

Evangelical zeal not matched by humility, curiosity

San Jose Mercury News, Sept 13, 2003

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The year was 1984.

I had just joined the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor as a doctoral student. I was given accommodation in the International Student Housing on campus in what was called an "efficiency," a one-room, furnished facility that doubled as living room as well as bedroom, with a small kitchen and a large walk-in closet.

Almost every Sunday morning there would be a gentle knock at the door. Two middle-aged women with leather-bound Bibles in their hands, an unfailing evangelical zeal in their hearts and a never-fading smile on their faces would be waiting there wanting to come in. I always ushered them in.

They would invariably open a page in the Bible, read it to me and start explaining selected passages. I used to listen to them attentively, occasionally delighting them with choice quotations from the Bible, particularly from the Psalms, thus showing off my knowledge of the Scripture.

They were surprised to learn that I had gone to a school run by the Church of South India where, on every school day, I attended a mandatory prayer meeting in which the headmaster read a passage from the Bible followed by a lusty and enthusiastic chorus of "Amen" from the assembled Christian as well as Hindu students.

They were even more dumbfounded when I told them that the New Testament was one of the prescribed texts I had studied and analyzed in detail for my master's degree in English Literature at the University of Madras.

My Sunday sessions with the visiting women usually lasted about 30 minutes, and I started liking the sessions, especially because they gave me an opportunity to reread the Bible and also provided a welcome change from my rigorous academic work.

A couple of months later, tired of their sermonizing and occasional sardonic remarks about Hinduism that revealed how little they knew about my religion, I thought I should do something about these weekly encounters.

I suggested breaking the 30-minute sessions into two parts.

"You talk about Christianity during the first 15 minutes, and I'll talk about Hinduism the

next 15," I said. "That way, we can learn about each other's religion."

Their face brightened. Their eyes sparkled. "That's a neat idea," they both said excitedly. I was quite pleased with my suggestion.

"We look forward to next Sunday," they promised as they took leave.

That was the last time I ever saw them.

Nearly 20 years later and hundreds of miles away, I had another noteworthy experience. A couple of weeks before Christmas 2002, I had evangelical visitors at my home in the Santa Clara Valley. This time it was two young gentlemen, well groomed, well dressed, and seemingly well educated. I opened the door and took them to our family room.

As I introduced my wife and our two children to them, one of them noticed a small, well-decorated plastic Christmas tree in one corner of the room.

"That's a cute little Christmas tree," he complimented.

"Are you Christians?" asked the other.

"Not by birth," I said. "We were born Hindus and we are still Hindus."

They looked a little puzzled.

They wanted to know how the kids reacted to having the Christmas tree at home. I told them that every year they have fun decorating the tree with lights and miniature dolls of their favorite cartoon characters, and like most other children, they get up early on Christmas day and eagerly run to the fireplace to see what Santa has brought.

"They enjoy Christmas very much," my wife said, "as much as they enjoy Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights."

They looked puzzled again but didn't pursue my wife's lead.

As the conversation proceeded, I realized that they had trouble reconciling our positive attitude to Christianity and our steadfast adherence to Hinduism. They thought it was high time we converted to Christianity. I disagreed and started talking about the concepts of polytheism, secularism, etc.

My wife, who had studied in a Jesuit school in India, tried to offer a simpler explanation.

"We come from a country that has almost all the religions of the world, and we belong to a religion that has many gods and goddesses," she said. "For us and for our children, Jesus is just one more addition to our pantheon of gods, and Christmas is just one more addition to our litany of festivals."

They left shortly later. Like the Michigan women, they never came back.

I was reminded of these encounters when I read about the latest "Evangelical Campaign" in the Family & Religion section of the Mercury News recently. I learned that more than 100 Santa Clara Valley churches have come together to convince the non-Christian residents of the South Bay area that they can make their lives richer by accepting Jesus Christ as their personal savior.

I was first heartened to read that this new brand of "friendship evangelism" is aimed at promoting dialogue in order "to draw people into the faith." But then doubts crept in when I read about a San Jose woman, who recalled her recent visit to an Indian village. "They worshiped 'demons'; they were rock worshipers," she said.

This is something similar to a non-Christian, after visiting a church full of parishioners, saying, "They worship wooden crosses; they are wood worshipers!" Those who understand the significance of the cross would dismiss such a statement as uninformed. Symbolism is an integral part of any religion. You miss the symbolism, you miss the religion.

For me, dialogue is a two-way process. A dialogue about religions, in particular, requires a desire to learn about other religions as well. I have always wondered why people who spend a considerable part of their life seeking to spread "peace that passeth understanding" show very little interest in gaining even a rudimentary knowledge of religions other than their own. I have always felt that the best religion is one that is most tolerant, and the best religious worker is one who is most knowledgeable.