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MY TURN

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"As a Christian, I deplore proselytization"

Christina Shankar

I recently became very concerned about what I perceived as Hinduism Today's on-going negative depiction of Christianity. A very kind and patient Swamiji at the editorial office asked me to point out specific articles. So, I spent the following afternoons studying every copy of Hinduism Today that I had. The majority of the "problem" articles were about Christian missionaries' aggressive conversion tactics. I found the articles to be true, and that I am defensive about a faith I have yet to come to terms with. What made me so angry was that I feel genuine shame, sadness and anger that members of my faith pursue these terrible actions. I was also upset by articles, often editorials, where authors stated that Christians have denounced Hindus as idol-worshippers and worse and have used Christian scriptures to forcibly colonize foreign lands. When I thought about it with an open mind, I had to agree that I have met many closed-minded Christians who actually believe this.

But I, as a Christian, utterly denounce this missionary activity.

As a child, a church I attended sponsored missions to Africa and brought eager young men to speak of their work. However, when a pair of converted young African students attended church one Sunday, no one sat with them, no one spoke to them, no one made them feel welcome. I was deeply dismayed.

In my travels in India, I encountered young people who were converted to Christianity with the promise of food, shelter and education, but who were despairing over the loss of family ties. Unfortunately they now make their way through life alone, without the support of their parents, aunties and uncles. The missionaries are long gone. Who will be there for them?

A few years ago I debated the issue with a fundamentalist Christian co-worker. She firmly believed that all non-Christians would not be permitted to enter heaven, but instead will face eternal damnation. She told me in no uncertain terms that these people must all be saved by converting to Christianity. When I argued that forced conversion has destroyed ancient cultures and denied the validity of religions many centuries older than Christianity, she actually became angry and said--"Good! How else will these people know the truth?" There was no way for her to see any other view but her own. My blood still boils when I recall this conversation.

The more I learn about Hinduism, the more I respect it. If I ever decide to leave behind the religion of my birth, I will be grateful that I am free, and not forced, to make that choice. Also, I understand the cruel legacy of British imperialism, and I rejoice in India's efforts to regain its pride in its traditional arts

and sciences, to which all of humanity is indebted. Hindus deserve to be proud of their faith and culture.

But Christians deserve this, too. Just as there must be good and bad Hindus, there are good and bad Christians and people of all other faiths. I hope that Hinduism Today and all good Hindus will realize and also portray that not all Christians are intolerant, seeking to annihilate all other faiths. The compassionate among us are deeply hurt by such one-sided portrayals, which can only lead to further intolerance and hatred. Not all Christians believe that those of other faiths must be "saved." We are taught to be kind to all strangers we meet, because one of them could be the Christ returned to Earth in disguise. We worship icons in our churches in much the same way that deities are worshiped in temples. True, we are taught that there is one God, but is this so different from the Hindu concept of One Eternal Brahman? I do not presume that all religions are the same: they are gloriously different, valid and meaningful. Religion gives us a way to approach the Eternal One, to find meaning, and to live in harmony and peace and tolerance with our neighbors, all of them.

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