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FROM JAINISM TO ORTHODOXY: AN INDIAN PASSAGE

Pilgrimage attracts intriguing people the world over, and it was on a Serbian pilgrim bus that *Road to Emmaus* staff met Indian Rahda (Elesa) Dalal and her American husband, Symeon Branson. Our weeks of travel and shared meals provided opportunities for long miles of conversation, and Elesa, with great candor and warmth, shared her colorful Indian childhood and her long road to Orthodoxy. The pilgrimage was a break from studies: Elesa is working on a doctorate in Islamic art and architecture, and Symeon is finishing his philosophy dissertation at Notre Dame.

Part I

Indian Life and Customs

RTE: Elesa, please tell us about your childhood in India.

ELESA: Although I was born in the United States, my parents didn't want me to grow up there because they felt that I wouldn't be able to acquire Indian values, so we returned to India when I was six months old. When my father died a year later, my mother, who is a doctor, went back to the U.S. to work, returning to India when I was six. I grew up in an upper middle-class extended Indian family until I was sixteen, when I came to the U.S. for medical school.

I was raised in the town of Ahmedabad, in the state of Gujarat in northern India, surrounded by family. My mother has ten brothers and sisters and each of my uncles and aunts has two or three children. My paternal grandparents died long before I was born, but my maternal grandfather married three times, and his last wife, my "step-grandmother," was alive through my childhood, as was my grandfather. My father had three sisters, one of whom

has a daughter my mother's age, and I grew up with her two children. Our family is very close. We meet often, and whenever there is a problem it only takes a phone call for everyone to gather. It was a good environment to grow up in; you felt needed, you felt loved, not just by your immediate family but by all your relatives, no matter how far away they might be.

RTE: You must have had a large house.

ELESA: Yes. The family bungalow was built by my great-grandfather, and then the "new" section, a courtyard linking the two buildings, was added in the



1920s by my grandfather, who was born in 1901. It is a wonderful house. It has twenty rooms and is made of brick and stone, two stories with a terrace at the top. We have a festival in India every January 14 called *Uttarayan*, the "Kite-Flying Festival," and almost every house has a terrace on the roof from which you fly kites. The house is surrounded by grounds, with a shed on one side, which was originally a shelter for a buffalo and milk cows. Later, it was turned into a garage for my grandfather's Studebaker. Behind the house there is an old well, an outhouse, and stables where he kept his horses and buggies.

RTE: What was a typical day for you growing up?

ELESA: Usually the mornings began with school, which some days was very early – at 7 a.m. – other days, it started at 10 and you had to have lunch before you went. In India, cooking is done very early in the morning, not only because the weather is hot, but also because the Jain monks and nuns come to the house to get food – they are not allowed to cook for themselves. They carry beautiful red earthenware pots like tiffins, separate little dishes stacked one on top of another. They dress all in white and come each morning to the door to ask for whatever has been prepared. They can eat only fresh food, and since we don't want to turn any of them away, we prepare it early in the morning, as do all the families in the area. The monastics not only go to the houses of Jains, they also go to Hindus, who present them with food as well. I'm not sure if they go to the Muslim neighbors as

Muslims are usually not vegetarians, but they may. Jains are both vegetarians and pacifists.

RTE: Wonderful. What other things made an impression on you growing up?

ELESA: Part of the Indian cultural tradition is to show tremendous respect to your elders. Now, your elder can be anyone from a cousin who is six months older than you to your grandfather, who is sixty years older than you. For instance, I would not call my cousin who is six months older than me only by her first name. I would use her first name and add "*ben*," which means "Elder Sister," at the end to indicate that she is older.

SYMEON: Before our wedding, I once forgot to call Elesá's uncle, Subash *masa*, I just called him Subash. I saw everyone take a deep breath and I realized I'd made a mistake. They didn't want to say anything because they knew I'd just forgotten.



Elesa with her mother and grandfather.

ELESA: Yes, it's an insult not to indicate the relationship with someone who is older. When I say the word, "Grandfather" or "Aunt" or "Elder Sister" I'm suggesting respect. The other thing that is very different is that we don't say "Thank you" or "I'm sorry." The words exist but they aren't used in vernacular speech. This doesn't mean that we don't thank or apologize, but the actual words, "Thank you" and "I'm sorry," are so formal, so weighted with depth and meaning that you only use them on very important and solemn occasions.

RTE: Then how do you make those acknowledgements?

ELESA: Through a touch of the hand, through your eyes, or in the tone of your voice. Another thing that is very different is that when you meet someone like your grandparent, who is an elder in years and not just in seniority, or on special days like New Year or the feast of one of the Jain prophets, you ask a blessing. The way we receive blessings is that we bend from the waist and touch their feet. Then they put their hand on our head in blessing. Even now in the United States, if I am to take an exam I bow in front of my mother to receive

her blessing. Although my father died when I was very young, his photograph is in the living room and I also bow in front of him to ask for a blessing.

SYMEON: Before our marriage we both did that.

ELESA: Yes, it was very important to my family that we asked his blessing. We lit a little wick lamp that burns *ghee* before my father's picture to show our respect.

These things are woven into our lives, and Indians do this with their neighbors as well. Our neighbors are considered as aunts and uncles, so if I'm going to do something special I also ask for their blessings. With this constant interaction you feel yourself to be part of a huge family. Also, your neighbor is not only the person next door, he can be someone who lives five blocks away.

In an Indian house the doors are always open. People come in at any time. You don't have to announce yourself, you don't have to call and ask if you can come. Hospitality is always offered; the door is open and you are welcomed with open arms, day or night.

We also don't have a sense of privacy as Americans think of it. I suppose you could go into a separate room, lock yourself in and do whatever you want, but it would be thought unusual. The idea is to not really have a "private" life because it is seen as unnecessary. My parents felt that this kind of community was not possible in the United States.

RTE: And the house was built to accommodate this hospitable lifestyle?

ELESA: Yes. All houses have a front door and a back door. You almost always use the back door. The front door is only for very important occasions – weddings, funerals, or greeting someone you haven't seen for a very long time. It is formal, like a domestic version of the royal doors in an Orthodox church. The back door is used for everything else. When you enter the gate of my grandfather's house, the front door is open before you with a second grill-work door behind it that remains closed except on formal occasions. If you were to enter the house by this door you would find yourself in a common room that has other rooms branching off of it.

The "back door," that we use most of the time, isn't a door at all, it's a large gate that stands open all day long. You just walk in. There is a small courtyard with a little sink where you wash your feet before entering the house. (This is very important. In India you never enter someone's house with your shoes on, no matter what religion you are – Jain, Hindu, Christian, or



Evening prayers with bells and lamps (Svetambara).

Muslim.) In my grandfather's house the courtyard leads immediately into the kitchen, and then off to the right, to the main receiving room where the guests and family meet. To the left is a hall that goes into the courtyard and the family bedrooms. There is a little dining room adjacent to the kitchen that always has food on the table. Anyone you know can walk in at any time.

RTE: Do you also have beggars coming who aren't monks and nuns?

ELESA: Yes. We feed them, we give them drinking water, and if they ask for clothing we give that also.

Animals also play a large part in the background of our daily lives. All large houses have huge gardens that are usually very well kept. Peacocks fly from garden to garden. We have monkeys galore. Ours in the north are small, even scrawny, gray with black faces and they rove in packs with a male at the head and many females with babies. They have long tails and jump from branch to branch in the gardens. In my backyard there is a huge *Neem* tree that has lots of branches where they love to swing. You can feed them fruit and vegetables. They aren't dangerous, but if you annoy them they'll throw something at you – a stone or a half-eaten banana, and they'll also steal.

When my mother was a young girl she once made a long journey on a steam train. There were rest stops along the way where you could wash and at one of these stops she put her clean clothes on the windowsill. A monkey came and grabbed her clothes. He sat in front of the window holding them up and teasing her, until he finally scampered off into the trees with the clothes. She had to call for help.

There are shutters and grilles over the windows of an Indian house, but the grilles are large enough for a monkey to reach his hand through and they will often grab things off of a table that's too near the window.

SYMEON: That's one way that people catch monkeys. The monkey will put his hand through the grill-work to get the food and then hold it tight in his fist. He can't get his fist back through the grille, but he won't let go of the food.

ELESA: We also have wild pigs, and snakes from time to time, including cobras. The cobras don't really bother people, although you don't want to get too close, but people will sometimes leave food for one in the road. The cobra is considered sacred, like the cow. In town we also have donkeys, which are used as beasts of burden, and camels that pull carts. In fact, when we move from one house to another we call a camel cart to come move our

things, like you would hire a U-Haul in the United States. They pull huge loads. Tractors are new to India and most farmers still plow their fields with oxen. Beyond the village districts are cheetahs and lions.

You also see elephants from time to time, usually domesticated, often pulling a cart or just walking from place to place. It's quite usual to see an elephant on the road in the midst of cars and motorcycles. Elephants are also venerated. They stand by the temples and people feed them.

SYMEON: One of the things that most struck me when I went to India is their reverence for life. Cows are sacred, and in a big city it's like driving through downtown Chicago at 50 miles an hour, but with cows wandering on the road. Drivers might go off the side of the road, they might hit another car, but they won't hit the cow.

ELESA: The reverence for cows is a particularly Hindu custom, but everyone abides by it. Jains also consider cows to be holy and they are referred to as *Gaimatha*, that is, "Mother Cow." You are allowed to touch the cow, but you can't hurt it. We don't euthanize animals either. In fact, along the road you sometimes come across animal shelters that care for old stray donkeys, or cows that people don't want because they no longer produce milk. This is ingrained in our culture.

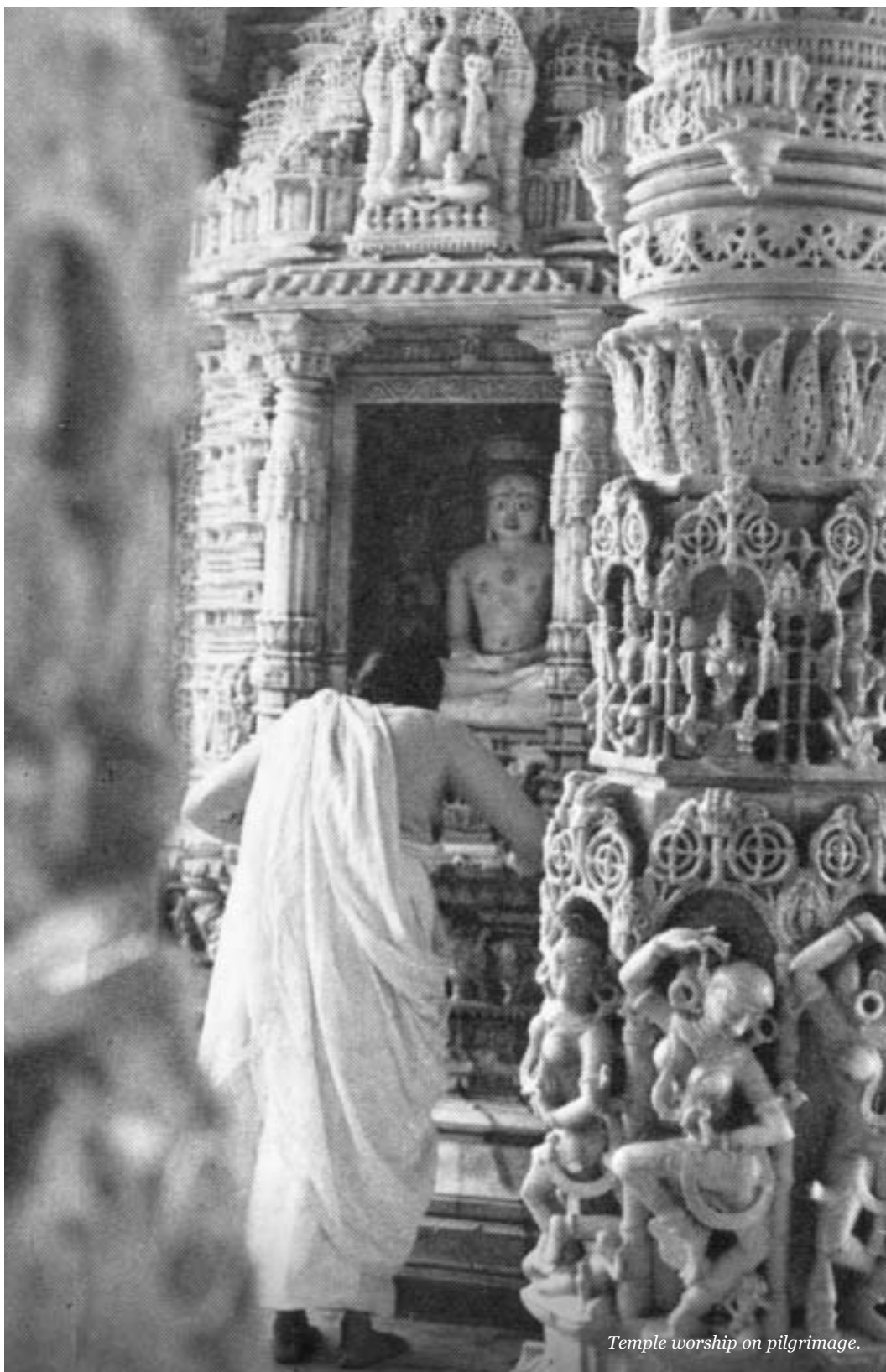
RTE: And why do the Hindus consider cows, elephants, and cobras to be sacred?

ELESA: They are seen as representations, as symbols of various gods in the Hindu pantheon.

Jain Beliefs

RTE: I've read that Jainism is very old; some say that it originated 3,000 years before Christ in the Indus Valley. Can you describe some of the elements of the Jain religion?

ELESA: Jainism is basically a religion of nonviolence. Nonviolence to everything living. Jainism is divided into two major sects. One is the *Shvetambara* Jains, whose monks and nuns wear white clothing, and the other is the



Temple worship on pilgrimage.

Digambara Jains. I've never seen the *Digambara* nuns but I know the monks are not supposed to wear any clothes at all. The names mean "white-clad" and "sky-clad," respectively. Within those two groups are two further divisions: the *Deravasi*, who go to temples and worship idols, and the *Sthanakavasi*, who do not believe in idolatry and refuse to pray to idols.

In Jainism we have twenty-four *Tirthankaras* or *Jinas*. They are the twenty-four prophets of Jainism; human ascetics who became enlightened and since they passed on are honored as guides to the spiritual life. Both Jain sects venerate them. The *Deravasi* worship the prophets, while the *Sthanakavasi* see them only as intercessors, roughly analogous to our Christian saints. We have statues, actually idols, of the prophets in the temples.

RTE: Are the temple statues always one of the twenty-four prophets, or do they sometimes symbolize a force of nature or an aspect of divinity?

ELESA: No, they are usually one of the twenty-four prophets and they are an integral part of our everyday lives. When we meet other Jains we greet them by saying, "*Jai, Jenindra*" which means, "Blessed be Mahavira" (or some other prophet's name). Also, the idols of the prophets all look similar. There are very few distinguishing features; the main means of identification is a small symbol on the base of the statue, similar to our symbols for the four Evangelists.

RTE: Is there a belief in a god or gods?

ELESA: This is very unclear. Jainism doesn't believe in a god as we think of Him.

SYMEON: The theology ends up differing a little from the practice. At the very least there is something that one might think of as a god, but this god didn't create the world. The world is governed by natural laws. As I understand it, there is *something* that you will return to, perhaps more like a consciousness than a person. Your goal is to escape from the cycle of reincarnation and merge into that other realm.

ELESA: Although we never mention that greater consciousness. We only pray to the prophets to work on our path.

RTE: Is this a greater consciousness in the popularized Hindu sense, that we are all drops in the cosmic ocean, or is there a belief in an immortal soul that retains its individuality?

SYMEON: There is a sense of the soul, but whether a person retains an individual consciousness of himself, I'm not sure. It is more a philosophy of absorption into the divine. Our Abrahamic monotheism is unique to Christianity and Judaism. It seems that the actual theology of Jain prayer was originally a little more like our veneration of saints, but in practice it has devolved into worship.

ELESA: Perhaps because Jainism has been influenced by Hindu polytheism.

RTE: Do Jains worship the idols themselves, or do the idols represent the twenty-four prophets, like Catholic statues represent saints? And if so, who are the guides interceding for you?

ELESA: They would intercede to that amorphous higher consciousness. The *Tirthankaras* were earthly guides who became enlightened, and Jains believe that they can also help us become enlightened, so that we can escape from the cycle of reincarnation. Although we understand that they are only guides, some Jains have deified them, so in effect, the guides have become idols or gods. It's all very unclear and this is why there was eventually a schism in Jainism between those who worshiped the guides and those who didn't.

RTE: Growing up, did you ever have an intimation of there being a personal God?

ELESA: I have always believed in a personal God. Although I practiced idolatry, I never quite believed in it. When I was young, I consciously prayed to what I thought of as a personal God and I felt that He heard me. Worshipping the idols just didn't make sense to me.

RTE: I found the following paragraph in a description of Jainism, and wondered if it coincides with what you practiced? It puts a rather different face on our western conception of idolatry, although you've made it clear that Jainism and Hinduism are different:

"Hence we may understand Jain image worship as being of a meditative nature; the Jina is seen merely as an ideal, a certain mode of the soul, a state attainable by all embodied beings. Through personification of that ideal state in stone, the Jain creates a meditative support, as it were, a reminder of his lofty goal and the possibility of its attainment."

ELESA: That sounds right from a scriptural point of view, but actual practice frequently differs.

RTE: Whether Jains worship the *Tirthankaras* or pray to them as intercessors, do they pray for help with specific needs, or just for a general blessing?

ELESA: You can pray for a general blessing, but you can also pray for tangible things. Often fruits and flowers are offered, or special sweets. You take your offering to the temple, present it, and then you sometimes take it back and eat it. As you eat, you take in the blessing.

SYMEON: Also, the prayers are not what we think of as prayers. They aren't directed towards any god or even towards the prophets. They aren't intercessors in that way.

RTE: Can you give us an example of a Jain prayer?

ELESA: The prayer that I grew up saying as a child is a verbal acknowledgment of respect for the prophets, my parents, elders, friends, and teachers. It is as common as the "Our Father" among Christians, but we might say it several times a day: on arising, before sleep, before eating, before work, before taking an exam...

SYMEON: There is a special temple ritual, as well.

ELESA: This ritual is only done when you've purified yourself, not only by bathing, but by saying certain prayers so that you can enter the sanctuary. You also cover your nose and mouth so that you don't breathe on the idols and don't accidentally kill any living organisms by breathing them in. Then you offer fruit and flowers and ritually dress the idols. There are also little idols at home, and you light a small vigil lamp in front of them after you've bathed.

RTE: The prayer you mentioned above seems to have more of an ethical aspect than worship or supplication as we Christians think of prayer. Could Jainism be compared to Confucianism as a kind of ethical philosophy that describes how you live righteously on earth, but isn't oriented towards worship, per se?

ELESA: Yes, the idea of reverence for your ancestors is common to both Confucianism and Jainism, but otherwise, we are much closer to Buddhism. Lord Mahavira is the twenty-fourth Jain prophet, and his coming was pre-

dicted by prophets and lay people before him. Supposedly, he and Buddha were acquaintances, or they were alive at roughly the same time. Some people say they knew each other, while others say that they were only contemporaries – certainly Mahavira did not intend to preach a new religion, he was continuing the teachings of the earlier prophets.

RTE: What was your daily spiritual practice like?

ELESA: I said the prayer I told you about several times daily as a child. You say it before you eat, before you sleep, before you do anything. You also say it when you enter the temple, along with other prayers. My mother and grandmother were well-versed in the temple prayers and they were the ones who chanted. As a child, I usually went to the temple once a week. There isn't a specific holy day each week as in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, although there are many feast days. Traditionally, you are supposed to go to the temple daily, and they are usually open in the morning and the evening.

In my early teens, I began going to the temple every day. One important tradition is that if you want to do *puja* (service to the idol) you always bathe before you go to the temple. In the courtyard, before you enter you take off your shoes, and dip your right hand into a bowl of rose water that sits near the door. You make something like the sign of the cross (although, it's not meant to be a cross in our Christian sense) by touching the top of your forehead, your chin, your right eye and left eye. Then you take the dish of saffron, and after dipping a twig into it, you make a dot on your forehead.

RTE: This is a rather simple question, but is this why we see Indian women with red dots on their foreheads? As children we were told that this meant they were married.

ELESA: Red dots on women's foreheads are traditionally symbols of marriage, but the dot on the forehead can also mean other things, including religious devotion by both men and women.

When you enter the temple you pray first to the main idol, then to the one on the right and finally to the left. There are always three, and they represent the individual *Tirthankaras* or guides to whom the temple is dedicated. You also light incense and cense the idols, then you ring a bell. You are never supposed to turn your back to the idols and there is a little screen near the door so that as you turn to descend the stairs you don't leave irrever-



Svetambara nun.

ently. After you finish, you walk around the outside of the temple several times, and say a final prayer before leaving.

Many people just sit in the temple and meditate. That is what I used to do quite often. Most Jain temples are made of marble and are very calm, quiet, cool places. We don't have temple priests, but there are guardians or caretakers who come to wash the idols and take care of the grounds.

RTE: Would you talk now about the extent of nonviolence in Jainism and how it works practically in the lives of lay-people?

ELESA: Our most obvious practice of nonviolence is our diet. Jains eat no meat, poultry, or fish, nothing that can walk or breathe, including eggs. Cheese, milk, and butter are all allowed. We do not eat root vegetables – carrots, onions, radishes, beets, potatoes – because they grow underground and have bacteria living on them. This is the rule, but not everyone follows it. My grandfather was very strict and when we returned to India when I was six, he didn't learn for years that I had eaten eggs in the United States. He would have been horrified.

Another interesting aspect is that when Jains or Hindus have dogs, the dogs are also vegetarians. They are never given any meat but they are healthy. They eat vegetables, grains, and dairy products.

RTE: On an interpersonal level are Jains pacifists?

ELESA: Yes, unlike most Hindus, Jains are pacifists. You would rarely find a Jain in the Indian army. This may be changing as people become less strict and more westernized, but traditionally Jains are never violent. For example, if someone breaks into your house you are to negotiate with him, to try to get him to see reason. If all else fails, you let him take whatever he wants. He will eventually have to pay for what he has done and it is not up to you to decide the punishment. Nonviolence is absolute. You do not beat your children or reprimand them by raising your hand, nor do you hurt animals. Nonviolence also means that it is your duty to help people as you can.

As a practice, however, it does not always work out like this and I'm sure people are now sometimes restrained if they try to steal something. However, robberies in the part of India that I live in are very uncommon; until recently it wasn't something that people needed to be concerned about, and we usually leave our doors unlocked during the day. In Ahmedabad there is almost no personal violence either, although sadly, this is beginning

to change as well. In New Delhi and in other big cities it has become a problem. Also, no matter what religion you are, a woman is regarded as a grandmother, a mother, or a sister. She is not to be violated in any way, either physically or verbally. Because of the structure of Indian society, you wouldn't encounter instances where your non-violent principles endanger you.

The Jain monks and nuns, called *sadhus* and *sadhvis*, are the ones who most strictly adhere to nonviolence. They wear a mask over their nose and mouth to keep from breathing in insects. They will eat food that is given to them as alms but they will not grow or harvest it themselves. They won't even take a banana off the tree because that would be hurting a living thing, although they can gather fruit that has already fallen. The young monks and nuns who come to beg take food back for the older ones.

RTE: Do Jains fast as well?

ELESA: Yes. Jains are on a lunar calendar and every month there are certain days – the 5th, the 8th, and the 14th – that are fast days. On these days everyone fasts. Fasting is a part of our culture just as in Orthodoxy, although Jain fasting is extremely strict, and begins in early childhood. At the beginning of the new cycle of the Jain calendar, our “New Year,” there are at least five days in a row on which you are supposed to fast. Infants, of course, nurse on demand. When you are about five, you begin to learn to fast by eating and drinking (boiled water) as you need to, but only between sunrise and sunset. When you are a little older you eat only twice a day, and a little older still, you eat only once a day for those five days. By the time you've reached your teens you may fast completely for eight days straight, only drinking boiled water.

RTE: And this is lay-people, not just monks and nuns?

ELESA: Yes, lay-people. Monks and nuns fast for even longer periods of time. This is pretty much what Mahatma Gandhi did with his fasts when people were rioting. He knew that no one would listen, so he decided to deprive himself of food, thereby setting an example of sacrifice to the people whom he knew loved him. And that is what happened every single time he fasted. He sometimes fasted for long periods of time, only taking boiled water and a little juice from time to time when his blood sugar went down.

RTE: In the West they saw his fasting as a political tool. The British felt that it was a weapon he consciously used against them.



Gandhi at Buckingham Palace.

ELESA: That wasn't his rationale at all. From what I've heard, he fasted, not because he knew that people would stop fighting because they wanted him to eat, although he realized that it might have that effect. Rather, it was a prayer. It was his way of asking God to grant peace, and he believed that if he fasted, his prayer would be answered.

RTE: And it worked.

ELESA: Exactly. People stopped fighting and laid down their arms at his feet. I think the British were always upset with Gandhi *because* it worked, and they couldn't fathom how it was possible that this "little brown man in a loincloth," as they called him, could subdue the whole sub-continent.

He did it in Africa, he did it in India, he did it in England, and huge crowds followed him everywhere. He knew that people loved him, but his fasting wasn't emotional blackmail because that wouldn't have been love on his part. He was petitioning God.

Ahimsa and Gandhi

RTE: Did your family know Gandhi?

ELESA: Yes. In the 19th century both sides of my family were merchants. In the 20th century my maternal grandfather was a stockbroker and my paternal grandfather a lawyer. My paternal grandfather was a man of principle. He believed completely in Gandhi's *Ahimsa* movement, and several members of the family were very close to Gandhi. *Ahimsa* means "nonviolence," and comes directly from Jainism. Gandhi was a Hindu but he believed in the Jain ideal of nonviolence; the line between Hinduism and Jainism is sometimes pretty blurred and they often accept each other's values and ideas.

My grandfather, the lawyer, often helped people who were involved in the freedom fighting. His daughter, my father's elder sister, was strongly involved in the non-violent resistance movement and went to prison several times. My grandfather's way of dealing with this was, "Well, she got herself caught and she's in jail, and she'll find herself a way out." She was very clever and she did. She is a philosopher and still tells me stories from her youth. These stories are particularly important in understanding contemporary Hindu-Muslim violence, which has its seed in the 1947 India-Pakistan partition.

For example, in the inner city everyone lives in gated communities, very small communities with a big wall around a number of houses. They have tiny streets – you can't get a car in there – and all of the houses are rather tall and narrow. Each community has its own temple or mosque, depending on whether it's a Jain, Hindu, or Moslem community. During the partitioning, however, when there were Hindu-Muslim riots, my aunt says that many Muslims took in Hindus and Hindus took in Muslims. They protected each other, because they realized that this was a political battle that had nothing to do with religion or the people living next to them. They had been living with these Muslims and Hindus for generations, for centuries. They were neighbors, and loved each other just as they loved their own families.

RTE: Was your family near the Pakistani border during the fighting?

ELESA: Yes. Ahmedabad is in Gujarat, and Gujarat borders Pakistan. The city is about 200 kilometers away from the border. There was more violence in the area of Punjab, because Gujarat's border area is in the middle of the desert and there weren't many people living there. But when people talk about the time of partition, it wasn't really about Muslims against Hindus or Hindus against Muslims, it was an overall political scheme, the British strategy to divide and rule: "Divide the Muslims and Hindus, divide the people, divide the land."

My mother's father also knew Gandhi. When my mother was three, grandfather took her and her six-year-old brother in his horse and buggy to meet Gandhi. My uncle presented him with a hand-made rope of sugarcane reeds; one of Gandhi's most cherished projects was encouraging local sustainable handicrafts. My mother gave him a mango, which he shared with her, or at least took it, blessed it, and gave it back. The feeling that I have when I speak with the older members of my family was that he was a wonderful man. He had an immense love for children; being with children was nourishment for his soul and inspired him to push forward, to save the future for the children of India.

Not only India's independence, but many of the social reforms we've made (for instance in the caste system) were instigated by Gandhi, and people still honor him for it. They don't pray to him as a saint, but they very much revere him. When he was shot, his dying words were, "*Hai Ram*," which means "O Lord!" and they've put up a little black granite pavilion on the shore of the Ganges with "*Hai Ram*" inscribed on it as a memorial. His birthday, October 2,

is a holiday in India, and people go there to pray for him and to give offerings and flowers in thanksgiving for his life. He is very loved.

Politically, the Indians around him were also important. They believed in Gandhi and saw him as their leader, but they were also very learned themselves and had the interests of the country at heart. Some say that towards the end Gandhi was more of a symbol, and others were wielding the political power.

RTE: But that would have been in line with Gandhi's whole approach. His sights were on higher things than personal political power.

ELESA: Right. He didn't really care who ran the government as long as it was a peaceful government and the people were happy. This is why, when the India-Pakistan partition occurred, it broke his heart that his people were being separated. At that point, Jawaharlal Nehru, who had backed the partition, was slated to become the Indian prime minister, but Gandhi asked him to step down and give the post to Muhammed Ali Jinnah. Jinnah didn't accept, however, and Nehru came to power anyway.

RTE: Has the *Ahimsa* movement continued and does Gandhi's ashram in Ahmedabad still exist?

ELESA: The ashram in Ahmedabad has been turned into a museum, but there are other communities that have taken on aspects of Gandhi's work; for example, the inequalities of the Hindu caste system, which has been a horrid thing for many people.

RTE: Do Jains also have castes?

ELESA: Theoretically, no. The caste system is Hindu. Neither Jains nor Muslims have castes, but because the Jains are usually merchants they are relegated to the merchant class in Hinduism. We are artificially placed into their hierarchy. But the people at the very bottom of the Hindu caste system, the *Shudras*, the Untouchables, are the so-called "backward" class. This was a huge problem for Gandhi. He could not believe that such a pious country, with everything we teach about loving our neighbor and doing good deeds, could treat these people so badly.

RTE: In speaking against it, Gandhi was overturning a five thousand-year-old tradition. Was he the first to do this?

ELESA: He was the first to have an effect. There were other people who had voiced concern, who had tried to bring these people into the mainstream of society, but Gandhi not only had influence, he had political weight and he was able to use it very efficiently to shed light on the problem.

RTE: What success have they had?

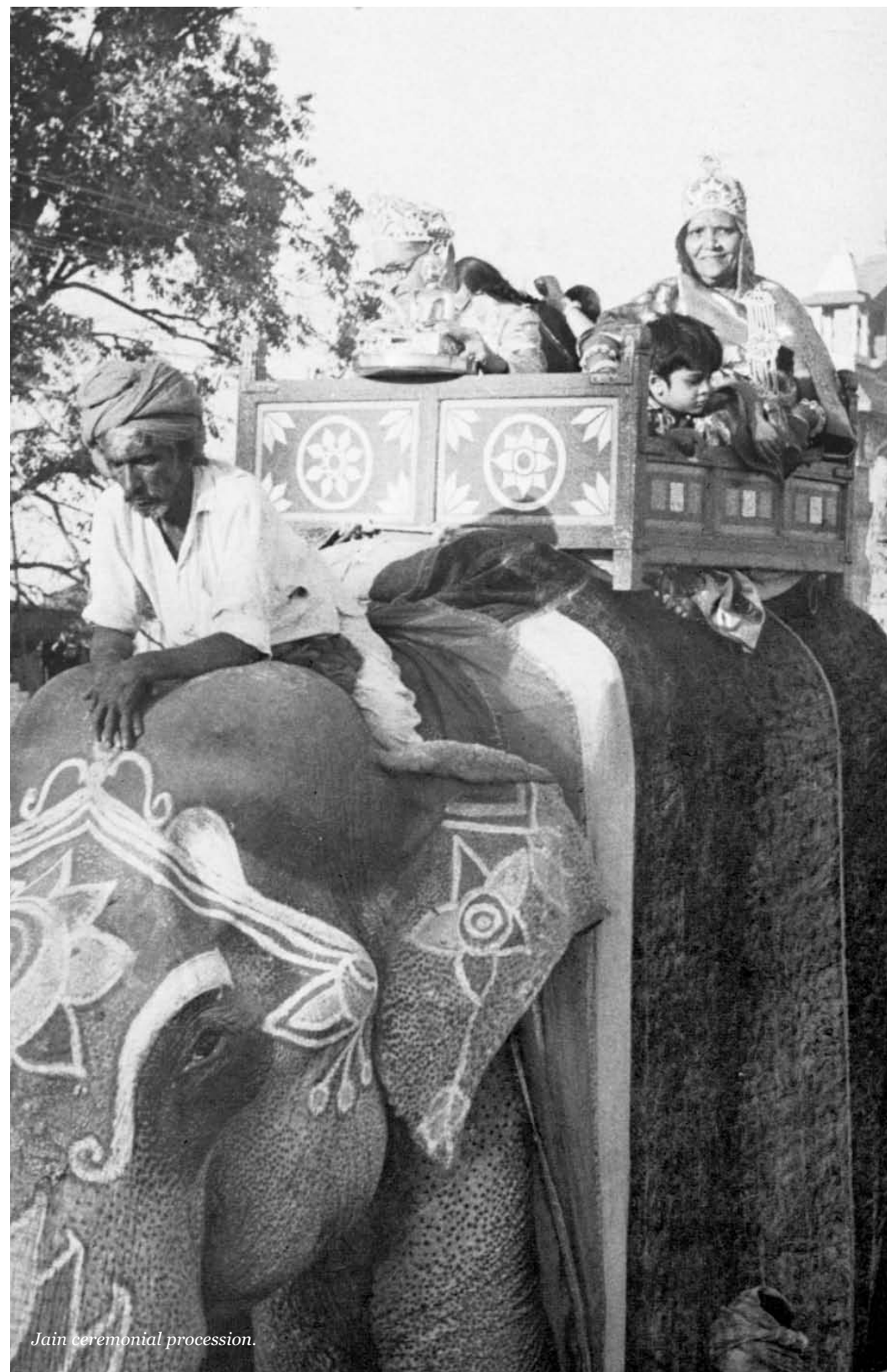
ELESA: Culturally, the caste system is still in place, but it is not as bad as before. The *Shudras* are no longer made to clean our chimneys or our toilets, but you can tell by the last name to what caste someone belongs, and people don't always treat them as well as they would, say, a *Brahmin*. The government has come up with affirmative action for them: they occupy many government posts and are eligible for some of the best education in India. We are trying to bring them fully into society, but it is a long process.

RTE: Are there Hindu traditionalists who want to see the caste system reinstated, or are people willing to let this integration happen slowly?

ELESA: Outward appearances are different from what people think privately. For example, they will be tolerant and outwardly polite and pleasant, but there is absolutely no question of intermarriage.

RTE: I recently met a British man who had worked for several months in an Indian Christian school. He was appalled at the poverty, and rather negative in his views of Indian charity. He felt that "the only ones doing anything" were Christians, and from his conversations with Hindus felt that they "didn't care." How would you respond to this?

ELESA: I take great exception to anyone thinking that only Christians are interested in or actively engaged in helping the poor in India. Charitable acts are performed on a nearly daily basis and on a very personal level by Hindus, Jains, Moslems, and Christians alike. There are also many organizations that specifically attend to the needs of the poor. Much of this is hindered by the general state of the economy, and there is a certain amount of corruption that may siphon off some money allocated for the poor, but Indians are very concerned about the poor and give according to their means. Also, as in Christianity, acts of charity are not meant to be broadcast. Perhaps the people he thought of as uncaring were simply modest.



Jain ceremonial procession.

Modern India and Hindu-Muslim Conflict

ELESA: In speaking of India, the other thing that people often misunderstand is that, before 1947, India didn't exist as a nation; it was 300 separate kingdoms, most of them under the British Crown. British colonialism began with the East India Trading Company in the mid-17th century, which extended its influence by taking over small plots of land on India's coasts. In the 18th century, they began claiming weaker kingdoms as "protectorates," and calling themselves rulers. Finally, in 1857, Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India. The last Mogul emperor was still living at the end of the 19th century and was imprisoned when he refused to submit to British authority.

Independence was declared in 1947, but it wasn't until 1947-1950 that the authorities finally went around to each separate kingdom to ask, "Will you, or will you not join the Indian Republic." Three said, "No, we will not," and the Indian army was sent in to take them by force. We had never been one united country, and some people still feel that they were forced to be a part of India.

RTE: You were divided more by political boundaries of small kingdoms than by ideology or religion.

ELESA: Exactly. And much of the conflict you see today is because of those artificial cultural divisions imposed by the British. As I said, Hindu-Muslim violence in India was first incited by the British as a way to divide and conquer.

RTE: So you feel that today's religious violence is a legacy of colonial policy?

ELESA: Absolutely. One of the reasons I feel so strongly about this is that the term "Hindu" only really came into being after the British took over India. Before that, "Hindu" didn't mean anything. You could be a *Brahmin*, you could be a *Vaishnava*, you could be a *Jain*, but there was no such thing as a "Hindu." We were a group of people who had social identities depending on which religion we followed, but nothing grouped us together in an overarching category. It was only when the British came and applied these terms that people began to believe that there was a political difference, that there was something beyond what they saw as their social identity.

As part of their colonial policy, the British had Muslim rulers fighting Hindu rulers, and Hindus against Muslims. States that had been peaceful

for centuries began having outbreaks of violence. The divisiveness and nationalism encouraged by the British in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was a breeding ground for later conflicts.

RTE: Did most of the Muslims leave India in 1947 when Pakistan was partitioned?

ELESA: Not at all. It was approximately a 70/30 divide. About 70 percent of the Muslims went to Pakistan. Today, less than 20 percent of India's population is Muslim.

RTE: Are you able to live together peaceably in Ahmedabad?

ELESA: Not any more. Hindu nationalism has been on the rise for the past thirty years and we have a fascist Hindu nationalist party that is bent on trying to turn India into a pure Hindu state (which would include the Jains). Over the past twenty years there have been many Hindu-Muslim riots. In 1992, a 400-year-old mosque in Ayodhya was destroyed by Hindus who believed that there had been a temple to the Lord Rama on that site prior to the construction of the mosque. Whether there is any truth to the theory or not is hard to tell. Archeologists haven't come to a conclusion, but Muslim extremists retaliated by destroying Hindu temples, and it has become a vicious circle. Both sides are losing; there are no winners. A few years ago, a train carrying the wives and children of Hindu politicians was set on fire, and everyone on the train died. It was later learned that the Muslim arsonists had been hired by fanatic Hindus to attack the train, so that blame would fall on the Muslims and start a riot.

RTE: What was your experience of living with Muslims and what would you say to Westerners who have not had Muslim neighbors?

ELESA: Interestingly, when I came to the United States I assumed that everyone knew as much as I did about Muslims. This actually wasn't much – I had grown up around them and knew many of their customs, but I found that people in the West generally didn't have even this. The reality of these people is not only what you hear on the news. They are a living community with their own culture and artifacts. I've not had a religious experience of Islam, but I believe that studying the culture in general would be helpful. Art might also be a good starting point; it is something that people can appreciate without going deeply into Islamic philosophy or religion.

Growing up, we were close to our Muslim neighbors, but there was also a distinction. In India you are always conscious of your social identity; that you are a Jain, and they are Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu. You can have dinner together or celebrate each other's festivals – not as a religious practice, but socially – but you are always conscious of the differences. In India we have public holidays when everything is closed for each religion's major festivals: Hindu, Jain, Muslim, and Christian. Socially, it's a very healthy practice.

PART II

From Jainism to Orthodoxy

RTE: Elesá, were there specific things in your Jain upbringing that laid a foundation for becoming Orthodox?

ELESA: Although I'm unclear on the details of Jainism's formal theology about who or what their higher consciousness is, I've always believed in a personal God and was opposed to idolatry.

RTE: Was that part of your upbringing or was it a personal belief?

ELESA: It was a personal belief. My family very much practices idolatry. When I was preparing to become Orthodox, I found many parallels between Orthodoxy and Jainism: forgiveness, tolerance, prayer, fasting, love for all. These are some fundamental things that I find universal in almost every religion, and it was these fundamental ideas that helped me to accept Christianity. The theological issues were a little more difficult: the Trinity, for example. There are things that I still struggle with, but I'm trying to learn and absorb more as I go along. Christianity is always going to be a challenge; much of it does not come naturally and it is not part of my native culture.

SYMEON: One interesting outward similarity between Orthodoxy and Jainism is in the depiction of our Orthodox icons and the idols of the Jain *Tirthankaras*. While many Hindu idols and Buddhist "temple guardians" are grotesque, with fierce features, the Jain representations of their prophets are very much in the style of our depictions of saints: ascetic, otherworldly, peace-

Ceremony of initiation into monkhood.

ful, and dispassionate. The way we portray the “gates of the senses” in Orthodox iconography – small ears, noses, lips, but then large eyes to symbolize that they are gazing into the spiritual world is similar to the Jain practice of enlarging the eyes and elongating the ears to symbolize enlightenment.

ELESA: I also find the role and conduct of Jain monks and nuns to be very similar to Orthodox monastics. They are our models and guides. You go to Jain monasteries in India to see what Jainism is about, to reflect on your own life. On this pilgrimage to Serbian monasteries, I’ve found that this is very important in Orthodoxy too; it’s in monasteries that you see a deeper Orthodoxy.

RTE: Did you have any contact with the Jain monastics, besides those that came for food?

ELESA: Yes, of course. We have a tradition that on days like your birthday, or if you need a special blessing, you go to where the monks and nuns reside and they will bless you by putting *vaskep*, a yellow powder that looks like wheat, on your head. They did this for me many times. They are very, very kind and when you talk to them (you aren’t allowed to touch them) they are extremely humble. They never said anything to me that was particularly personal, but I was always touched by their humility and their peaceful countenances. I liked being around them very much.

RTE: Are the monastics also divided into groups of idolaters and non-idolaters?

ELESA: Yes, the one group will not engage in idolatry at all, nor do they wear clothes.

SYMEON: The ideal here is poverty, of not owning a lot of possessions, and this group considers owning clothes to be too much of a luxury.

ELESA: The idea behind this is that to really humble yourself you should not be ashamed of your body. They see shame as self-consciousness, a kind of vanity.

SYMEON: Also, in Indian culture the clothed monastics always wear white, while in ours, they wear black. But the symbolism is the same, because in Jainism, white is a symbol of mourning. Everyone wears white to funerals and widows wear white for an entire year.

RTE: Do Jains pray for the dead?

ELESA: Yes, they do. On the anniversary of my father’s death every year we have what we call *aarti* where a prayer is said for him in the temple and then a bell is rung a certain number of times. This is done annually for everyone in our family who has died. Our family is associated with a particular temple near our home where the prayer is always sung.

RTE: Is there any form of confession?

ELESA: We don’t practice confession in the Christian sense; however, if there are things that trouble us, secular or religious, some Jains will go to the monastics about it.

In Jainism there is also a day when we ask forgiveness of everyone, like our Orthodox Forgiveness Sunday. You go to everyone you know, even casually, whether he is a Jain, Hindu, Muslim or Christian, and you bow to him and say, “If I have ever offended you knowingly or unknowingly, please forgive me.”

Another outward similarity I’ve noticed between Jainism and Orthodoxy is the Serbian practice of having family saints, called *Slavas*. For the Serbs, these aren’t saints who are picked anew in each generation, they are saints who were given as protectors to a particular group or tribe the day they were baptized centuries ago. Serbs pray for all of their deceased relatives back to that point of that original baptism. In a similar way, Jain families have a *kuldevi*, usually a goddess that the family considers to be their patron. What I mean by a goddess here is very different from what we would think of as a female equivalent of God. We have many minor prophets and some of them were women; they were human beings who became enlightened, their births were foretold by prophets.

On a Jain family feast day, like a Serbian *slava*, food is prepared for weeks in advance, and the doors are thrown open to anyone who wants to come. The small lanes of the gated communities are covered with awnings or branches to provide shade and lined with carpeted platforms for people to sit on. Servers come by giving out food until you burst. It is not only for family or friends, but for anyone who comes off the street.

RTE: Wonderful. Speaking of praying to the *kuldevi*, did the Christian veneration of the Mother of God pose any difficulties for you?

ELESA: No, the idea of venerating a holy mother has an analogy in Jainism. We honor the mother of Mahavira, the 24th prophet, who had a vision that she was to conceive a child and that he would be the enlightened one to guide his people. Although Mahavira was not God, the idea of venerating Mary, the Mother of God, was easy for me to accept, because I already believed in a personal God. Most of the Ten Commandments were also very familiar, because they are implicit in Jainism. Also, some of the Gospel parables are similar to stories of Jain saints and their ethical teachings. Much of Christian belief already seemed familiar to me.

RTE: Mother Theresa felt that the West was spiritually impoverished. After growing up in India, do you feel this also?

ELESA: Definitely. I feel this about America in particular. Unfortunately, as we Indians have become westernized, many of our traditions are also being corrupted by individualism and acquisitiveness. In attitudes and actions people are beginning to break away from what they followed as social norms for centuries.

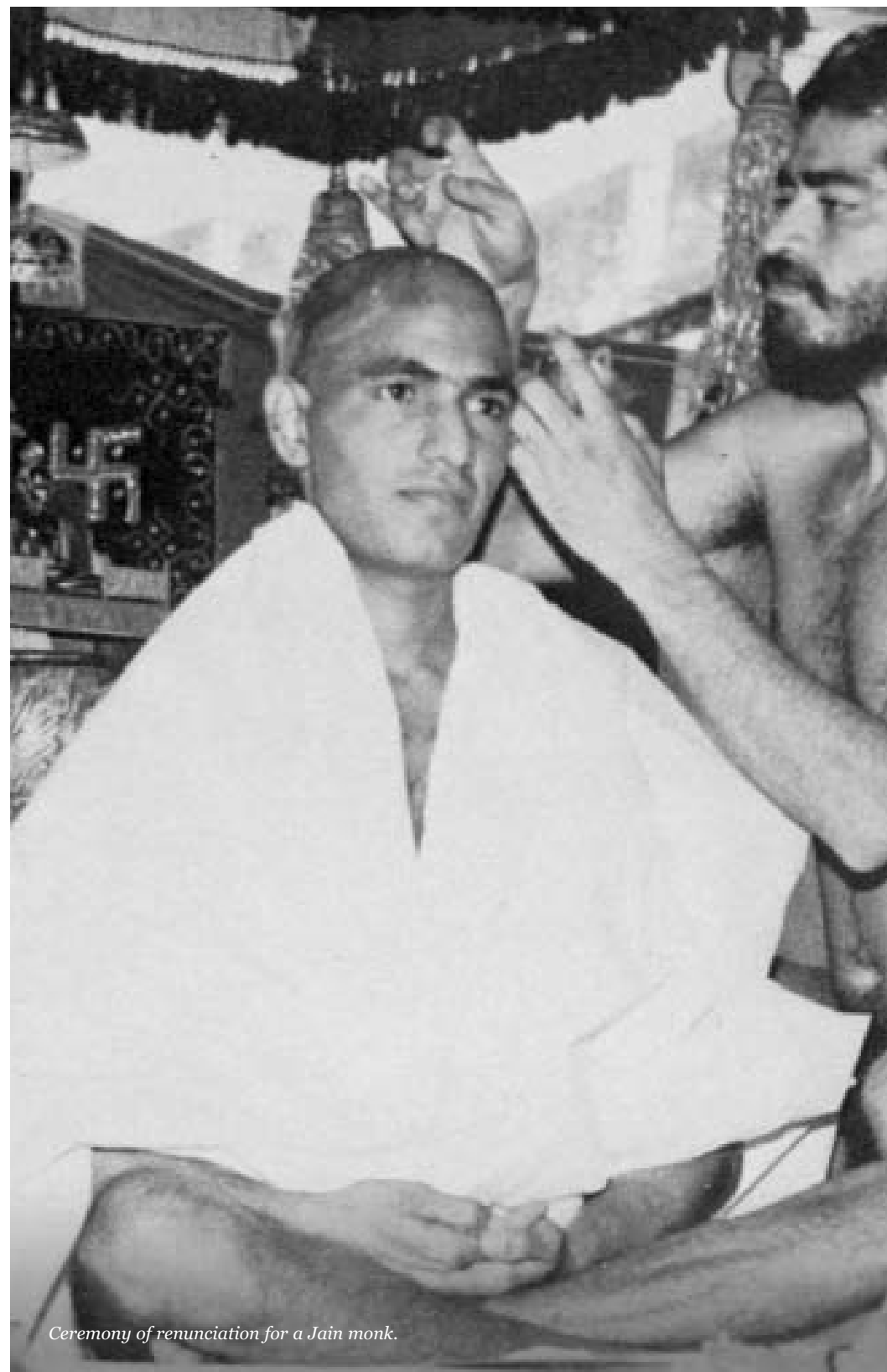
RTE: Can you give an example?

ELESA: Yes, for instance, in marriage customs. The dowry used to be clothes and jewelry that would be handed down for generations, and sometimes perhaps money, but now more substantial things are expected, cars or other huge gifts. Some people see it as an opportunity to acquire wealth. Some Hindu brides who didn't meet the in-laws' expectations have come under tremendous pressure, and a few have even been burned to death. This would not have happened in the past.

RTE: So the dowry goes to the bride's in-laws?

ELESA: Today, yes. You would think that it would be something for the bride to use in her married life, but it actually goes to the groom's family. The mother-in-law feels completely justified in taking it, because her own dowry went to her mother-in-law. Often the groom's parents will write out a list and say, "This is what we want," and if the bride's parents aren't wealthy enough to provide it, the marriage won't take place.

RTE: It must be difficult for Indian parents to see their son marry an American or European woman who has no intention of giving a dowry.



Ceremony of renunciation for a Jain monk.

ELESA: Yes, it is frowned upon to marry a foreigner, or someone from another caste. My mother's family is more liberal, but on my father's side you are even expected to marry a person from the same Jain sect.

SYMEON: Although western values are creeping in, I was amazed at how religion still completely pervades the Indian culture. In the United States we believe that we are quite religious and have the freedom to express it, but this is much more true in India. Although the religions are intensely varied, everyone freely expresses their belief when and where they choose. Any store you walk into will have a statue of the family deity or, if Muslim, some verses from the Koran. Along the street I came to a small building that I thought was a fast-food kiosk. Instead, it turned out to be a little temple where passers-by go in to pay homage to the idol. Religion is a very visible part of their lives.

In order to get along in our pluralistic western societies, we have privatized our religion and it is becoming socially unacceptable to say anything about it in public. If you mention your religion, people often feel that you are proselytizing, even in academic circles. In my experience, we aren't pluralistic, we are outwardly almost atheistic, because we simply aren't allowed to talk about it.

ELESA: I also have to say that I've never come across an atheist in India. I'm sure there are some, but I haven't met one.

Islamic Studies, Christian Belief

RTE: Elesha, you said earlier that you went to America to study medicine. How did that change to Islamic art?

ELESA: There are numerous doctors in my family. Every second person is a doctor and almost every specialty was covered except neurology. I thought that perhaps this was my niche, so I began my studies and did one of my bachelor's degrees in neurophysiology.

At the same time, as part of my core education, I had to take a humanities course in art history. My course was on Western art from 1300 to the present, and in one sense it was my first real exposure to Christianity. I had never read the Bible before and I was fascinated with the art, the history, and the whole idea that there was a culture out there about which I knew

very little. So, I took a second art history course, then a third, and finally a course in Islamic art. I'd grown up around Muslims; Islamic culture was familiar to me, and I immediately found that I had a connection with it that went beyond the beauty of Islamic art – the whole idea of these Muslim communities working together to erect mosques, medresi, and caravanserais – places for people to pray, to rest, to eat was fascinating to me. I also found it very interesting that Islamic spirituality is expressed through architecture without figural imagery. As you know, Christian art (as with Hindu and Jain) is almost completely figural: paintings, frescoes, icons, statues.

As I was exploring art history, I was also taking pre-medical courses and found it incredibly competitive; there was a lot of back-stabbing and unhealthy reasons why people wanted to get into medical school. I decided that I didn't want my life to be filled with that kind of anxiety, that I'd rather do something different, so I left pre-med to study Islamic art at a graduate level.

RTE: How does that work with being Orthodox?

ELESA: People have asked me before how I reconcile the two. I don't. The one thing doesn't have anything to do with the other – one is my religion and the other is a course of study. I study Islamic theology as part of art, but it is not my belief. Orthodoxy has immersed me in Christian culture and belief; I haven't experienced Islamic spirituality. However, I am very interested in the confluence of cultures, such as the Christian and Islamic cultures, and I realize that many Islamic traditions came from Byzantium, from what already existed in the Christian world. That was their template.

RTE: Weren't many of the famous Islamic structures built by Byzantine Christian artisans?

ELESA: Absolutely. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is the foremost example. The mosaics there are said to have been created by Byzantine mosaicists who were sent by the Byzantine emperor at the request of the caliph. Also, most of the texts on Islamic art history are by western authors, and some are very good, but they lack the personal experience of growing up in the culture. I'm grateful that I had Muslim neighbors and have a living sense of their community life.

RTE: You've grown up close to, but outside of, both Christianity and Islam, which gives you a unique vantage.



Vimala Temple, Mt. Abu, Rajasthan, India.

ELESA: Yes, I began studying Islamic art before I became Orthodox, so I find myself trying to understand both sides when it comes to history, conflict, and art. I really try to stick to the Orthodox ideals of tolerance, love, and forgiveness. Atrocities have been committed on both sides, but all you can do is pray and forgive. We can't see the acts of a minority of Muslims as a reflection of the culture as a whole. The community at large is not like that, and Muslims are caught in a bind of having to defend their faith, which the whole world seems to be attacking.

As to how I express myself culturally, I cannot be anything other than Indian, and that does cause conflict. When I am in the United States, I try very hard to express my Indian side. When I am in India, I do the opposite. I feel that I don't completely belong to either culture. The same goes for Islam. I am protective of Islam, but I'm also protective of Orthodoxy, which is my faith. When I hear someone speaking negatively about Orthodoxy or in ignorance about Islam, I try to correct it as best I can; not to impose my beliefs, but to offer an explanation.

Orthodoxy and Marriage

RTE: Do you remember your first encounter with Christianity?

ELESA: Yes, I went to a Catholic school in Ahmedabad, and although we weren't required to attend Catholic religion classes, we all said the "Our Father" together each morning and evening. We didn't mind this, because there is always a morning and evening prayer in Indian schools, and we were used to praying in common with other students. There were a few Catholics there, but most of us were Hindus, Muslims, or Jains. We weren't pressured about Christianity, and if in school we incidentally learned anything about a religion that wasn't ours we just ignored it. In India you don't learn religion in school. You learn it at home, at the temple, and from the monks and nuns.

RTE: How did you become Orthodox?

ELESA: My first brush with Orthodoxy, although I wasn't yet conscious of it as a religion, was when I was ten years old. At our home in Ahmedabad, I found some Reader's Digest condensed books that my father had bought when he was alive. He had a huge library and as I was a very fast reader, I read everything that came my way. One day I came across a biography of the lives of



Elesa Dalal and Symeon Branson.

Tsar Nicholas and Tsaritsa Alexandra of Russia. The story stuck with me. At the time I felt, “There’s something special here.” I had no idea that it had anything to do with Orthodoxy, I just thought of them as the rulers of Russia and marveled over their lives. Later, I lost the book at one of my aunt’s houses and mourned it for a long time. It was more than losing a book; it was losing a piece of myself. I had an inexplicable connection with them.

I was introduced to Orthodox Christianity through Symeon. We met when I was administrating an archeological dig for the University of Maryland at Caesarea Maritima in Israel. Caesarea Maritima is Herod’s city, and we were excavating the temple to Augustus and Roma. Symeon had come as a volunteer from the University of Oklahoma and we ended up going to a lot of churches together, the Holy Sepulchre and others that I had studied as part of Byzantine history. They were interesting to me because of their history, but I didn’t have a conscious spiritual connection with Christianity.

Once we became more involved, I understood that Symeon could not be with someone who was not Orthodox. I decided that before I made up my mind that this relationship couldn’t go anywhere, I would at least see what Orthodoxy was about. I didn’t want to reject it without making an educated decision. This wasn’t something that Symeon asked me to do; I just picked

up the Washington, D.C., Yellow Pages and found St. John the Baptist Russian Orthodox Church.

SYMEON: I was hoping, of course, that she would become interested, but I didn’t push it. I had already talked to my priest, and he had basically said, “Orthodox Christians don’t try to force their religion on others. Pray about it, but don’t push her into anything. If she converts to Christianity, it has to be from her heart, not as a condition for your relationship.” Although I didn’t want to push, I’m afraid that I did end up talking to her quite a bit about Orthodoxy. I tend to do that..

ELESA: (*Laughing.*) Non-stop. Even now, anything we talk about comes back to Orthodoxy.

So, I e-mailed Fr. Victor Potapov, the priest, and said, “I’m not a Christian, but I’m interested in learning. What do you suggest?” He said, “Come to liturgy.” The next weekend I met Fr. George Johnson, the church’s English-speaking priest, who said that he would be interested in catechizing me on Sundays after liturgy.

RTE: Were you already thinking of becoming a catechumen?

ELESA: No, I wasn’t. Fr. George was wonderful, though. He was very interested in what aspects of my background would work well with Orthodoxy and it actually went rather quickly. For the first month and a half I just went to Vespers and Liturgy, learning about the services. After coffee on Sunday we would sit and talk for an hour or two about Orthodoxy, and then I would drive home and call Symeon, who was now at Notre Dame, and say, “This is what I learned today.” I was excited about it, and it felt good, because I was learning on my own.

At the time I told Symeon, “If I do this, it will be of my own volition. I don’t want to ever feel that you forced me into it. If our relationship is to continue, I don’t want to someday come and say, “Look, I did this for you....” That would be totally unfair.

After those first weeks, Fr. George suggested that I become a catechumen. He said, “You know, becoming a catechumen doesn’t mean that you are Christian, but it does mean that you are being prayed for in the Church.” So, I became a catechumen, but I didn’t tell Symeon until later.

While this was going on, a problem arose in my relationship with my mother. My mother could not accept that I would even think of converting.

Because Symeon was a Christian and was white, she also could not believe that I would marry him. I first visited St. John's in October, and in January the problem really surfaced. Every step was harder, but Fr. George encouraged me to keep going rather than to stop and take a break. He felt that this was a temptation in preparation for baptism, and that no matter when I came to this point, the temptation would be the same or even stronger. I kept on, because I wanted to keep learning. Of course, it was also bringing me closer to Symeon, and I understood that if I didn't participate in Christianity in one form or another, there would be a huge chunk of his life that I wouldn't have access to.

RTE: Had anything connected for you at this point between your early fascination with Nicholas and Alexandra's story and your catechesis?

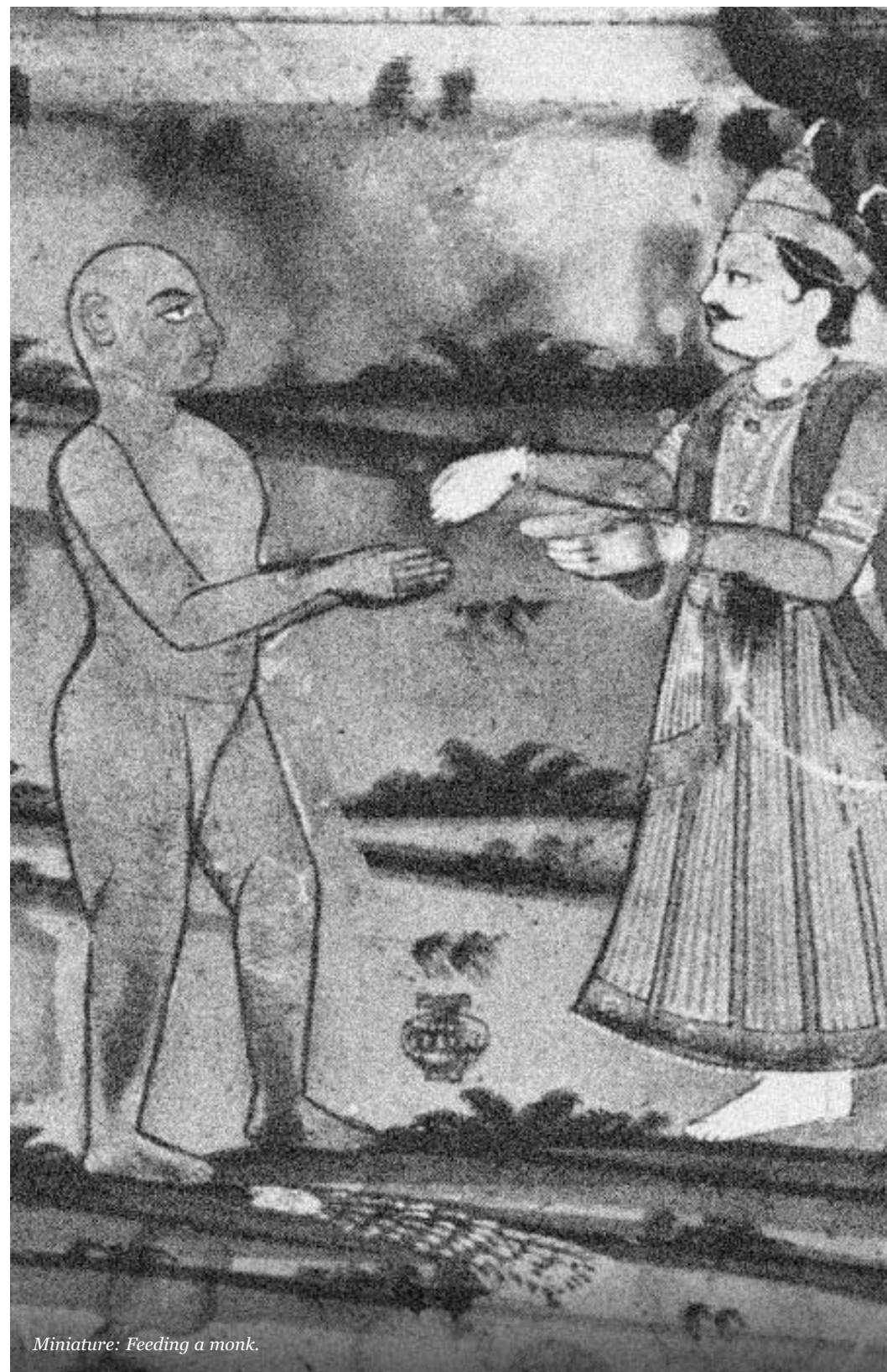
ELESA: I did think it interesting that I'd ended up in a Russian Orthodox Church with Russian services. Only later did I learn about the concept of passion-bearers and the Tsar being killed as the anointed head of the country, the physical symbol of Russia's Orthodox church and people. I began to read about the family again, and one of the stories that really struck me was when Tsar Nicholas tried on a newly designed soldier's uniform and hiked all day with a full pack to see if the uniform was comfortable enough to march in before it was issued to the troops. I thought, "If that wasn't a loving tsar, I don't know what is."

There wasn't a certain moment when I knew it was time to be baptized. There wasn't a point at which I felt I was done; baptism was just the next step. Becoming Orthodox is a process. I have a wonderful priest now in Minneapolis and a very warm community, and this is important to me. If I hadn't found that warmth and welcome at St. John's when I first approached the Church, I would have turned my back on Orthodoxy altogether.

Symeon and I had already been engaged for a month before I was baptized. Frankly, my baptism was the worst day of my life. I put my mother through so much pain that day. She was aware I was planning to be baptized, but that morning we had a huge fight.

RTE: In a Jain household that must have been particularly painful.

ELESA: To have her be upset with me to that degree was heart-wrenching. I was so torn that there were a couple of times that morning that Symeon said, "You know, maybe you should just wait," but I said, "No. This is some-



Miniature: Feeding a monk.

thing I have to do and I don't want to ever go through this pain again." I knew if I put it off, the next time would be even harder. It ripped my mother and me apart though, and although this was March, our relationship didn't begin to heal until the end of August. For her, it was a real blow. Not only was I leaving the faith I was brought up in, I was leaving behind my social identity as a Jain, I was marrying someone not of my own culture, and I was her only child. I understood this, and I wanted her to feel that I loved her deeply in spite of these decisions.

To understand the enormity of this you first have to understand that my mother is incredibly important to me – there is no way I can describe how important she is. This is something that Symeon also had to come to understand, that I could not be with anyone who couldn't share my mother's importance to me and who didn't want to participate in the way I wanted to take care of her. Without the support I got from Symeon in this, I would have just broken down.

RTE: Symeon, how did you heal your relationship with your mother-in-law?

SYMEON: Throughout the whole ordeal she was always perfectly polite and kind to me. It was obvious that it was devastating, but she never took her sorrow out on me. At some point though, it all turned around and she decided that this was going to happen and that she would have to live with it. We have a fantastic relationship now. I think of her as I do my own mother. And much to our surprise, she did come to the wedding. Many of the family in India couldn't come because it was right after September 11th and they couldn't get visas, but Elesha's family members in the United States came from all over.

ELESA: It has been a tremendous sacrifice on her part, and Symeon and I should never forget that. I very much want to be with her, to look after her. She will be with us for the rest of her life.

SYMEON: It will be good to be together as a family. Children and grandparents have a unique relationship.

ELESA: My mother is my hero. She has been through many tragedies; losing her own mother at the age of three, losing my father when I was eighteen months old, a very difficult second marriage, and a long fight with cancer, but through all of that she has never had a bad word for anyone. She is full of self-sacrifice, and she's the most wonderful person I know.

Living Orthodoxy

RTE: Elesha, how has your inner life changed since you became Orthodox?

ELESA: One very large difference was that as a Jain there were no scriptures easily available to me. Jain scriptures are in Sanskrit, and although I read Sanskrit, they are very difficult and one would have to go to the nuns and monks to understand them properly.

RTE: Do Jains regard these scriptures as revealed, or is it more of a commentary on the philosophy of Jainism?

ELESA: It is usually philosophy and commentary on the lives of the *Tirthankaras*, the guides: what they taught, what they said we need to do to obtain enlightenment. The precepts I was talking about earlier – loving your neighbor, forgiveness, patience – all of that became more concrete to me when I converted to Orthodoxy, because I was able to read examples from the Gospels, from the lives of saints. I like knowing what the ideal is and how far I have to go to come up to it. It has been refreshing to have that clear-cut in Christianity.

RTE: In the West, much criticism is leveled at Christianity for being “too structured, too rigid, too moralistic, ...” but this is something you value.

ELESA: My affinity towards things like the Ten Commandments is probably because I'm a person who loves structure. I suspect that in Jainism there is a deeper structure that I wasn't aware of as a child nor asked to follow, because structure is implicit in Indian culture.

While Jains don't have a caste system, we do have ritual: for example, to bathe and fast before you go to the temple to worship. This is religious structure; people tell you what to do, and you follow it. Had I been given something to read, something more theologically concrete, Jainism would probably have had a greater impact on me than it did, but this clarity is what I appreciate in Orthodoxy.

RTE: Obviously, it is important for you not to feel psychologically divided. How have you been able to fit your Christianity into your cultural identity as an Indian?

ELESA: Not very well. In that sense, I'm like many Americans in that I keep my religion private from my life at large. The few Indian friends I have in my department at the university are the only ones with whom I can interact as a Christian Indian. I cannot do this with my family and friends in India nor with other Indians in the United States. My religion is more my American part; culturally, I'm a Jain.

RTE: That sense of cultural division is common to many Orthodox who grew up in other religions. When I asked Fr. Daniel Byantoro from Indonesia how he dealt with his Christianity within his extended Muslim family he said, "We don't. We simply don't talk about it." How about your inner identification as a Christian?

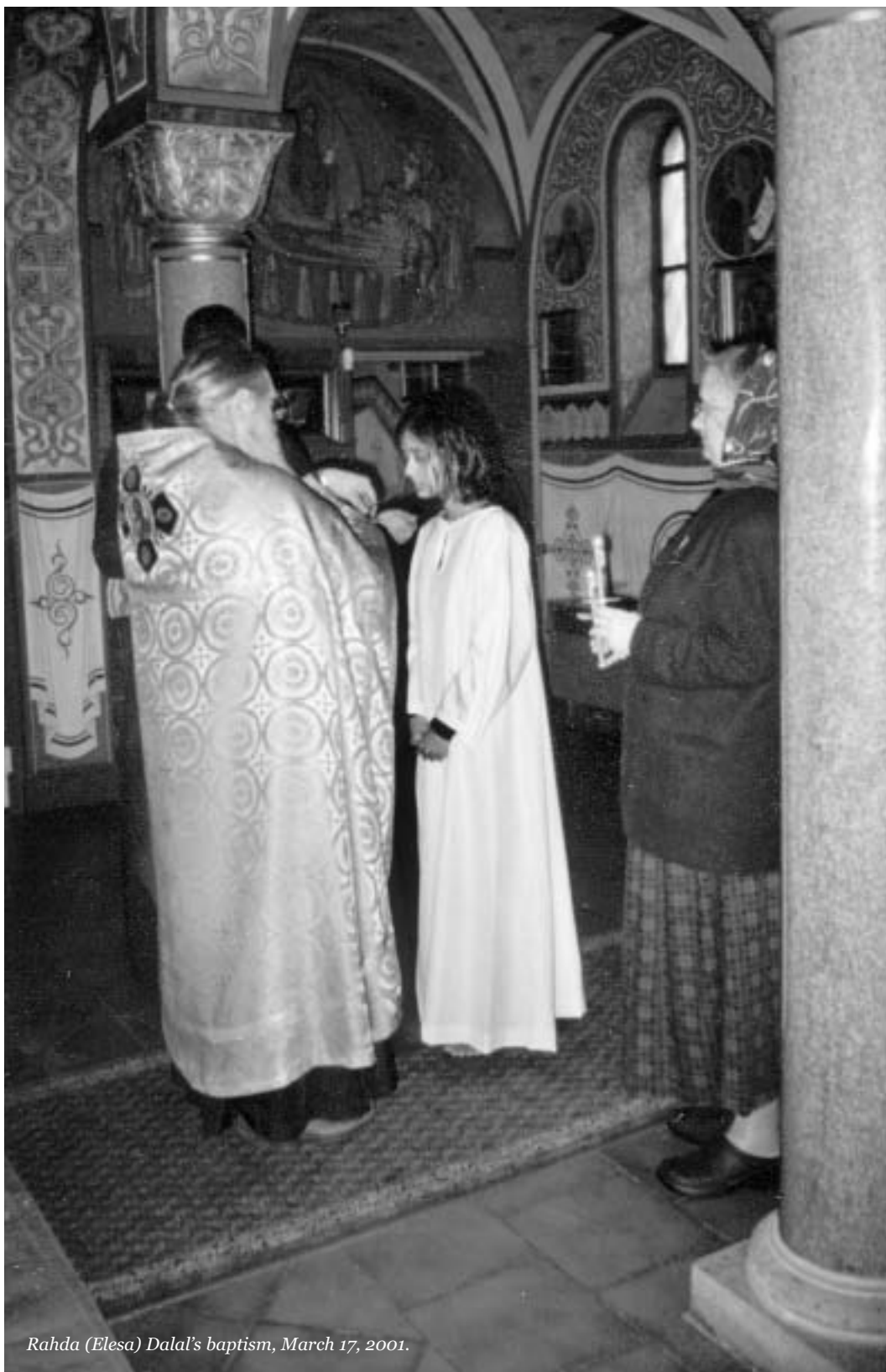
ELESA: Because I've always believed in a personal god, that aspect of Christianity wasn't difficult to accept. On the other hand, the idea of the Trinity has been and continues to be difficult. I'm not even certain of what my problem is – I can't put a finger on it. Symeon and the priests I know have explained it in many ways, but it hasn't quite come home yet. It is one of the things I end up discussing a lot.

RTE: Not many of us do understand the Holy Trinity deeply. I think it comes with time, and maybe even only in the next world.

ELESA: Perhaps there is something for me in that. Sometimes, as I'm reading, I'll think, "What if Jesus Christ is not God, what if He's just a man and I'm on the wrong path?" Fr. George would say this is just a temptation, but I have an absolute certainty that I am going to be judged, and I occasionally have thoughts like, "What if I'm really supposed to be Buddhist?"

RTE: What do you do then?

ELESA: I go to the Gospel to read something that will reaffirm what I believe. If I'm not in a place where I can read, I say to myself, "OK, I need to think this through," and I focus on the things about Christianity that I really like. "If my conscience is my guide, and it tells me that these are the things I should be doing and this is what Christianity teaches, then I can wholeheartedly follow it even if I don't have answers to all the eternal questions." I realize that we cannot fully understand God.



Rahda (Elesa) Dalal's baptism, March 17, 2001.

RTE: Also, you are from a vastly different culture and have only been Christian for three years. After you've prayed and received the sacraments for a decade, it will look different.

ELESA: I hope so. Sometimes I just look up and say, "Help me!" I try hard to be as honest as I can about my beliefs and doubts. If I'm not honest, the only person I'm hurting is myself.

RTE: Yes. Do you think that Orthodoxy would appeal generally to the Indian mind and culture? Except for the Thomas Christians in southern India, most Indian Christian converts have been either Catholic or Protestant.

ELESA: It seems to me that Orthodoxy has a stricter "code," if you will, and more ritual and tradition. I have an idea that you don't so much convert to Orthodoxy as that Orthodoxy converts to you. That's an ambiguous statement, but what I mean is that Orthodoxy adapts to whichever culture it finds itself in, and this would be very acceptable to Indians. Having been under colonial rule for so long, which included forms of Christianity that tried to convert us culturally, to hold to our "Indianness" is important for us. Orthodoxy allows this.

SYMEON: Orthodoxy doesn't do violence to the cultures it goes into. It tries to take the best of that culture and transfigure it. As I've learned about Indian culture, I've found that a lot of it makes sense to me in a way that it wouldn't have if I hadn't been Orthodox. For example, the way Indians receive blessings from their elders is much the same way that we receive blessings from priests, or as parents in the Bible blessed their children by putting their hands on their heads. Indians also have a hierarchy, within the family and the community. If Protestantism has gone over well with Indians, it isn't because they feel a cultural affinity; it lacks the outward expressions of reverence that are part of the culture.

RTE: Elesia, is there anything you would like to say to Christians at large?

ELESA: One thing I would urge Christians to do is to take the idea of forgiveness and tolerance to heart and not dismiss people of other religions because they are not followers of Christ. Make an attempt to understand them. When you understand them you will realize where the similarities are, and you will be able to accept the culture and the people. This is a very

Christian thing to do, and is the only way people of other religions will ever be able to hear about Him.

Although Indians, Chinese and Africans are generally not Christian, I believe that most of them have had some experience of Christ, some real contact with God, and that it is unjust on our part to dismiss that. We don't know how God is reaching them. I am not saying this to be politically correct, but one shouldn't try to make Orthodox truth dependent on another religion being bad. Orthodoxy can stand on its own.

SYMEON: Some of the Church Fathers speak of the Sibylene oracles who foretold Christ's coming, and say that some of their revelation was authentic. Also, an Alaskan native I met said that their shaman had prophesied that one day the Healer would come into the world. Later, they told the people that the Healer had come because they had seen His star. They were just waiting for someone to come and tell them about Him.

There is a temptation for many people to think that any non-Christian religion is unconditionally bad. It seems obvious that it doesn't have to be this black and white. We believe that Orthodoxy is the truth and that to whatever extent something deviates from Orthodoxy it is less full, but we don't have to say that it is utterly worthless. No one who has grown up in another faith and has experienced the good elements of it could take that seriously.

ELESA: If my Indian values are the same values that Christians follow, and that similarity was what attracted me to Christianity, how can Jainism be completely wrong?

SYMEON: I don't think the Holy Fathers would have said so. St. Paul began his preaching to the Athenians by pointing to their temple to the Unknown God and saying, "I can see that you are very religious people." Then he talked about the fulfillment of that idea. He began with something positive, something they could understand, and so should we. ✦