Friendship Evangelism
Category : October/November/December 2009
Published by senthil on Sep. 03, 2009

Religious Rights

Friendship Evangelism

Hindus, especially young students at universities, need to be alert to insidious Christian tactics

by Maruthu Pandian Dharmalingam

The subtle conversion program which christians call "friendship evangelism" is becoming a common experience for Hindus of all age groups. It is an active force on Malaysian university campuses. The main targets are Hindu students between the ages of 21 and 30 who are often unaware of the ulterior motives behind "friendships" initiated by Christian peers. We need a more alert, informed Hindu student body or we will see more and more young Hindus being cleverly converted to Christianity even before they realize it.

I was just 21 when I enrolled in a Kuala Lumpur medical school in 2001. My mother was terminally ill and hospitalized. She died the following week. I was grieving and depressed. Upperclassmen are assigned as "fosters" to help orient freshmen. One foster started giving me attention and soon became my closest campus friend, developing a three-year relationship during which he tried his best to convert me to Christianity. Freshmen coming from an innocent, sheltered home environment are very open. I was no different. A new friendship is accepted as a comforting source of security in a new world outside of home. From his name I knew he was Christian, but initially religion did not factor into the friendship. Besides, I had always respected and mixed freely with people of various religions and traditions.

In the beginning he helped me during difficult times and I cherished his kindness and still do. He loaned me things I needed, such as medical books. After gaining my close friendship, he started inviting me to Christian faith-based activities: barbecue parties, picnics, pre-exam prayer sessions, etc., and a Methodist gathering, held weekly only five minutes from campus. There I observed many newcomers who were Hindus like me. They had been brought by fosters from other colleges. I began

to realize what was going on, but as a gesture of respect, I stayed throughout the events, just observing. In such crowds one hears criticisms of Hinduism, of caste, vegetarianism, the Gods, etc. Despite this, my foster claimed that he belonged to the Pillai caste. And while making fun of Hindu vegetarianism, he was vegetarian on Christian holy days such as Lent. This did not make me despise him or break off the relationship. But I continued to observe him closely.

After about six months, he took another step by inviting me to go with him from Kuala Lumpur to visit his family home for Christmas in Penang, a northern Malaysian state. I was excited. It would be the first Christmas function I ever attended and also my first trip to Penang Island. I looked forward to some sightseeing and a party during my three-day holiday. But it was so much more than that!

During this and subsequent trips to Penang throughout our three year's friendship, I learned all about my friend's family. It turned out his father was a Methodist pastor, though the family did not put forward that identity in Penang. They ran a flour mill named Ambal Flour Mill and conducted business with Penang Hindus and the Hindu temple next to their mill. The mother taught Tamil to local Hindu children. She told me that one of her goals is to teach Christianity to kids. But I did not see them doing overt Christian ministry in Penang.

Meanwhile, the family was conducting Christian activities 200 km away in the State of Perak, Matang District, actively converting Hindus in the area and raising money for their mission work. Here, in a Hindu village, they maintained a newly built Church in which the father preached every Sunday, and they had begun building a new small mission center nearby. Most Sunday attendees were Hindu adults and children from the neighborhood.

The pastor was retired and his wife was a Tamil tutor. The mill business was small. Yet the family had a good standard of living, was maintaining the church, building the new mission center, covering travel expenses and the cost of books and mission supplies. All this seemed to me beyond their means, making me suspect they were receiving funds from overseas.

After Christmas day, I received a gift from the family. "This is a special gift. Do not

open it until you are back home in Kuala Lumpur." It was a Christian Bible. It had a cover letter that I remember to this day. It read, "You are saved only by accepting Jesus Christ as your personal savior. They say your sins are washed away by taking a dip in the Ganges. No. There is no truth in Hindu religion. Jesus Christ died for our sins, you must accept him personally, too!" One by one, conversion stories came up in my mind that I had read when I was 10 to 12 years old in the Shakti magazines collected by my father. I realized, "Oh yes, this is a very similar case!"

I was not angry at my friend or his family, because it's what they were trained to do, and I somewhat anticipated it. But I was hurt and offended; he knew I was a practicing Hindu and he also knew my family members well, yet he still pushed to make me a Christian. It also surprised me that no one in my family was concerned about the activities that this Christian was getting me involved in. My dad treated him as a son, without any bias because of his religion. My siblings were glad to have a "doctor" friend. I was sad to see them extend a genuine heart and hospitality toward someone who was ultimately trying to alienate me from my own family, and who would take the next step to convert them, too, one by one, through me!

After learning about the true intentions behind his friendship, it was difficult to associate and study with him. I maintained a cordial relationship, even though I was certainly not going to convert. But after my father died in 2003, it became clear to me that my younger siblings would be vulnerable to the young man's influence. Their Hindu faith would certainly be undermined if I maintained the relationship. So I completely disassociated myself from him.

A number of my friends have been influenced by friendship evangelism, and some have converted. This happens primarily because there is little basic Hindu education on campus. University Hindu societies appear to be ignorant of the problem and are focused more on social service and entertainment activities rather than pursuing activities that deepen the understanding of Hindu religion. Never at a single Hindu event that I ever attended did anyone highlight the problem of Christian friendship ministry, even though it was going on all around them. A related issue is interfaith love marriages that occur on campus. I have never met a Christian-Hindu couple in which the Hindu can practice his/her faith freely. In fact, more often than not, the Hindu is required to renounce his or her Hindu faith.

These groups never target Muslims. They know that the Malaysian Government's tough Islamic law would have them arrested or banned altogether if such

evangelization were to happen among Muslims. Apparently Hindus are considered a soft target.

As a Hindu, I believe all religions are good, but they are not the same. Because I was brought up a knowledgeable Hindu and was informed about Christian tactics for converting Hindus, I was able to save myself and my family.

Having been exposed to Islam in a Muslim majority country and bombarded by evangelical Christians, I have come to realize that, by comparison, the Hindu religion is the greatest. Hinduism is gentle, God-centric, emphasizing experience of God rather than mere beliefs and, above all, it has genuine respect for all other religions.

The only way to counter Christian friendship ministry's destructive impact on Hindus is by imparting more knowledge to Hindus. That can and should start at a very young age, as it did in my own case. Parents should be alert to the associations their children have at university. Even though university students are mature and independent, and parents are reluctant to interfere in their lives, I would encourage mothers and fathers to discuss the issues of maintaining their Hindu heritage in the face of pressure from their Christian friends and peers.

ISM Targets US South Asian Students

The intervarsity christian Fellowship began at the University of Cambridge, England, in 1877. It spread to Canada in 1928 and to the US in the late 1930s. In 1941 the Christian groups formalized their associations in the US and Intervarsity/USA was born. Today it comprises over 33,000 students on 577 campuses in the US with a well developed International Student Ministry (ISM, see: http://www.intervarsity.org/ism/).

While professing high-minded motives based on "a response to God's love for all people," ISM members are dedicated to what this magazine's founder, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, described as "infiltrating, diluting and destroying" the faith of their fellow Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Buddhist students through "friendship evangelism." Indian students comprise the highest number of foreign students on US campuses, and ISM has set its conversion sights on Hindu and Muslim youth.

Infiltrating: ISM's online resources and the winter 2008-2009 issue of their publication Internationals on Campus read like training manuals for subversives, turning Christian students into duplicitous moles. Infiltration of Hindu organizations and young Hindu minds is the first step. Evelyn Stephens writes, "As a student group, we encourage our members to be a part of the Hindu student club on campus. Together we go to their festivals and parties. We also attend important community functions like dance recitals and Diwali. In these ways, we connect to the culture and have a natural meeting place to develop friendships with Hindus.... Once the friendships are formed, it is important to train students to go deeper in friendships and really get to know one another through giving to and receiving from our Hindu friends."

Diluting: Hindus can often be persuaded to add Jesus to their pantheon of "n +1 Gods." But ISM recommends the soft-sell. "Do not press 'Jesus is the only way' too soon in your relationship, since it may break trust and not allow you to tell more about Jesus. Pray for the right time when you will be able to allow Jesus' words to explain why he is the way to God, so that your Hindu friends wrestle with Jesus, rather than with you."

Destroying: Make no mistake--behind all the sugar-coated empathy, the goal of these students is to destroy their Hindu or Muslim friends' faith and beliefs. "Satyavan" wraps up the publication with an article addressing idol worship. He writes, "These Hindus may have opened themselves up to evil influence as they worshiped falsely. Certainly, Hindus must deal with idolatry in their lives, and as they come to Christ and submit to him as disciples, those idols will have to fall away. He is God of gods and demands that central place in their lives, my life and yours."

The Hindu Challenge: ISM admits that conversion of Hindus is challenging. They explain that even nominally Hindu Indian students are usually more religious than most Christians and may view Christian social activities as shallow. Paradoxically, ISM teaches Christian students to impress Hindus by becoming more religious themselves. "Exposing and living out our personal devotion to the Lord Jesus rather than preaching is the most effective way to share faith among Hindus. Work into your life the traditional Hindu (and biblical) values of simplicity, renunciation (fasting), spirituality and humility."

Download a copy of the PDF for a complete overview of these wily and unethical strategies: www.hinduismtoday.com/campus-ministry/. And check your membership rolls for Christian evangelicals!