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## Conversion: Christian Perspectives

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## 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”.<sup>1</sup> It demands that “Foreign funds which are being sent for the purpose through various registered trusts should also be stopped immediately.”<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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

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.<sup>5</sup> "In the constitution, secularism implies respect for all religions, without discrimination".<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

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?<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

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".<sup>12</sup>

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.

According to T.V.R. Shenoy, implicit in every attempt to convert a person is disrespect for his religion:

Respect begets respect. If the representatives of other faiths don't really respect Hinduism, how do they expect anything in return? And can you imagine a greater act of disrespect than converting someone? Isn't a missionary effectively saying, "Your faith is flawed, but mine is not"?<sup>13</sup>

1.3. M. V. Kamath believes that "Attempts at conversion should be considered a mortal assault on local cultures and should be totally banned."<sup>14</sup>

Swami Dayanada Saraswati thinks that conversion can do damage to the culture of the people of India. He is convinced that Christians are responsible for the destruction of many ancient cultures. He points out:

Further, in many religious traditions, including the Hindu tradition, religion is woven into the fabric of culture. So, destruction of a religion amounts to the destruction of a religious culture. Today, for instance, there is no living Greek culture; there are only empty monuments. The Mayan, the Roman and many other rich cultures are all lost forever and humanity is impoverished for it. Let us at least allow humanity to enjoy the riches of its remaining mosaic of cultures. Each one has some beauty, something to contribute to the enrichment of humanity.<sup>15</sup>

1.4. Attempts at conversion are looked upon as violence. According to the same Swami:

Religions that are committed by their theologies to convert, on the other hand, are necessarily aggressive, since conversion implies a conscious intru-

sion into the religious life of a person, in fact, into the religious person. This is a very deep intrusion, as the religious person is the deepest, the most basic in any individual. When that person is disturbed, a hurt is sustained which is very deep. The religious person is violated, it can produce a martyr. People connected to a converted person are deeply hurt.<sup>16</sup>

1.5. Conversion disrupts social harmony. As M. Rama Jois says:

In view of this, it is clear that planned conversion leads to the disruption of social harmony. Further, it brings about estrangement between blood relations who get converted and those who do not.<sup>17</sup>

From a slightly different point of view, Swami Dayananda Saraswati agrees:

Even the converted person will suffer some hurt underneath. He must necessarily wonder if he has done the right thing and, further, he has to face an inner alienation from his community, a community to which he has belonged for generations, and thus an alienation from his ancestors. I don't think that can ever be fully healed. Religious conversion destroys centuries-old communities and incites communal violence.<sup>18</sup>

The Swami is not the only one who thinks that aggressive efforts at conversion lead to communal conflicts. M. V. Kamath quotes Mr. Jon Stock, the New Delhi correspondent, of the British paper, *The Daily Telegraph*, as saying:

There is little doubt that the current communal tension in India would not be serious if foreign-funded missionaries had been content with giving Indians the choice of Christianity and left it at that.<sup>19</sup>

1.6. Christian missionaries and their work have been accused of being anti-national. A few years ago, Arun Shourie pointed out:

For one thing, intelligence agencies speak specifically of the role of missionaries in stoking the unrest in the Northeast. They point, for instance, to the role of the American Baptist Church in instigating and helping some of the principal secessionist bodies in that area – the N.S.C.N. and others. The role of the Church in Mizoram is directly political.<sup>20</sup>

A few months ago Sultan Shahin asserted:

Another recent example is that of East Timor. The tribals in that area were first converted to Christianity, then encouraged to demand and fight for secession and have now been helped to secede. It is possible that the Indonesian economy was destroyed, in fact, to facilitate this secession. It is no accident that this has encouraged Muslim and Christian secessionists in India.<sup>21</sup>

1.7. Closely connected with this is the political implications of conversion. As Prof. V. V. John, a former member of the Minority Commission, says:

Speaking to my co-religionists, I have had occasion to urge that Christian charity should oblige Christians to develop some understanding of the sensitivity on this point among the followers of other faiths. In a situation where elections are influenced by caste and communal considerations, every convert may represent a vote transferred from one party or group to another.<sup>22</sup>

Saeed Naqvi points out how sensitive the issue of numbers is:

Since the advent of the Muslims in India and the subsequent arrival of the British, large scale conversions have generally fed on the inequalities in the social order. It has obviously been an unequal *entente cordial*. One group does not convert; the others do. Nearly 500 million Muslims, Christians and Buddhists in South Asia were once part of a system the leaders of the Hindu community claim as the social pyramid on which they preside. It would be extremely insensitive of us not to realize that this awareness could periodically bruise Hindu sensibility.<sup>23</sup>

1.8. Christians are often accused of converting people through force or fraud.<sup>24</sup> Besides, there is a growing suspicion that Christians are engaged in education, health services and other charitable activities in order to win converts.<sup>25</sup> This is particularly true of the work done among the poor, the Dalits and the tribal people.<sup>26</sup> It is also alleged that the kind of education imparted in the Christian institutions tends to alienate the people from their cultural moorings. Sultan Shahin states:

The real danger, however, comes from those who were not converted, who were simply brainwashed into considering their own cultures vile, obscurantist and superstitious. . . This is something even the Sangh Parivar doesn't seem to realize. Had it done so it would not have buried the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch quietly and so unceremoniously. Can you find a single neocolonial market-economy enthusiast who is not a product of Christian missionary schools? Not to speak of a capitalist, you will be hard put to find even a notable communist who is the product of a *pathshala* or a *madrasa*.<sup>27</sup>

Most likely, there is a lot of exaggeration in what is said against conversion.<sup>28</sup> It is possible that the people who oppose conversion are politically motivated.<sup>29</sup> All the same, we Christians need to take them seriously if we are concerned about preserving the good will of our fellow-citizens.

## 2. Theological Perspectives

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, conversion is a key concept. We can look at it in three different ways: conversion to God, conversion to Jesus Christ and conversion to the Church. I shall now deal with them separately.

### 2.1. Conversion to God

In the Old Testament it was the prophets who powerfully called people to conversion.<sup>30</sup> For them conversion meant a turning to God. As John L. McKenzie points out:

Conversion is a personal change and not merely a participation in community ritual; it is a total change, the adoption of an entirely new attitude toward Yahweh and an abandonment of all previous attitudes and habits. Both the personal and the total quality of conversion appear most clearly in Hos 2:4-24. It is the return of a faithless wife to a loving husband, a restoration of love and an entire rejection of one's past life and of the false values to which one has been attached. Conversion is the acquisition of love and knowledge (Hos 6:6).<sup>31</sup>

The totality of conversion is stressed also by other prophets (see Is 10:20; 30:15; Jer 25:5f; 26:3-5). The prophets demand that one put one's entire trust in God and repudiate all false

security. Hence, conversion implies the acknowledgement of "Yahweh's total supremacy in all phases of human life and activity."<sup>32</sup> It also means that one does not expect lasting good from any other source.

The idea of conversion in the New Testament is not very different from that in the Old Testament. In the Gospels Jesus begins his public ministry by announcing the good news of the advent of God's Kingdom and calling people to repentance (See Mk 1:14-15). Though the Greek word *metanoein* is here used for repentance, it is meant to express the idea of total conversion. As George-Soares Prabhu explains:

For underlying the Greek *metanoein* of the New Testament is the prophetic ideal of repentance, expressed in the well known Hebrew word *shub* (= 'to be converted', 'to turn'), which in the Old Testament always signifies the turning of the whole man to God (Is 31:6; Jer 3:12-14; Hos 41:1). In line with this, the repentance demanded by Jesus involves the whole man and not a compartment of his life; and it involves him in a dramatic positive movement of turning to God, and not primarily in the negative movement of turning away from sin.<sup>33</sup>

There are three aspects to the New Testament idea of conversion to God which it is important to note.<sup>34</sup>

1) The call to conversion is universal. It is addressed to Jews and gentiles alike. Paul tells the elders of Ephesus: "With Jews and Gentiles alike, I insisted on conversion before God..." (Acts 20:21; see also Acts 2:38; 3:26; 10:43; 17:30). It is in the first chapters of the letter to the Romans that Paul

demonstrates how “all, both the Jews and the Greeks, are under the power of sin” (Rom 3:9) and hence stand in need of conversion (see Rom 3:23). Commenting on these chapters of the letter, Cranfield says:

Paul himself reckoned that, by describing. . . the obvious sinfulness of the heathen, he was, as a matter of fact, describing the basic sinfulness of fallen man as such, the inner reality of the life of Israel no less than that of the Gentiles . . . So we understand these verses as the revelation of the gospel’s judgement of all men, which lays bare not only the idolatry of ancient and modern paganism but also the idolatry ensconced in Israel, in the Church and in the life of each believer.<sup>35</sup>

2) Jesus praises the people of Nineveh for positively responding to the preaching of Jonah:

The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here! (Mt 12:41)

It is significant that according to the book of Jonah the Ninevites, who were Gentiles, do not get converted to the religion of Jonah. They merely “turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands”. And they “cry mightily to God” (Jon 3:9). In short, they are only converted to God. It is remarkable how the book carefully distinguishes the Lord God (*Yahweh Elohim*) to whom Jonah prays from God (*Elohim*) to whom the Ninevites cry for mercy.

3) According to the New Testament, it is God who takes the initiative in conversion. As Lucien Legrand says:

Awareness of sin and conversion are not the ultimate contents of the biblical message. In Jesus’ summary of the Gospel in Mark 1:14, the call to conversion comes only in second position. It is subordinated to the first part of the proclamation: “The time is fulfilled; the Kingdom of God is at hand”. In other words, it all begins with the gift of God’s grace. The Gospel’ is primarily what the word means: Good News.<sup>36</sup>

For Jesus, the good news is the advent of the Kingdom of God. Since the proclamation of the Kingdom is the revelation of God’s unconditional love for us, repentance consists in our total acceptance of this love.<sup>37</sup> That is why Mark interprets repentance as believing in the good news (see Mk 1:15). “To believe in the good news (to repent) is therefore to accept the fact (personally and not merely notionally) that God loves us, and to allow our lives to be transformed by this love (see I Jn 4:7-12).”<sup>38</sup>

It is such a radical conversion to God which leads to a real transformation of life that resonates with our Hindu brothers and sisters. In a recent article in *The Times Of India*, O. P. Sharma speaks of two types of conversion – the lower and the higher.<sup>39</sup> He terms that conversion “lower” which is “undergone more for socio-economic reasons than the desire for the highest spiritual enlightenment.”<sup>40</sup> However undesirable this type of conversions may be, he points out, they would appear to be justified “in those cases where people have

resorted to them in order to escape the otherwise inescapable caste and other oppressions.”<sup>41</sup> The higher kind of conversion is that which brings about a ‘basic change’ or transformation in life. This involves a “spiritual rebirth”. Sharma shows how this is stressed in the Hindu tradition:

The *Bhagavad-Gita* talks of a great *durachari*, sinner, becoming a saint under its influence, and he that was ‘an ajnani’ and ‘a totally self-centred person’, from which all evil and wickedness ensue, eventually becoming ‘a wise’ and ‘Self’-centred person. Here, the ‘Self’ stands for the Supreme Divine present in all beings. Such a transformed person then conducts himself as a well-wisher and promoter of the good of the entire humanity’, *sarvabhutahite ratah*: - a veritable blessing unto himself and the society.<sup>42</sup>

Sharma believes that the Bible also urges “renewing of one’s mind”, the need to be “transformed,” to “be born again” in the Spirit. In this context he refers to Mt 18:3; Lk 22:32; Acts 3:19. Paul’s idea of conversion as progressive turning away from the ‘flesh’ to “the Spirit” comes very close to this (see Gal 5: 13-26). In his view conversion means that a person is touched and transformed by the Spirit of God so that the fruits of the Spirit are present in his/her life (see Gal 5:22; 2 Cor 3:17).

## 2.2. Conversion to Jesus Christ

During his ministry, Jesus had proclaimed the kingdom of God. After his death and resurrection, the Apostles proclaimed Christ. It has been pointed out that while *basilea* (the Kingdom) is used 116 times in the Synoptic Gospels it is

used only 14 times in the letters of St. Paul. On the other hand, Christ is used only 36 times in the Synoptics while it is used 379 times in Paul.<sup>43</sup> This is understandable since the Apostolic Church believed that the Kingdom was realized in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Hence, for the early Church preaching Jesus Christ, the Risen Lord, is not a rejection of Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom. It is merely an affirmation that the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth has actually been realized in the glorified Christ.

Only very rarely does the New Testament speak of conversion to Jesus Christ. In the Second Letter to the Corinthians Paul refers to conversion, that is, turning to the Lord Jesus Christ which can lead to freedom and transformation (see 2 Cor 3:16-18). And the First Letter of Peter tells the Christians that they had gone astray like sheep, but have now returned, that is, have been converted to Jesus Christ, their shepherd and guardian (see 1 Pt 2:25). These are probably the only passages which explicitly deal with conversion to Jesus Christ.

However, the idea of conversion to Christ is also conveyed through phrases like ‘faith in Christ’ or ‘baptism in the name of Jesus’. In the New Testament, the response to the Apostolic preaching is faith in Jesus Christ (see Acts 5:14; 9:42; 11:17; Gal 2:16; Eph 1:15; Col 1:4). In the Acts, there is repeated mention of baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus (see 2:28; 8:16; 19:5). And Paul has developed a rich theology of baptism. He believes that through



baptism a Christian participates in the death and resurrection of Christ (see Rom 6:3-11). J. L. McKenzie brings out the relationship between faith, baptism and new life when he states:

The content of Christian faith for Paul was that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah), Lord, Son of God, that He died and through His death delivered us from our sins and was raised from the dead and through His resurrection communicates new life to those who believe in Him and are baptized.<sup>44</sup>

Closely connected with conversion to Jesus Christ is the Christian claim that Jesus Christ is the one and only saviour of humankind. We find the beginnings of this claim already in the New Testament. According to John, Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father (see Jn 14:6). He is the one mediator between God and humankind (see 1 Tim 2:5). And Acts categorically asserts:

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

It is significant that in our own day Pope John Paul II refers to these and similar texts of the New Testament to affirm the uniqueness and universality of salvation in Jesus Christ.<sup>45</sup> He is firmly convinced that all humans receive salvation as a gift from Christ. In his own words:

From the first moment of time to its end, Jesus is the one universal Mediator. Even for those who do not explicitly profess faith in him as the Saviour, salvation comes as a grace from Jesus Christ through the communication of the Holy Spirit.<sup>46</sup>

Reacting to such statements of the Pope in the recent Post-Synodal Apos-

tolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia In Asia*, Arun Shourie remarks:

In India we are taught to believe that God is everywhere, that he has manifested Himself in many forms, and that, therefore, we must subscribe to *sarva dharma samabhav*, etc. The Pope has no time for such syrupy make-believe. In his eyes this is no virtue, it is one of the difficulties in making Asians accept that Jesus is the one and only Saviour, it is a notion that has to be put out of harm's way.<sup>47</sup>

In the multi-religious context of our country we Indian Christians need to re-think our understanding and interpretation of Jesus Christ. It is significant that during the Asian Synod in April-May, 1998, many bishops referred to the difficulties which the Church in Asia faces in proclaiming Jesus Christ as the only Saviour. As *Ecclesia in Asia* reports:

Some of the followers of the great religions of Asia have no problem in accepting Jesus as a manifestation of the Divine or the Absolute, or as an 'enlightened one'. But it is difficult for them to see Him as the only manifestation of the Divine. In fact, the effort to share the gift of faith in Jesus as the only Saviour is fraught with philosophical, cultural and theological difficulties, especially in light of the beliefs of Asia's great religions, deeply intertwined with cultural values and specific world-views.<sup>48</sup>

Unfortunately no new articulation of our faith in Jesus Christ is to be found in the Post-Synodal Exhortation. Nor do I have a new interpretation to offer.

However, I would like to put forward some considerations which might help us in our search for a fresh under-

standing of the significance of Jesus Christ in India today.

1) Jesus did not preach himself. His entire ministry was centred on the Kingdom of God.<sup>49</sup> It was the main theme of his preaching (Mk 1:14-15), the referent of most of his parables (Mt 13:1-52), and the content of his symbolic actions like the table-fellowship with publicans and prostitutes (Mk 2:15-17). And his miracles, too, were signs of the advent of the kingdom (Lk 11:20). The early Church believed that the Kingdom of God was actually realized in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Hence, its preaching of Christ was intimately related to the Kingdom which Jesus announced. As L. Legrand observes:

Therefore proclaiming the *basileia* does not just amount to advocating a set of values. It refers to the eikon Jesus gave of it and to the "power of the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead" (Rom 8:11). Reciprocally, preaching Christ means proclaiming what Jesus Christ stood for and died for. In saying Jesus, we evoke the eikon, the concrete image, which Jesus gave of his Father, of his will and of his reign. In saying Christ, we evoke the divine power of the Resurrection at work in this human image.<sup>50</sup>

2) As far as I can see, the core message of Christianity is God's offer of love, forgiveness and salvation to sinful humans in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Or, as John Paul II expresses it, "Through Jesus' paschal Sacrifice *the Father inevitably offers reconciliation and fullness of life to the world.*"<sup>51</sup> This core message has been interpreted and articulated in culturally conditioned ways. This is true of the

New Testament as well as the dogmatic formulations of the Church down the centuries. Is it right to claim that such formulations express "the Christological doctrine in an appropriate and universal way?"<sup>52</sup> Can there be any human formation which is appropriate to every time, place and culture? Or, should one speak of alienation? That is what Sebastian Kappen believes.<sup>53</sup> As he points out:

What a far cry from this Jesus, who is so much like us and yet in his very likeness stands out as the wholly other, is the Christ of dogma! The latter is Jesus transmuted as he was made to pass through the Greco-Roman mould of thinking. He came out of this mould fragmented into abstractions such as person, nature, hypostasis, body, soul, substance, quality, quantity, essence, and existence.<sup>54</sup>

The end-result of it all is the loss of the challenging call of Jesus: Come, follow me! This has been replaced by the question: Do you believe in this formulation?

3. In the Christian scheme of things Jesus Christ is not the origin and the final goal of our life. God the Father is. He is the source of creation and salvation. It is he who sent Jesus to realize his plan of salvation. Or, as Paul expresses it, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19). And the Father is the final goal of all things (see 1 Cor 8:6). In the words of Paul:

When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all (1 Cor 15:28)

John Paul II recently wrote:

The saving action of Jesus has its origin in the communion of the Godhead, and opens the way for all who believe in him to enter into intimate communion with the Trinity and with one another in the Trinity.<sup>55</sup>

From this point of view, one can say that Christian life and Christian theology must be theocentric. G. Soares-Prabhu assures us:

Such a theocentric focus is nothing to be embarrassed about, for it is completely faithful to the Bible. The biblical story begins and ends not with the Church nor even with Jesus Christ but only with God who is all in all (Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 8:6). It may be the task of an Indian theology to restore this theocentric focus to a Western Christianity, which, because it tends to stop short at Jesus (who is the way not the goal); or, worse, because it tends to sacralize the Church (which is a symbol and the servant of the Kingdom, but not the Kingdom itself), may have lost its sense of the overwhelming reality of God.<sup>56</sup>

4) In a thought-provoking article, Joseph Neuner has called our attention to the dangers to which a Christocentric approach to mission is exposed.<sup>57</sup> He is comparing the different theological approaches which *Ad Gentes* of Vatican II and *Redemptoris Missio* of John Paul II have adopted. The Council begins with “the vision of God’s saving plan for all people and then proceeds to the realization of God’s plan in Jesus Christ”. “Jesus’ person and work, unfolded in their full significance, are placed in the context of God’s all-embracing love.”<sup>58</sup> The encyclical begins with the chapter on “Jesus Christ the

only Saviour.” The centrality of Jesus Christ is the constant concern of the document. True, it refers to the universality of God’s saving plan, but its perspective is much narrower than the Council’s. In this *Redemptoris Missio* returns to a theological approach that prevailed in the Church before Vatican II. And this Christocentric approach is fraught with many dangers. As Neuner points out:

In retrospect we have become aware of the serious deviations which darkened many chapters in our history: for centuries the centrality of Jesus Christ has blinded many Christians to the treasures of wisdom and beauty bestowed by God on people of other cultures; it led many to a negative, often deeply offensive, attitude towards other religions; it could bring about a spirit of superiority in Christian nations alien to the spirit of Jesus. Instead of following Jesus Christ who came not to be served but to serve, Christians became, in his name, masters and lords.<sup>59</sup>

### 2.3. *Conversion to the Church*

During the New Testament times there was no conscious effort to win converts to the Church. The growth of the Church seems to have been a by-product of the preaching of the gospel. In fact, St. Paul says: “Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel” (I Cor 1:17).

Acts of the Apostles describes the gradual emergence of a Christian community at first in Jerusalem and then in different parts of the Roman empire. At the beginning it was Peter who proclaimed the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. Those who welcomed the

message were baptized and so became members of the Church (see Acts 2: 41-42; 4:4). It is not at all clear if the Jewish Christian community at Jerusalem thought of itself as a new religion. For they kept the Jewish law, worshipped in the temple and accepted the Old Testament as their sacred scripture. And they preached the gospel to no one except the Jews (see Acts 11:19). Most probably the community at Jerusalem regarded itself as part of Israel, maybe as a Jewish sect which accepted Jesus as the Messiah. In the meantime, through the apostolic activities of Paul, Barnabas and others Gentile Christian communities came into existence in Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Galatia, Rome etc. These were surely communities of people who believed in Jesus Christ as their saviour. But did they think of themselves as the part of a new religion? Probably not. It was only after the destruction of the temple in 70 AD and the expulsion of Christians from the Synagogues that they began to think of themselves as distinct from the Jews.

Converting people to the Church became a major concern only after the doctrine of the necessity of Church for salvation began to be taught. Though Irenaeus and Ignatius of Antioch may have hinted at it, it was Origen and Cyprian who in the third century clearly articulated it.<sup>60</sup> After that it was widely held that outside the Church there is no salvation.<sup>61</sup> It was the eagerness to save the souls of the non-Christian peoples of the world that was the driving force of the missionary effort of the Church from the 16th century onwards. Speaking of the missionaries of that era, E. C. Dewick says: "Their purpose was sim-

ply to rescue souls from the clutches of heathenism in this world and from the fires of hell in the next."<sup>62</sup>

With Vatican II there was a marked change in the Church's approach. In unambiguous terms the Council declared:

Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience (*LG* 16).

Vatican II also holds the non-Christians can have saving faith (*AG* 7) and that "the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery" (*GS* 22). Such an understanding of the possibilities of salvation open to those who are not members of the Church shows that working for the conversion of people to the Church need not be a top priority for us.

This was the way Paul VI seems to have looked at evangelization (see *EN* 18-20). However, John Paul II stresses the need for baptism and membership of the Church:

Conversion to Christ is joined to Baptism not only because of the Church's practice, but also by the will of Christ himself, who sent the Apostles to make disciples of all nations and to baptize them (cf. Mt 28:19). Conversion is also joined to Baptism because of the intrinsic need to receive the fullness of new life in Christ. As Jesus says to Nicodemus: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, one cannot enter the Kingdom

of God" (Jn 3:5). In Baptism, in fact, we are born anew to the life of God's children, united to Jesus Christ and anointed in the Holy Spirit. Baptism is not simply a seal of conversion, a kind of external sign indicating conversion and attesting to it. Rather, it is the Sacrament which signifies and effects rebirth from the Spirit, establishes real and unbreakable bonds with the Blessed Trinity, and makes us members of the Body of Christ, which is the Church (RM 47).

The Pope is aware that there are people who, though they profess an interior commitment to Christ, do not wish to receive baptism and become part of the Church for a variety of reasons. He wishes to remind them that, "if they feel drawn to Christ, it was he himself who desired that the Church should be the "place" where they would in fact find him" (RM 47).

The Pope's views should not make us go in for aggressive proselytising in our country. In November, 1999, John Paul II was in India to release the Post-Synodal Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, which contains the statement "that in the Third Millennium a great harvest of faith will be reaped in this vast and vital continent."<sup>63</sup> This statement created a furore in this country.<sup>64</sup> I think that we need to change our approach to the question of conversion to the Church. It is true that we have the God-given right to make Jesus Christ and his message known to the people of India. This is also a constitutional right in our country. All the same, we have to be sensitive to the feelings of people who have been aggrieved by our method of approach in the past. I like the way

Maulana Mahfoozur Rahman looks at conversion to Islam. He says:

While propagation of Islam is our fundamental right and we cannot close the doors of Islam for non-Muslims, as for instance, Zoroastrians have done, I don't think it is our religious duty to embark on a massive campaign of conversion of non-Muslims to Islam in the circumstances prevailing in India at present.<sup>65</sup>

Could not the Church in India, too, take such a stand?

### 3. Priorities in the Church's Mission Today

What has been said about conversion in the preceding section leads to a discussion of the goals of our mission. In this section I shall highlight three which I consider to be very important in the context of India today.

#### 3.1. *Creation of a New Humanity*

For centuries the salvation of souls had been thought of as the goal of the Church's mission. But the realisation gradually dawned that God can and does save humans even without the Church. This led to a rethinking of the mission. The purpose of mission then was said to be the planting of the Church in areas and among peoples who do not yet believe in Christ. This is the way Vatican II describes the mission of the Church (See AG 6; LG 17). The intention seems to be to make the Church, the universal sacrament of salvation, present throughout the world as a constant invitation to people to turn to God in true repentance.

This Church-centred approach is not acceptable to many today. They believe that just as Jesus' life and minis-

try was centred on the Kingdom of God, so too the Church's mission should be directed to the establishment of the Kingdom. After a careful investigation of the biblical story, George Soares-Prabhu comes to the conclusion:

Christian mission therefore must not forget the primacy of God's Reign, and so the ultimate primacy of God. Like all Christian life, Christian mission too is theocentric, not Christocentric, much less ecclesiocentric. It is always God and God's Reign that is the goal (1 Cor 15:26), Christ who is the way (Jn 14:26), and the Church the concrete locus ("the body") of this way in our world (1 Cor 12:27). The concerns of Christian mission therefore extend beyond the interests of the Church to embrace all the manifold demands of the Reign of God. The cosmic, historical and spiritual dimensions of the biblical story must enter into Christian mission so that its horizons are as large as the cosmos (for God the Redeemer is also God the Creator who does not abandon creation) and its concerns embrace (like the biblical story) every aspect of human and cosmic liberation.<sup>66</sup>

In recent years, the magisterium of the Church began to speak of the centrality of the Kingdom of God. Already in 1964 Vatican II had said that the Church had received the mission to proclaim and establish the Kingdom of God (see *LG* 5). Eleven years later, Paul VI stated that Christ, as an evangelizer, first of all proclaimed the Kingdom of God and that the Church's mission is centred on the Kingdom of God (see *EN* 8; 34). He also asserted that the Church "refuses to replace the proclamation of the Kingdom" by the proclamation of a

merely this-worldly human liberation (*EN* 34). John Paul II also teaches that the Church's mission is to proclaim the Kingdom of God and work for its perfect and definitive realization (see *RM* 12).

According to Soares-Prabhu, the Kingdom of God points to Jesus' vision of a new society.<sup>67</sup> In his opinion, the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus "is ultimately his *revelation of God's unconditional love*".<sup>68</sup> And he goes on to state:

When the revelation of God's love (the Kingdom) meets its appropriate response in man's trusting acceptance of this love (repentance), there begins a mighty movement of personal and societal liberation which sweeps through human history. The movement brings *freedom* inasmuch it liberates each individual from the inadequacies and obsessions that shackle him. It fosters *fellowship*, because it empowers free individuals to exercise their concern for each other in genuine community. And it leads on to *justice*, because it impels every true community to adopt the just societal structures which alone make freedom and fellowship possible. Freedom, fellowship and justice are thus the parameters of the Kingdom's thrust towards the total liberation of man. Together they spell out the significance of the Kingdom, and tell us what the Kingdom, in practice, means today.<sup>69</sup>

Hence, for the Church to work for the Kingdom of God is to collaborate with God for ushering in a new society.

Paul VI also believes that the Church's mission is to create a new humanity:

For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its in-

fluence transforming humanity from within and making it new: "Now I am making the whole of creation new" (EN 18).

John Paul II holds a similar view:

Working for the Kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God's activity, which is present in human history and transforms it. Building the Kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms (RM 15).

Taking all this into account I would say that the Church's mission in India today is to work for the creation of a new human community which is rooted in God, which is characterized by equality, freedom, love, justice and peace and communion which lives in peace and harmony with nature.

But if the Church in India seriously commits itself to the creation of a new society, it shall face strong opposition from all those who profit from the unjust society existing among us. There is reason to believe that the opposition to the Church's missionary activity stems, at least partly, from the realization that it has "an empowering impact on significant sections of adivasis, dalits and poor and subordinated groups in general".<sup>70</sup> As Sumit Sarkar remarks:

Today, with the Churches clearly changing in quite striking ways, there is ample evidence of far greater awareness of such issues among many - though of course very far from all - Christian activists in India. And perhaps it is precisely these aspects that arouse the greatest anger and fear among adherents of Hindutva. Certainly Arun Shourie's widely-circulated anti-Christian tirade, *Missionaries in India* (1994), is very clear on

this point. It begins, and ends, with a violent denunciation of the ways in which the Church today, "spurred by the new 'liberation theology,' is spurring movements among so-called 'dalits'" - movements which he fears "would certainly disrupt Hindu society."<sup>71</sup>

Walter Fernandes concurs with this view:

Today many Christians, like their counterparts belonging to other religions, view an unjust society as a social sin. To them, evangelization means struggling for the liberation of the victims of injustice. They are, therefore, a threat to those with a vested interest in poverty. The reaction of the oppressors is to demonise them and rouse religious emotions by accusing them of converting the poor. In other cases they are physically eliminated. For example, Sr. Sunita Mary was murdered near Indore in 1995 because she was struggling for the liberation of bonded labourers. Her murderers remain free till today. So are the murderers of Fr. A. T. Thomas who was working for the land rights of Dalits.<sup>72</sup>

I think that it is the Church's vocation earnestly to work for the realization of God's dreams for a new human community in our land and be prepared to pay the price.

### 3.2. *Inter-religious Dialogue*

Vatican II strongly urged Catholics to dialogue and collaborate with the followers of other religions. In *Nostra Aetate* it stated:

The Church, therefore, has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collabo-

ration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture (NA 2).

The Council also advocated inter-religious collaboration for the promotion of peace in the world:

Since God the Father is the origin and purpose of all men, we are all called to be brothers. Therefore, if we have been summoned to the same destiny, which is both human and divine, we can and we should work together without violence and deceit in order to build up the world in genuine peace (GS 92).

Both Paul VI and John Paul II have championed interreligious dialogue.<sup>73</sup> During the past 40 years the Church in India has taken some steps to promote such dialogue.

Recently, when opposition to Christian missionary activity made conversion a hot topic of discussion in our country the importance of interreligious dialogue was stressed. Writing in *The Times Of India*, T. V. R. Shenoy pointed out:

The Catholic Church took some steps forward in initiating a debate with other faiths after the Second Vatican Council. It would be a pity if hot-heads – on both sides – derailed whatever little progress has been made since then. This is the time for conversation and not conversions, certainly not for confrontations.<sup>74</sup>

This is a welcome development. But unfortunately the Catholic Church does not have a theology that promotes

genuine dialogue with the followers of other religions. Vatican II had already declared:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims and must ever proclaim Christ, “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6), in whom men find the fullness of religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (Cf. 2 Cor 5:18-19) (NA 2).

The Council<sup>1</sup> also held that whatever truth and goodness was found in the world religions is a gift of Christ (see LG 16). Hence, it spoke of “seeds of the Word” which lay hidden in the religious traditions of non-Christian peoples (see AG 11).

If the Church really believes that humans can find the *fullness of religious life* only in Jesus Christ and that the positive elements in the world religions are merely a ray of Christ the Truth, how can she enter into dialogue with the followers of these religions with honesty and respect? Recently John Paul II wrote:

Christians bring to interreligious dialogue the firm belief that the fullness of salvation comes from Christ alone and that the Church community to which they belong is the ordinary means of salvation.<sup>75</sup>

Then he added:

Indeed, the Synod Fathers readily recognized the Spirit's action in Asian



societies, cultures and religious, through which the Father prepares the hearts of Asian peoples for the fullness of life in Christ.<sup>76</sup>

These statements of the Pope provoked a negative reaction in India. As Arun Shourie remarked:

Yes, Asia has many religions. Yes, the Asian people have sought answers to the deepest questions of life. But these religions are just a preparation for their becoming Christians. That is the essential point.<sup>77</sup>

In the last analysis the Church does not show any readiness to acknowledge the world religious as valuable and salvific *in their own right*. They have to be respected *in their otherness*. In this connection I wish to point to a line thought which is found in Vatican II. *Ad Gentes* speaks of the “treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth” (AG 11). And the Pastoral Constitution adds;

Each branch of the human family possesses in itself and in its worthier traditions some part of the spiritual treasure entrusted by God to humanity, even though many do not know the source of this treasure (GS 86).

I wonder why the Catholic Church cannot honestly admit that God in ways known only to himself distributes his gifts and graces among the followers of other religions. In the middle ages theologians held that God is not bound by the sacraments. Though the sacraments are channels of grace, God can bestow his grace on people without the sacraments. Can something similar be said of Jesus Christ who is the Primordial Sacrament of the encounter between God and humans?

It is heartening to note that the Fathers of the Asian Synod showed some willingness to recognize the other religions in their otherness. They declared:

Interreligious relations are best developed in a context of openness to other believers, a willingness to listen and the desire to respect and understand others in their differences. For all this, love of others is indispensable.<sup>78</sup>

At a time when communalism threatens to tear apart the very fabric of our nation, we Christians should do all we can to practise and promote interreligious dialogue and collaboration in our country.

### 3.3. Inculturation

Ever since Vatican II the leaders of the Church have insisted on inculturation. In the recently published Post-Synodal Exhortation *Ecclesia In Asia*, John Paul II wrote:

Through inculturation the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is, and a more effective instrument of mission. This engagement with cultures has always been part of the Church's pilgrimage through history. But it has a special urgency today in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural situation of Asia, where Christianity is still too often seen as foreign.<sup>79</sup>

The document singles out key areas of inculturation – theological reflection, liturgy, the formation of priests and religious, catechesis and spirituality.<sup>80</sup>

There is a vast literature on inculturation available in India today. I do not wish to add to it, I merely intend to point out that the growth of Hindutva

has given a new urgency to inculturation. In the perspective of Hindutva, the Church's efforts to establish Christian communities through mission is viewed as a means to destroy the cultural identity that binds together the people of India. Hence, we need to make sure that the communities we establish are truly Indian and genuinely Christian. This calls for a radical decolonization (that is, the removal of the remnant of our colonial past) and a thorough insertion of the Christian faith and the Gospel way of life into the culture of our people. Every aspect of the Church's life should be inculturated.

Besides, we need to counteract the attempt of the Sangh Parivar to promote cultural nationalism. Serious efforts are being made to undermine the composite culture of India and impose on every one a uniform, oppressive culture. The culture of the High Castes, especially the Brahmins, is canonised as the culture of India. It is here that we Christians along with all people of good will should strive to promote our rich cultural heritage. We can do it credibly and effectively only if we are thoroughly inculturated.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Before I conclude this article I wish to suggest some practical steps we Christians can take to clear up misunderstandings about our approach to conversion.

4.1. The Church in India should scrupulously follow the policy enunciated by Vatican II:

The Church strictly forbids forcing anyone to embrace the faith, or allur-

ing or enticing people by unworthy techniques. By the same token, she also strongly insists on a person's right not to be deterred from the faith by unjust vexations on the part of others. In accord with the Church's very ancient custom, a convert's motives should be looked into, and if necessary, purified (AG 13).

4.2. We need to ensure that our educational apostolate, our health services and our social involvements are not in any way geared to conversion. They should be expressions of our love for our fellow-citizens and concern for their welfare. In this area we have to be totally transparent.

4.3. The success of our mission in India should not be measured by the number of converts we have won for the Church. Rather, it should be measured by the contribution we have made towards the establishment of God's Kingdom in our land. It is a well-known fact that millions of people in India are admirers and disciples of Jesus, though they are not members of the Church, and that they live by the values of the Gospel. In fact, the Indian society is deeply affected by the Kingdom values of equality, freedom, love, justice and peace. These values are also enshrined in the Constitution of India.

If the establishment of the Kingdom of God is our primary goal, then we will have no problem in collaborating with persons, movements and associations which are working for the liberation of the poor, the Dalits, the tribal people, and women and for the promotion of ecological balance. Instead of being a ghetto Church doing its own thing, we are called to be active collabo-

rators in the noble task of creating a new India – the India of our dreams.

4.4. In this time of stress we need to have faith in the people of India. By and large our people are respectful and tolerant of other religions. The Sangh Parivar which advocates Hindutva do not really represent the majority of Indians, not even the majority of Hindus. This was evident from the fact that so many Indians, including many Hindus, came out in support of the Christian community during the past year when conversion to Christianity was vehemently opposed by a section of the press. From 1947-1949, when the Constitution of India was being framed, the Christian community took a courageous

stand. It stated in unambiguous terms that it wanted to be part of the mainstream of national life and did not need any reserved seats in Parliament.

Let us preserve this proud heritage of our community.

4.5. In some parts of this country Christians, especially Christian missionaries, are facing a difficult time. They are being opposed and harassed in a variety of ways. There is a temptation to react to it violently. Let us not yield to this temptation. This is the time to be true Christians – non-violent and peaceful. The difficulties and problems we face today are a challenge to us to be true disciples of the man who died on a cross praying for those who crucified him.

## Notes

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4. M. V. Kamath, "Mission Impossible," in *The Times Of India*, Mumbai, October 13, 1999, p. 18.
5. See M. Rama Jois, "Conversion, Fruit of Intolerance," in *The Indian Express*, Pune, November 25, 1999, p. 8.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. As reported in *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, November 7, 1999, p. 1.
10. As quoted in A. Shourie, *Missionaries in India*, New Delhi: ASA Publications, 1994, p. 47.
11. As reported in *The Times Of India*, Mumbai, November 23, 1999, p. 11.
12. *The Times Of India*, Mumbai, October 13, 1999, p. 18.
13. T.V.R. Shenoy, "A Time for Conversation, not Conversion," *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, November 5, 1999, p. 8.
14. *The Times Of India*, Mumbai, October 13, 1999, p. 18.
15. *The New Indian Express*, Bangalore, October 29, 1999, p. 8.
16. *Ibid.*

17. *The Indian Express*, Pune, November 25, 1999, p. 8.
18. *The Times Of India*, Bangalore, October 29, 1999, p. 8.
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29. See S. Sarkar, "Conversions and the Sangh Parivar," in *The Hindu*, Delhi, November 9, 1999, p. 10; R. Dhavan, "Christians in India," in *The Hindu*, Coimbatore, November 5, 1999, p. 10.
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34. See L. Legrand, "Conversion in the Bible: A Diological Process," in J. Mattam and S. Kim (ed.), *Mission and Conversion - A Reppraisal*, Mumbai: St. Pauls, 1996, pp. 18-24.
35. As quoted by L. Legrand, *Loc. Cit.*, p. 22.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
37. See. G. Soares-Prabhu, "The Kingdom of God . . .," p. 600.
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39. O. P. Sharma, "Conversion is of the Heart and the Mind," in *The Times Of India*, Mumbai, November 20, 1999, p. 12.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*
43. See L. Legrand, "Good News, Kingdom and Conversion," (unpublished), p. 4.
44. J. L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 269.
45. John Paul II, *Ecclesia In Asia*, Nr. 12.
46. *Ibid.*, Nr. 14.
47. A. Shourie, "The Pope Dispels All Doubts!" *Maharastra Herald*, Pune, November 20, 1999, p. 4.
48. *Ecclesia in Asia*, Nr. 20.

49. See G. Soares-Prabhu, "The Kingdom of God . . .," p. 584.
50. L. Legrand, "Good News, Kingdom and Conversion," p. 5.
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52. *Ibid.*, Nr. 20.
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77. A. Shourie, "The Pope Dispels All Doubts," in *Maharashtra Herald*, Pune, November 20, 1999, p. 4.
78. John Paul II, *Ecclesia In Asia*, Nr. 31.
79. *Ibid.*, Nr. 21.
80. *Ibid.*, Nr. 22.

## **The Challenges to Christian Mission Today**

### **Consolidated Report of a CCBI Consultation**

#### **Introduction**

During the past few years events have occurred in India which have disturbed the peace in the country and have had an unsettling effect on the Church and the services she offers. Fundamentalist forces have viewed the Church's services with disfavour and have embarked on a programme of acute harassment. In view of these happenings, the CCBI Commission for Proclamation organised a consultation that was held in Ishvani Kendra, Pune, during December 4-6, 1999. About 35 persons attended the consultation. Among them were bishops, theologians, sociologists, anthropologists, journalists and others. The participants decided to record the main themes and ideas that were shared in the seminar and to prepare a consolidated text of the same. The text does not claim to be a statement!

After the inaugural session which included a prayer service, a word of welcome from the director of Ishvani Kendra and a briefing on the dynamics of the consultation, papers were presented. Workshops and general sessions followed after which the participants entrusted a group to finalise the consolidated report.

#### **A. Papers**

1) The *first* paper "The Christian Response to Harassment: A Deeper Commitment to the Gospel" considered the upheavals of the present and the particular challenges they address to the Christian Church. It cautioned against pitting Indians one against the other; instead, it invited all to engage in constant interaction, creative and critical dialogue, mutual education, and collaborative efforts. In doing so Indians would arrive at what is noblest and best in our country's heritage. This would be the ultimate flowering of our great Indian civilisation.

2) The *second* paper "Culture, Nation and Conversion: Issues in Mission Today" studied the question of national identity and the cultural foundations of modern India. Efforts have been made to distort the true course of our nation's history by claiming a monochromatic civilisation where the interests of the upper castes are cultivated. As a result, we observe today the emergence of contrasting interests and the politicisation of culture between the privileged upper castes and the lower, the former vigorously clinging to their traditional status, and the latter fighting for justice, equality and human dignity.

While treating of the question of conversion and human freedom, it was

pointed out that conversion has been going on all through the history of India. Adivasis or tribals and other indigenous people have been drawn into the orbit of a Sanskrit world-view. A deeper look into the history of India would reveal that at some point time Buddhism and Jainism were widespread, but today they have been reduced to small minority religions because of conversion movements engineered by Brahmanic Hinduism. Hence, conversion did not begin with the advent of Christianity but had already been taking place in India. Dialogue would surely help to understand the true meaning of culture, nation and conversion.

3) The *third* paper "Situating our Mission Today" emphasised the need for restructuring our Christian mission. Such restructuring was necessary so that the Church's mission could be realised among different peoples and in different areas: globalisation, where an unequal and exploitative dependency is continuing; religion, where Hindutva is made out to be a religious creed whereas in fact it is a political strategy; society as a whole, in which Dalits and women have felt empowered to ask for recognition of their human rights and dignity; and finally, the environment, where ecological concerns work towards keeping planet earth safe for the present and future generations.

4) Through the *fourth* paper the biblical significance of such basic terms as 'good news,' 'kingdom,' and conversion was explained. Good news as referred to by Jesus was not naïve optimism but a hope based on unshakeable faith in both the power and the love of

God the Father. God's kingdom was not to be seen primarily as one sociological reality contrasted with others; rather, it referred to an action of God coming with his sovereign power and saving concern. Finally, the term 'conversion' is fraught with ambiguities. Conversion should be subordinated to God the Father's coming and offering his love and hope to a distressed world; it invites us Christians along with others to join in a common pilgrimage of purification leading to a God who remains hidden.

5) The *fifth* paper dwelt with "The Church's Dialogue with the Asian Reality: The Orientations of the CBCI and the FABC." According to the author of this paper, they underscore the urgency and importance of the Church's dialogue with the Asian Reality where the abject poverty of the masses and the plurality of cultures and religions were highlighted. Both the CBCI and the FABC affirm that the Church can fulfil her mission of sharing in God's plan of integral liberation of humans by dialoguing with her context of mission. This would involve a total incarnation of the Church in the Asian Reality.

Even though a paradigm shift—from the emphasis on developmental activities to the promotion of social justice as a constitutive dimension of evangelisation—had taken place in 1971 with the Synod of Bishops, the Church in India is still to make a clear mission statement about her dialogue with the reality of poverty and injustice. Her dialogue with cultures and religions has suffered set-backs not only because of outside interference but also from the lack of enthusiasm to include all aspects