

SOUL IN SOCIETY

All these temperaments encounter quelling and flourishing social contexts. We may have a magnificent God-given seed of a soul, but it may find itself planted in acid soil when it needs alkaline, or in clay when it prefers the rich shallow humus of a rapidly cycling rainforest. This social match or mismatch forms us and our understanding of the Holy as much as these more essential qualities of perception and cognition. How we understand what we are seeking depends so much on how it is named for us as a child: God hunger or rebellion. Honesty or impiety. That naming does not always shape itself into a word. Social response can take the form of a smile, a frown, a heart-ruffling silence. It settles in us, often more powerfully than our original response.

For example, a secular family might mock their questing daughter Naomi when she comes home from a visit to the local Catholic church with her friend Agnes, who kneels by her bed at night to say prayers and kneels with everyone in a church where they recite in unison the Our Father or Hail Mary. Something opened up in Naomi as she imitated her friend Agnes and she came home excited and proud of having learned the prayer so rapidly, something that had endeared her immediately to Agnes's mother. But Naomi's own mother says, "Hail *what?*" Naomi's mother is Jewish but would define herself as tolerantly agnostic—until her daughter comes back reciting Catholic prayers to Mary. Her response is quicker than thought—and therefore engraves in Naomi's mind as somehow truer than the look of compassion and remorse that quickly follow once her mother recognizes her daughter's disappointment and obscure shame. Secret, Naomi may think, I need to keep this pleasure secret. Her mother looks at her beloved little eight-year-old and wonders: Will there be places she goes that I absolutely can't follow?

Our social context can also create a broader sense of our own religious tradition and foster surprising affinities. A young boy growing up in the suburbs of Chicago in the late 1930s who is being raised in a strictly

fundamentalist Christian denomination may realize that he shares more with the Orthodox Jewish children in his school than he does with other Christian children in his school or neighborhood. He may experience, through this identification, a more intense sense of horror at the upcoming war with Germany that radically affects his understanding of the value of tolerance between religions.

A woman whose parents are Orthodox Jews may find her parents too kind to rebel against but still hate the religion, especially what she felt and still feels were arbitrary and niggling rules of conduct. She may express her loyalty to her parents and to the real faith they fostered in her by turning to social work as the expression of her own faith in the transforming power of human relations.

These matches and mismatches can take place between a child and his family, between his family and its faith community or tradition, or between the faith tradition and the surrounding society. And these learnings are very rarely spoken, rather they infuse one's sense of social connection, of possibility, and mold one's sense of where the Holy flickers, beckons, hesitates, flees, or permanently resides.

Let's look more carefully at how community has affected the early faith development of some of the people who shared their stories with me.

SHEILA BOYINGTON

When I went to talk to Sheila Boyington, an educational consultant, in her attractive office near the Tennessee River, she wanted to talk about Joel Osteen, who she watches religiously each week. She recites the days, hours and channels where he appears (Friday and Saturday nights, Sunday morning at two times on two different channels). It's not just because Osteen's cute, as her husband Dana teases her. She likes his motivational attitude. "He teaches us not to wait for our lives to be good. We can have a positive spirit now." She is especially pleased to have learned recently that Joel's father loved India, so he went there many times as a child. Interviewed on Larry King a few days earlier, Joel had said, "I've been to India and you can't tell me these people don't have God in their hearts." Sheila is both proud and a little abashed by her enthusiasm for the popular television evangelist—or is he primarily a motivational speaker? Her husband Dana, a tall quiet man, raised Southern

Baptist but now a practicing Hindu, doesn't buy in. Neither do her Hindu friends. It feels just a little, deliciously illicit. And *normal*. She and 30,000 others, she muses. "It's my first time seeing a Christian minister not bashing other religions," she says. She finds it easy to take out the Christianity from his talks and just leave in the practical optimism.

Eclecticism and belonging are both strong themes in Sheila's life since childhood. She grew up in Brevard, North Carolina, a small college town in western North Carolina with a population of about 6,000. Her family was the only Hindu family in town. Her parents taught Sheila and her brother and sister Hinduism at home but encouraged them to attend the churches in town. "Hindus believe religion is a way of life," Sheila observed, contrasting it implicitly with the assumption that religion is primarily a question of church going. For Hindus living in western North Carolina in the 1960s, temple going wasn't a possibility in any case, whether or not it was central to Hindu religious practice. Sheila's family would drive to Greenville, S.C. once a month to join in Indian festivities with the larger Indian population there. Hinduism, Indian culture, and a sense of belonging became synonymous in this environment. Synonymous and a rarity.

In the North Carolina mountains, many people had never left the county, much less the country. Usually this felt oddly comfortable to Sheila and her family. But Sheila remembered being about eight and her mother picking her up after Brownies. "A man came up and talked to me. 'Do you know about Jesus?' he asked me. He sent me a Bible in the mail. I found it threatening. I had the feeling I was doing something wrong."

As the only Indian family in town, and a highly educated one (Sheila's father had a doctorate in chemical engineering and her mother had a masters and a law degree), people did not know how to categorize them. Their mother, in particular, urged them to explore—other churches, friendships across the strong racial divide common at that time. This, Sheila remarked, was more unusual than the religious tolerance they espoused, since in her experience, "Most Indians are racist. Our parents raised us to have a good sense of who we were. We had friends of both colors."

Her mother's multiculturalism and religious tolerance ran especially deep. "For my mother, all religions were pretty much the same. *Her* friends were always multicultural and she never saw a distinction between them. But at core, she wanted the Hinduism to be there."

On the other hand, the desire was non-coercive.

They let us go off and explore. In high school, my best friend was a devout Christian. There was a strong charismatic movement in the late 70s—and they held big meetings on the weekends. Lots of speaking in tongues. Many people praying over me. I kept saying to myself, there's going to be a point where I'm going to accept Jesus—but it's going to happen on its own. But it didn't. I'm sure my parents wondered.

But they didn't intervene. As Sheila observed later, about the choice of which gods to worship, "You'd *never* find a Hindu who would try to convert you. They *value* other religions. It's a personal decision. They don't feel any uniformity is necessary."

On the other hand, cultural cohesion and inclusion became a gracious experience for Sheila's parents when they moved to Florida where there was a large and thriving Indian community. From having no Indian friends, they began to live in an almost completely Indian community. Sheila, as a teenager, was exploring Christianity. She didn't find a compatible Indian community until she went to college at the University of Florida in Gainesville. When she did, however, her life cohered.

"In Hinduism, religion and culture go hand in hand. They are one and the same. Hinduism is a way of life." And for that way of life, one needs a critical mass of people who share the same culture. When Sheila found it in college, she realized it was essential to her. When she met Dana, she quickly told him she would need to raise her children Hindu. "He was raised Baptist, but his parents only went to church until the kids left home—it was not a way of life." Dana agreed.

They combined traditions at their wedding. Sheila wore a white dress and they included traditional Christian wedding vows in a traditional Hindu ceremony. "It felt like knitting across both cultures." In their new home, Sheila set up an altar and began praying every day to Sai Baba and Ganesh, the gods her parents worshipped. "I don't remember when Dana started doing it too. Soon he became almost more Hindu."

When the couple moved from Berkeley to Chattanooga, they became involved with the growing Indian community there. Sheila is the only one in her age cohort who is second generation and speaks no Indian language (each of her parents speaks three). This has given her an outsider's sense of appreciation for the tensions and gifts of the immigrant community—the differences between northern and southern Indian culture. The community, especially those involved in the building of the temple, are predominantly