

I, Anand Mahadevan, the Convert

My conversion was not a change of religion; it was a change of heart. I was born a Brahmin and am the grandson of a priest whom I dearly loved. I am educated and my current professional standing indicates that I am reasonably intelligent. I am also affluent and my income would put me distinctly in the upper middle class bracket. I guess that would make me high-caste, rich and smart. In other words, I am not a tribal, or poor or dim-witted. And yet, I chose to become a follower of Jesus Christ.

The world would call me a convert to Christianity. I have no problems with that, though I see my faith more as a relationship with God through Jesus Christ than as a religion. And for the record, I can truthfully claim that no one financially induced or threatened or deceived me into converting to Christianity.

I am fiercely proud of my national identity as an Indian and I am completely at peace with my cultural identity as a Hindu. I retain the name my parents gave me. My wife, who also shares my faith, continues to go by her Hindu name. We have two children and we have given both distinctly Hindu names. In fact, many of my colleagues and acquaintances who may happen to read this column are likely to be surprised. They have no inkling about my faith, for I generally don't go about announcing it. But if someone does ask me the reason behind the joy and hope that is ever present in my life, I am always delighted to share it with them.

I write this piece to make one point—that my conversion was not a change of religion but a change of heart. To explain this, I need to go back to my childhood in Chennai, similar to that of so many other Tamil Brahmin boys like me. My grandfather, every bit the virtuous priest, had enormous influence over me. I absolutely adored him and as a toddler, always clung to him. He too loved me to a fault. There was no wish of mine that he would not rush to fulfill. But even in my early, formative years I was unable to relate to the religion he fervently practiced. Later, in my school days, I once spent my summer holidays with him in Trichy. Memories of dawn walks with him, for the ritualistic dip in the Cauvery river, cow in tow, are still fresh in

my memory. I learnt many shlokas, some of which I still remember. But I never understood any of it and none of it helped me connect with God.

When I was 19, a Christian friend with whom I used to play cricket invited me to his house for prayer. If he had invited me to a pub, or party, I would have gone too. At his home, he and his sister prayed for me. It was a simple yet delightful conversation with God that lasted all of five minutes. I don't remember it verbatim, but they articulated a prayer of blessing on my life, future, career and family. It was a simple affair—no miracles, no angels visiting. All they did was utter a deep human cry out to the creator God and His only son Jesus Christ. When they said Amen, I felt in my heart a desire to follow Jesus.

It was a faith encounter with God that I shall not even attempt to understand, rationalise or explain. I simply accept it. It is my faith. It is what I choose to believe. That evening I did not change my religion, for in reality I had none. Hinduism was my identity, not my religion. It still is.

The Christianity I acquired that evening is not a religion. On the contrary, it is an intensely intimate relationship with Jesus. Over the past fifteen years, I have come to know this Jesus even closer. I know Him as the pure and sinless Son of a Holy God. And I know Him as a dear friend to whom I pray and talk to every day—about my career, my dreams, successes, failures, finances and even my sexuality.

If I read a good book, watch a good movie, or eat a good meal at a new restaurant, I would naturally tell my friends about it. In Jesus, I have discovered a truly amazing friend, guide, leader, saviour and God. How can I not tell all my friends about Him? And if anyone does listen and he too comes to believe in Jesus, I am delighted. The world would call it a conversion; I call it a change of heart, like mine.

But I would never force anyone to listen to me, leave alone financially induce, coerce or con him into believing. That to me is pointless and against the very grain of my faith. But I do have a constitutional right to practice my faith and to preach it without deception, force or bribery. It pains to see such basic rights of mankind being cruelly violated every day in this great Hindu nation.

God bless India.

(Anand Mahadevan is the editor of Outlook Business.)