

Of Self and Religion

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Asian American Youth Culture

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One distinct feature of my high school was the large number of Indians in the student body. Walking down the hallways, I was able to see various types of Indians: the recent immigrants who still spoke their native language to each other, the second generation Indians who hung out in exclusive cliques, and the “white-washed” Indians who only hung out with white kids. Sam, a second generation Gujarati, attended the same high school as me, and I noticed that he was more of a free-floater among these three groups. One day he would be with an all-Indian second generation group, another day he would be hanging out with my Chinese and Korean group, and sometimes, he would hang out exclusively with the white kids. Sam was one of my few Indian friends, and I sometimes envied his ability to mesh well with all types of people.

When Sam hung out with my second generation East Asian group, he was often made the target of our Hindu jokes. It was easy for us to mock him as we ate our hamburgers, asking him if he was sad that we were “eating his God.” We called him a “cow worshipper” and an “elephant lover” and always referred to Gandhi as his “Jesus.” We were aware of our ignorance, but we never seriously considered what his religion was really about.

In interviewing Sam about his religious beliefs, I saw that underneath the reverence of animal-based gods, which my friends and I found very humorous and “mystical”, was a religious foundation that was as legitimate as any other belief system. I also found that Sam was very private about his religious beliefs, and until now, he had never made an effort to correct my misconceptions. In getting to know more about his beliefs, I realized that beyond our apparent differences, such as the practice of abstaining from meat, there existed a common ground between his religious development and my own.

I remember on a biology trip to the zoo in tenth grade, I threatened to punch a cow in front of Sam and asked him if he would be offended. He just laughed it off and walked away that time, but I wondered if he really did care. “I don’t eat meat because that’s how my family has been. It’s just tradition to me. I don’t place the cow on a holy level or anything. I know they’re highly valued for farming and other things in India, but no, I don’t worship them,” he told me. This information helped to clear up my misunderstanding. I used to know a very conservative Protestant Korean kid in high school who would tell Sam to stop worshipping “evil idols” that imitated the “true, Christian God.” Sam never replied to such remarks then, and he explained to me that he viewed Hinduism as a monotheistic religion, contrary to popular knowledge.

“I actually believe in one God, Suaminara, who is the god of wealth,” Sam explained, “I know there are other gods in my religion, but I believe Suaminara is *the* God.” He was unsure of the English spelling and told me to figure it out phonetically. He even keeps a picture of Suaminara in his wallet for “good luck.” Having mentioned a central part of his belief, Sam was careful to point out that Hinduism wasn’t a totally uniform religion. Although Hindu sects had basic principles and similarities, practices differed from region to region and even from family to family. He proudly noted that he was the seventh-generation of the Lohana Hindus from the Gujarat region.

Sam considers himself a “liberal Hindu” who tries to pray daily, go to the temple about once a month, and read the Scriptures when he has time. He admits to drinking and smoking occasionally, acts which are “unclean to the body” and “forbidden in the Scriptures.” He also pointed out that his knowledge of his religion had faded away considerably over the years, and

much that he had learned at the temple as a child were mostly forgotten at this point in life. “I used to know what Diwali meant, but now I just know it’s a big deal for Indian Hindus.”

However, Sam believes that religion serves the important purpose of preserving his ethnic heritage. For Sam, religion is a means of bonding with his parents and learning about his family ancestry. Sam prefers worshipping at home with his parents or alone at his NYU dorm.

“I’m not much of a temple person. I think that temples have a tendency to force their ways of worship on people, and I find that very restricting to my approach,” Sam said.

This may explain why Sam is able to adjust so well to various types of people. By trying to separate religion into a private sphere of his life, limited mostly to family and relatives, Sam is able to exercise ethnic and religious detachment with relative ease. Though he enjoys the time he spends with his Indian friends who share the same food and have similar experiences growing up in America, he finds little cause in “limiting” himself to a specific group.

“When I’ve graduated college and I’m working, I know that I’ll come in contact with non-Indians, and I just have to get used to it. People who still hang out in all-Indian groups are going to have problems dealing with the rest of America,” Sam told me. Born in the United States, Sam considers himself “American” before anything else. His religion is Hinduism, his ethnic background is Indian, but his mindset and focus, he said, “is more American than anything else.”

One might assume that Sam is very passive in his beliefs, not too eager to defend it from mockery and not as passionate in learning more about it. In fact, there was an incident when he was served meat accidentally once at a fast food restaurant. He had taken a few bites before realizing that he had eaten beef. Sam was furious that the restaurant had made such a mistake, but instead of taking it up with the management and issuing a complaint, he verbally expressed

some disgust in eating meat and soon forgot about it. Unlike the Hindu plaintiffs who sued McDonald's over the beef-flavored fries and claimed great moral grievances, Sam's take on his unfortunate meat consumption was that he had "accidentally" deviated from his traditional practice and that he had personally done no wrong (Goodstein, 2001). This example may demonstrate Sam's passive nature, but it serves as a better indicator that for Sam, religion is less about moral responsibility and more about maintaining a family practice.

Talking to Sam about his religious beliefs allowed me to reexamine my own belief system. I currently do not associate with any religion, and I do not want to see myself categorized as an atheist or an agnostic. Growing up, I was heavily influenced by the presence of a strong Christian order in the Korean American community. My father was a reverend for most of my childhood, and I was a weekly churchgoer who memorized as many Bible stories as possible and even led prayer at Sunday school. I looked forward to church each week because I had a lot of fun hanging out with my Korean friends and eating the well-prepared Korean food after services. Although I was well-spoken in English and had many non-Korean friends, I could never see myself with best friends who weren't Korean. I had a "high level of social ethnic attachment" as described in the article by Joann Hong and Pyong Gap Min (1999).

Even after my father gave up his ministry due to his changing ideology, I found a Korean Protestant church that provided me with a similar environment. Church became more of a comfort zone for me as an adolescent. My second generation Korean friends and I often discussed how white people were "racist" and how we needed to "stick together." Our general attitude was similar to a viewpoint offered in Kelly Chong's article; we experienced a "loss of confidence regarding the possibility of complete assimilation" (Chong, 1996, p. 268). At a time

when my face was teeming with pimples and my voice had almost changed entirely, I was sure about my identity: a proud Korean and a good Christian.

As a sophomore in high school, I had become less reliant on maintaining strong friendships with other Korean Americans. By this time, I was more focused on my academics and preferred hanging out with people who pursued similar interests. My two best friends were Chinese, and my passion was for football. As I began to skip church every now and then, I started to lose touch with some of my Korean American friends. When football season ended and I had more free time, I began to attend church regularly once again; but this time, because my ties had weakened with the kids there, I actually began to pay closer attention to the sermons preached at the youth group services. By tuning into the sermons, church suddenly became more than just a social meeting place with Korean friends. The ideology put forth by the sermons made me examine my religious beliefs. Up until then, I had only heard what I wanted to hear – that Jesus preached love and that he died for our sins. But upon closer inspection, there were many other messages that were being taught: creationism was a fact and evolution was an “evil theory”; other religions were “mystical witchcraft”; homosexuals should not have any rights in this society. I knew that my church was fairly conservative and that a literal reading of the Bible was expected, but I strongly disagreed with their views on homosexuals. Though I confess to not being the greatest fan of their lifestyle, I believed that to pray to God with a wish for the US government to strip the rights of every gay person was ridiculous. I always had the idea that Christianity was about loving our neighbors and not judging each other. To hear that the leaders of the church wished ill upon a group of people seemed very hypocritical to me. I voiced my thoughts to some of my church friends, but only found myself ostracized because of my “pagan” thoughts. I tried to forget about the incident, but from then on, going to church and sitting

through sermons was unbearable. That is why when I read Chisun Lee's article (2000) on a Korean American church and its efforts to politically support the California Defense of Sexual Responsibility Act (CDSRA) it brought back negative memories about my church experience. I had to find someone who could tell me that it was okay to think the way I did.

I consulted my parents, who had great experience as religious leaders, and asked them for advice on the situation. They told me that they were glad I was able to think critically about the sermons and interject my own thoughts. They then told me that if there was no other cause to go to church, it would be best for me to stay home and learn more about religion through a dialogue with them. I agreed and my church days ended, much to the dismay of my grandmother, who continued to attend. For her, church was a lifeline; she did not know how to speak English and she had no friends nearby. The only way for her to keep in contact with people was through church. I felt confident enough about my friends at school that the prospect of losing my Korean American friends did not bother me as much. I decided to learn about Christianity from my parents' perspective and conversed with an open mind. They never tried to preach to me, but offered various explanations as to how certain beliefs emerged. Absent from our dialogues were religious rites such as prayer and hymn-singing. My parents told me that if such things made me feel comfortable, I should do them, but if I felt nothing, then I should not bother. Through our dialogues and my own time of reflection, I came to the conclusion that I could not be a Christian.

How does my movement away from Christianity draw any similarities to Sam's Hindu beliefs? I believe that by turning away from the social and ethnic aspect of church life and by focusing on the religious aspect, I found myself at great odds with the restrictive practices of the church. Sam had expressed the same problem with Hindu temples and how he preferred to keep religion a family affair. For me, dialogue with my parents was as deep a religious experience as

I could have had; instead of proclaiming my submission to God as I had in past church retreats, I found myself on my own making very important decisions on what road I would take. Also, I found that constant interaction with my parents improved my Korean-speaking and listening skills. As our topics jumped around, I began to ask about East Asian philosophy and Korea's Confucian background. Knowing about some of the pre-Christian beliefs in Korea helped me to imagine what my ancestors might have followed. I soon felt that there was nothing to be ashamed of in our ancestors' beliefs, and I began to see similar moral messages from East Asian texts that appeared in the Bible. Like Sam, I began to feel proud that I could learn some of the things that my ancestors had. My religious revelation, therefore, was also a reaffirmation of my Korean roots.

When I see someone like Sam, I know that religion plays an important role, not only in the spiritual realm, but in his family life as well. I also know that Korean American churches, no matter how conservative they may be, are very resourceful in helping recent immigrants and in maintaining ethnic identity in second generation Koreans. What I have learned from my personal experience is that religion is not necessarily about reading a sacred text and trying to mold a lifestyle. For me, religion is a continuing process that allows a person to examine life and its meaning. I might not be "religious" in a conventional sense, but this is a belief that has defined who I am: no longer a Christian, but a truth-seeking Korean American.

References

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