

From "Krishna Bhakti" to "Christianity" to "Krista Bhakti"

by Raghav Krishna

My Life Before Christ as a Krishna Bhakta

I spent the first part of my childhood and teenage years in an orthodox Brahmin family in a South Indian city. I grew up in a family where religion and spiritual matters dominated every other aspect of life. It was under the umbrella of spirituality that the rest of our lives were lived. Probably the most significant or remarkable aspect of my family, spiritually speaking, was the devotion (*bhakti*) of my mother. She knew of the existence of her Creator and the temporality of this life. She led a life of simple trust in God. Unlike most mothers, she was not one to worry about her children because she knew that God was the one who created them and He was fully capable of taking care of them. She also did not care much for material things and would often tell us that our real treasure is in God and that we should always spend our energies seeking God and things that concern Him, and not be consumed by the world.

Because of her influence and my own inclinations, I was very interested in spiritual matters from early on. Even as a little four year old boy, I would wake up early in the morning to watch my father perform the family *puja*, or worship, and would accompany my parents in the evening to listen to sermons, or *pravachanas*, taught by gurus in the temple. It is true that God gives a special understanding of Himself to children, and even very early on I was fascinated by Him and wanted to learn more about Him. I loved to converse about Him with the elders in the family and would often question them about different aspects of theology.

By the time I was twelve years old, I had come to the conclusion that there was nothing more important in life than to know God and grow in my relationship with Him. In the Hindu context, the way to do that was to devote myself full-time to studying scriptures and practicing spiritual disciplines by becoming a *sanyasi*, a Hindu renunciant (monk). After some thought, I expressed this to my parents who, surprisingly, were not supportive of the idea at all. The reason was that they did not want their son to have a difficult life. They wanted me to marry and have a normal life because the life of a *sanyasi* is very hard. It is comparable

Editor's Note: This paper was originally presented at the 2007 meeting of the International Society for Frontier Missiology in Dallas, Texas, September 15–17, 2007.

Raghav Krishna is a Brahmin follower of Jesus.

to the tension parents in Christian circles may feel when their son or daughter decides to become a missionary to a third-world country and take away the grandkids! After much pressure from my parents and extended family, I had to give up on the idea and pursue school and other normal activities. That made me a little disillusioned because I was fascinated by God and wanted to know more and more about Him, but I didn't see a way for that to happen. I told myself at that point that someday, when I had carried out all my worldly duties or dharma, I would get away from this world for the purpose of knowing God and having a relationship with Him. That was my goal in life.

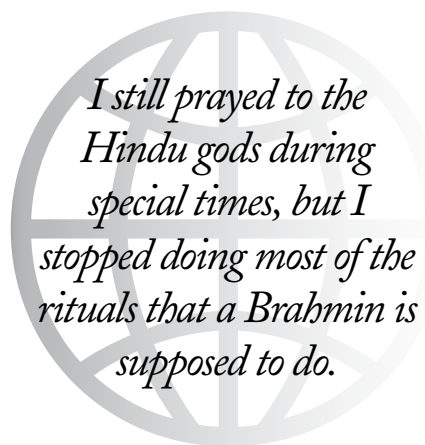
My Introduction to Christianity

I then went on to do what the rest of the Brahmin boys in cities do, namely, studied hard so I could get into Engineering or Medical School. My father would tell me that, as a Brahmin, my only hope in leading a decent life was through good education. The other castes could somehow make it because of special privileges that the government provided, he said, but not Brahmins. I got into Engineering School and, through the years, the disillusionment that I first felt gradually caused my faith and its practices to become very nominal. I still prayed to the Hindu gods during exams or special times but, for the most part, I stopped doing most of the rituals that a Brahmin is supposed to do.

After college, I came to the US to pursue a Masters in Engineering. Soon after arriving, I became friends with a few Americans. The interesting thing about them was that they were interested in God and wanted to talk about Him. It renewed the interest I had always had and so, over the next few months, it was simply fascinating to learn about their beliefs. After the very first conversation, I thought to myself how very similar their ideas about God were compared to what I had been taught. I had grown up with an understanding of the separation between man and God, the reality of heaven, the facts that salvation is getting to be with

God forever in heaven; that people can never become God; and seeking to have a relationship with God is the most important goal in life. I grew closer to these Americans due to the similarities I saw between our faiths and their general interest in spiritual matters.

As I started to get to know them better, I saw that not only were they interested in spiritual matters, but the lives they led were truly spiritual in spite of their being college students. I saw one major difference in them from what I had seen in my own people growing up—Christ Himself and the



reality of His presence in their lives. I saw that the difference between the lives they were supposed to live and the actual life they lived was very small. In my own traditions, there were many good ideals taught, but there was no sufficient living example of someone that actually lived the life. The gap between what one is supposed to be and what one actually is was wide.

It was also during this time that I participated in a Bible study on the book of John, watched the JESUS film, and learned more about the person of Jesus. Jesus simply fascinated me and made me realize that there was something powerful about Himself. Especially because of seeing His life in His followers, I knew that this Jesus was not just a person of the past, but rather a current reality.

One day, I was out with one of my friends, and he asked me what my goal in life was. I thought about it for

a minute and remembered what I had told myself as a child, that my goal in life was to seek God and grow in my relationship with Him. I shared that with him and I said, "But you know as a graduate student, I am so burdened with studies that I can't pursue my goal now." He encouraged me to pursue my goal even now with whatever little time I could afford.

By this time, I was getting very restless internally, because I could kind of see how my life was going and what it would most likely look like: graduation, job, marriage, children, retirement, grandchildren and death. This life seemed meaningless—this cycle of life where you work so hard to attain so much and then when you are about to start enjoying what you have worked so hard for, you start losing hair, start having all kinds of health problems and eventually die and leave everything behind for someone else to enjoy.

This restlessness became so bad that I found it difficult to motivate myself to study, and that started showing in my grades. I could not afford that as an international student with bank loans. But, I had gotten to a point that I didn't care. I just wanted to live life for the purpose it was intended. My heart was so burdened. Finally, I couldn't bear it anymore and just opened up and shared my internal struggles with one of my Christian friends. This friend listened to me and counselled me that I should seek God with my troubles because Jesus had promised to carry our burdens if we seek Him. She also had a practical suggestion which was to spend maybe five minutes a day praying to God, whoever He is, to reveal Himself to me in a way that I could understand, in a way that I could follow. I took up that suggestion and started praying to my creator God, not Jesus, but just God in that prayer. I prayed for about two months, many times just pleading and crying out to God, "Why is it that these people have the relationship with you that I can't have?" It was covetousness, but good covetousness.

One day when I was praying, I was especially burdened and started praying in my mother tongue. A strange thing happened which had not happened before. My body started to go into something like convulsions, with the whole body shaking and breathing heavily. The friend who made the suggestion to pray this way was there and she started praying with me. However, when she noticed these weird things happening with my body, she got concerned and thought of getting medical help. I stopped her and said to her, through labored breaths, something like, "This is not medical, my mind is fully alert but this is something spiritual, so pray for me." She then started praying for me and, while she was praying, I felt internally as if I was going through a battle in my mind. I was trying to get my breathing under control almost symbolic of getting my life under control, but the more I tried, the worse I became until I came to a point where I felt like I just needed to let go. I told my friend that I wanted to follow Jesus and asked how I could do that. She led me in a prayer and as soon as I finished praying, my breathing became normal. I got up and we both started laughing joyfully.

My Life as a Christian

Soon afterwards, I started attending church regularly. It was like a honeymoon period, learning about Christ and getting to know God. About eight months into it, however, I became somewhat disillusioned with the whole experience because, on the one hand, I found Christ to be so precious and his teachings so powerful, but on the other hand, many things that happened in the church confused me. I had questions like: Why are men and women romancing in this place of worship? Why does there always need to be some fun associated with every supposedly spiritual event? Why is it so easy to get people to come to family fun nights but so hard to get people to a prayer meeting? Why is there so much marketing going on inside the church, for events and for finances, using much the same tactics as the secular world does?

I found Christ to be so precious and his teachings so powerful, but many things that happened in the church confused me.

With many such questions, I came to a point of crisis and almost abandoned Christ. After some thought, I decided that I would make an appointment with the pastor. I told myself that if I came out of that meeting convinced about Christ, I would follow Him no matter what or, if he didn't have convincing answers for me, I would kiss this whole faith goodbye. I don't remember the specifics of what he said, except that he humbly accepted my criticisms and apologized on behalf of the shortcomings of Western Christianity. He also gently pointed out that there are unique cultural sins which plague different civilizations, but that the unfaithfulness of people is not the fault of our faithful Lord. I walked out of the pastor's office saying something like, "This Christ is worth following no matter what difficulties come and I won't look back from this day forward." I believe that was the day I truly began following Jesus.

About two months later, I went back home to India for the first time since being in the US. I tried many times to bring myself to share about my new found faith but I just couldn't. Five days before I was supposed to come back to the US, my mother and younger brother were in an accident and, within eight days, both of them died. It was during the period of grief over the next few months that I really grew in my faith. I had no one but Jesus to cling to for strength and comfort. Other people could only go so far in comforting me, but it was the Spirit of God speaking comfort to me that helped me cope with the tragedy. Because Jesus had become so dear, I wanted to talk about Him with the rest of my family and friends. In my zeal-ousness, I took every opportunity to talk about Him to others, but most of my talks backfired. My non-believing friends were gracious to listen to me, but it didn't do much for them.

My "Reconversion" from a Western Christian to a Krista Bhakta

My first job after college was in a small town. God put some devout Christians in my life who were a family to me. They helped me both with my grieving, as well as my growing in the essentials of the faith. This was a concentrated time with other believers that the Lord used to solidify my faith in Him, and I am very thankful for it. I had some Indian acquaintances, but I didn't associate much with fellow Indians during those three years.

My wife had been introduced to some ideas about contextualization during a visit to India. When we both went to India for the first time, we went to a *sammelan* (or spiritual retreat) of *Krista Bhaktas* near my hometown. Instead of welcoming this new way, I was very much opposed to it. I argued vehemently, even obnoxiously, and at the end of the *sammelan*. I pretty much dismissed this *Krista Bhakti* as garbage. I didn't want anything to do with it or the people associated with it.

Looking back, my strong negative reaction to this new way of thinking has to do with being confronted with core identity issues. After becoming a Christian, I had taken on a new social identity and that was now being challenged. Several months later, there was a series of layoffs in my company and I lost my job. After that layoff in 2003, I considered going to seminary and changing my career. I got on the phone with the same pastor who had helped me earlier with my problems with church. He said many things that really made me think.

For example, he asked me why I would even consider going to seminary. "Seminaries," he explained, "are a very western thing that came into existence much later after the early church. If that

was the way to go, Paul would have built seminaries, but he didn't. He went about planting house churches. You would be alienating yourself from the very people you want to reach if you went to a seminary. So, please think about it carefully."

He talked about the importance of my staying rooted in my culture. "We Westerners," he said, "have done a very good job of bringing someone to Christ and then uprooting them from their culture so that any effect that the salt and light can have is permanently removed."

He also started talking to me in terms of seeing my own culture positively. For example, the hospitality and caring for each other in extended families, and sacrificially and humbly living in your own culture, he said, is a lot more biblical than what we have in Christian Western culture.

Finally, he blew me away when he said, "Why in the world would you want to call yourself a Christian, when I myself am uncomfortable with that term? Anymore, I call myself a follower of Christ, because that more accurately describes who I am. Over 80 percent of Americans call themselves Christians. You are a Hindu in culture, and that is your civilization. You have now found Christ precious and want to follow him very much as a Hindu."

After that conversation, he invited me to go through a nine-month internship that dealt specifically with issues with interns preparing to go to the Muslim world. We made the move, and I decided to keep my career and look for a job in engineering while doing the internship at night. We also attended the Worldwide Perspectives course, and were part of a house church as part of the internship. The next nine months were an intense time of rethinking this subject of being a follower of Christ with the cultural identity that God gave me. After the internship, I went back to the very people I had rejected and gladly took on the identity of a Hindu *Krista Bhakta*.

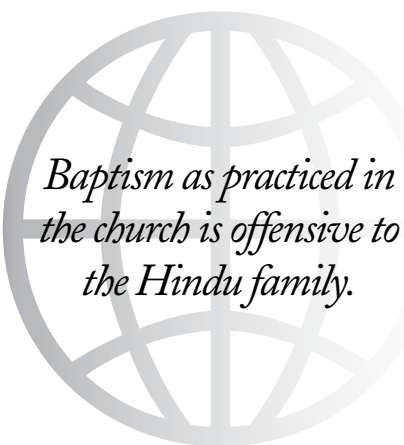
My Journey as a Krista Bhakta

I would like to now list some differences between following Christ as a Christian vs. following Christ as a Hindu *Krista Bhakta*. Broadly speaking, the differences can be categorized into differences in lifestyle and forms of worship, and difference in identity.

Differences in Lifestyle and Forms of Worship

Diet

Typically, a Christian has no dietary restrictions. In most Hindu communities, especially the ones in the US,



eating chicken is acceptable, but not eating beef; many are pure vegetarians.

Corporate Worship

If a person says that they are a Hindu *Krista Bhakta*, going to Sunday morning church is not possible because it would be considered incompatible with being a Hindu; it is Christians who go to church on Sunday mornings. Corporate worship in the form of *satsang* or house gathering is more in line with being Hindu. The same would hold true for singing *bhajans* (Indian style devotional music) instead of English choruses.

Baptism

Getting baptized in a Christian church is again a "Christian" thing to do. The Hindu way of following a guru is the initiatory ceremony called "*Guru Deeksha*," which is a water ceremony celebrated with close family and friends. Baptism as practiced in the church is offensive to the Hindu family because it

denotes the extraction of the convert out of the family community.

Celebrating the Lord's Supper

In the life of a *Krista Bhakta*, communion is celebrated with banana and milk after a *puja* where the Lord's work on the cross is remembered with the breaking of a coconut. The items mentioned above are commonly used elements in Hindu homes for family devotions. The Christian communion as practiced in the church is very foreign and unnatural in Hindu settings.

Hindu Festivals

Since a *Krista Bhakta* identifies himself/herself as part of the Hindu community, all festivals are celebrated with the community. Festivals are a time of great community rejoicing and the *Bhakta* will not miss out on this time of unique fellowship with the larger community. This is not to say that this celebration is without boundaries, however. A *Krista Bhakta* will not go against his or her convictions concerning God in matters involving things like bowing to deities, etc, and sometimes may pass on being included in certain festival activities. This is acceptable in Hindu tradition, however, as followers of certain Hindu gods refuse to bow before idols of other gods. A Christian historically does not participate in Hindu festivals in any way.

Difference in Identity

At the core of being a *Krista Bhakta* is the issue of identity. The differences in lifestyle and forms of worship can be viewed as preferences. A Westerner prefers Pepsi, a Hindu prefers tea; a Westerner prefers pizza, a Hindu prefers paneer; a Westerner prefers hymns, a Hindu prefers *bhajans*. So, those differences should be obvious and not an issue when thought through clearly.

However, the issue of being a Hindu rather than a Christian is the harder of the two to understand and to reconcile with, especially for a traditional Christian. This Hindu identity is key for me as a *Krista Bhakta* in order to live the life that God has called me to. It is not a peripheral issue but a central one. I

cannot be a Christian with Christians and a Hindu with Hindus. When I say I am Hindu, my life has to consistently reflect that. If I go to Sunday morning church, eat beef, get baptized in a church and call myself a Hindu, the Hindu community will see through the inconsistency and consider this merely another deceptive strategy to befriend and convert them.

The Need for Becoming a Hindu Krista Bhakta

In this section I'll summarize the main reasons why I decided to be a Hindu *Krista Bhakta* rather than remain a Christian.

In order to fully be who God made me

God did not make a mistake when he placed me in a deeply religious Hindu family. He has been at work in my life ever since I was conceived in my mother's womb. I have experienced Christ in a deeper way after following forms of worship and devotion that are more in tune with my Hindu upbringing. I can work hard at fitting into the

I have experienced Christ in a deeper way after following forms of worship and devotion that are more in tune with my Hindu upbringing.

Western mold; I may even succeed to a large extent, but I'll never be home. Hymns can never touch parts of my soul that *bhajans* do. Taking on an identity and lifestyle foreign to me robs me of the depths of experiencing Christ.

In order to be an authentic part of the Hindu community

If I were to be a Christian trying to relate to my Hindu family and friends, I would be like oil in water rather than yeast in bread. No matter what I do, I will always be an outsider if I have an outsider's identity. When God has so graciously placed me to be within a community I love and want to share Christ with, why would I pull myself out of it and then try to come back to it in order to share Christ? This identity issue plays itself out in many subtle ways, like inclusion in family festivals

and events, inclusion in religious/spiritual discussions, etc.

In order to live a biblical life of faith in Christ

Finally, being salt and being yeast is what the Bible calls me to be. Christ did not come to create separate communities, but rather for His followers to be part of every community in order to bring kingdom values into every community. When Christ himself contextualized and changed to become like us so that he could relate to us, why wouldn't I follow His example, and remain one with my Hindu family and friends so that some may become His followers? **IJFM**

Connecting students to God's global purposes.

A pastor and parent share about INSIGHT, a college-level worldview program of the U.S. Center for World Mission, available for 32 college credits at locations nationwide:

Insight
Intensive Study of Integrated Global History and Theology



"...a God-entranced vision of reality that will make all other study, and all the rest of life, deeper, richer, and more in sync with God's ultimate purposes for your life."

John Piper
Pastor, Bethlehem Baptist Church

"The INSIGHT Program was a life changing experience for our daughter....My wife and I consider the money invested in the program to be one of the best investments we ever made with any of our children."

Doug Birdsall
Executive Chair, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization



Contact INSIGHT for program locations: insight@uscwm.org