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Conversions: The Gandhian Critique and Our Response

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Abstract: In our process of trying to theologize in the Indian context, we need to take Gandhi very seriously, and this for three reasons. First, “No single statesman, politician and writer of recent times embodied to the same extent as Gandhi did the soul of his country and people.” No wonder, then, that R.C. Zaehner said that in Mahatma Gandhi Yudhisthira, the son of Dharma, was reborn in our times. Second, there was a constant struggle in him to bring a harmony between his belief and his life/ Third, many Christians consider him as one of the greatest Christians of our times, while some of his compatriots accused him of being a ‘Christian in secret’, an accusation which Gandhi admitted was not new

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Conversions: The Gandhian Critique and Our Response

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In our process of trying to theologize in the Indian context, we need to take Gandhi very seriously,¹ and this for three reasons. First, "No single statesman, politician and writer of recent times embodied to the same extent as Gandhi did the soul of his country and people."² No wonder, then, that R.C. Zaehner said that in Mahatma Gandhi Yudhiṣṭhira,³ the son of Dharma, was reborn in our times.⁴ Second, there was a constant struggle in him to bring a harmony between his belief and his life.⁵ Third, many Christians consider him as one of the greatest Christians of our times,⁶ while some of his compatriots accused him of being a 'Christian in secret',⁷ an accusation which Gandhi admitted was not new.⁸

Gandhi had a deep love and reverence for Jesus: "The gentle figure of Christ, so patient, so kind, so loving, so full of forgiveness, that he taught his followers not to retaliate when abused or struck, but to turn the other cheek – I thought it was a beautiful example of the perfect man."⁹ His last prayer "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," is "world famous."¹⁰ He was a great prophet,¹¹ a great reformer,¹² one "of the greatest teachers of the world,"¹³ and "a prince among politicians."¹⁴ For Gandhi "politics bereft of religion are absolute dirt, ever to be

shunned."¹⁵ He tells us: "I simply and humbly follow in the footsteps" of Jesus and other great teachers in practising *satyāgraha*.¹⁶ He was much taken up by Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.¹⁷

Gandhi not only had some very close Christian friends, but was also greatly influenced by some of them. He himself admits this:

Though I took a path my Christian friends had not intended for me, I have remained for ever indebted to them for the religious quest that they awakened in me. I shall always cherish the memory of their contact. The years that followed had more, not less, of such sweet and sacred contacts in store for me.¹⁸

For him "the Voice of God, of Conscience, of Truth or the Inner Voice or 'the still small voice' mean one and the same thing."¹⁹ This 'still small voice' had a normative role in his life.²⁰ But it was from a Trappist monk in South Africa that he learned to "listen to the still small voice that is always speaking within us."²¹ He found in St. Francis of Assisi a model of *ahimsa*.²² He names "[Leo K.] Tolstoy by his book, *The Kingdom of God Is within You*; and [John] Ruskin by his *Unto this Last*," as two of the "three moderns [who] have left a deep impress" on his life.²³

Gandhi accepted some form of conversion as legitimate. He himself would have liked to bring about the conversion of the British people, and he adds: "I have deliberately used the word conversion. For my ambition is no less than to convert the British people through non-violence, and thus make them see the wrong they have done to India."²⁴ In this context conversion appears to be a form of fraternal correction on a much larger scale. Not only the British, but all of us need conversion because "Conversion in the sense of self-purification, self-realization is the crying need of the times."²⁵ This is also what Jesus wanted because he "preached not a new religion but a new way of life. He called men to repentance."²⁶ He even accepts that "cases of real honest conversion are quite possible. If some people for their inward satisfaction and growth change their religion, let them do so."²⁷ We cannot adequately express the mystery of God because He is beyond our understanding. Therefore Gandhi emphatically maintains that "we do not need to proselytize or do *Shuddhi* or *Tabligh* through our speech or writing."²⁸ By proselytization Gandhi is referring to the Christian missionary endeavour to convert Indians.

In this article I shall examine what Gandhi has to say about the missionary work of Christians, and see what we need to learn from his observations.²⁹ The need to study the reasons for his attitude becomes all the more imperative, because his impressions are not only the impressions of many others but also because, due to his stature, his perceptions have shaped the subsequent

attitude of many Hindus. As one perceptive writer puts it:

... even though the particular circumstances that influenced Gandhi's dialogue with the Christians no longer prevail, the stereotypes of Christians and Christianity [referred to by Gandhi]... have affected the position of the Christian minority in independent India... The Christian community in India today has thus been encapsulated by its historic dialogue with Gandhi.³⁰

A: Christian Endeavour at Conversions in India

Even though Gandhi had a great reverence for Jesus and had many intimate Christian friends, from whom he had learnt some of the greatest lessons of his life, and even though he accepted in principle the legitimacy of religious conversion, yet he was against all forms of organized efforts to convert Indians to Christianity, and this for several reasons.

Today's Christians: Incredible Witnesses

Though all Christians profess Jesus as their saviour and accept the Bible as their one scripture, Gandhi notes that they are not united.³¹ He further asks: "have not the so-called Christians distorted the undiluted message of Jesus?"³² As a result of this, "much of what passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount,"³³ and now "it comes to yearning mankind in a tainted form. Fancy bishops supporting slaughter in the name of Christianity."³⁴ Hence, addressing missionaries at Y.M.C.A., Calcutta, on 28th July,

1925, he claims: “If I have read the Bible correctly, I know many men who have never heard the name of Jesus or have even rejected the official interpretation of Christianity will probably, if Jesus came in our midst today in the flesh, be owned by him more than many of us.”³⁵ It should not surprise us that Gandhi comes to the conclusion: “Christianity is good, Christians are bad.”³⁶

It was in England, where Gandhi went for his studies, that he first came into intimate contact with Christians, and this was further extended in South Africa. Here he had some humiliating experiences at the hands of the Whites who ruled the place. He was thrown out of a first class railway compartment even though he had the right to travel by it, just because he happened to be coloured. To add insult to the injury, when the general manager of the railway was informed about the episode, he justified the conduct of the railway authorities.³⁷ For the same reason he was not allowed to sit inside a coach but had to content himself with a seat outside, normally used by the agent, who now sat inside. After some time, the agent wanted to have a smoke and so had to come out. He spread a dirty rag on the footboard and ordered Gandhi to sit there. When he refused he was boxed in the ears.³⁸ This was only the beginning of a long chain of painful episodes.

All this and what he saw in Europe resulted in a bad impression about Christianity in the West. But he was not the only person who felt that way, and he knew that “many good Christians believe that the Christianity of the West

is a negation of Christ’s central teaching.”³⁹ Most of the missionaries working in North India during Gandhi’s time were people from the West. Gandhi could have very well asked them: When “it seems to me that Christianity has yet to be lived” in the countries from where you come,⁴⁰ what moral authority do you have to preach it in India? “To those who would convert India, might it not be said: ‘Physician heal thyself’.”⁴¹

Missionary Motivation: Unacceptable Presuppositions

All missionary endeavour is the visible expression of the theology that shapes the thinking of the missionaries. They believe “that it is impossible to find eternal peace, unless one accepts Jesus as the only Son of God and the Saviour of mankind.”⁴² To this Gandhi replies: “The epithet [Son of God] in its material interpretation is quite unacceptable. Metaphorically we are all begotten sons of God...”⁴³ The Christian belief that Jesus is “the only incarnation of God and the Mediator between God and man,” Gandhi confesses, “left me unmoved;”⁴⁴ he is also of the opinion that many have “not taken the trouble of understanding the Hindu theory of incarnations.”⁴⁵ Similarly the argument that Jesus died to save all from sin and that those who believe in him will have eternal life “utterly failed to convince” him.⁴⁶ He gives us his own understanding of Jesus’ death on the cross:

I may suggest that God did not bear the Cross only 1900 years ago, but He bears it today. It would be poor comfort to the world if it had to depend upon a historical God who died 2000 years ago. Do not then preach the God

of history, but show Him as He lives today through you.⁴⁷

Gandhi believes that “All prophets [including Jesus] are equal. It is a horizontal plane.”⁴⁸

The belief in the uniqueness of Jesus and his universal soteriological role leads many Christians to believe in the superiority of Christianity over all other religions. This naturally creates a bias against other religions, as Gandhi states: “missionary societies have certain preconceived notion of our society and religion which the members propagate.”⁴⁹ He tells us that from his childhood he had a great respect for other religions, but he adds:

Only Christianity was at that time an exception. I developed a sort of dislike for it. And for a reason. In those days Christian missionaries used to stand in a corner near the high school and hold forth, pouring abuse on Hindus and their gods. I could not endure this. I must have stood there to hear them once only, but that was enough to dissuade me from repeating the experiment.⁵⁰

Hence, cooperation between Christians and Hindus is not possible as long as “the presentday Christian missions persist in holding up Hinduism to ridicule.”⁵¹

Gandhi maintained that “all religions are one at source” and so “we need to synthesize them.”⁵² They are “beautiful flowers from the same garden, or they are branches of the same majestic tree. Therefore they are equally true, though being received through human instruments equally imperfect.”⁵³ Hence Gandhi “could not accept Christianity

either as a perfect, or the greatest religion.”⁵⁴ For this he gives two other cogent reasons. First “All truth represented by imperfect humans that we are is relative. We can only act according to our lights. God alone knows the reality.”⁵⁵ Second, addressing Christians who claim to have the best religion he says: “You are labouring under a double fallacy: That what you think is the best for you is really so; and that what you regard as the best for you is the best for the whole world. It is an assumption of omniscience and infallibility. I plead for a little humility.”⁵⁶

The Christian missionaries could tell Gandhi that in going about preaching they were following the example of Jesus. Gandhi’s reply would be that Jesus “was working amongst his own people, and he said he had not come to destroy but to fulfil,”⁵⁷ and “conversion of others was a bye-product” of his exemplary life.⁵⁸ If they retorted by saying that Jesus also gave them a mandate to go out to the whole world and preach and baptize, Gandhi had two comments to make. First, “Well, I must say that I do not accept everything in the Gospels as historical truth.”⁵⁹ Second, “May it not be that ‘Go ye unto the world’ message has been somewhat narrowly interpreted and the spirit missed?”⁶⁰ The missionary could confront Gandhi: “You yourself go about preaching!” To this Gandhi’s reply is: “while I am strengthening the faith of the people, you are undermining it.”⁶¹

Missionary Workers: Colonial Agents

Apart from the Mar Thoma Christians of Kerala, all other Indians who

became Christians did so after the arrival of colonial powers. This was definitely the case of Christians in North India, the Christians whom Gandhi encountered. So he remarks: "Christian missionaries come to India under the shadow, or, if you like, under the protection of a temporal power, and it creates an impassable bar."⁶² A religion that needs protection from some temporal power does not seem to have much of an appeal from within, and such a religion is not worth the name. Gandhi almost seems to be cynical when he says: "The history of India would have been written differently if the Christians had come to India to live their lives in our midst and permeate ours with their aroma *if there was any*."⁶³ In return for the political patronage, the religious leaders tend to propagate the culture of their patrons: names, food habits, dress, music, architecture, etc., as is so much evident in Goa and most of the early missions in North India. He told the missionaries: "I miss receptiveness, humility, willingness on your part to identify yourselves with the masses of India."⁶⁴

This linkage with colonial powers leaves a very unfavourable impression about Christianity itself. Gandhi is quite aware of this:

Unfortunately, Christianity in India has been inextricably mixed up for the last one hundred and fifty years with the British rule. It appears to us as synonymous with materialistic civilization and imperialistic exploitation by the stronger white races of the weaker races of the world.⁶⁵

Thus the missionary undertaking of the West is seen as one aspect of its imperialistic ambitions. It is easy to gov-

ern a people and win over their loyalty if they have the same faith as that of the colonial ruler. This is but one application of the maxim: *Cuius regio ejus religio*.⁶⁶

Missionary Activity: Irreligious Tactics

Gandhi admits that he had "a great regard for the missionaries and their zeal and self-sacrifice," but he had "not hesitated to point out to them that both are often misplaced."⁶⁷ Speaking about missionary charitable institutes he said: "But even such noble service loses much of its nobility when conversion is the motive behind it. That service is the noblest which is rendered for its own sake."⁶⁸ Speaking about the service rendered to orphans, he tells the missionaries: "In my opinion your mission is infinitely superior to that. You want to find men in India, and if you want to do that, you will have to go to the lowly cottages not to give them something, but *to take something from them*."⁶⁹

Gandhi was also aware that material gain was one factor that won over converts, so he comments: "When a Christian preacher goes and says to a Harijan that Jesus was the only begotten son of God, he will give him a blank stare. Then he holds out all kinds of inducements which debase Christianity."⁷⁰ Talking to a medical doctor, Gandhi tells him that he may presume that "there are people in whom certain things are lacking," and that it is his duty to "supply them whether they want them or not." To such a person Gandhi would say: "You must feel that what you possess, your patient also can possess but

through a different route.”⁷¹ Gandhi is uncomfortable with this attitude of missionaries, that they have something to offer to Indians, while the latter have nothing to give them.

Gandhi told the missionaries: “If you have come to give rich treasures of experiences, open your hearts out to receive the treasures of this land and you will not be disappointed.”⁷² The material wellbeing of people should be only an expression of a deeper concern of missionary activity: to improve the spiritual quality of others. For this they have to be people with a deep religious experience and open to learn from people who are as much religious as they are.

During Gandhi’s time not only were there different Christian sects, but also Muslims (*tabligh*) and Hindus (*Śuddhi*) involved in some kind of conversion activity. Commenting on this situation he remarks:

We see today a rivalry, a war going on among different religions as to the number of adherents each can boast of. I feel deeply humiliated and feel that in every one of the feats we claim to have performed in converting people to our faith, we are denying our God and being untrue to ourselves.⁷³

This only goes to show that for those missionaries – whatever be their religion – numbers were more important than quality of life, and missionary activity “has become a matter of business, like any other.”⁷⁴ They also serve to divide this country. Hence he laments:

If leaders of different religions in India ceased to compete with one another for enticing Harijans into their fold, it would be well for this unfortunate country. I have the profound conviction that those who are engaged in the competition are not serving the cause of Religion.⁷⁵

Competition is bound to “give rise to suspicion if not even secret hostility.”⁷⁶ Proselytization was considered by Gandhi as “perhaps the greatest impediment to the world’s progress towards peace.”⁷⁷

Missionary Targets: Helpless People

Though Gandhi was against all forms of proselytization, he admits the right of others:

Those who believe in it have a perfect right to follow their own course without let or hindrance, so long as it is kept within proper limits i.e., so long as there is no force nor fraud nor material inducement and so long as the parties are free agents and of mature age and understanding.⁷⁸

But the bulk of the converts who came over to Christianity after the advent of colonial powers from Europe are from the scheduled castes and tribes. Commenting on this Gandhi says: “I strongly resent these overtures to utterly ignorant men. I can perhaps understand overtures made to me, as they are being made. For they can reason with me and I can reason with them. But I certainly resent the overtures made to Harijans.”⁷⁹ During Gandhi’s life-time, not many dalits had the benefit of even elementary education. Hence he could say without much exaggeration: “The majority of Harijans can no more understand the

presentation of Christianity than my cows.”⁸⁰ He thinks

that there is considerable force in it [missionary effort at conversions], especially when it is made applicable to members of the Scheduled Castes who have been ill-treated by their fellow Hindus and would, therefore, yield to compulsion in the hope of avoiding ill-treatment from their fellows who arrogate to themselves superiority, falsely so-called. Frequently this compulsion assumes subtle forms, as for instance, free grants of land or offer of service even beyond merit.⁸¹

Gandhi is aware of the missionary work among tribals in Bihar, and how it has improved their lot, yet he is not happy about it: “The scope for work in their midst is inexhaustible. Christian missionaries have been doing valuable service for generations, but in my humble opinion their valuable work suffers, because at the end of it they expect conversion of these simple people to Christianity.”⁸² Before the impact of modernization, people in our villages had their own life-organization, but Gandhi thinks that conversions are “destroying their social superstructure, which notwithstanding its many defects has stood now from time immemorial the onslaughts upon it from within and from without.”⁸³ The tribals and the dalits belong to the poorest strata of our society. Hence, Gandhi dares to say: “It will not be denied, I speak from experience, that many of the conversions are only so-called. In some cases the appeal has gone not to the heart but to the stomach.”⁸⁴

Indian Converts: Alienated People

Gandhi accepts that “in theory, since there is one God, there can be only one religion.” Then he adds: “But in practice, no two persons I have known have had the same and identical conception of God. Therefore, there will, perhaps, always be different religions answering to the different temperaments and climatic conditions.”⁸⁵ Elsewhere, speaking about religious pluralism, he states: “It is highly likely that mine may be good enough for me and his for him. A thick woollen coat would be the thing for one living in the cold regions of the earth, as a piece of loin-cloth for another living near the equatorial regions.”⁸⁶ I do not know if Gandhi even used the *Bhagavadgītā* (3.35; 18.47) doctrine – a text he was so fond of – that we must follow our (*sva*-) *dharma* even if it appears to be faulty (*viguna*), or whether he understood the plurality of religions in terms of his pet concept of *svadeśī* but his words we have just quoted seem to be pointing in that direction: we have different temperaments (*guna*), and we belong to different countries (*deśa*), each having its own ecological framework, which powerfully shapes the external expression of our religion. Hence, his advice to missionaries is: “I would similarly say to you, make us better Hindus, i.e., better men or women.”⁸⁷

Against this background we can understand his question: “Why should a man, even if he becomes a Christian, be torn from his surroundings?”⁸⁸ and what he has to say about conversion:

Conversion must not mean denationalization. Conversion should mean a definite giving up of the evil of the

old, adoption of all the good of the new and a scrupulous avoidance of everything evil in the new. Conversion, therefore, should mean a life of great dedication to one's country, greater surrender to God, greater self-purification.⁸⁹

Authentic "converts are those who are 'born again' or should be. A higher standard is expected of those who change their faith, if the change is a matter of the heart and not convenience."⁹⁰

The Indian converts whom Gandhi met belied all his expectations. Recalling a childhood episode, he says:

About the same time, I heard of a well known Hindu having been converted to Christianity. It was the talk of the town that, when he was baptised, he had to eat beef and drink liquor, that he also had to change his clothes, and that henceforth he began to go about in European costume including a hat... I also heard that the new convert had already begun abusing the religion of his ancestors, their customs and their country. All these things created in me a dislike for Christianity.⁹¹

This earliest impression was confirmed by his subsequent contacts with converts: "Years of experience of proselytising both in South Africa and India has convinced me that it has not raised the general moral tone of the converts who have imbibed the superficialities of European civilization, and have missed the teaching of Jesus."⁹²

The convert could ask Gandhi: "Is there anything morally wrong in accept-

ing European ways?" To this Gandhi's reply is:

The aping of Europeans on the part of Anglo-Indians is bad enough, but the aping of them by Indian converts is a violence done to their country and, shall I say, even to their new religion. There is a verse in the *New Testament* to bid Christians avoid meat, if it would offend their neighbours. Meat here, I presume, includes drink and dress. I can appreciate uncompromising avoidance of all that is evil in the old, but where there is not only no question of anything evil but where an ancient practice may be even desirable, it would be a crime to part with it when one knows for certain that giving up would deeply hurt relatives and friends.⁹³

Not only do converts ape the not so good aspects of Western culture, but they also retain the unpleasant features of their old religion. Gandhi draws our attention to this: "I have had the privilege of addressing meetings of Indian Christians who have appeared to me to be no better than their fellows. Indeed the taint of untouchability persists in spite of the nominal change of faith so far as the social status is concerned."⁹⁴ Thus, the Indian converts are not only not better than the others but they are tainted by the evils associated with Hinduism and with Western culture. Language is not merely a medium for communicating our thoughts, but is the vehicle of a culture and its tradition. Hence we can understand Gandhi's outburst: "Is it not truly deplorable that many Christian Indians discard their own mother-tongue, bring up their children only to speak in English?"⁹⁵

B: The Conversion We Need

Even though Gandhi had raised some very serious objections against the missionary activity as he saw it during his life, we need to proclaim Jesus to the people of this land, and in this we are encouraged by Gandhi's own words: "I believe that Jesus belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world, to all races and people, it matters little under what flag, name or doctrine they may work, profess a faith, or worship a God inherited from their ancestors."⁹⁶ Gandhi believes that even though people may not know Jesus, he is already present in their lives:

I refuse to believe that there now exists or has ever existed a person that has not made use of Jesus' example to lessen his sins, even though he may have done so without realizing it. The lives of all have, in some greater or lesser degree, been changed by his presence, his actions, and the words spoken by his divine voice.⁹⁷

Our task today is not so much to bring Jesus to India – He is already there. What we need to do is to discover his presence,⁹⁸ more so since "Jesus caught a breath of wind from Asia and gave it to the world."⁹⁹ For this we need to become truly the Church of Jesus, a real local Church, believing in Jesus the Servant of all, radiating his love by becoming the salt of the earth and the light of the world, made possible through a contemplative union with him.

A Christian Church

Gandhi is not against our missionary presence in this land, but he proposes a different approach: "I do not

believe in telling others of their [sic] faith, especially with a view to conversion. Faith does not admit of telling. It has to be lived and then it becomes self-propagating."¹⁰⁰ To illustrate his point he invites the would-be-missionary to be like a rose:

There is no occasion for articulate expression. Life is its own expression. I take the simile of the rose used years ago. The rose does not need to write a book or deliver a sermon on the scent it sheds all around, or on the beauty which everyone who has eyes can see. Well, spiritual life is infinitely superior to the beautiful and fragrant rose, and I make bold to say that the moment there is a spiritual expression in life, the surroundings will readily respond.¹⁰¹

To put it more tersely: "Truth is to be lived if it is to fructify."¹⁰²

Gandhi is, thus, reminding us of what Jesus wanted us to be: the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Mt 5.13-16),¹⁰³ he is asking us to love one another so that people may know we are his disciples, his living memorial in the world today (Jn 13.34-35; 17.20-23). In short, Gandhi is saying: "You want to bring people to Jesus. Very good! But first you yourselves become Christians!" Gandhi is urging us to move away from a mandate- to a witness-missiology, and rightly so. For him what is more important is our authenticity rather than what we believe about Jesus: "It is not possible to consider the teaching of a religious teacher apart from the lives of his followers."¹⁰⁴ We have to admit that "Christian history is not a model of righteousness."¹⁰⁵

There is one episode in the life of Gandhi which is little known: his visit to a Trappist Monastery in South Africa. He does not record it in his autobiography either. It was in 1895. Here he found that “The principle of liberty, equality and fraternity is carried out in its entirety.”¹⁰⁶ The monks were vegetarians, and “They take no intoxicating liquors except under medical advice. None keep money for private use. All are equally rich or poor.”¹⁰⁷ Wherever Gandhi went he was greeted by “a beaming smile.”¹⁰⁸ The monks worked in different workshops. Gandhi found that “the most prominent feature of the settlement is that you can see religion everywhere... A lovelier walk, or a lovelier scenery, could not well be imagined.”¹⁰⁹ He sums up his impression in these words: “If this is Roman Catholicism, everything said against it is a lie.”¹¹⁰ Gandhi is reminding us of the life of the first Christians: a life of hard work, prayer, mutual concern, evangelical simplicity and – this may sound unbelievable to many moderns – deep joy. It is this witness of Christian life that is the most effective way of evangelization.¹¹¹

Years back I was sharing with a colleague my concern for the un-Christian features of Christianity in our land. Then my companion said: “We have been sacramentalized, but not really evangelized!” We see not only a divided Christianity, but also a divided Catholic Church: tensions between the Latins and the Orientals, between different castes,¹¹² between language groups, between peoples of diverse ethnic origins, between the locals and the outsiders, between diocesans and religious, be-

tween different religious congregations, and now in the tribal belt between different clans. When this happens, it becomes “possible for Christians, in the name of Christ, to ignore or even contradict fundamental principles and values that were preached and acted upon by Jesus of Nazareth.”¹¹³ That being the case, can we really proclaim Jesus? Does he and the kingdom which he preached really have the first place in our life?

An Indian Church

The converts whom Gandhi met most in India were those influenced by missionaries after the advent of European colonials. They brought with them their brand of Christianity, so much so that a great admirer of Jesus could say: “It seems that the Christ that has come to us is an Englishman.”¹¹⁴ One of the great concerns of Gandhi, even though he was not a narrow nationalist, was the alienation resulting from conversion, a fact noted even by anthropologists.¹¹⁵ Conversion also brings about division in the parent society.¹¹⁶ Further, in all honesty we have to admit that missionaries who worked in close collaboration with colonial powers “asked or forced [even the] unbelievers to give up their rites and customs.”¹¹⁷ Here two considerations need to be noted. First, “Culture as the meaning system provides an identity to the group. Religion as the deepest element in culture is a deeper source of the same identity.”¹¹⁸ Second, “Change in religious faith has vast sociological implications and further changes in religion, the focal aspect of culture, led to corresponding changes in festivals, village organisation, rites-de-

passage, economic round of life and such other aspects of traditional culture.”¹¹⁹ These two phenomena raise a serious question. Let me explain.

In the *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium* we have the two following canons

31. No one can presume in any way to induce the Christian faithful to transfer to another Church *sui juris*.

32. § 1. No can validly transfer to another Church *sui juris* without the consent of the Apostolic See.¹²⁰

I presume the reason for this is given in canon 39:

The rites of the Eastern Churches, as the patrimony of the entire Church in Christ, in which there is clearly evident the tradition which has come from the Apostles through the Fathers and which affirm the divine unity in diversity of the Catholic faith, are to be religiously preserved and fostered.

Religion is a more powerful factor in shaping the life and tradition of a community than rites. If Christians feel that they should preserve the rich traditions of Churches *sui juris* in communion with Rome and that people belonging to those traditions should be not alienated from them, should they not be more sensitive to the cultural traditions intimately bound with totally alien religions, and avoid alienating people from them? In other words, this would amount to a moratorium on our efforts to convert the poor and illiterate tribals and Dalits!

It is true that attempts at inculturation have been made, but we have hardly gone beyond transla-

tions.¹²¹ Fundamentally we are either a Latin or a Syrian Church. We have a long way to go before we become truly an Indian Church, a Church in which a convert will be in cultural continuity with his past. There is another element that needs to be attended to. Even fifty years after Independence, the Catholic Church appears to be a colony of the West. Most of the significant decisions that shape our life here are taken by people outside India. We continue to depend heavily on foreign funds. These two factors not only slow the pace of but sometimes even obstruct inculturation. The latter – foreign funds – tends to have a more devastating effect: it further alienates us – especially members of the hierarchy and religious congregations, sometimes even leading to a distortion of values. A recent study of the way the media depicts us also confirms the impression people have of us:

The analysis of reports in Indian media on Christianity reveal many stereotypes and myths – that... Christianity is a Western, foreign religion, its adherents are not patriotic. The way Christianity is portrayed in Indian movies show such stereotypes. The villains wear a cross around their necks, Christians are depicted as drunkards and crooks.¹²²

A Servant Christology

The second millennium saw the emergence of political and ecclesiastical Eurocentricism – the one supporting and being supported by the other. This unholy alliance was undergirded by a Christology which projects Jesus as the one lord and king of all creation.

Hence it was the duty of Christians to bring all peoples and their land into Christendom. This was a triumphalistic missiology. In this milieu

the numerical expansion of the missionizing Church or the political or economic advancement of its patrons can become more important than the welfare of the 'evangelized' people. *Mission then ceases to be an act of service and becomes a selfish and therefore sinful exercise of institutional survival and expansion of power.*¹²³

This triumphalistic mentality continues to shape the Church even today. We could make our own the humble confession of Cardinal Kim of Seoul. Speaking about the preparations for the bicentenary of the arrival of Christianity to Korea, he says:

In our preparations we are stressing spiritual renewal, and the love of Jesus, saying that we must love one another as Jesus loved us. But sometimes I have the nagging suspicion that what we want most of all is to have a successful celebration and show the whole world how beautiful and prosperous the Korean Catholic Church is, instead of gearing all the efforts to present the image of Jesus, Incarnated Love, who became the Brother of brothers, the Brother of all people.¹²⁴

Today Europe is no longer the centre of the world, but the West continues to rule the world: we are facing economic colonialization, because now money has become omnipotent. The earlier triumphalism has been replaced by the glamour of a consumer culture. This malaise has infected not only the

laity but also the hierarchy and people who have vowed poverty. Yes, power and pomp, glamour and publicity, status and prestige, competition and success, comfort and luxury – in short all worldly values – are as much part of the Church, specially of the hierarchy and religious, in our country as they are elsewhere. Once again Jesus ceases to be the centre of our lives.

If we are to be truly credible, we need a shift from a royal Christology to the servant Christology: Jesus who came to serve, specially the poor, the outcast and the exploited.¹²⁵ This is particularly urgent for us because "A very significant encounter of India with Jesus Christ takes place on the path of suffering and agony its millions of poor are undergoing today. Jesus is known and experienced not in what he differs from people, but what he is in solidarity with them."¹²⁶ Church leaders must cease to be 'lordships' and become deacons not merely through the ritual of ordination, but through a life lived for and with the poor.¹²⁷

A Contemplation Missiology

Once Gandhi asked a missionary: "Are all who dare to preach the message of Jesus the Christ sure of their union with God?"¹²⁸ Again, he is reminding us of a fundamental dimension of mission: it is the fruit of contemplation. Let me illustrate this by two examples from the Gospels. One day some disciples of John the Baptist are with him on the bank of the Jordan and Jesus walks by. He draws their attention towards him. Two of his disciples follow Jesus. Jesus turns round and

wants to know what they want. They ask him: “*pou meneis?*” (Jn 1.38). The Greek verb *menein* occurs around 10 times in the parable of the wine and the branches (15.1-10). The thrust of this parable is that just as Jesus abides in the Father, so too the disciples ought to abide in Jesus, otherwise they will bear no fruit. So when the disciples ask Jesus: “*pou meneis?*” this is what they are saying: “Sir, you are very attractive. Even our venerable teacher is drawn to you; there is a power within you. We wish to know the secret of that power. Which is the vine of which you are such a fruitful branch?” Jesus says: “Come and see.” John succinctly describes the response of those youngmen: “They came, they saw, they abided (*menein*) in him” (1.39). They have not received any mandate, but they go and invite others to come and see what they have seen. Others pay heed to their testimony and come to Jesus (1.40-46).

The second episode is about the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They are sad and discouraged. They have given up all hopes. They feel very badly let down by Jesus. As they converse with each other, Jesus walks with them and explains the scriptures to them. They fail to recognise him. When they reach Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, Jesus tries to continue his journey, but they tell him: “Young man, don’t be foolish; it is night now. Don’t travel further; it is dangerous. Spend the night with us and tomorrow morning you may continue your journey.” So Jesus goes in with them and as they sit at table he breaks bread for them: a typical gesture of Jesus – the bread broken

for us. At that moment the disciples recognized Jesus, for their eyes were opened. What happens then? A few moments ago they tried to frighten Jesus, pressing him to spend the night indoors with them. Now that they have experienced Jesus that frightening night becomes the joyful morning of Easter. At that very instant the disciples leave their house in Emmaus and run back to Jerusalem, not because they have been ordered to, but to share with others what they had experienced: “The Lord is risen and we have seen him, we have met him.” (Lk 24.1-35)

This New Testament challenge is significant for us in India, for two reasons. First, the Indian word for a witness is *śāksī*, i.e., one who has eyes (*akṣa*). The idea suggested is that only when we have seen with our own eyes, can we bear witness with credibility. That is what mission is all about: sharing with others our experience of Jesus. This is what our country demands from us. This is also what people of our times expect of us. As Pope Paul VI puts it: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”¹²⁹ Here the Pope is speaking of the witness of life, but this witness of life demands a deep commitment to Jesus and his values. This commitment attains its maturity only when it is nourished by contemplation, because “the closer we come to the sources of Christian life in the contemplation of Christ, the more we are led to look for acts to put into practice in the concrete situations in which we live.”¹³⁰ When mission gets institutionalized it loses its credibility. Institutions can testify to our

efficiency and to our capacity to raise funds. Their success does not necessarily call for a deep commitment to Jesus. They may even serve to mask its absence!

The call to contemplative prayer is at the very heart of mission, more so if we are called to be missionaries in Asia. Not only Hinduism, but also Buddhism and Islam have their own mystical traditions. Hence it is not surprising

that Pope John Paul II states: "My contact with representatives of the non-Christian spiritual traditions, particularly those of Asia, has confirmed me in the view that the future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation."¹³¹ The call to contemplative life is addressed to all Christians, because "the Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all."¹³² If we cease to be Christians, we cease to be missionaries.¹³³

Notes

1. Subhash Anand 1979, "A Prolegomenon to Theologizing in India Today", VJTR, 43 (1979), pp. 50-58; and "Gandhian Satyagraha: A Theological Model for India", Ibid., 59 (1995), pp. 561-80. I am using the following abbreviations in the notes:
 CM M.K. Gandhi, *Christian Missions: Their Place in India*, ed. B. Kumarappa, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1941.
 EGT A.T. & G.A. Hingorani, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, New Delhi: All India Congress Committee, 1985.
 ISS M.K. Gandhi, *In Search of the Supreme*, 3 vols., ed.: V.B. Kher, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1961.
 MJ M.K. Gandhi, *The Message of Jesus Christ*, ed. A.T. Hingorani, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1964.
 SMEW *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1927-29, 14th rep., n.d.
 VJTR *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*.
2. Z. Maurina, "Gandhi: Image and Symbol of India", in S. Radhakrishnan (ed.), *Mahatma Gandhi 100 Years*, New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1968, pp. 240-42, here p. 240.
3. He was known as Dharmaputra not only because he was the son of Yama, the Lord of Death – who is himself known as Dharma, but also because of all the Pāṇḍavas he was the most truthful and just.
4. R.C. Zaehner 1962: *Hinduism*, London: Oxford University Press, pp. 224-53, i.e., the chapter on Gandhi "Yudhisthira Returns".
5. This explains the title of his autobiography: *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.
6. They felt that he was "one of the most Christlike men in history" (E. Stanley Jones, quoted by L. Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1952, p. 362), and "a more sincere Christian than thousands in Europe" (H. Kunich, quoted by A.J. Appasamy, *Sundar Singh*, Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1966, p. 44). R.C. Zaehner is even more lavish in his estimate of Gandhi, who amazed the Christians, "for never in modern times had they seen any man tread more faithfully in the footsteps of Christ" (Zaehner, *Hinduism*, p. 224). He is "far nearer the Truth of Christ, the Truth of the Cross than we are... for in the last analysis Christianity is the Cross of Christ." (J.S. Hoyland, *Gandhi's Satyagraha and the Way of the Cross*, in S.

Radhakrishnan (ed.), *Mahatma Gandhi: Essays and Reflections on His Life and Work*, London: George Allen & Unwin, (1939) 2nd ed. 1949, pp. 124-49, here 149). Not only his life but also his thought has left its mark on contemporary Christian thinkers (W.R. Miller, *Non-violence: A Christian Interpretation*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964, p. 15). Among those influenced by him are the great pioneer of liberation theology: Archbishop Helder Camara of Brazil (J. de Broucker, *Dom Helder Camara*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1970, pp. 58-60), the martyred Negro leader: Martin Luther King (N. Ezekiel, "Preface" in M.L. King, *A Martin Luther King Reader*, ed. N. Ezekiel, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969, pp.vi-xi), the great American Trappist monk: Thomas Merton (D.Q. Mcinery, *Thomas Merton: The Man and His Work*, Washington: Cistercian Publications, 1974, pp. 83-84), the people-centred economist: E.F. Schumacher (E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, London: Sphere Books, 1974, pp. 31-32), to name only a few. But S.C. Daniel, after examining what it means to be a Christian, concludes by saying "that Gandhi was a Christian in the informal sense of the 'term;' for, he was a 'civilized, decent, respectable person.'" "Was Gandhi a Christian?", *Gandhi Marg*, 15 (April-June 1993 - January-March 1994), pp. 471-77, here p. 477.

7. CM, p. 24.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
9. MJC, p. 13.
10. ISS, vol. II, p. 36.
11. ISS, vol. I, p. 58.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 234.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
15. ISS, vol. III, p. 341.
16. ISS, vol. I, p. 359.
17. SMEWT, p. 58.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
19. ISS, vol. I, 311.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
21. ISS, vol. III, p. 328.
22. ISS, vol. II, pp. 30, 38.
23. ISS, vol. I, p. 150. See also J.B. Chakraborty, "Christian Influence on Gandhi", *Gandhi Marg*, 14 (April-June 1992 - January-March 1993), pp. 648-54. E.J. Fernandes, in "Gandhi Could Have Been A Christian", *The Examiner*, 148/33 (August 16, 1997), pp. 12 + 30, here p. 30) has even stated that: "Gandhiji said he would have even become a Christian if on one Sunday morning, dressed in his Sunday clothes, he was not turned away at the church entrance because he was a coloured man. That is what changed Gandhi's life." Fernandes ("a senior journalist who has worked with several newspapers in Mumbai." ed.'s note, p. 12) says "From my childhood to my student days I have been a close follower of Gandhiji and have been a witness to several incidents which have had an impact on my life and mind." p. 12. I have not read all the writings of Gandhi, but I do not remember any text pointing in this direction. I also consulted Dr. Vivek Pinto, a Gandhian scholar and author of *Gandhi's Vision and Values: The Moral Quest for Change in Indian Agriculture* (New Delhi: Saga Pb., 1998), and he too is not aware of any such episode in Gandhi's life.

24. ISS, vol. I, p. 74.
25. ISS, vol. III, p. 69.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 320.
27. CM, p. 132.
28. MJC, p. 25.
29. As far as my knowledge goes not much work has been done by Christians in this direction. The earliest article seems to be I. Vellaringatt, "Gandhi and Christian Mission" *Clergy Monthly*, 8 (July 1944 - June 1945), pp. 228-36. That was almost two decades before Vatican II. Then we have F. D'Lima, "Gandhiji and Conversions", SAP (an occasional publications of the Society of Aquila and Priscilla, Bangalore), no. 4 (January 1969), pp. 20-29. This journal is not much known and had a very brief life-span. The author does not indicate his sources. The indexes in *Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi: A Bibliography* (a project of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1974) do not indicate any entries on this topic. A. Pushparajan, a convinced Gandhian scholar, published "Gandhi's Views on Conversions" (*Indian Missiological Review*, 3/2, April 1981, pp. 103-18). Here the author studies Gandhi's views not only on the work of Christian missionaries, but also that of Muslims and of the Hindu advocates of the Śuddhi Movement. By way of response he tries to spell out the presuppositions that govern Gandhi's thought. In 1990 he published *From Conversion to Fellowship: The Hindu-Christian Encounter in the Gandhian Perspective* (pb. author). Here too his response is from the Gandhian perspective, as indicated by the title, and this because he believes that

Of all the persons who were engaged in the controversies, Gandhi alone touches the issues both theoretically and practically. Moreover, Gandhi proves to be unbiased in considering the issues of religious controversy, while all others are biased in one way or the other. He alone seems to stand uniquely free from all prejudices which govern the nature of religion and the fact of religious plurality."(p. 27)

I would hesitate to agree with him because Gandhi himself says: "The Gita has become for me the key to the scriptures of the world. It unravels for me the deepest mysteries to be found in them." CM, p. 39. S.K. George, *Gandhi's Challenge to Christianity* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Pub. House, (1947) rep. 1960) has a chapter "Christian Missions in India," but the original sources are not indicated. N. Minz, *Mahatma Gandhi and Hindu-Christian Dialogue* (Madras: Christian Lit. Soc., 1970) has a short section on "Conversion" and "Missionary enterprise" (pp. 45-47). D.M. Balia, "Flowers from the Same Garden: Gandhi's Challenge to Christianity", *Missionalia*, 32 (1995), pp. 355-65, has not even two full pages on conversion (pp. 361-62).

30. J.C.B. Webster, "Gandhi and the Christians: Dialogue in the Nationalist Era," in H. Coward (ed.) 1989, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters*, Maryknoll (NY): Orbis Bks., pp. 80-99, here p. 95.
31. ISS, vol. I, p. 27.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
33. ISS, vol. III, p. 335.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 328.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 314.
37. SMEWT, pp. 93-94.
38. *Ibid.*, 94-96.

39. ISS, vol. III, p. 51.
40. MJC, p. 36.
41. ISS, vol. III, p. 69.
42. SMEWT, p. 100.
43. ISS, vol. III, p. 313.
44. SMEWT, p. 102.
45. ISS, vol. I, pp. 238-39.
46. SMEWT, p. 104.
47. ISS, vol. III, p. 323.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 8
49. ISS, vol. II, p. 271.
50. SMEWT, pp. 28-29
51. ISS, vol. I, p. 27.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
53. ISS, vol. III, p. 4.
54. SMEWT, p. 114.
55. ISS, vol. III, p. 51.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
57. CM, p. 134.
58. ISS, vol. II, p. 259.
59. ISS, vol. III, p. 320.
60. MJC, p. 16.
61. CM, p. 101.
62. ISS, vol. III, p. 329.
63. *Ibid.*, pp. 319-20. Emphasis added.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 329.
65. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.
66. ISS, vol. II, p. 271.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
68. *Ibid.*
69. ISS, vol. III, p. 329. Emphasis added.
70. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.
71. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 322.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 342.
74. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
75. CM, p. 52.
76. ISS. vol. III, p. 68.
77. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
78. *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.
79. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

80. CM, p. 58.
81. ISS, vol. III, p. 81.
82. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
83. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
84. MJC, p. 16.
85. ISS, vol. III, p. 16.
86. CM, p. 48.
87. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
88. MJC, p. 20.
89. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
90. CM, p. 6.
91. SMEWT, p. 29.
92. ISS, vol. III, p. 339.
93. MJC, p. 14.
94. CM, p. 54.
95. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
96. EGT, p. 46a.
97. *Ibid.*
98. M. Amaladoss, "The Mystery of Christ and Other Religions: An Indian Perspective", VJTR, 63 (1999), pp. 327-38.
99. EGT, p. 48a.
100. ISS, vol. III, p. 112. I traced this text to another collection of Gandhi's works, there too we have the expression "their faith". Possibly Gandhi is saying that we should not tell others about the negative side of their faith, and thereby seek to win them over to our own. He believes that every religion has both positive and negative elements.
101. CM, p. 154.
102. ISS, vol. II, p. 24.
103. A defective exegesis of the 'Great Commission' (Mt 28.16-20) leads to a mandate-missiology with many un-Christian dimensions. This text has to be read together with Mt 5.13-16. See G.M. Soares-Prabhu, *Biblical Themes for a Contextual Theology Today*, ed. I. Padinjarekuttu (*Collected Works of George M. Soares Prabhu, S.J., vol. I*) Pune: Jnana-deepa Vidyapeeth, 1999, pp. 16-25. It seems to me that Mk 16.15-18 is the earlier version of Mt 28.16-20. Marks speaks of the signs that will accompany those who believe as a result of the proclamation, *inter alia*, the believers will pick up snakes and drink poison and still remain unharmed. For those who swear by the mandate-theology, I wish to say that I have not met any such person, even though I have visited many 'mission stations'!
104. MCJ, p. 32
105. R. Panikkar, "Mysticism of Jesus the Christ", in B. Baeumer (ed.), *Mysticism in Shaivism and Christianity*, New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1997, pp. 73-178, here p. 118.
106. M.K. Gandhi, *The Complete Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 91 vols. (inc. index vol.), Delhi: Government of India, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Publication

- Division, 1979 - 1988, vol. I, p. 182. I am grateful to my friend, Dr. Pinto (see note 23), for supplying me with this reference.
107. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
 108. *Ibid.*
 109. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
 110. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
 111. Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, nos. 11-12; PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 41; John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, nos. 42-43.
 112. During my lectures, I tell my students: "The Hindu blood running through us is thicker than the few drops of water poured over us in Baptism!"
 113. J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, tr. J. Drury, London: SCM, 1978, p. xv.
 114. K.C. Sen as quoted by Pannikar, "Mysticism of Jesus the Christ", p. 124, ft. nt. 64.
 115. See L.P. Vidyarthi, *Cultural Contours of Tribal Bihar*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1964, pp. 168-75; N.N. Vyas & R.S. Mann, *Indian Tribes in Transition*, Jaipur - Delhi: Rawat Pub., 1980, p. 27; V. Elwin, *A Philosophy for NEFA*, Shillong, Governor of Assam, (1957; 2nd ed. 1959), rep. 1960, pp. 122, 144. For data concerning the alienation of converts of low castes, see S. Anand, "Evangelization in Hindu Context: Theological Trends, Positive Experiences and Main Difficulties", *Evangelization and Inter-Religious Dialogue*, Rome: Salesian Centre for Missions, 1994, pp. 121-45, here pp. 126-28; "Evangelization among the Hindus", *Indian Missiological Review*, 16/3 (1994, Sept.), pp. 57-74, here pp. 60-61.
 116. See L.P. Vidyarthi & B.K. Rai, *The Tribal Culture of India*, Delhi: Concept Pub., 1977, p. 426. Elwin, *A Philosophy for NEFA*, p. 219.
 117. C.J. Borges, "Christian Life in Goa during Colonial Times", *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies*, 1/2 (July 1998), pp. 34-41, here p. 35a.
 118. M. Amaladoss, "Difficult Dialogue", *VJTR*, 62 (1998), pp. 567-79, here p. 572.
 119. Vidyarthi, *Cultural Contours of Tribal Bihar*, p. 280.
 120. Eng. tr. *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, Vadavathoor (Kottayam): Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, rep. 1992, p. 15.
 121. S. Anand, "Inculturation in India: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow", *Indian Missiological Review*, 19 (1997), 19-34.
 122. G. Plathottam, "Religion and Media: Need for an Ongoing Dialogue", *Mission Today*, 1 (1999), pp. 110-23, here pp. 116-7.
 123. Soares-Prabhu, *Biblical Themes for a Contextual Theology Today*, p. 17. Emphasis added.
 124. S. Kim, "Reflections on Being a Bishop", *FABC Papers*, 35 (1983), pp. 13-20, here p. 17.
 125. See also S. Anand, "Universally Unique and Uniquely Universal", *VJTR*, 55 (1991), pp. 393-424, here pp. 416-24.
 126. F. Wilfred, "Some Tentative Reflections on the Language of Christian Uniqueness: An Indian Perspective", *VJTR*, 57 (1993), pp. 652-72, here p. 670.
 127. See also S. Anand, "Evangelical Poverty and Our Mission in India Today", *VJTR*, 40 (1976), pp. 461-66; and "Some Missiological Implications of the Concept of Incarnation", *Ibid.*, 42 (1978), pp. 35-41.
 128. *ISS*, vol. III, p. 66.

129. Quoted in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 41. Eng. tr. *Evangelization in the Modern World*, New Delhi: CBCI Centre, n.d., p. 41.
130. Brother Roger as quoted by K. Spink, *A Universal Heart: The Life and Vision of Brother Roger of Taizé*, London: SPCK, 1986, p. 136.
131. *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 91. Eng. tr. *On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate*, Bombay: St. Paul Pbs., 1991, p. 150.
132. K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 20, tr. E. Quinn, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981, p. 149. I am grateful to my friend, Dr. Errol D'Lima for providing me this reference.
133. For a more comprehensive treatment of this theme, see S. Anand, "Mission: The Fruit of Contemplation", *Ishvani Documentation and Mission Digest*, 17 (1999), pp. 211-20.

Conversion: Christian Perspectives

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Conversion to Christianity has been a hot topic of discussion in the print media for more than a year now. What is particularly striking in this discussion is the growing opposition to conversion. It is true that in the past, too, many respected Hindus like Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda were against conversion from one religion to another. But recently there has been violent opposition to conversion, especially in Gujarat and Orissa where missionaries have been murdered, churches destroyed and Bibles burnt.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad “wants law to ban conversion”.¹ It demands that “Foreign funds which are being sent for the purpose through various registered trusts should also be stopped immediately.”² In an open letter to Pope John Paul II, on the occasion of his recent visit to India, Swami Dayanda Saraswati wrote:

On behalf of the non-aggressive religions of the world, the Hindu, the Parsi, the Jewish and other native religions in different countries, I request you to put a freeze on conversion and create conditions in which all religious cultures can live and let live.³

M.V. Kamath, too, is of the opinion that “total stop must be ordered (by the Pope) of conversion activities.”⁴

All this invites us Christians to examine our theory and practice of con-

version. We probably need to radically rethink our approach to conversion and redefine the goal of the Church’s mission in our country today. This paper is meant to be a small contribution along these lines.

It begins by examining the arguments that have recently been brought forward against conversion. It goes on to discuss conversion from a theological point of view. It then attempts to develop a new approach to the Church’s mission in India. Finally, by way of conclusion it suggests some practical steps that could be taken to clear up misunderstandings.

1. The Case against Conversion

During the past one year several writers have put forward arguments against the missionary effort to convert people to Christianity. It is to be noted that their opposition is not against isolated individuals who for their own reasons join the Christian community. They are against what is called “planned conversion”, which refers to organized efforts to convert large members from significant sections of society like the Dalits or the tribal people. I shall now summarize their arguments.

1.1. According to M. Rane Jois, a former chief justice of the Punjab and Haryana High Court, planned conversion goes against the spirit of secular-

ism enshrined in the Constitution of India.⁵ “In the constitution, secularism implies respect for all religions, without discrimination”.⁶ But the desire to convert is rooted in intolerance towards other religions. The learned judge agrees with the Supreme Court's interpretation of Article 25 of the Constitution which confers on every citizen the fundamental right to practise and propagate his/her religion. According to the Supreme Court's judgement:

What the Article grants is not the right to convert another person to one's own religion, but to transmit or spread one's religion by an exposition of its tenets.⁷

After explaining some of the reasons against conversion, M. Rama Jois concludes:

Respect for all religions is the essence of our secularism, whereas religious intolerance constitutes the basis of planned conversion. Therefore, conversion cannot be a secular activity.⁸

That intolerance towards other religions is at the basis of the Christian approach to conversion is held by many in our country. In “An Open Letter to Pope John Paul II”, an organization of concerned citizens stated:

Your Holiness have openly declared that salvation has to come only through Christ and not through any other faith. This is where, as the Encyclopedia Britannica observes, Christianity is intolerant towards other faiths. This intolerance makes Christianity aggressive in its efforts to convert others.⁹

1.2. Closely related to intolerance is the tendency to look down on the culture and religiosity of the people of In-

dia. About six years ago, a Texas based group called Gospel for Asia, asserted:

The Indian sub-continent with one billion people is a living example of what happens when Satan rules an entire culture... India is one vast purgatory in which millions of people... are literally living a cosmic lie! Could Satan have devised a more perfect system for causing misery?¹⁰

Recently, *The Times Of India*, Mumbai, reported:

Nearly four dozen Hindus picketed outside a church on Sunday to protest against a Southern Baptist Convention prayer booklet that said Hindus have “darkness in their hearts that no lamp can dispel.” The booklet, released during the Hindu Festival of Divali, contains a number of other phrases considered offensive by Hindus. It has ignited similar protests in Houston and Atlanta.¹¹

A Colorado-based Group of World-wide Christian Mission which calls itself *AD 2000 and Beyond* holds a similar view. About three months ago M.V. Kamath pointed out in *The Times Of India*:

AD 2000 and Beyond described Varanasi, Hinduism's holiest city, as full of temples dedicated to Shiva “an idol whose symbol is a phallus”, and as a city whom many (?) consider the “very seat of Satan”.¹²

It is important to note that though these derogatory statements were made in a foreign country, they were read by many Hindus in India. Besides, some of the leaders of the Charismatic movement as well as the Neo-Pentecostal churches in our country seem to share such sentiments.