

Selected Excerpts from
Saffron Cross: The Unlikely Story of How a Christian Minister
Married a Hindu Monk
By J. Dana Trent

eHarmony

While the rest of America digested fried turkey, I sat at a computer in the apartment I shared with my mother and checked several hundred boxes describing my temperament and habits. I poured over endless squares indicating my desires in a partner: values, physical attributes, nature, habits, spirituality, religion—or lack thereof. I worked hard to spare myself from a psychopaths and smokers, and moved onto more sacred matters.

The eHarmony television commercials had been enticing: a silver-haired Dr. Neil Clark Warren boasted that, for the price of expensive shoes, his lengthy questionnaire would help me meet the love of my life. Happy, pretty couples careened across the screen, and I yearned for relief from the approaching holiday season, which was hell for a self-proclaimed twenty-seven-year-old spinster whose college and divinity school friends who were already celebrating fifth anniversaries and working on child number two.

Dr. Warren is a clever devil. His dating service sets itself apart from the competition with this dissertation-length survey that includes the added component of matching folks by faiths not limited to Christianity. “What faith(s) would you accept in a partner?” the eHarmony algorithms inquired. My dating history had been insularly Christian, save for the non-practicing Muslim medical student I dated briefly while in college. “What *would* I accept? Tolerate?” I ticked off “Christian” and “Jewish” without delay and narrowed the field. The Jewish bit was no surprise; I felt kinship with my Hebrew brothers and sisters and had had a life-long infatuation with Adam Levine lookalikes. But the remaining traditions? I bit my lip. How did I feel about “Muslim,” “Buddhist,” “Hindu,” “Spiritual, but not religious,” “Agnostic,” and “Atheist”?

The last two were out; it would be difficult to bridge the gap between a Christian minister and someone who wasn’t, at the very least, seeking God. The global traditions remained; I looked out the window in search of an answer. The glass reflected a woman sitting in her pajamas at three o’clock in the afternoon with no Saturday night date. Each turn of the calendar meant sales of a new Christmas album recorded by a boy band whose members were born the year I entered high school. My pool of suitors was shrinking, and as far as I was concerned, I was one inch closer to turning forty-five and having twenty-nine cats. I needn’t decrease my chances further by being picky about the ways in which a future beau approached God.

“All remaining world religions? Sure.” I ticked them off one at a time, whispering to myself, “The possibility that I’d be matched with anyone who wasn’t a Christian is minute, right?”

Interfaith Dating

Growing up in a denomination that doesn’t have a formal, high church focus on sacraments meant that the moves of baptisms and Holy Communion were simple and symbolic. My Duke Divinity School Episcopalian, Catholic, and even Methodist friends would have croaked had they known my casual plans for adding Fred to the eternal roster.

Fred had actualized the first two steps in the process—his altar call and public declaration of faith—albeit reluctantly. I conjured all sorts of ways to complete the final step. I rationalized that it didn’t have to be within a church community, and it didn’t have to be perfect. After all, I was guilty of performing less-than-orthodox sacraments after divinity school when I served as a hospital chaplain. I’d been paged many on-call nights to neonatal intensive care rooms at 2:00 a.m. When I arrived, concerned nurses shoved unused emesis basins and sterile water into my hands while anxious parents pleaded with me to baptize their tiny babies in the name of the Triune God.

I didn’t know these families, nor did I question how deep and pious their religious convictions were or whether they really were committed to raising this child, should it survive, in the Church. But what I learned in those sacred moments is that the Holy Spirit always intercedes, and it is my job to get out of the way.

In a less-than-kosher method, I’d even baptized Truffy the cat during his routine bath in our home tub. He wasn’t thrilled—even though I’d forgone my Baptist heritage of immersion and opted instead for the Methodists’ sprinkling.

But Fred was a devout Hindu—he wasn’t a dying baby, and he wasn’t a beloved family feline. He’d been pressured into a middle school altar call, and he hadn’t asked for a baptism. Still, in the few months I’d known him, I felt compelled to complete his salvific criterion. My timid dating disposition disappeared, and I took on the role of evangelical pastor. But my offer was met with obstinacy.

“Why can’t I baptize you?” I whined.

“Because I’m not a Christian!”

"But you are!" I protested.

"No . . . I'm not."

"But you've nearly been saved," I pleaded. "You just need the last step!" His eyes flashed with anger as I let "You've nearly been saved," fall from my tongue, and he knew instantly that I didn't view Hinduism as an equal religious path. "Even Truffy's been baptized!" I said casually, with an "Everybody's doing it" argument I hoped would ease the tense moment.

I'm not sure whose theology I was applying here, but my seminary professors wouldn't likely have approved of me pushing baptism on an unwilling candidate. This holy sacrament needed to be performed on the eager, on one who is ready to profess his or her faith in Jesus Christ, preferably with some discipleship classes and the witness of a community. My reluctant Hindu boyfriend did not fit the bill.

Still, I was adamant. I hadn't yet accepted Hinduism as a legitimate way to God. I was one *those* Christians, the kind who couldn't see beyond her own nose to embrace a tradition that is, in fact, older than Christianity and steeped in sacred scripture, ritual, and authenticity.

I was forcing God (and Fred) into my cozy little Baptist box—and I schemed more before I finally let it go. I pondered baptizing Fred in his sleep, or tossing water on his face at dinner, and crossing him in the name of the Triune God.

This was my first failed attempt at interfaith understanding.

Sex-Free Honeymoon

I didn't have sex on my honeymoon. Instead, I spent two weeks as a religious minority among 57,000 Hindus—a season of reverence commemorating the Christian-Hindu interfaith marriage between me, the Baptist minister, and Fred, the Hindu monk. Fred and I arrived in New Delhi after midnight three days before Christmas. In the two years I had known him, he had incessantly warned me that India would be an assault to my senses, but I hadn't prepared myself for the physical truth of his counsel. When the automatic airport doors opened, they revealed a dusty city that smelled as if everyone had lit matches and ceremoniously blew them out at the same time. Through the lens of nighttime, the sulfur-infused metropolis foreshadowed a dawn reality: India didn't smell or look like paradise.

From the airport we traveled forty minutes with our driver, Deepak, through the polluted smog, dodging bedraggled delivery trucks and enduring horns until we reached a three-story building. Nestled on a dirt road that resembled a western film set where cowboys and horses trot by the same bush ad infinitum, the Web advertisement had boasted a "Western-style" hotel. By Indian standards, this was the Waldorf-Astoria. By American standards, it was the shady roadside motel most of us avoided. We were greeted in the lobby by young Indian men running the establishment who slept there, ate what food their guests left behind, and washed and hung their one pair of pants and shirt out to dry on the filthy rooftop. Less than an hour in, I became a Lysol-wielding American snob who slammed helplessly into the cultural and socio-economic walls of Indian bedlam. We boarded a narrow elevator and arrived at the threshold of room 217. The men waited for our approval. Fred nodded that, "Yes," it was fine. They exhaled, relieved, and motioned back with the quintessential Indian nod that is a quick jerk of the chin to left or right, of which a Westerner is never sure indicates a clear yes or no. Once they were out of sight, Fred turned to me to offer his usual, thoughtful check-in.

"How are you, my sweet?"

I said nothing and collapsed in his arms. We had been married five months, and Fred had become saintly in his patience for my anxieties. His monastic training had served him well; his intuitive, sensitive nature quieted my sharp, spoiled edges. I accepted his directions to get in the shower. One hot water bucket bath later, I was sound asleep and had forgotten we were seven thousand miles from home. I remembered only when I woke up to what sounded like a Jewish shofar on Rosh Hashanah and Fred smiling on the edge of the bed as he watched flamboyant Bollywood music videos blaring from the small color TV. It was 4:45 a.m.; we were in India. I groaned and pulled the covers over my head.

Shared Sabbath-Keeping

Formulating and maintaining an active, balanced Sabbath-keeping schedule with a devoutly religious partner of an intrinsically different faith is like asking a spatially challenged person to move a wide armchair through a narrow doorway. The victim will try to squeeze the furniture through the doorway as is, struggling and cursing, banging the door frame repeatedly. She determines she will surely have to have to saw off half of the chair to make it work, until some clever person points out that the chair can be turned on its side, tilted, and gently guided over the threshold. The chair hasn't changed; its volume and shape have remained the same, but the perspective has shifted. Our armchairs were the religious traditions we brought to the marriage. The depth, or breadth of neither tradition was lost, but we had to figure out the angle by which we could get it in the living room.

This is not as simple as brokering a deal between Protestant denominations. We're talking about solving a puzzle that has, according to most religious circles, diametrically opposing theological tenets. There was no meeting in the

middle with Abraham or the Trinity, no common resurrection, baptism, or scripture. These were the Mutt and Jeff of religious perspectives.

“Worshiping separately would be easier,” I offered, when I had taken the time to consider the consequences of merging traditions that felt as though they were on opposite ends of the God spectrum.

“No,” Fred had become adamant. His intuition told him that choice would be the beginning of the end. We’d stop talking about faith, we’d begin to segregate on other interests, and our life together would be over.

“You sure about this?” I wasn’t.

“Yep. If we split up our sabbath, we are admitting to God, to each other, and to our friends and family that this was all a hoax and that there was no such thing as an interfaith marriage. We might as well rewind the last three years, be single again, and do our own thing.”

I was surprised by his conviction.

“OK, then. We stick together?” I proposed.

“We’re stuck.”

We shook hands, kissed, and agreed to our own interfaith household golden rule: no separate worship.

We brainstormed about a smooth schedule of Christian and Hindu services— equally balanced, equally attended. It was a circus rose solution—a beautiful hybrid of yellow and red flowers, shimmering in our budding garden of interfaith marriage. But we hadn’t anticipated droughts, malnourishment, questions, resentment, and imbalance that bore thorns on the stems of even the most heavenly of blooms.

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