

December, 2001 Hinduism and Friendship with God

I was reminded this fall of just how precious is the Christian understanding and experience of Christ as our friend. This reminder came especially through one encounter with a student.

Two of my students told me about this woman about three weeks before we were scheduled to address Hinduism. Apparently she had spoken to another class about cow worship. They wanted me to invite her to talk to our class. They told me she was a new student in the school and that she was from Nepal and that she was a Hindu. I was both interested and cautious about the idea. On the one hand, Hinduism was my weak point. I had been burying myself in Islam and would not be able to prepare as much for a quality lecture on Hinduism. A guest speaker might be just the thing. On the other hand, I was not eager to have heavy “proselytism” in the class. I had cultivated a good classroom atmosphere and did not want this compromised for the sake of a guest speaker.

I made an appointment with this woman just to talk about the idea. I listened to her tell me something about her life story and her religious practice. I gathered a few things from this conversation: 1) she was articulate and could probably speak in a classroom setting (though she spoke quickly and with a strong Indian accent), 2) she was, indeed, a devout Hindu, having been born and raised in the faith, and 3) her knowledge and practice of Hinduism more closely resembled what I had read of “village Hinduism” rather than the more Westernized philosophical Hinduism of American Vedanta Centers and Krishna Societies, though she was well-acquainted with Sai Baba. I decided to invite her to the second class on Hinduism (I would introduce Hinduism the first week), and to structure the session by asking her to speak about her approach to certain key concepts in Hinduism and then to allow for questions. I was also interested in learning more about Hinduism myself. I asked if she might be available after class to answer some of my own questions. She was amenable and arrangements were made.

The class went well, both the lecture and the questions. Her approach to some of the topics and questions revealed just how diverse Hinduism is. After class I went with her across the street to the coffee shop (she ordered Chai tea). I asked her about incarnation, religious practice, gods and other things. Then I asked her about her own experience of prayer. She told me of her regular practice of adoration to her gods. She told me of her experience of gazing at their pictures or statues and imagining them as real beyond their material forms. She told me the kinds of things she says to them, words of praise, petition, thanksgiving. Then I asked her what her gods ever said to her. She was taken aback and laughed out loud. “Why I would never be holy enough for the gods to speak to me!” she exclaimed, “To think of the gods talking to you!” At this I was the one taken aback. I realized that this young woman had spent her whole life adoring gods, had expressed deep love (*bhakti*) for them, but had never experienced a personal relationship with any of her gods. I told her that God’s interaction with us in conversation--that an experience *from God*--was not at all unusual for Christians. This is what Christians understand by the Holy Spirit.

I asked her about her practice and experience of imagination in prayer. She frequently would imagine one of her deities as part of her practice of prayer. I asked if the deities ever responded to her in these imaginations. Again, she was surprised and denied that kind of experience. Her practice was simply to imagine her deity in a particular pose while she adored this god. I then shared with her some insights from *Praying the Scriptures* about the use of imagination in prayer, drawing from Catholic and Protestant classics, about allowing the Spirit to move the imagination and respond to us in prayerful, imaginative reflection. I thought of those times when I had “placed myself” in a Gospel passage and watched Jesus respond to me with such love and tenderness. My new friend had never experienced this personal expression from God to herself. I encouraged her to begin praying more seriously to Jesus (she had earlier told me that she believed in Jesus, among other gods) and to ask for relationship with him. Later I gave her a copy of *Praying the Scriptures*.

I had made the appointment with this young woman to learn more about Hinduism and to appreciate the religion as a sympathetic scholar. When I left the coffee shop that night and drove back to Montrose, I was struck with the difference between her experience of faith and mine, a difference that just might be intrinsic to the two religions. Here was a woman who spent a good deal of time in personal devotions, a faithful Hindu. And yet she could never imagine “knowing” her gods in the way I had known Christ from the time I first became a Christian as a teenager. In all honesty I spent my drive home grieving for her and others like her.

Jesus, in John 15 tells his disciples (and us), “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (John 15:15). Paul writes in Romans 8, “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:15-16). In the final picture of our relationship with God we find the voice on the throne saying, “See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them” (Revelation 21:3).

In this season of Thanksgiving I am grateful for a God who is not distant. I am thankful that our God is not simply transcendent and holy, but also a familiar friend. I am grateful that God makes known and sends his Spirit and dwells with us. I am grateful that I have a friend that I can go to again and again, and with whom I can share life together.

May God the Father bless you with riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit.