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Forum

THINGS MY FATHER TAUGHT ME

A Hindu among the Jesuits

By Nagarajan Vijaya

Whenever people ask me what I do, I tell them, with a wide grin, "I am a Hindu among the Jesuits."

When I first came to the department in 1997 my department had six Jesuits, one nun, one lay Catholic, one Lutheran theological scholar, one sociologist of religion, one social ethicist, and then, me. I was one of the few women in the department. I was deeply moved by the Jesuits welcoming me into their midst. I felt awkward and shy, not sure of my place, and not sure whether I would gradually feel a sense of belonging.

There was a string of autobiographical history, though, that tied me to the Jesuits which gave me a deep felt connection to the University of San Francisco and made me feel more at home. I thought it coincidental that nearly forty-five years after my father's Jesuit education in India, from 1948-1952 at St. Josephs College in Bangalore and Loyola University in Chennai (then Loyola College in Madras), I was to teach religious studies at a Jesuit university in America.

It was the slow movement of a gift of learning, stretched out across time and space, across disciplines, religions, cultures and continents, spanning half the world. The Jesuits trained my father in math and physics, English language and literature, and Tamil language and literature in Chennai, just after Indian independence, and I, having been trained in religious studies, Tamil language and literature, art history, anthropology, economics and engineering, was going to teach Hinduism, religion and ecology, and religion and nonviolence to students attending a Jesuit institution.

My father's memories were of a cosmopolitan Jesuit priestly community from England, Ireland, German and Spain, who all had devoted their lives to teaching and were enormously gifted. They were highly disciplined, and expected the same from their students; they helped channel and rein in the enormous energy of undergraduate students with stimulating, high quality lectures, and expected a matching of effort from their students that they themselves were exhibiting and modeling.

It is clear to me now that the ways in which my father worked through problems and his philosophical and ascetic outlook to life, all of which he tried to pass on to me, were as much shaped by his orthodox, conservative Hindu upbringing, progressive Gandhian ideals and the cosmopolitan Jesuits who schooled him.

Throughout my childhood consisting of extended periods in India and the United States, my father embodied the sharp, critical, intellectual questioning of the Jesuits, his openness and critical inquiry into his own faith and others, and above all, a cultivation of his natural curiosity towards multiple subjects, both in the humanities and the sciences. He became a life-long intellectual, curious about the history of ideas, and his ability to braid together his native Tamil and Indian philosophical knowledge, his critical receptivity and analytical sophistication in both western systems of thinking and learning, and his intense desire to gain knowledge all served him extremely well in his career and his life, all of which he modeled for me and passed onto me as best as he could. Even now at seventy-nine years old, my father exhibits an unusual level of thoughtfulness, a high degree of intellectual curiosity about the world, and a commitment to deep learning.

How about Philippine soteriology?

Now in 2012, fifteen years later, in our department we have a tremendous diversity of theologians and religious studies scholars; we have one Jesuit who has been a beneficent, brilliant presence throughout my time here and whose interests include Scripture and Christology; four lay Catholics who have varied interests—one scholar specializing in multiple historical-critical understandings of the Bible; another on Africa, feminism, and theologies of HIV; another on Latin American liberation theologies, race theory, and faith-based social movements; another on Catholic systematic theology, the Philippines and soteriology; one scholar focusing on immigration, social and environmental ethics, and gender and violence; another bridging together Jewish and Islamic politics both in the Middle East and in America, another bringing together Islam, gender and sexuality, another a medieval textual scholar on Tibetan Buddhism from India, one anthropological scholar of Buddhism, Japanese Shinto religion and globalization, and another on Hinduism, ritual, art, gender and ecology. These scholars-teachers all personify, each in his or her own way, a deep attention to discipline, a mastery of multiple overlapping disciplinary orientations and mappings, and a heart open to learning and service.

Soon I will become the department chair, and it is an important time for me to reflect on the multiple gifts that a Jesuit, Catholic university can offer in the contemporary educational climate.

Disciplined learning, academic excellence, and a rigorous base knowledge of multiple disciplines in both the arts and sciences, and a willingness to work hard, all seem to be a great foundation for any student in the contemporary world. It seems to me that a Jesuit education is as foundational now as it was then, sixty years ago, in my father's memories and now echoed strongly in my own life.

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