

My Word < By Swathi Desai >

IF I FOUND ANOTHER RELIGION, COULD I BE LIKE EVERYONE ELSE?

They were Mormons. Two very young Mormons dressed in white shirts, black slacks and black ties. I pulled the drapes away from the window to get a better look. The cuffs of their right pant legs were secured with rubber bands and they had left their 10-speed bicycles on the front porch. I could hear their earnest voices through the open window.

I wished that my mother would stop talking to them so she could take me to the mall. Finally, I heard the door close. She went back to the kitchen and resumed rolling out the chapattis for dinner.

"We're going to Shayna's house for a while," my mother announced. Shayna? Who is Shayna? "She has invited us to talk about her faith. She is helping those boys." This day was not going as planned. My 12-year-old brain could only focus on clothes and boys, not religion and, certainly, not someone else's religion. But this was the way it was with my mother. Although a staunch Hindu, she welcomed information on any and all religions.

One summer when I was about 7, she sent me to Vacation Bible School. The words "vacation" and "bible" seemed to be a contradiction, but many friends in my Walnut Creek neighborhood were going. They told me it would be loads of fun, and it was. We played Red Rover and sang songs about Jesus. Who built the Ark? No one built it! It wasn't until I was well into my teens that I figured out that someone named Noah figured prominently in that

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song. Despite the games, catchy songs and kindness of my Bible School friends, I was, after all, only 7, and after a few days, I just wanted to ride my bike around the block, so I bid farewell to my religious vacation.

My mother's Indian friends were appalled that she had let me consort with Christians, but she rose above their reactions. She said that Hindus recognized Jesus as a saint and knowledge about other religions only made her stronger. In my teen years, my mother would make up for the Vacation Bible School episode by sending me to Hindu



Camp, but back to the Mormons.

"Do we have to go now?" I whined. "She lives just up the street. We'll walk," she explained. Great. When we got to Shayna's house, I realized that the Patels and the Chopras from down the street were also there. Could this be a mass conversion of Hindu Indians? I quickly noticed the house was also filled to the brim with good-looking young men; all talking about their religion. At least there was something to look at. Shayna introduced all of them to us. I couldn't keep their last names straight except they all had the same first name: Elder. This was odd. There were no soft drinks, but Shayna passed me a plate of homemade cookies, which I stacked in my hand like a deck of cards. My mother gave me a disapproving look.

While Shayna let each of the Elders speak about their faith, I imagined our converting to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They were all so clean cut and fit. And those sparkling smiles. I would definitely have a date for the seventh

grade dance if I belonged to a group like this. I would eat all matter of meats and celebrate Christmas. Well, even though we were Hindus, we did celebrate Christmas, albeit with a plastic tree. But if we truly switched to the other side, we would be obligated to buy a real tree and then I would understand the true meaning of Christmas.

Over the next year we were invited to many Mormon gatherings. During one such fete, Shayna invited my mother to make a typical Gujarati dinner for her family and friends. My mother was

thrilled and astonished when every Elder dug in to the Indian spread with gusto. "Can you believe the Americans ate all of my food!" she exclaimed.

My mother eventually attended a church service, of which I was mercifully spared. Upon her return she told me that there was much good in the church; they took care of their own during financial hardships and family time was central to their beliefs. They weren't just Mormons on Sundays and holidays; their faith was incorporated into their daily lives.

I liked the idea of being just like everyone else, well, in this case, just like the other Mormons. But I couldn't shake the sense that we didn't fit in. Could it have been because we were the only brown people in a sea of cream and gold? All I had to do was look around me and know that I would never look the part.

Just as my mother's previous religious sojourns ended with her reaffirming her Hinduism, so did this one. There were no big announcements. No slamming doors. One day I noticed that we hadn't gone to Shayna's in awhile. My mother shrugged her shoulders while she stirred the dal and said, "She stopped calling me when she realized I wasn't going to convert." And that was that. My fantasies of being just like everyone else were shattered. After a moment she asked me if I wanted to go to the mall. I said yes.

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