Conversion: Psychological Perspective

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Abstract: Conversion, as a religious phenomenon, is a subject that has fascinated psychologists for nearly a century. In fact, conversion was "the earliest major focus of the psychology of religion." However, this early understanding of religious conversion is very different from the popular connotation the concept has in the current controversy in India. The psychologists viewed conversion as a transformational process with profound changes in self-concept and self-experience. In the current controversy in India conversion is understood more as a change of religion; there may or may not be a personal transformation.

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Conversion: Psychological Perspectives

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Conversion, as a religious phenomenon, is a subject that has fascinated psychologists for nearly a century. In fact, conversion was "the earliest major focus of the psychology of religion."[1] However, this early understanding of religious conversion is very different from the popular connotation the concept has in the current controversy in India. The psychologists viewed conversion as a transformational process with profound changes in self-concept and self-experience. In the current controversy in India conversion is understood more as a change of religion; there may or may not be a personal transformation.[2]

The psychological dimensions of religious conversion are complex and can be understood from a variety of perspectives. The scope of this article is limited to the following: it first presents an overview of classical psychological understanding of religious conversion and then attempts a psychological exploration of the phenomenon of religious conversion and the controversies surrounding it in contemporary India. It seeks to present an explanation of the motivational dynamics operating in the convert, the missionary, and the antagonists of religious conversion. This explanation is based on the insights provided by Self Psychology, a dynamic relational theory of human development formulated by Heinz Kohut (1913-1981)[3] and further developed and refined by his colleagues and students.[4]

Classical Understanding of Religious Conversion

Even though Sigmund Freud sought to dismiss religion as "an illusion,"[5] many well known psychologists have explored the phenomenon of religious conversion. G. Stanley Hall delivered a series of public lectures in 1881 at Harvard University on the topic of religious conversion. Much of the material he covered was incorporated into his two-volume study of adolescence.[6] James H. Leuba, a student of Hall's, published the first journal article on conversion in 1896.[7] The following year Edwin Starbuck, another student of Hall's, wrote an article on conversion.[8] Starbuck wrote a book on the topic in 1899.[9] William James devoted two of his Gifford Lectures to the specific topic of conversion.[10] Conversion has continued to hold the interest of psychologists.[11]

These psychologists regarded conversion as a radical transformation of self. Conversion was seen as bringing about "a radical reorganization of identity, meaning, and life"[12], and a correspond-

ing shift in consciousness. For William James, to be "converted" meant that "religious ideas, previously peripheral in [one's] consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of [one's] energy." By the habitual centre of one's energy James meant "the hot place" in one's consciousness, the group of ideas to which one devotes oneself, and from which one works.[13] The consequence of conversion is the attainment of "an all together new level of spiritual vitality."[14]

James, following Starbuck, distinguished between two types of transformational processes in conversion—a conscious and voluntary way, *"the volitional type"* and an involuntary and unconscious way, *"the type of self-surrender."*[15] In the volitional type the regenerative change is usually gradual, and consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits. In the self-surrender type, there is a surrender to forces outside oneself, and conversion is more sudden and out of one's control. In this latter type one experiences oneself to be "a passive spectator or undergoer of an astounding process performed on him from above."[16] James and other early psychologists focused more on the latter type of conversion, labeled "mystical" by Lofland and Skonovd in their categorization of conversion motifs.[17]

This understanding of conversion as a radical transformation of self, particularly of the self-surrender type, was heavily influenced by the domination of the Pauline experience on the road to Damascus as the prototype of all conversions in Protestant circles.

The central meaning of conversion, whether sudden or gradual, is change. Something happens to people that changes them or transforms them from one belief to another, or from one group to another. Conversion involves "an appreciable change of direction concerning religious ideas or behaviour."[18] Wayne Oates sums up this change as follows: "Conversion, strictly defined, is a noun referring to the act of being converted in any sense from one position or conviction to another, from one party or form of religion to another, from one group affiliation to another. More often than not, in the psychology of religion, the word *conversion* is used to refer to an abrupt change toward enthusiastic religious attitude, with highly emotional features being conspicuously evident, whether they are lasting or not."[19]

Psychological Explanations

A number of psychological explanations have been provided for religious conversions, both sudden and gradual. The older models that explain sudden and dramatic forms of religious conversion have a psychoanalytic flavour. These emphasise the psychological processes operating in the individual. Many of them invoke "the concepts of conflict, frustration and the unconscious."[20] The conflicts might be between personal, societal and religious values. The frustration might be due to a discrepancy between the person's actual and desired levels of performance. These conflicts and frustrations may not always be present in one's awareness. They

come to the surface and are resolved through conversion.

Gradual conversions are explained more through cognitive theories. They imply a more intellectual type of process than that involved in sudden conversions.[21] While conflicts and frustrations are present, gradual converts have a greater cognitive need for answers to basic questions and to find meaning and purpose in life. They come to reassess aspects of their lives and begin to consider a religious world-view, or a particular religious world-view as providing answers.

Object Relations Theory

A variety of research studies conclude that conversions, both sudden and gradual, are most likely among people with a history of poor parental relationships.[22] Two psychoanalytically based psychological theories are important here. These are Object Relations theory and Attachment theory.

The Object Relations school[23] of psychology focuses on early parent-child relationships in the development of personality. The concept of "object relations" refers to "relations with significant others and their internal representation, starting with the mother"[24] According to this theoretical school, the functioning of the adult personality depends on the maturity of one's object-relations patterns developed in early childhood. The basic assumption in object relations theory is that the crucial determinant of personality, whether normal or pathological, is the relations between self and others, real or imagined by the self.

Object Relations theory sees the unconscious conflicts and frustrations leading to conversion, particularly adolescent conversion, as resulting from an unsatisfactory relationship with one's father. The powerful, benevolent and loving God becomes a substitute for a weak, distant, uncaring or absent father. Conversion also creates "an internal representation of a strong and principled substitute father, with clear values and firm judgement."[25]

Chana Ullman tested this explanation of religious conversion which emphasises problems in relationships with one's father. In a comparative study[26] she did of 40 converts (to Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism, ISKCON, and Bahaism) and a control group of 30 non-converts (from the same groups) almost one-third of the converts reported the loss of their fathers by death or divorce before the age of ten. About half of them reported unsatisfactory and stressful relations with their fathers. The fathers, when present, were passive to the point of psychological unavailability or actively rejecting. Ullman interpreted the results "as showing that the most significant determinant in cases of conversion is found to be the role of the father, and conversion seemed like a means of attaining an idealized father-attachment"[27]

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth and other researchers[28] "offers a rich and powerful theoretical perspective for understanding religious experience," including conversion.[29] This theory "regards the capacity to make intimate

emotional bonds with other individuals…as a principal feature of effective personality functioning and mental health."[30]

This theory proposes three attachment styles that have profound impact on personality development. When the attachment figure, that is, the caregiver, usually the mother, is consistently responsive and attentive to the infant's needs, the infant develops a secure pattern of attachment. If the attachment figure is inconsistently responsive to the infant, it develops an anxious ambivalent attachment style. Finally, if the attachment figure repeatedly rebuffs the infant's attempts to gain and restore proximity and experience safety and security, it develops a pattern of avoidant attachment. The secure base provided by the attachment figure brings comfort and confidence with which to approach and master one's environment.

For many people God functions psychologically as an attachment figure that provides a secure base. For many Christians a personal relationship with God is central to their faith. It provides a deep emotional bond. Psychologically, love for God is akin to a child's love for its mother or father, and God's love for oneself is perceived in terms analogous to a mother's love for her child. [31]

Hence it is possible that some people with insecure attachment histories may seek and find in God the kind of emotional bond they never had in human relationships. In times of distress, this emotional bond with God can provide feelings of comfort and security. A study by Kirkpatrick and Shaver showed that adults who described their childhood attachments to their mothers as avoidant were four times more likely to experience a dramatic conversion later in life than those who classified their maternal relationships as secure or anxious/ambivalent.[32]

Conversion, as acceptance and experience of a relationship with God, can be understood in terms of the dynamics of attachment theory as seeking a secure base. God represents an ever available and responsive attachment figure. According to Kirkpatrick, it is the activation of the attachment system that is most closely associated psychologically with religious conversion.[33]

Interactional Models

The more recent process models of religious conversion place emphasis on the interaction of personal and social forces, with a heavier emphasis on the social or situational forces. Paloutzian hypothises "that the right combination of predisposing and situational forces coupled with a person with a particular need encountering a group that promises to meet that need creates exceptionally strong forces for that person to convert to that group."[34]

Conversions in India are more understandable from this interactional perspective. The interactional model of conversion that Louis Rambo[35] presents is especially relevant to the Indian situation. Rambo considers conversion to be a "product of the interactions among the convert's aspirations, needs, and orientation, the nature of the group into which she or he is being converted, and the particular social matrix in which these processes are taking place."[36]

Rambo's model is explained in greater detail in the section below.

Conversion: The Indian Situation

From my limited knowledge of the conversion controversy in India, I understand that conversion here is more a question of change of religion rather than the profound transformation of self seen in classical psychology of religion. By this I am not denying the genuine transformation of self that accompanies many of the conversions in this country. But by and large the controversy surrounds the change of religion.

Religious conversion in the Indian context has to be seen as the result of a complex interaction of personal and social forces. What Rambo observes about religious conversions in general is pertinent here: "Conversion is a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations." He goes on to elaborate:

> (a) conversion is a process over time, not a single event; (b) conversion is contextual and thereby influences and is influenced by a matrix of relationships, expectations, and situations; and (c) factors in the conversion process are multiple, interactive, and cumulative. There is no one cause of conversion, no process, and no one simple consequence of that process.[37]

It is subject to the structural, ideological, theological, and personal demands of both advocates of conversion and of potential converts.

Rambo presents a process model of conversion comprising the following

elements: Context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences. *Context* refers to "an overall matrix in which the force field of people, events, experiences, and institutions operate on conversion." It is the total environment in which conversion transpires.[38] Conversions in India have to be seen in the context of the socioeconomic disparities, the hierarchical structure of society and the deep-rooted religious sensitivities of its people. The Christian Church's self-understanding as a missionary Church also shapes the context of conversion.

Most scholars agree that some form of *crisis* usually preceds conversion. Crisis may be internal or external. Internal crisis may be brought about by loss of faith in one's own religious worldview or through loss of meaning and purpose in life. In the Indian situation it can also be brought about by the experience of oppression and discrimination. One externally triggered crisis is the activity of missionaries and evangelical preachers. The presence of a missionary and the possibilities he or she suggests may trigger a dissatisfaction in a potential convert that was not previously felt.

Crises force individuals and groups to confront their limitations and can stimulate a *quest* to resolve the conflict. This quest for a way out of the crisis, for a more meaningful and satisfying life, is endemic to human beings. Everyone seems to want something more or something better than one's present situation. This quest is an ongoing process, but one that will greatly intensify during times of crisis. Many Indians from the depressed classes are

seeking a more meaningful and satisfying life.

Encounter refers to the meeting between the missionary and the potential convert.

The encounter stage brings together people who are in crisis and searching for new options with those seeking to provide them with a new orientation through affiliation to a new religious group.

Encounter leads to *interaction*. Once sufficient mutual interest is established or created, both parties increase the level and the frequency of interaction. Increased interaction will lead to more intense levels of learning regarding the possibilities of need satisfaction offered by the new religious perspectives. The potential convert may either choose to continue the contact and become more involved, or lose interest, while the missionary works to sustain the interaction in order to extend the possibility of persuading the person to convert. This interaction between the missionary and the potential convert provides the matrix of change.

Strategy refers to the style and methods the missionary uses and the benefits he or she offers or promises to persuade or influence the potential convert to accept the possibilities offered by the new religious perspective.

Commitment is the consummation of the conversion process. It is a specific turning point or decision required and/or experienced by the potential convert. This commitment is often dramatized and commemorated—sealed with a public demonstration of the convert's choice. Many traditions employ various rituals of rejection, transition, and incorporation to give public testimony to the commitment.

The *consequences* of conversion are determined in part by the nature, intensity, and duration of the conversion process and the possibilities offered by the new affiliation and in part by the person's or group's social context.

Context and consequences as described by Rambo are particularly relevant in discussing current controversies surrounding conversions in India. The context and consequences surrounding conversion in India "are manifold and far more complex than they appear at first sight."[39]

Historically, conversions have taken place mostly from the ranks of the economically poorest and socially most defenseless sections of the population.[40] Conversion was and is for many among the socio-economically depressed classes in India an opportunity to escape the notorious oppression by the higher castes.[41] This is the reason which the converts themselves provide. During a protest against the recent anti-conversion demonstrations, tribals who had converted to Christianity declared: "We embraced Christianity to avoid social torture"[42] The noted columnist Y. Sharada Prasad points out that it was not just the opportunity to improve their economic status that impelled these people to convert, but "plain and simple self respect."[43] The psychological perspective on conversion presented in this article is coloured by this socio-economic dimension.

Toward a Psychological Explanation

How can conversions and the controversy surrounding conversions be understood from a psychological perspective? As no research on the topic is available, I am attempting a tentative explanation. In the following sections I hope to provide some psychological explanation for the behaviour of the converts, the missionaries and those who oppose conversions, using insights particularly from Self Psychology, one of the newer relational theories.

The central idea in Self Psychology[44] is that healthy psychological development of the self depends on what Kohut called "selfobject" experiences. These experiences refer to functions that significant persons in one's life served and continue to serve. More accurately, selfobjects are "*subjective* aspects of a function performed by a relationship. As such, the selfobject relationship refers to an *intrapsychic* experience and does not describe the interpersonal relationship between the self and other objects."[45] Appropriate selfobject experiences evoke, maintain and give cohesion to the self. Faulty selfobject experiences lead to an experience of fragmentation and emptiness.

Three of these selfobject experiences are crucial for healthy psychological development. They are *mirroring* selfobject experiences, *idealising* selfobject experiences, and *alter ego* selfobject experiences.

Mirroring satisfies the need one has to feel affirmed, confirmed and recognized. It satisfies the exhibitionist need to be looked at and admired. Mirroring is reflecting back to the person his or her own sense of grandiosity— the feeling of being great, powerful, wonderful and/or beautiful. Mirroring is usually provided by a responsive caregiver. It can also come from a responsive external environment that provides recognition and affirmation.

Idealising selfobject meets the need to experience oneself as being part of an admired, respected and/or powerful other who embodies the qualities one lacks. The idealizing selfobject is someone the child can count on to provide strength and assurance. The qualities adored in the idealized other become internalized and strengthens the individual's sense of self.

The alter ego selfobject meets the need for a response acknowledging a bond of essential alikeness or kinship. The self is strengthened by the quietly sustaining presence of the alter ego— someone similar. Kohut originally considered alter ego as a part of the mirroring process but later drew a distinction between the two as he found alter ego needs to be as basic as those of mirroring. Both individuals and groups can serve as alter ego selfobjects.

A related important concept is that of *empathy*—the capacity to understand deeply another's inner experience and to respond to it warmly. The experience of being deeply understood and affirmed by another has a profound impact on one's sense of self. It increases self-esteem and feeling of wellbeing.

Failure in empathy on the part of the selfobject is experienced as an af-

front to the grandiose self—the inflated self-image. It threatens the cohesion of the self and leads to *narcissistic rage*. Such rage aims at destroying the offending selfobject as if to avenge oneself. Narcissistic rage does not disappear when the threat to the self disappears. It can linger on and burst out again at the slightest real or perceived provocation. This rage may also be turned against oneself, leading to self-loathing and despair.

This brief summary does not explain Self Psychological theory fully. It only highlights those concepts relevant to the exploration of the psychological dynamics of conversion and the opposition it has engendered. These psychological dynamics are crucial in infancy, but continue to operate throughout the life span.

These concepts and dynamics of Self Psychology are further elaborated below in trying to understand the psychological experience of the convert, the missionary and those who aggressively oppose religious conversions.

Conversion

Conversion in India, as we have seen above, more than a profound transformation of self as traditionally understood in the psychology of religion, is a change of religion often initiated and promoted by complex socio-economic and cultural realities. One such reality is that most conversions in India occur among the socially disadvantaged. Change of religion is a way out of a social degradation often legitimized by the religious values of society.

Conversion offers members of these depressed classes the possibility of mirroring selfobject experiences—the need for recognition and affirmation—denied to them in a caste-ridden social and religious milieu. This mirroring experience is very aptly conveyed in the words of Winnicott, the Object Relations theorist who understood the idea of early selfobject functioning in much the same sense as Kohut did. He wrote: "When I look I am seen, so I exist."[46]

The pre-conversion environment of the converts was one in which they experienced little acceptance and affirmation. Their self-respect and human dignity were frequently denigrated by unempathic and often hostile members of the dominant social class[47]. They were too helpless to give expression to the resulting narcissistic rage. In such a situation, the hope of dignity and equality offered by the Christian faith and Christian fellowship would appear very attractive. They would find a way of out of an unempathic and suffocating environment to one in which their sense of self would be recognized and affirmed. The communion and solidarity promised in the community of faith could soothe their wounded psyche. In Winnicott's phrase they would be "seen" and feel they "exist." (The fact that the hoped-for recognition and affirmation do not always materialize is one of the reasons why converts sometimes revert to their former religions).

The Christian community with its vast network of institutions and organizations and its ornate liturgies can serve as an idealising selfobject that can com-

pensate for the diminished sense of self-worth produced by years of humiliation and oppression. Converts can feel empowered by sharing in the power and strength represented by the institutional Church.

Conversion provides opportunity for alter ego selfobject experience—to have one's essential humanness and alikeness with others and one's belonging to the group recognized and affirmed. Such acceptance in equality and human solidarity is something that the converts missed in their pre-conversion milieu. The sense of belonging as an equal and the experience of affiliation within a caring community can be very attractive to those deprived of them.

The potential convert may also see the compassionate God of Christianity as both mirroring and idealizing selfobject. Such a God would add salience to the attractiveness of the Christian faith to those who are denied social acceptance and equality.

Mark Galanter's observation in regard to conversions to charismatic groups is also relevant to conversions explored in this article. According to him there is an inclination among individuals to coalesce into such groups, "particularly when ties to other sources of affiliation are weakened. It appears that for some entry into the social matrix of the charismatic group may provide significant resources that bolster psychological functioning and produce an improved sense of well-being. This effect may be particularly significant for members whose dissatisfaction with their previous life status was most pronounced."[48]

Opposition to Conversion

Much of the aggressiveness directed against conversion can be interpreted as expressions of narcissistic rage that is not only an individual experience but also a group phenomenon.[49] There is a close relationship between aspects of one's personal identity and that of the group to which one belongs. Thus to the extent one is identified with one's religious group one feels proud of its history and accomplishments. Any denigration of the group's shared ideals, beliefs and practices is experienced as an assault on one's own self and can lead to narcissistic rage which wants to destroy the offender.

Hinduism, with its very ancient beliefs and traditions that predate Christianity, its philosophical and intellectual accomplishments through the ages, and its mythological and historical heritages, can justifiably create in its adherents a feeling of greatness and grandiosity. Hindus can regard themselves and their religion as superior to Christians and the Christian faith. Accordingly Christian proselytisation can be experienced as an affront to this grandiose self. It can be seen as a failure in mirroring which leads to narcissistic rage.

The Christian missionary's emphasis on the superiority and uniqueness of his own faith can be interpreted by the adherents of Hinduism as a negation of the greatness of their own faith. The Christian missionaries can be seen as not mirroring their grandiosity. In their efforts to show that their religion is better than that of the competition, Christian missionaries may quietly, and sometimes quite ostensibly, run down Hindu beliefs, customs and rituals. Narcissis-

tic rage is a natural reaction. This rage expresses itself in the desire and attempt to denigrate and even destroy the Christian missionary and the religion he or she seeks to promote.

An example of the unintentional insensitivity on the part of the Christian Church to Hindu sensibilities is the recent visit of the Pope to India and the public Mass offered on Diwali in the capital of the country. From a Christian perspective, Diwali—the festival of lights—is a beautiful and auspicious occasion to proclaim Christ as the Light of the World, as the one who dispels the darkness of ignorance and falsehood, and in the Pope's own words, "the true light that enlightens every man."[50] But to some Hindus, including artists and intellectuals, the visit and the Mass on Diwali—one of the most popular of Hindu festivals—was the height of insensitivity. They interpreted the visit as a veiled attempt at the conversion of Hindus.[51] According to the RSS Intellectual Forum, the visit "has only confirmed the Sangh Parivar's worst fears about the Church's grand plans to convert India into a Christian country"[52] Recall the resentment among Christians when extremist Hindu groups chose Christmas day for mounting their attacks on Christians in Gujarat.

The day after the Pope left the country an editorial in the *Indian Express* pointed out that the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, that the Pope promulgated in New Delhi, had claimed that "the religious values they [religions of Asia] teach await their fulfilment in Jesus Christ." This statement was seen as offensive and

indicative that the Church did not have "the deepest respect for these traditions" it claimed to have[53].

This author is aware that the animosity expressed against the Christian missionaries has its roots in factors other than the affront to the religious sentiments of the majority group. Christian missionaries not only preach the Gospel. They are involved in the social and economic uplift of the depressed classes of society. The education they provide not only improves economic prospects but also evokes and strengthens self-respect and assertiveness. Sumit Sarkar's comments in the *Economic and Political Weekly* is pertinent here. He quoted Arun Shourie's words from his controversial 1994 publication *Missionaries in India*, to emphasise that the real reason for the attacks on Christians in India is the apprehension among upper class Hindus that Christian missionary work undermines their domination. They do this by liberating and empowering Dalits and other weaker sections of society.[54]

From a psychological perspective, aggression triggered by this apprehension among the upper classes can also be interpreted in terms of rage resulting from narcissistic injury. The loss of domination over the depressed classes, the undermining of their privileged position, becomes an affront to their sense of grandiosity and entitlement. Consequently, they would like to destroy those whom they see as responsible for this affront.

Missionary Motivation

What might be the psychological dynamics operating in the missionary?

The Object Relations interpretation of conversion (See above on p. 3) as seeking to create an internal representation of a strong and principled substitute father might be operating in the missionary too. It is possible that the future missionary grew up in an unempathic and unresponsive home where his or her need for mirroring and idealisation was not adequately met. George Atwood and Robert Stolorow[55] have suggested that messianic salvation fantasies appear in individuals who have experienced disappointments in relationships with early love objects. Disappointment leads to compensatory fantasy in which the image of the lost love object is conceived as a deity. Later on, identification with the lost object leads to the individual's declaring himself and behaving, albeit unconsciously, as a saving messiah.

From the perspective of Self Psychology, narcissistic grandiosity—the need for recognition and affirmation of an exalted sense of self—may be the psychological dynamics motivating the missionary. That grandiosity is manifest in the messiah complex. The missionary believes the Christian faith to be superior and unique and identifies with it. He or she becomes the bearer of that superior faith, of the "true light" to those who sit in darkness. The missionary's grandiosity in turn becomes the source of narcissistic woundedness of those whose religious traditions he or she undermines in the process.

Grandiosity and messiah complex is manifest in much of the social service activity that accompanies Christian missionary enterprise. Uplift of the downtrodden by doling out monetary and material assistance as well as through educational and developmental projects feeds the missionary's narcissistic grandiosity. The unverbalised and often unconscious internal experience of the missionary is: "I have, you don't. I am able, you are helpless. I am superior, you are inferior." It is some of these same grandiosity-driven developmental projects that, as we have already seen above, create animosity among the privileged upper classes and turn them against missionaries and the missionary enterprise.

The psychological dynamics inherent in conversion and the opposition to it is ultimately one of identity and self-experience. The behaviour of all the three groups involved—converts, missionaries and the antagonists of missionary activity—is driven by identity awareness: who one experiences oneself to be, who one wants to be and who one wants to be seen as. Self Psychology provides one approach to understanding this identity awareness.

Conclusion

Religious conversion in India and the antagonism it provokes in certain sections of the Indian population have to be seen within a complex socio-economic, religious and cultural context. Religious conversion in India is seldom the profound transformation of self that classical psychology of religion understands by the term. It is mostly a change of religion motivated by extrinsic factors.

This article has explored the psychological dynamics inherent in the process of conversion and the controver-

sies surrounding it from the perspective of Self Psychology. Conversion is presented as a motivational path leading to mirroring, idealising and alter ego selfobject experiences. The opposition to conversion and the aggression it has evoked among some sections of the population is presented as the rage resulting from narcissistic woundedness suffered by a grandiose self.

In Self Psychological theory, healing of pathology resulting from narcissistic woundedness and consequent rage is brought about by repeated experience of empathic responsiveness. The Church's commitment to the reconciliation of differences and the promotion of peace and harmony can be expressed through greater empathic sensitivity to wounded Hindu sensibilities.

Notes

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47. For an excellent description of the psychological experience of members of subordinate classes, see J. B. Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (2nd. Ed.), Boston: Beacon Press, 1986, pp. 3-12.

48. M. Galanter, "Cults and Charismatic Group Psychology" in E. P. SHAFRANSKE (Ed.), *Religion and the Clinical Practice of Psychology*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1996, pp. 275.

49. Wolf, p. 82ff.

50. "Pope Calls for Inter-religious dialogue", *Times of India*, Mumbai, November 8, 1999, p. 1.

51. "Pope's Visit Sparks Debate over Religion, Minorities", *The Indian express*, Pune, November 8, 1999, p. 9.

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53. "Christ in Asia", *The Indian Express*, Pune, November 9, 1999, Editorial, p. 6.

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Conversion: Legal Perspective

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Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims that everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practise and teaching.

But the existing situation the world over reveals the fact that this right is far from being universally enjoyed. Religious persecution of minority faiths, forcible conversion, discretion of religious rites, pervasive discrimination, torture and killing on religious grounds constitute the major and gross violation of human rights even after fifty years of the proclamation of the Universal Declaration.

It is important to note that the right to freedom of religion and belief enjoys a legal status in most countries. However, the legal status of a right or its official pronouncement does not ensure its congruence with the societal realities and operational dynamics. In India there is a gap between the precept and practise of the right to freedom of religion and belief.

Religion is meant to hold people together. It must lead people out of their self-centredness, help foster an attitude of oneness and good will towards all people. All religions, in their essential teachings, urge their followers to reach out in love to their fellow human beings irrespective of the faith they profess.

Politicians in their lust for power have used religion to set one group against another for political gains. Vested interests in politics and religion coming together have proved disastrous to the nation. Recently the problem over conversions has arisen not because there has been any sudden rise in conversions or because the activities of foreign missionaries have suddenly become alarming, but because the forces of Hindutva have decided to try to make political capital out of targeting a minority. A national debate over conversions had already taken place in the Constituent Assembly when the right to "propagate" one's religion was explicitly included in the fundamental rights because the Christian community had specifically stated that propagation of the Gospel was a sacred

duty conjoined on the community by their faith. It was the colleagues of Mahatma Gandhi, the freedom fighters who followed him, who incorporated the right to propagate one's faith into the Constitution. Conversion is an issue of grave legal and constitutional im-