu, in November of 1997. The past three years have had their

moments of difficulty, but overall they have been a peak experience of my life, a fulfillment of my heart's desires.

My Husband and I and Our Lifelong Quest

Amala Seyon, 51, entered Hinduism in May, 1975. A homemaker on Kauai, she and her husband live within walking distance of the Kadavul Hindu Temple.

My first introduction to Hinduism was when I met my husband. He had been going through a very soul-searching time, asking God why the Vietnam war, why the rioting in the streets of America, and what does materialism have to offer the soul? While going through this trying time and praying, a born Hindu man came to his world religion class and talked about the Hindu religion. All the concepts of Hinduism were the truths my husband was looking for. This Hindu man had a meditation center and invited anyone in the class to come. My husband started going on a regular basis.

During this time my husband asked me to marry him. He explained to me about the Hindu religion and took me to the meditation center. I was so happy to hear some of the concepts, like God is within you, the law of karma, the evolution of the soul. I felt like I had been in a cage, like a bird, and someone opened the door, and I was able to fly into something much bigger and deeper.

My husband told me that if we got married this was the path

he wanted us to take. I accepted that and supported it fully. This started the process of a confrontation of Western and Eastern philosophies. Our first encounter was in finding someone to marry us. My husband went to the Hindu meditation center and asked this saintly man if he could marry us. His visa did not allow him to perform the ceremony. So we went to my family's Christian minister and asked him to marry us. He asked my husband a series of questions. Do you believe Jesus Christ is the only Son of God? Do you believe that the Holy Bible is the only word of God? The questioning went on for some time, and at the end of the interview he told my husband that not only could he not marry us but he was going to call my parents and tell them that he was against having me marry someone who was not a Christian.

We then had to confront my mother, who was very much a Christian. This was all emotionally hard for her because of the belief that you could only be saved through the belief in Jesus Christ. She was very disappointed, and the issue caused a major disruption in our family. Finally, they accepted our marriage, and my husband located his past minister, who agreed to marry us.

After our marriage, we started reading all we could on Hinduism. My husband mistakenly followed the statements in Hindu scripture that we now realize were intended for monks. We sold and gave away all our wedding gifts and went to live in very remote areas of British Columbia. He read from morning until night and sat by a river for hours on end, but we finally realized we were not making real spiritual progress, and I was lonely living in remote areas and even on a deserted island.

We started searching and praying, and one day someone invited us to meet our Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami. We recognized what a great soul he was immediately, and we started our studies with him. When our two daughters were five and three years old, we all had our name-giving together, formally entering the Hindu religion.

My children were raised in the Hindu religion, and we spent a lot of years living near the Flushing, New York, Ganesha Temple, learning the culture and mixing with born Hindus. We learned so much and felt so naturally a part of the Hindu heritage. We followed a curriculum for teaching our children in the home until they were twelve years old. Our daughters are now both married and are wonderful mothers who stay home and care for their children. Our oldest daughter is married to a wonderful Hindu man from Mauritius in an extended family that showers her with love. We now live on the little island of Kauai and serve the community and the broader Hindu family through our many activities. We are so very grateful.

From the Masonic Order and Roman Catholicism

Shyamadeva and Peshanidevi Dandapani, both age 54, live in Wailua, Hawaii on the island of Kauai. Shyamadeva is a commercial real estate broker specializing in site acquisitions and leasing for local, regional and national real estate clients. Peshanidevi is a retired nurse, "domestic engineer" and homemaker.

We pilgrimaged to Kauai in November of 1994 for Krittika

Dipam. During this pilgrimage, we truly began to embrace the Sanatana Dharma and returned home to Alaska to talk to our family and friends about becoming Hindus, and to begin merging with the Hindu community in Anchorage. For the most part, everyone was tolerant of our enthusiasm about becoming Hindus.

We had already leased out our house in preparation for moving to Kauai, so we rented an apartment, continued our studies and began the conversion and severance process. It was our in-depth study to review our lives, to determine our true beliefs, where they came from and if they were still valid for us. There were many rewrites and surprises. We returned to our previous influences (myself to the Freemasons and Peshanidevi to the Catholic Church), studying and participating with them again to be positive that we wanted to change our path. I returned to the Masonic Lodge and fully embraced Freemasonry for the next thirty days. I attended the lodge and participated fully in all its ceremonies and rituals. At the end of the thirty days, I was completely convinced that I no longer held the inherent beliefs of the Masonic Order. Even with all the years of being a very active Mason I knew it was neither my belief nor my path. The Masons say, "Once a Mason, always a Mason." The only way to sever the vows was to become a self-imposed apostate. I prepared a letter declaring that I was a self-imposed apostate to the Masonic vows and beliefs, and that I was converting fully to Hinduism. I read the letter in open lodge before all the members present and a copy was given to the secretary to be recorded into the minutes of the meeting on June 8, 1995, at Kenai Lodge No. 11.

Peshanidevi returned to the Midwest to attend mass and meet

with the priest who had given her instructions for being baptized a Catholic. Two hours of discussion did not produce a letter of release, because, he said, "Once a Catholic, always a Catholic." He took it very personally but promised a letter to follow. A month later it arrived (above left). The fire was strong but the bond was broken.

We applied for our legal name change and announced it in the newspapers. On the auspicious day of July 9, 1995, in Kadavul Hindu Temple we made the irrevocable step of having our namakarana samskara. We felt the blessings of Lord Siva pour forth on us as we sat before God, Gods and our guru and took this momentous, life-changing step. We had come home to the religion of our souls. We experienced so much love, joy and emotion, and it affirmed our beliefs that we are Hindu souls.

The name change made our conversion very real to others, and many were quite alarmed. Our daughter was visibly frightened to enter our shrine room, and she forbid her young children to spend the night with us anymore. She was willing to use our new names and said that whatever we wanted to do was okay, but it was not for her. She would not accept any literature or talk about Hinduism. The two sons said about the same but were less rigid. My parents and siblings felt total rejection because of the family name, and they disowned us. They said that if their name was not good enough for us, then they had no son and daughter. My wife's grandmother and her brother were the only family members who were really happy for us. And they showed it by immediately beginning to learn how to pronounce and then use our new names. In my work, a few close friends fully accepted our new names and life without question. However, there was a period of about one

year where I faced a lot of fire and testing.

Being Refused Communion Was the Test

Aran Sendan, 50,is a builder and general contractor in El Sobrante, California. He and his wife Valli entered Hinduism formally on February 14, 1980.

I was in the process of formally converting from Roman Catholicism to Hinduism. I had resolved that, indeed, I felt more comfortable with Hindu beliefs than those of Catholicism or Christianity. I needed a clean break with Catholicism, so went back to Sacred Heart Church, the parish in which I was baptized, confirmed and received my first holy communion. I had an appointment with the monsignor and met with him in the rectory office.

I would have preferred a frank and rational discussion along the lines of the point-counterpoint; I was ready for that, but we were not going there. He was non-plussed by my statements, like it really wasn't happening, and said that, well, Buddhists or whatever were good people, too, and if I wanted to study, that it was alright with him. I insisted that he write "declared apostate" next to my name in the Parish record book where my baptism, confirmation and first holy communion dates were recorded. He wouldn't do it, but allowed me to. I wrote "declared apostate" and dated it. I left the meeting unsatisfied by the interaction and felt that I needed to do something else.

I decided to attend mass the next morning and went up to the communion rail where the same priest was giving out holy communion to the faithful. It seemed to me that his faith would prevent him from giving me holy communion and thus my point would be made. At the rail he asked if I "believed in Jesus Christ as the son of God and the savior of mankind." I said that I didn't and that he couldn't give me holy communion. At that moment it became real. I could feel the Catholic angels withdrawing from me as clearly as I could feel the wind. I now understood Catholicism better than I had ever understood it before. It isn't a religion of belief. It's a religion of faith, and clearly not my faith. I was no longer a Catholic.

Our Release from the Jewish Faith

Vel Alahan, 52,is a partner in a home building center in Vail, Colorado. His wife is Valli Alahan.

I was nervous as I sat with my former rabbi to discuss my change of religion. We explained what we were doing, and he gave arguments in response. He wanted us to give him a chance to start over. But I explained what we had been through and that we could not refute the inner knowing that had come from within about the truth of our Hinduism. We told him that based on our own inner experience we believed in Hinduism. Based on the fact that I was a normal person, successful in the business world, with a family and children, he believed what I said and respected my convictions.

I explained to him why I had come: because I needed to A) test

myself in the face of my former religious commitments and B) in the presence of my former rabbi and Jewish inner plane hierarchy, in the Jewish institution, state my inner commitment and my desire to leave Judaism. He had his arguments. We just had to stay strong. I held fast to my inner commitment. My outer mind was fluxing and swaying a bit, but I always had the inner part to hold onto.

He would not write a letter of severance. He felt that by writing such a letter he would be doing a wrong act himself. But he wished us well, gave his blessings and complimented us on a fine intellectual knowledge of our religion and of Judaism. I introduced the witness and explained why we had brought a witness, so that in the event that the rabbi would not write a letter, the witness could write a letter stating what had happened. We were well prepared, and that is a key point. If one were to go unkempt, unemployed, he would not get the respect. And if you are unprepared, you will fumble a bit.

After the meeting was over, I felt a sense of release. I felt wonderful. And we did not hurt the rabbi's feelings; though he did say he was sad to lose one of his fold and expressed his view that "Once a Jew, always a Jew." But he had never faced anything like this before.

When we reached the stage to contact the Hindu community, we made an appointment to meet with the Gangadharam family, Pattisapu and Sakunthala. They talked with us and took us into the community. They became our appa and amma and treated us very nicely. We explained that we intended to have a namakarana samskara later, and they immediately said, "We

will do it. We insist. It will be good for the community as a whole."

Mrs. Gangadharam planned the day according to Hindu astrology. And a priest was there from the Pittsburgh Temple, Panduranga Rao. Many people were there. A new sari was given to my wife to wear and a shirt and veshti was given to me. It was very nice the way they took care of us. During the ceremony, our "parents" signed our names in rice and repeated the required words before the community and Gods. Then we walked around and touched the feet of anyone who was an elder and gestured namaskara to anyone younger. Food was served afterwards, prasadam from the puja.

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"Comments of Hindu Leaders on "How to Become a Hindu"

"All those who find their roots in the Vedas, who believe that India is a pious land, who have sympathy and believe in protecting the cow can become Hindus, while keeping others' welfare in mind, and is acceptable to His Holiness as a Hindu. Those who have been proselytized by deceptive methods or by physical force must be

permitted to go back to their original religion on the principles of human rights."

H. H. Srimadjagadguru Shankaracharya, Goverdhan Math, Puri, Orissa, India, Sri Swami Nischalananda Saraswatiji Maharaj

"Revered Maharaj points out that the doors of Hinduism had been kept closed to 'outsiders' for centuries. Swami Vivekananda himself gave his famous call to Hindus to broaden their outlook. There are many devotees associated with the Ramakrishna Order who were not born into the Hindu faith but have accepted Hindu names of their own accord. Scores among them have gone on to take, and faithfully keep, formal lifelong vows of brahmacharya and sannyasa."

Swami Asimatmananda, for Srimat Swami Ranganathanandaji, President, Belur Ramakrishna Math and Mission, West Bengal, India

"The Hindu religion has a long history of accepting anyone and everyone who is on the path toward eternal truth. Hinduism does not discriminate against any sincere seeker. Whosoever is devoted to the search for that Eternal Truth is embraced

by Hinduism. Therefore, it is perhaps the most universal and welcoming faith of all time."

H.H. Sri Swami Satchidananda, Founder/Spiritual Head of Satchidananda Ashram; Founder, Light of Truth Universal Shrine (LOTUS); renowned yoga master and visionary; Yogaville, Virginia

"True conversion is not a mere change of label but an inner transformation of mind and heart. The great task that lies ahead of us is that of converting Hindus--in India and abroad--into true Hindus, acutely aware of the rich heritage that belongs to them. When the Hindus bear witness in deeds of daily living to the great ideals of Sanatana Dharma, then indeed will India shine once again in the splendor of the new morning sun. Hindus have forgotten how to live as Hindus. They need to be taught the truths proclaimed by their prophets and avataras. Millions of Hindus are waiting to be converted into true Hindus. I am one of them."

H.H. Dada J.P. Vaswani, head of the worldwide Sadhu Vaswani Mission, renowned Sindhi religious leader and lecturer, Pune, India

"Hinduism does not proselytize. However, nothing keeps it from defending itself from the obsessing and devouring invasion of those religions that live under the flag of proselytism. A line of defense can be the correct popularization of how you can become a Hindu and profess your religious beliefs appropriately. Hinduism would certainly be more solid and of greater utility for humanity if every Hindu professed his own religious beliefs with pride, asserting his spiritual principles, cultivating them in his own family and becoming an example for society. Or still, if every organization or group of Hindu devotees in the world collaborated with one another, without egoism and exaggerated pride, to carry out a common task of spreading Hinduism, its spiritual traditions and culture, without superficiality."

Sri Svami Yogananda Giri, Founder and Spiritual Head of Unione Induista Italiana, Sanatana Dharma Samgha, Gitananda Ashram, Carcare, Italy