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IN MY OPINION

How I Became a Hindu

My search for a religion that would bring me to a confrontation with Truth has led me to Hinduism

BY PARTHA J. MILLER



MY FAMILY'S HISTORY IN America can be traced back to 1643. I am an American of British, German and Polish descent, with roots that delve deeply into Christian Anglo-America. Now, however, I am a Hindu.

I was baptized in the Methodist church of my maternal grandparents but raised in a

largely secular home. From early on I was aglow with the innate longing for something transcendent. This was evident in my many teenage studies, sifting through the world's manifold religious and mystical traditions. I spent my young adulthood as a committed atheist, but my longing for the transcendent returned as I matured into adulthood. I concluded that my quest must occur within an established religion and under the guidance of a spiritual authority from an unbroken lineage. I wasn't looking for a religion that would simply comfort me, but one that would bring me into a confrontation with Truth, forcing me to face myself.

Having set this criteria for my pursuit, it was Hinduism to which I turned. As fate would have it, there in my own town was a Chinmaya Mission temple. Swami Siddhananda, our temple acharya, along with the temple members, welcomed me with great warmth. As I entered this new world with childlike ignorance, Swamiji patiently answered all my questions. He showed me the very basics, including participation in puja and arati. I held the philosophy of Hinduism close to my heart and felt it easy to assimilate, but I did have difficulty learning the most basic cultural acts and behaviors, those that the children at the temple performed so naturally.

After attending the temple for a year, I decided to make a more concrete commitment. I asked Swamiji if there was a formal ceremony that could be done to mark my conversion. He and Pandit Ekambaram Prasad, our temple priest, performed the initiation. During the ceremony, Swamiji gave me the name Partha.

A few Christians and others criticized me. They argued that one must draw on one's own heritage. They said Hinduism is an ethnic religion for Indians only, and I would not be able to fully engage in an "alien" faith. I'd ask, to which heritage of mine should I turn? The Methodism of my grandmother's family? Or perhaps the Mennonites they had previously been? Or the Lutheranism of my paternal grandfather? My ancestors were many things, converting from one religion to another in the face of change.

Hinduism is not as alien to Westerners as one might suppose. American conceptions of the Self and God have been evolving since the early nineteenth century. The writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and other members of the Transcendentalist movement introduced Hindu concepts to the broad American public. Theosophists later popularized, however inaccurately, many Hindu concepts

and paved the way for the arrival of Swami Vivekananda and Paramahansa Yogananda. Today increasing numbers of non-Hindu Americans accept reincarnation, some simplified version of the Advaita philosophy, the non-duality of Self and God, and the belief that there are countless paths to Truth.

What I needed from a religion was a context and worldview through which I could work towards a direct experience or perception of the Self, God, and the Supreme Truth. Hinduism offers the means to attain these goals. Although the temple I go to is suffused with an Indian culture distinct from my own, Hinduism allows me to pursue eternal principles, transcending the categories of Indian, Western or American.

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