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Conversion in Mission History

Jacob Kavunkal, SVD

Abstract: We are so used to speak of ‘conversion’ with an ease that gives the impression that the idea of conversion that we have today was always true in the history of the Church. We normally use conversion to indicate that a person has left one religion, or indeed none, for an exclusive attachment to Jesus Christ in the Church. We also speak of conversion in a person who up till a certain period had been a merely nominal adherent of faith, but had then awoken to its significance and importance with enthusiasm and commitment. Ordinarily it is in the former sense that Missiological writings speak of conversion and that is the topic of discussion in this paper. We want to examine the chequered history which the idea of conversion went through so that our mission today does not suffer from the weight of any particular interpretation gathered from a specific period.

Keywords: Missiology, Proselytising, Church history, Conversion, Mission history

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Conversion in Mission History

Jacob Kavunkal, SVD

Dept. of Systematic Theology, JDV, Pune

We are so used to speak of 'conversion' with an ease that gives the impression that the idea of conversion that we have today was always true in the history of the Church. We normally use conversion to indicate that a person has left one religion, or indeed none, for an exclusive attachment to Jesus Christ in the Church. We also speak of conversion in a person who up till a certain period had been a merely nominal adherent of faith, but had then awoken to its significance and importance with enthusiasm and commitment. Ordinarily it is in the former sense that Missiological writings speak of conversion and that is the topic of discussion in this paper. We want to examine the chequered history which the idea of conversion went through so that our mission today does not suffer from the weight of any particular interpretation gathered from a specific period.

Apostolic Period

Conversion in the earliest period of the Church was not a change of religion at all. The earliest Christians were Jews and it is as Jews that they listened to the Gospel and accepted it. They did not consider themselves as followers of another religion, even after they joined the new community. As opposed to the rest of the Jews the members of the new

community believed that in Jesus of Nazareth God had fulfilled the promise of a Messiah. Thus, they were members of the group that believed in the fulfilled Messiah whereas the rest of the Jews looked forward to the promised Messiah. That is why Paul could say that he is persecuted "because of the hope of Israel" (Act 28:20). The earliest Christians continued to keep the Sabbath and attend the Temple though they broke bread at home in memory of the Lord on the first day of the week (Act 2:43; 3:1f.).

At this stage the community's attention was not on the passion of the Lord as much as on his resurrection, "his victory by which a new age had dawned".¹ Interestingly, St. Paul himself never mentions that he is preaching a new religion, but the fulfilment of the promises made to Israel. Hence, often he began his ministry in a new place by addressing the synagogue and the Jewish community. The early Christians of Jewish origin were Jews even after their baptism and were told to become better Jews as the messianic age had come.

Initially, the Gospel was confined only to the Jews as Acts tells us: "speaking the word to none except Jews". Deacon Philip could have been the first one to take the Gospel to a Gentile, the Ethiopian eunuch, but this was an iso-

lated case. The first case of a non Jewish Christian community is that of Cornelius and his household in Acts 10, because of which the church in Jerusalem concluded that “to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life” (11:18). As in the case of the Jews, so also the earliest Gentiles were not invited to accept a new religion, rather to become participants of the promises made to Abraham and his descendants. However, faith in Jesus Christ and repentance for the sins were prerequisite for Baptism (Act 8:13; 2:38).

Even for the Jews who did not accept it, Christianity was not a new religion, but a heretical sect, which the parental body tried to eliminate by persecution. This along with the Roman persecution of the Christians gradually led to the emergence of Christianity as a new religion, and an increasing number of converts from the Gentiles as opposed to the decreasing number of Jewish converts. In fact the renowned scripture scholar Dominic Crossan is of the opinion that Christianity is not a new religion, rather the biblical Judaism of the second temple developed into two streams, that of Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity.² Crossan characterizes the early Christianity as the Kingdom of God movement, the Christ movement rather than a religion separated from Judaism. He goes on to say: “Whenever I use the words *Christian* or *Christianity* in this book, I intend a sect within Judaism”.³

This Kingdom movement was a “repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18). The Easter experience convinced the community that the Kingdom Jesus had pro-

claimed as having drawn near, was realized still more intensely and that this message must continue to be proclaimed everywhere. In this the new community inherited its missionary zeal from Judaism, which through its mission had established itself in most parts of the Roman empire, not to speak of the expansion through migration to different parts of the world.⁴

St. Paul, by far the greatest evangelizer of the Apostolic church, looked forward to the consummation of the Kingdom and the return of the Lord already during his life time. Hence, he feels urged to proclaim the eschatological salvation that has come in Jesus to the whole world. In Rom 15:19f. he explains how the Word is preached from Jerusalem to Illyria, the end of the Greek world. Thus, he has preached the Word to the entire Eastern hemisphere, “a conception which is only intelligible upon the supposition that the certainty of the world’s near end made no other kind of mission possible than one which thus hastily covered the world’s area”, points out Harnack.⁵ The fundamental idea is that the Gospel is to be preached everywhere during the short remaining time of the present world-age, while at the same time this is only feasible by means of mission tours across the world. Conversion, thus, was understood as the gathering of the eschatological people.

St. Paul’s writings played a leading role at this juncture, with regard to the life and theology of the new movement. Paul, a well-versed Jew and also well acquainted with Greek thought, interpreted the Christ event more in line

with the Jewish concept of sin and redemption which was operative also in the Greek mystery religions. Hence, for Paul Jesus was primarily the glorious heavenly Messiah “who died for our sins” and rose again (1Cor 15:3; Gal 2:20). Here we have a transition from Jesus of Nazareth and the Kingdom movement to the Christ who atoned for our sins and achieved salvation.

In the light of this Pauline theology, for the early church conversion became a matter of salvation. With the impact of Greek Philosophy this salvation became the passage from this world to heaven. Through conversion both Jews and Gentiles were called upon to put their faith in God’s Messiah and join the company of his people through baptism. Baptism was the physical sign and seal of the turning to Christ in repentance and the sign of the entry into the Christian community.

Deliverance from guilt and the power of evil has always been a major impetus to conversion. According to St. Ignatius of Antioch, conversion brought the newness of eternal life, and the deliverance from the forces of magic, ignorance, sin and death which Christ brought to us.⁶ Similarly St. Cyprian described the effects of Baptism on him: “The water of regeneration washed away the stains of my past life. A light from above entered and permeated my heart, now cleansed from its defilement. The Spirit came from heaven, and changed me into a new man by the second birth...”.⁷

Christianity succeeded among the Greeks and the Romans as it “united sacramentalism and the philosophy of

the time. It satisfied the inquiring turn of mind, the desire for escape from Fate, the desire for security in the hereafter; like stoicism, it gave a way of life and made man at home in the universe, but unlike stoicism, it did this for the ignorant as well as for the lettered. It satisfied the social needs and it secured (men) against loneliness. Its way was not easy; it made uncompromising demands on those who would enter and would continue to live in the brotherhood, but to those who did not fail it offered an equally uncompromising assurance”, observes Nock.⁸

Some of the great minds of the early times like Justin, Augustine, etc., accepted Christianity because of its intellectual credibility and respectability. They found Christianity intellectually and ethically respectable and it was in line with the best thought of the pagan past. Justin writing in the middle of the second century speaks of his conversion in Apology II.12: “I myself used to rejoice in the teachings of Plato and to hear evil spoken of Christians. But, as I saw that they showed no fear in face of death and of all other things which inspire terror, I reflected that they could not be vicious and pleasure-loving”. The apologists wrote to persuade non-believers that Christianity was the preeminent faith. The *Letter to Diognetus*, written about 129 C.E., is of that genre. The Letter speaks of how Christianity is of Divine initiative, in contrast to the Gentile faiths which are human creations. Christianity brings vitality and grace and love to a hateful world. “They (Christians) have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their

fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land. They marry, like everyone else, and they beget children, but they do not cast out their offspring. They share their board with each other, but not their marriage bed. It is true that they are “in the flesh”, but they do not live “according to the flesh”. They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven”.⁹

The Christian concern for the poor also attracted many to the community. It was the Church’s care for the poor, for its own poor and for outsiders, which impressed even emperor Julian, who tried to revive paganism in the empire after Constantine’s pro-Christian policies. In his letter to Arascius Julian asks: “Why do we not notice that it is their kindness to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase the atheism (i.e., Christianity)”¹⁰ Not to be outdone, Julian went on to instruct Arascius to set up hostels on the Christian model: “In every city establish frequent hostels in order that strangers may profit by our generosity...for it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg the impious Galileans support both their own poor and ours as well”.¹¹ Hence, Avery Dulles aptly summarizes the reasons for the rapid spread of Christianity in the first centuries as due to “its sacramentalism, which rivaled the appeal of the mystery religions; its respectability as a philosophy excelling the Greek schools; the communal bonds of love and fellowship; and the moral integrity of its adherents”.¹²

The Middle Ages

Mention was made earlier of St. Paul’s understanding of the death of Jesus as the atonement for our sins. This comes to its full flowering in the Medieval theology with regard to conversion and baptism. Already Origen saw the death of Jesus on the cross as bringing about a reconciliation between God and humans, for through sin humankind made itself subject to the devil the mark of which was death. Though God wished to free humans, He was unable to do so since the devil’s claim was a just one. Jesus Christ, the sinless one, upon whom the devil had no right, neutralized the Satan’s claim through the ransom of his death. This grace was operative in the Church and was made available through baptism.¹³

This was modified by the medieval theologian Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) according to whom, when a person sins, that person breaks the right order of the universe and thus is alienated from God. Since God is just, Jesus Christ through his death paid a satisfaction for sin, so that he could forgive the sinner. Baptism effected this forgiveness in the Church. Anselm was very much influenced by the Augustinian doctrine of original sin. In the light of the doctrine of original sin, as described by Augustine, baptism became absolutely necessary for salvation. Against the Pelagians Augustine maintained the validity of baptism as it washed away the stain of original sin which bars even a new born child from the Kingdom.

Commenting on the role of Baptism for the forgiveness of original sin

according to Augustine, Peter Brown writes: "For without Catholic Baptism, Augustine was convinced, it seemed impossible (to human minds, at least) that God would grant forgiveness of original sin that made all human beings equal because equally estranged from God. For this reason, the Church had to be truly universal. It was the only resting place, on earth, in which a sorely wounded humanity could hope to recover its lost health".¹⁴ In fact, the entire world had been told millennia before, by the prophets of Israel, to belong only to Christ and to his Church. The Church was the glorious city for all ages and for every region: "In the wide world, which has always been inhabited by many differing peoples, that have had, in their time, so many different customs, religions, languages, forms of military organization, and clothing, there have, however, only arisen two groups of human beings (those destined for the "city of God" and those who were not) – groups we call "cities" according to the special usage of scriptures".¹⁵

Mention must be made that Augustine's teaching on baptism and the need for the church is associated also with St. Cyprian who held that outside the Church there is no salvation (Letter 73.21). However, it may be pointed out that Cyprian was speaking in the context of the indivisibility of the church in the face of the Novatian heresy. Hence, probably he did not deny the possibility of salvation for those who had never joined the Church. At any rate Cyprian and Augustine together laid the foundation for the exclusive theology which became the corner stone of the mission theology for ages to come.

Though the major motive of conversion was the forgiveness of sin and salvation, the real cause that transformed the Church into the religion of Europe, in the middle ages, is to be sought elsewhere. Beginning with Constantine, emperors and rulers of Europe began to impose Christianity on their subjects and on the conquered peoples. Constantine's liberal policies towards the Church gave it prestige and social acceptance. This in turn made people to flock to the Church. Eventually, emperor Theodosius through the Edict of Milan in 384 made Christianity the only religion allowed in the empire.

A similar pattern took place in the case of Franks. Clovis, king of the Franks, won a victory over the Alemanni, having prayed to the God of his Christian wife. He was converted to Christianity in 496 and along with him the whole of Gaul. This was the pattern of the medieval conversions. It was essentially a matter of royal policy. The ruler's will decided the religion of his subjects. King Ethelbert of Kent whose wife was a Catholic was converted and with him his kingdom as well.

The Frankish kings had to face constant incursions from the barbarian tribes. In Charlemagne's time the Saxons were the menace. Charlemagne conquered them and conversion to Christianity was included in the terms of peace. Subjection to the stronger God followed subjection to the victorious ruler as a matter of course. We see the same story repeated in the case of Norway under Olav Tryggvason, of the Swedes under Olav Skoetkonung, of the

Poles under Mieszko I, of the Hungarians under Stephen and of the Russians under Vladimir. One after the other all European groups became Christian, the last being the Lithuanians. In 1250 the Teutons from Prussia forced Duke Mindove to accept baptism.¹⁶ Norman E. Thomas rightly describes Lk 14:23, "Compel them to come in", as the most used missionary text of the medieval period.¹⁷ However, it has to be remembered that the real conversion of the people was a gradual affair requiring many years and was the result of the patient work of monks, secular priests and even respected lay persons.¹⁸

One of the key figures in this Christianizing process was St. Boniface. He preached to the Germanic tribes in a language that was similar to their own. He defied their gods, demolished their shrines, cut down the sacred trees and built Churches on the holy sites. He educated and civilized the converted tribes through the monasteries and thus made possible a settled society, a well grounded Church and good Christian nurture.

Inquisition & Crusades

In the middle ages and even later the Inquisition played a role in conversion. Heresy (from the Latin *haeresis* - the exercise of choice) in religious teachings was a problem for Christianity all through. In the middle ages when heresy became more marked the church adopted a rigorous response. Pope Lucius III decreed that a suspect once convicted had to be handed over to the secular arm for punishment. The special courts set up to judge the intentions

as well as the actions of the heretics were known as the Inquisition. Later during the colonial times the Portuguese and Spanish authorities had recourse to the Inquisition not only to weed out suspected Jewish and Muslim practices but also to ensure the spread of pure faith in the colonies.

Similarly the Crusades were another enterprise that left its impact on conversion in the middle ages and later colonial period. Though the original motive of the crusaders was the recovery of the Holy sepulchre and the rest of the Holy places from the Muslims, it was used also as a means to convert the Muslims and the Jews. In fact the later colonialistic mission itself can be seen in the light of the crusades. "Crusading ideas helped to shape the Portuguese and Spanish oceanic expansion in the early 16th century; and the history of the crusades was thus interwoven with early colonialism."¹⁹

Colonial Expansion

It was in the period of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries that Christianity actually became a worldwide religion, with the expansion of the Portuguese, Spanish, and French empires. While the rest of Europe suffered heavy losses at the hands of the Turks and Constantinople itself fell in 1453, the Iberian nations managed to push the Muslims in their home soil down south to the island of Granada. Pope Alexander VI was only too happy to grant them the right to conquer the lands that they discovered and "to bring to Christian faith the people who inhabit these islands and the mainland...and to

send to the said islands and mainland wise, upright, God-fearing, and virtuous men who will be capable of instructing the indigenous peoples in good morals and in the Catholic faith".²⁰

Conversion of the newly discovered people to the Christian faith justified their subjugation and the occupation of their land. This is amply shown in the ritual proclamation, "*requerimiento*", one of the main tools in the conquest of the new world. According to the proclamation the Spaniards demanded that Indians recognize the Church as the ruler of the whole world and accept the right order of faith and world, willed by God, from the Spanish monarch who acted on a direct mandate from God. To refuse that summons meant war, a just war, and the proclamation made it clear that in that case only the Indians would be guilty of the bloodshed and the disaster that would inevitably overtake them. Thus, the call to the faith, with the choice of submission or war, was a precondition for the Spanish occupation of territory.

In fact colonial conquest introduced into theology the word 'mission' with its current meaning. Though St. Thomas had used it in the 13th century with regard to the processions within the Bl. Trinity, mission, in the sense of foreign mission with a geographical emphasis, was the result of certain coincidences. In 1540 when St. Ignatius founded the Society of Jesus, to the three classical vows of religious life he added a fourth one, the vow of mission, i.e., the members would accept any assignment (mission) given by the Supreme Pontiff. Though the original emphasis

of the 4th vow was on the sending and carrying out of a mandate given by the authority, in keeping with the colonialistic territorial expansion, it soon acquired a territorial aspect, i.e., to whatever places they are sent and to whatever peoples, Turks or other infidels and to the Indies (Bull of Julius III, 21 July 1550). Shortly thereafter the term mission came to be restricted to a geographical going out to a place other than where one normally resides. Thus, the Jesuit General Aquaviva in his letter of 29th September made the distinction between Jesuits in the "missions" and those involved in other ministries (Letters of the Generals Vol.1, Rome 1845, p.66).

Mission now was a geographical going out to convert other people to procure their salvation. Christians in Europe were astonished to discover how even fifteen centuries after the church was founded, there were millions of people who knew nothing about salvation and hence were heading to the eternal fires, as they were not baptized. True, as opposed to the Catholics who saw the new world as a God-sent opportunity to make up for the "losses" in Europe, the reformers like Luther and Calvin, influenced as they were by the ideas of predeterminism, consoled themselves that whomever God wanted to hear the Gospel had heard it already through the apostolic preaching. In his sermon on the Marcan account of the Ascension and the commission "to go into all the world" (Mk 16:14-20), Luther held that as it was given to the Apostles it was fulfilled by them. Other Christians did not participate in this mis-

sion.²¹ Calvin, likewise, held the view that the Apostles had an “extraordinary office” as the first architects of the church, appointed to lay its foundation all over the world. This role is not delegated to other Christians.²² However, there were other schools of reformation, like those of the Anabaptists and Pietists, who upheld the need for mission to the new world.

In any case mission was for the sake of saving the people. We get a window on the theology of conversion in the colonial period from a letter of the Franciscan General Fr. Francisco de los Angeles to his friars in New Spain in 1523. Referring to Mexico he writes: “Since its vintage is being gathered by the devil and the flesh, Christ does not enjoy the possession of the souls which he purchased with his blood. It seems to me that, if Christ lacks for no insults there, neither was there reason for me to lack any feeling concerning them...”.²³

As the children of the times, colonial missionaries and the Church of the colonial era could not see much good in the religions and cultures of the newly discovered lands. The people of these lands at best were devil worshipers and were generally termed heathens, sitting in the shadow of death and the darkness of sin. On the other hand, Christ had paid for their souls too through his atoning death. Hence, salvation was to be made available to them by freeing them from the clutches of devil through conversion.

In spite of the above missiological motivation, since the colonial mission-

aries operated along the lines of the colonizers, their key concern was physical and numerical expansion. Geography replaced faith experience. Expansionism was the guiding principle of the conversion movement. The Church in the West launched the foreign missions with formidable man-power and economic backing to convert the pagans to Christianity. To quote Justo Gonzales, “the West in general considered that God had placed the benefits of Western civilization and the Christian faith in the hands of the white people - both Europeans and North Americans, so that they could share them with the rest of the world. That responsibility was “the white man’s burden”: to take to the rest of the world the benefits of industrialization, capitalism, democracy, and Christianity”.²⁴ Missionary expansion coincided with the colonial expansion.

The father of the modern Catholic Missiology, Joseph Schmidlin defined mission as the activity of the church to spread the Christian Religion, the Catholic Church, the Kingdom of God, among the non-Christians.²⁵ It is the conversion work undertaken among the non-Christians and non-Catholics as only the Catholic Church was the true Church. Steeped in the colonial spirit, Schmidlin holds that mission also renders a service to the colonial enterprise of different powers. Through mission the spiritual conquest of the colonies is accomplished through which the colonized people become obedient subjects ready to accept the external power of the colonizers.²⁶ Hence, colonization and mission are complementary factors and they must go hand in hand!

It should be admitted that the missionaries of the 19th century were men and women with deep conviction and compassion. They believed that the heathens were lost without the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Therefore, they spared no pain to convert the heathens before it was too late. What Pearl Buch wrote about the Protestant missionaries is largely true of the 19th century conversion work: "No weak or timid soul could sail the seas to foreign lands and defy death and danger unless he did carry religion as his banner; under which even death itself would be a glorious end. To go forth, to cry out, to warn, to save others, these were frightful urgencies upon the soul already saved. There was a very madness of necessity - an agony of salvation."²⁷ Similarly John C. Webster shows how most missionaries of the 19th century came to India in response to an appeal to "save the heathens by giving them the Christian Gospel".²⁸ No matter what trade the missionaries were known to be competent in, all of them were motivated by the desire to evangelize the people of India, to preach to them the message of salvation through Jesus Christ alone and thus to be the means of their conversion to Christianity. One of the major points of instruction to the prospective candidates for baptism was: "the name of the Saviour, the fact that He gave His life for sinners, and that salvation is only through Him".²⁹

As far as the Presbyterians, and the Protestants in general, were concerned, conversion to Christianity was based on the theology of the Gospel of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone depending on the substitutionary

theory of the atonement. All people are sinners and will therefore be punished by God. By themselves they cannot satisfy God's demand for holiness and righteousness. God in his love sent his Son to suffer and die, thus taking upon himself the atonement for human sins; and salvation is offered freely to everyone and should be accepted with repentance, faith, thanksgiving and holiness of life.

Education and other activities were used as means to conversion. The South India Missionary Conference of 1858 set the goals of English education in India: "The object of all missionary labor should not be primarily the civilization but the evangelization of the heathens... schools may be regarded as converting agencies and their value estimated by the number who are led to renounce idolatry and make an open profession of Christianity."³⁰

An invariable characteristic of conversion work in the colonial times was the relationship of domination of the sending Western Churches over the "young" Churches in the colonies and the attitude of subservience on the part of the latter. This was only natural in so far as colonialism itself was a relationship of domination of the powerful over the weak. In fact the churches in the colonies were typically characterized as "missions" of the western churches. The missionary character of the new churches was never thought of, until the first World Mission Conference of Edinburgh in 1910.

Another aspect of conversion in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century were the mass movements which led many groups voluntarily into

Christianity, especially from the marginalized sections. Thus, we have the mass movements among the Adivasis of Chotanagpur triggered by Constans Livens and Hans Hoffmans in the last quarter of the 19th century. Similarly, the London Mission Society effected mass movements among the Dalits of Salem, Attur, Coimbatore and Erode areas beginning with the second half of the 19th century. The social elevation of the outcasts and the destruction of the caste system were the chief concerns of the missionaries.

Conversion to the Fullness of Christ

With the beginning of the 20th century we detect new perspectives and nuances in the understanding of conversion. One of these perspectives had to do with the fresh understanding of other religions. If until then they were largely regarded as heathenism, under the impact of Max Mueller's publication of the series, *The Sacred Books of the East*, and of the interest in the History of Religions towards the end of the 19th century, other religions were increasingly perceived as preparation for Christianity and Jesus Christ. The trail blazer in this direction was J. Farquar's *Christ the Crown of Hinduism*, published in 1913. This prepared the way for the fulfilment theory according to which other religions are fulfilled in the Church or in Jesus Christ.

The Plenary Council of India held in Bangalore in 1950 had the first official positive words about other religions. "We acknowledge indeed that there is truth and goodness outside the Christian religion, for God has not left the

nations without a witness to Himself, and the human soul is naturally drawn towards the one true God", declared the Council.³¹ This was followed up by Vatican II which asserted that divine Providence does not deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without fault on their part, have not yet reached an explicit knowledge of God, and yet endeavor, not without divine grace, to live a good life, for whatever goodness or truth is found among them is considered by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel (LG 16). The Decree on Other Religions said further: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. With sincere respect she looks on those ways of conduct and life, those precepts and teachings,... But she proclaims and must ever proclaim Christ, "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6), in whom men find the fullness of religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (2Cor.5:18-19)" (NA 2).

According to this evaluation and understanding of other religions, conversion to Jesus Christ from these religions is not a radical break or discontinuity but is a fulfilment of the religious search in Jesus Christ. This is the line of thought followed by Pope John Paul II in his Mission Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* as well as in his recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*. In the former he affirmed: "While acknowledging that God loves all people and grants them the possibility of being saved (cf 1Tim 2:4), the Church believes that God has established Christ as the one mediator and that she herself has been established at

the universal sacrament of salvation” (RM 9). Conversion in this understanding is the response to the call to belong to the catholic unity, to which all are ordered in various ways.

In *Ecclesia in Asia* he resumed the same line of thought when he wrote: “as the incarnate Word who lived, died and rose from the dead, Jesus Christ is now proclaimed as the fulfilment of all creation, of all history, and of all human yearning for fullness of life... In him, “authentic values of all religious and cultural traditions, such as mercy and submission to the will of God, compassion and rectitude, non-violence and righteousness, filial piety and harmony with creation find their fullness and realization” (No.14). Obviously through the description of these values, taken from the various Asian religions, the Pope wishes to underline how these religions are fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Conversion to the Kingdom

Apart from the new understanding of other religions, Vatican II ushered in also a fresh outlook on history itself. The relation between the mission of the Church and this world and its cultures is the main theme of the Council document *Gaudim et Spes*. Under the impact of developments in biblical theology this in turn gave rise to the rediscovery of the all important theme of the Kingdom of God. The rise of the theology of liberation popularized it further. In the words of Paul VI, “as an evangelizer, Christ first of all proclaims a kingdom, the Kingdom of God; and this is so important that, by comparison, everything else becomes “the rest”, which is “given

in addition” (EN 8). If so the purpose of mission is not primarily planting churches, as it was understood earlier (AG 6). In fact the Pope cautions us against such a temptation by saying, “any partial and fragmentary definition which attempts to render the reality of evangelization in all its richness, complexity, and dynamism does so only at the risk of impoverishing it and even of distorting it” (EN 17). He goes on to say “for the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new” (EN 18). Evangelizaion is not only a question of proclaiming the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, humankind’s criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation (EN 19).

Similarly the Fifth Assembly of the WCC at Nairobi used the term “confessing Christ” to describe the comprehensive nature of mission. It declared:

The gospel always includes: the announcement of God’s kingdom and love through Jesus Christ, the offer of grace and forgiveness of sins, the invitation to repentance and faith in him... the responsibility to participate in the struggle for justice and human dignity, the obligation to denounce all that hinders human wholeness, and a commitment to risk life itself.³²

All this gives a new focus to conversion. It is not always a question of

joining the Church but also includes going through a transformation from whatever is in contrast to the human vocation. This has been identified as the Kingdom in the Gospel. It is concerned with every aspect of life and society. In this perspective the Church is the servant of the Kingdom of God in the world. The centre of gravity is the world in which the divine Reign is to be realized and not the Church itself. If so conversion becomes on the one hand a service to the world. It is other-centred and not self-centred, for the sake of one's own salvation. Further, conversion is not only of the persons, but also of any situation in the world that is in contrast to the Reign, though it has to be immediately added that this cannot happen without the conversion of human hearts.

Conclusion

Jesus' call to conversion was in the context of the kingdom, which was very much linked with the prevailing Jewish situation. This was manifested throughout the ministry of Jesus. Our examination of the historical development of conversion in mission history, in spite of exaggerations and deviations, also reveals a concern for the context. True, the exaggerations sometimes jeopardized even the oneness of the God who brought the church into being and the God who created and governs the world and encompasses the communities outside the church. Conversion is not so much a question of individual salvation as much as the plan of God for the cosmos to be realized. In this understand-

ing conversion is not only for an eschatological salvation but must indicate its anticipation already now.

Today conversion should not so much aim at the elimination of religious differences as the transformation of the dehumanizing aspects of human society. We need a conversion from the collective maya that makes us tolerate a host of social evils which dehumanizing millions of our people. Today conversion cannot remain unaffected by the lot of the hundreds of dalit manual scavengers, braving dreaded diseases, busy at the pre-dawn hours clearing faeces and carrying them on their head to the dumping grounds, often for a meagre pay. Conversion cannot be blind to the millions of children who are condemned to spend their childhood in forced labour. It cannot tolerate the happy coalition of the landlords, money lenders and the traders in the rural and interior areas making life a hell for the millions of adivasis. Conversion cannot remain unaffected by the communal virus carving away precious lives in thousands every year, or by the millions of poor who have to face injustice at every front and who eke out an impoverished and enslaved existence. It is a call to rise from the slumber that tolerates the sins of the caste system, of discriminating women, of exploiting children, the illiterate and the helpless. In short it is a call "to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly before the Lord" (Micah 6:8) so that all may have life abundantly (Jn 10:10).

Notes

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