

5-25-2018

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Recommended Citation

Bryant, M. Darrol (2018) "Encountering the Living Religions of India: Strangers to Friends," *Consensus*: Vol. 39 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol39/iss1/3>

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Encountering the Living Religions of India: Strangers to Friends

M. Darrol Bryant¹

I consider myself fortunate to be living in a time when the relationships of the world's great religious traditions are going through a sea-change. If you have lived as long as I have (seventy-five years) you can remember a time when members of different Christian churches were not on speaking terms with one another. And folks of other religious traditions were “followers of false gods” or, at best, an “exotic but foreign other.”

Within the Christian world, this change began with the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) and *Nostra Aetate*, the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*. Here for the first time in the history of councils, other religious traditions – Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Jewish – were named and affirmed, and Catholics were encouraged to engage with other faiths in “dialogue and collaboration.” One of the major fashioners of *Nostra Aetate* was Canada's own theologian Gregory Baum.

A few years later, at Uppsala, Sweden, in 1968, the World Council of Churches (WCC), a collaboration of Protestant and Orthodox churches, also established a program of *Dialogue with Living Faiths and Ideologies*, engaging with Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, and others. Now Catholic and many Protestant churches in Canada have official statements on interfaith dialogue. Fundamentalist Christianity is the major holdout within the Christian world on these initiatives.

Even before these official initiatives, brave souls were pioneering the Way of Dialogue, and they were found in all traditions.

My own initiation into these new opportunities began in 1969, in a course on “Religion in Dialogue” led by my college friend Marcus Borg. We went to the WCC in Geneva, to Rome where the new Secretariat for the Non-Christian Religions had its offices, and to eastern Europe for Marxist-Christian Dialogue. It was a stunning encounter and experience. I then ended up working with the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva organizing the World Encounter of Lutheran Youth, a program to bring Lutheran youth to Latin America for a week in both a rural and an urban centre. Our topics were world hunger and student unrest. The job led me to almost every Latin American country, where I encountered Catholic and Protestant figures deeply engaged with liberation theology and social transformation. It enlarged my horizons and my sense of the rich variety within the Christian world. I also become more aware of how people in many traditions were engaging the global issues facing humanity.

In the mid-1970s and 1980s, I encountered more people from the world's religious traditions at international and interfaith conferences. However, the decisive event was the decision to spend a sabbatical in India with my family in 1986–87. I went with the clear intention of immersing myself in the living religious traditions of India. When the kids asked me what we were going to do in India, I said, “We are going to hang out in different religious

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communities.” I needed to have a more experiential encounter with Hindu, Islamic, Sikh, Tibetan Buddhist, Parsee (Zoroastrian), and Indian Christian traditions. I knew one person in each of these traditions – Shrivatsa Goswami, Ausaf Ali, Mohinder Singh, Doboomb Tulku, Homi Dhalla, and Paulos Mar Gregorios – and they became my guides. I was about to enter into a living dialogue with the religious pathways of India. I will share a few of my experiences.

First Encounter

In anticipation of my sabbatical, I went to New Delhi in July 1986. I met Dr. Mohinder Singh, then head of the Guru Nanak Centre, and we went to the Gurudwara Bangla Sahib in central New Delhi. We removed our shoes, washed our feet, and climbed the stairs to the central hall where turbaned Sikhs were sitting on the floor playing a harmonium and a tabla (drum) and singing. I found the experience enchanting and soon felt myself gently swaying. I then learned from Mohinder that they were reciting/singing their holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib, and that this recitation was what happened at the Gurudwara. We sat there for fifteen to twenty minutes, until Mohinder said we had to go to *langar* (literally “kitchen”) where a free meal is provided daily at every gurudwara. Langar is a sign of the equality of all and is open to everyone. Everyone sits on the floor and is served the same thing: typically rice, dal, and a chapati. The food is prepared by Sikhs, both men and women. Later, when I took students to the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the students were invited to help prepare the chapatis. There were no images in the central hall since the divine/sacred/God is one, formless, and eternal. I came away with a new appreciation of the Sikh Way as I experienced something of this living tradition.

Later in that early trip to India, I went to Bangalore for an interfaith meeting. There I met Dr. Homi Dhalla, a member of the Parsee community in India. He was the first Parsee I had encountered. That evening we sat together at dinner and I told him of my plan to come to India with my family. I told him that we would begin in New Delhi but much of our plan was still to be determined. I learned that he had taught in the university in Tehran, but returned to India when Ayatollah Khomeini came to power. He was now living in Mumbai. He then told me that he had grown up in Pune in Maharashtra and still had the family home there, and we would be welcome to stay in that home. Rent free! I was astonished. We ended up staying in Pune for a month.

Was this the encounter with the Other, the stranger?

New Delhi and Vrindaban

We arrived in India in the fall of 1986, all six of us: my wife Susan, Benjamin (18), Jessica (15), Lucas (8), Emma (4), and myself. We began our sabbatical in Hamdard University, a newly founded Islamic university. Our anticipated apartment was not finished so we had rooms in Scholar’s House. We had three meals a day with Dr. S. A. Ali, the director of the Indian Institute of Islamic Studies, and his family. Over the next two and a half months, by sharing meals with a very wonderful Muslim family, we learned much of the Muslim Way in India.

Mrs. Ali was a third-generation woman graduate of Aligarh Muslim University – she was also the principal of an elementary school on campus. Later, I performed the Friday prayers with Dr. Ali and a Pakistani Muslim PhD in chemistry, now living in Sweden and part of the UN team investigating the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl. His education had begun with

memorizing the Qur'an at a madrasa, and then he did Western education, obtaining his PhD from the University of Bonn in Germany. We stood shoulder to shoulder. I was astonished when he began to recite/chant/sing the Qur'an. It was stunningly beautiful. Afterwards, some of the younger Muslims came up to me and asked if I was a Muslim. I said no, I was a Christian. I asked them if it was okay to be present for their prayers. I told them that Palestinian Christians call God Allah. It led to some fascinating interfaith conversation. Later, I would also visit the shrine at Nizammudin for some magnificent Sufi singing, and Dr. Ali arranged for me to give a lecture on interfaith dialogue at the Iranian Embassy in New Delhi.

A couple of hours south of New Delhi is Vrindaban, situated in the very heartland of Krishna devotion in North India. It was here that Krishna played with the gopis, the young women who looked after the cows. Especially important is Radha, one of the gopis with whom Krishna danced and played. She is the true devotee, and their love is an emblem of the relation of the soul to the divine.

Shrivatsa Goswami invited our family to visit Jai Singh Ghera, the ashram/home of a Goswami family. The Goswamis of Vrindaban are descendants of the six Goswamis whom Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1534) sent to Vrindaban to revive devotion to Lord Krishna, the flute-playing blue god. That evening, we went to the Radharaman Mandir that contains a special image of Lord Krishna, along with a smaller image of Radha. Devotees greeted us with a "Hare Krishna," assuming that all Westerners in Vrindaban were devotees of the town's new International Society for Krishna Consciousness temple. Over time that shifted, and on later visits we were always greeted with a "Radha/Radha."

When the curtain in the mandir/temple is opened and the image of Krishna, together with Radha, appears, there is an intake of breath as people go to the front of the temple to gain a glimpse of the image and light oil lamps to honour Krishna and Radha. Meanwhile, songs of devotion are sung to the accompaniment of the tabla and harmonium. Some dance; others circumambulate the temple; others offer prayers. Shrivatsa told me that music and dance are, said Chaitanya, the principal ways of honouring Krishna and Radha. This pleased me, giving me further insight into the Way of Bhakti, the way to God through the heart.

The following day was the birthday of Venu, Shrivatsa's younger brother. We were invited to the puja/worship that would mark the occasion. A Brahmin priest was invited to do the puja. We all sat on the floor in the Goswami home as the ritual was performed. Venu received blessings, as did our children Emma and Lucas. The language was Sanskrit, so not too meaningful to us, but we were caught up in the welcome and inclusiveness.

Later that evening, we went to a nearby temple for a performance of stories of Krishna and Radha by groups from across India. A stage was set up outside the temple that provided the backdrop to the all-India event that Shrivatsa organized with support from the central government. Over three hours, groups from across India performed stories of Krishna and Radha. The music and dance were magical, and I even had a moment when I realized that, for many, this was not a performance but the presence of Krishna and Radha.

Over the years, I have been in Vrindaban for the fall Festival of Lights / Diwali and the spring festival of Holi. It has been an amazing experience to witness the devotion that people bring to these events. One realizes that devotion speaks its own language and that it is untouched by what the American commentator Walter Lippmann once called the "acids of modernity."

Hinduism is a richly varied family of traditions, and if I had more time and space I would share my experience in the Lingayat/Veerashivite community in Karnataka. Dr. Shivamurthy Shivacharya leads this remarkable community. And then there is the Menakshi Temple in Madurai, and more – all distinctive and lively parts of the big tent that is Hinduism.

Ever since college and reading Huston Smith's *Religions of Man*, now called *The World's Religions*, I have wanted to know more of these many pathways of the spirit. And I was not disappointed to encounter the richness of this Way in my visits to India.

McLeod Ganj

I had met Doboomb Tulku, a Tibetan lama and director of Tibet House in New Delhi, at an interfaith event in the United States. When I arrived in New Delhi, I made contact with him and visited Tibet House, a cultural and educational centre established by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He helped me arrange a visit to McLeod Ganj, above Dharamsala in the foothills of the Himalayas in Himachal Pradesh. Here His Holiness has his residence, and it is the centre of Tibetans in Exile. Susan came with me on our first encounter with Tibetan Buddhism. Our journey began with a night train from New Delhi to Pathankat, followed by a narrow-gauge train up the mountain through villages you could not reach by road. Then we walked along a trail that included a swaying bridge over a mountain river until we came to a road, where we flagged down a bus and we were in McLeod Ganj.

I quickly made contact with one of the monks and met Geshe Gyatso, the head of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics. We had a conversation about the school and I asked if I could join them for the six o'clock morning service; he said I was welcome. Later that evening we went up to the Buddhist temple just across from His Holiness's residence. Here the student monks gather every evening for an hour of debate, called *rtsodpa* in Tibetan. It is part of their education in the Gelugpa or Yellow Hat tradition. One student sits on the ground while another student, in elaborate, very physical ritual moves, winds up and throws him a question as his hands come together in a sharp clap. The sitting student quickly responds as another question is formulated and again thrown at him. If the standing student succeeds in stumping the sitting student then he can sit on the student's neck. The teachers told me the students love this physical/intellectual practice, and they have to stop them after an hour. Later, I would watch a spirited competition between different teams. I would later read that this debate was designed "to overcome misconceptions and realize the true nature of things." And, I would add, the young monks were certainly having fun while doing so.

I returned to McLeod Ganj many times. I was able to hear His Holiness the Dalai Lama speak, and on our next family sabbatical (1993–94) we were invited to be part of the "monks' picnic," a celebration at the end of the monsoon season. On that day, all the students and teachers left their school and went to a grassy mountainside. Geshe Gyatso led a ritual and then the boomboxes were turned on and the games began: soccer, basketball at a hoop tied to a tree with no backboard, a kind of dodgeball, and just hanging out in small groups talking. It was very festive. Our family was invited to lunch with the faculty. I was surprised to see a very young Tibetan join us and he was clearly an important figure. I asked who he was and I was told, "He's the Dalai Lama's teacher." Then it dawned on me: the reincarnation of the former teacher of the Dalai Lama. I had my video camera with me and I asked if they thought the Dalai Lama's teacher would like to see it. They said yes, and I went to show him. I spoke to him in English and he responded in English. When I returned to my seat, I said to my guide

that he sounded like someone from California. I was told that he had just spent a year in California learning English.

Over the years McLeod Ganj became a favoured destination, and I later took my students there too. I was always struck by the smiling faces of Tibetans, especially as I learned the harrowing stories of their flight from Tibet and the fearsome struggle to remake themselves in exile.

So, What Did I Learn?

When I first went to India I was already familiar with the main teachings and practices of these great traditions. Now I wanted to see them in action, hear the sounds, feel the devotion, talk to them, be present to their rituals. In a word, I wanted to witness living faith. This experience was moving beyond academic interfaith exchange into the vital heart of lives unfolding within the living sacred pathways of humankind. Now, I often wonder why anyone ever thought it was either bad or forbidden or dangerous or inappropriate to come to know our brothers and sisters as human beings in the one human family. These strangers have become my dearest, deepest friends. They have taught me that there are many Ways to the sacred mystery that lies at the heart of things.