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## Revisiting the Conversion Debate

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**Book Review: *Changing Gods: Rethinking Conversion in India*, Rudolf C. Heredia, (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2007. ISBN-13: 978-0-14310-190-1; ISBN-10: 0-14310-190-0; pp. xii–386, Rs 350.)**

### Preliminary Remarks

There has been an on-going debate on conversion for many years in India. Before India's independence, the discourse on conversion became very intense and complex between Gandhi and the Christian missionaries. Recently there have been quite a few significant contributions to this issue from various disciplines. Now Rudolf C. Heredia has made fresh contributions to this debate with the objective of stimulating a total rethinking of the issue in this volume, published by Penguin Books.

*Religious Conversion* is a complex and emotionally charged issue in contemporary India. Already a lot of tears and blood have been shed, and many a life has been sacrificed on its altar. Heredia has taken up this explosive issue for a scholarly, inter-disciplinary analysis in this book. This many-sided, multi-disciplinary research on conversion is presented without any sectarian leanings, with a strong commitment to secular humanism. Incidentally, the author is a devoted Catholic, a Jesuit priest, a concerned sociologist and a committed social activist. He believes that no one can start an inquiry into a burning social issue without personal perspectives and commitments, or personal prejudices and presuppositions. Hence, to be honest and authentic, he promises neither to bury nor to betray his personal beliefs and commitments, but to bracket them for the time being. He hopes to revalue and reshape them with critical and constructive insights gained through this study.

### Methodology

This is explicitly a sociological work and not a theological one. But it has a lot of theological and spiritual implications. The author does not build his arguments in a linear, one-dimensional way. He has consciously opted for the methodology of circular or spiral reiteration: "Points first made are elaborated later to bring a deeper and more comprehensive understanding

to the subject, and hopefully some incisive insight and decisive determination to the reader” (p. xiii). Desiring “to understand in order to be understood, to interpret creatively in order to change constructively”, he tries to bring reflection and action closer together, moving towards praxis, in an action-reflection-action process.

The author illustrates that in times of rapid social and political changes, as well as during cataclysmic natural disasters, ordinary people unable to find solace and security in their own traditional religio-cultural sources, turn to other traditions. In such times there arise aggressive promoters of religious conversion, who want to fish as much as possible in troubled waters, and also the fierce resisters who oppose conversion tooth and nail. But both tend to silence the voices of the converts and suppress even their fundamental freedom and human dignity. In this conflictual situation, Heredia makes an epistemological option to approach the whole issue of conversion from the perspective of those converts, or would-be converts, who see conversion as one of the weapons of the weak.

### Structure and Content

There is a meticulousness about the chapterization of this book. Each chapter contains a wealth of well-researched information leading to deeper insights into the issues discussed. After an introductory **first chapter**, which registers the cacophony of many voices regarding the issue of conversion, **the second chapter** presents very engaging historical information about conversion in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. This helps to explode the popular myths that create stereotyped prejudices about these religions.

The **third chapter** presents a multi-disciplinary analysis of the complex issue of conversion. Religious ‘conversion’ etymologically means ‘to turn around’ or to ‘change completely’ in the spiritual realm. ‘Conversion’ is equivalent to the Greek *metanoia*, frequently used in the Bible, calling for a return to covenantal fidelity in the First Testament, and a commitment to God’s Reign in the Second Testament. Following this trajectory, Christianity had stressed in the past the interior aspect of conversion, almost to the neglect of its socio-political aspects. Whereas the Indic traditions speak of an *atmaparivartan*, equivalent to the western notion of interior conversion, and a *dharmantar* to refer to the change of religion, or *dharma*. The Indian thinkers who oppose religious conversion often describe it as a betrayal of *dharma*.

Toward the end of the book, Heredia shows how the Sanskrit word *dharma* is not an exact equivalent of the English word *religion*. The confusion comes because of the many *dharmas* the Indic traditions have in mind.

Though Hinduism is called *sanatana dharma*, each ethnic group (varna/ caste) has its own *samaj dharma*, binding social obligations. Besides, each individual also can have his/her own *sadhana dharma*, personal spiritual practices, and *svadharma*, the obligations of personal conscience. Those who emphasize the *sanatana dharma* and *samaj dharma* cannot be tolerant to *dharmaantar*, conversion to another religion. But those who stress *sadhana dharma* and *svadharma* will emphasize *atmaparivartan*, the interior transformation, and be open to *dharmaantar*, if it becomes a necessary expression of *atmaparivartan*. The scholarly use of these Indic concepts and terms shows how the writer is deeply rooted in the religious and linguistic traditions of India.

The **fourth chapter** introduces the readers to a holistic approach to the discourse on conversion. Conversion is studied from **psycho-social, socio-cultural, political-economic and religious-spiritual angles**.

As conversion is a multi-faceted phenomenon, it involves a long process. It does not necessarily imply a sudden uprooting of old worldviews and values, replacing them with radically new ones. The author agrees with Lonergan that “conversion is not so much the denial and destruction of value systems and root paradigms as their restatement and transvaluation” (p. 144). This explains how the converts, especially the downtrodden people, generally tend to be at home with multiple belonging and multiple identities. The author proceeds with a clear ethical stand that the concern for the legitimate aspirations of the converting people should take precedence over the concern for preserving the purity of religious doctrines, traditions and socio-political institutions, that is, concern for preserving the *status quo*. He advocates the same ethical option both for the passionate converters and the opponents, that they might tame their fundamentalist and fanatic tendencies.

In the **fifth chapter** we have narrations of four personal journeys, those of Babasaheb Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi, Pandita Ramabhai, and Nivedita. Among them Dr. Ambedkar, Ramabhai and Nivedita have struggled with both *atmaparivartan* and *dharmaantar*. By their conversion they have created a crisis in their former religion as well as in their new religion, while initiating a social transformation. Gandhi’s struggle was at the level of *atmaparivartan* leading to the reform of Hindu religion and Hindu society on the basis of the critique of the Dalits and others who left Hinduism to enter other religions. In these portrayals of four personal journeys, we realize that many of the issues touched on in this book assume academic interest only because they touch the real life of real people.

The **sixth chapter**, titled “Connecting Contested Issues”, tries to assemble together the many issues on conversion emerging from the perspectives of the Dalits, the Tribals, Christians, Muslims and Hindus, taking the reader

into a deeper reflection. The Dalits and the Tribals emerge, through their conversion, as the 'other' who critique and interrogate Hinduism which some leave, and Islam and Christianity that they embrace. For Dalits conversion is a way of protesting against caste hierarchy, in which they have an ascribed *status and identity* that destroy their true humanity. Conversion is also an affirmation of their *human dignity* with an innate entitlement for equality. For the Tribals, conversion expresses their resistance to the cultural hegemony of the Hinduizing forces, as well as a way of affirming their unique cultural identity, different from the saffron culture. Through conversion the Dalits reject social dominance, and the Tribals cultural dominance. When they enter a new religion with these emancipatory agenda, they also interrogate the new religions and initiate a transformatory process there. Therefore, they are not to be seen as passive objects by the converters and the opposers. The Dalits and Tribals are acting as sovereign subjects in their conversion, calling all religions to be humanised by being faithful to authentic spiritual values.

In the **seventh chapter**, titled "Rethinking Conversion" the book reaches its climax. With an ambitious project of rethinking conversion the author revisits all the issues already stated. He shows that conversion is an unending process. It is always a point of departure, rather than the point of arrival. If conversion is treated as a completed event or finished product, there will be no space for humanizing tolerance and dialogue.

Herdia uses Raimundo Panikkar's insights in order to elaborate the four levels of tolerance, leading finally to a genuine celebration of differences, celebrating not only unity in diversity, but also diversity in unity:

- i. **The pragmatic/political level of tolerance** in which the acceptance of the other is a fundamental practical necessity for survival;
- ii. **The philosophic/rational level of tolerance** affirms that no single human being or human tradition can be absolute. All have only partial grasp of being and truth. I need others for complementing and completing the possession of truth I have;
- iii. **The ethical/moral/religious level of tolerance** where the love of the other, and therefore the recognition of the lovability of the other, is an essential ethical imperative.
- iv. **The mystical/spiritual level of tolerance** sees the other in one's ultimate depth. The other is a partial expression of the same Mystery of which I am one in a limited way. And therefore, this level of tolerance

recognizes that *the other is part of me*, if not that *the other is me*. This leads to a joyful way of **existing in/with/for the others**, collectively shaping the common human destiny. Such mystical tolerance is able to transcend all differences and conflicts in a journey towards a greater unity and higher communion.

The richer and broader the mystical *mythos* (imaginative, and intuitive collective dreams) of a tradition is, it can take us to higher levels of tolerance whereas the narrower and restricting the *logos* (dogmas and ideologies) of a tradition is, it will force people to be exclusive and intolerant, while boasting of its uniqueness and superiority. To attain the highest level of tolerance that celebrates difference, Heredia suggests that we need to convert ourselves from *paranoia* to *metanoia*, by enlarging our *mythos*. Happily, not only the Indian Religions, but also Islam and Christianity are full of such rich *mythos*, before being constricted by doctrinal *logos* tainted by political ideologies. We need an effective pedagogy to recapture the liberating spirit of the original *mythos* in order to grow in constructive tolerance. The conversion debate needs to be premised on this foundation. This will enable conversion to become primarily an *atmaparivartan*, without being averse to *dharmantar*.

Further, Heredia shows how to nurture the **culture of dialogue** to help everybody to practise, and to grow in, tolerance. Tolerance is the necessary condition for dialogue, a two-sided reciprocal engagement in our search for truth and life, justice and peace. To dialogue is to go beyond the dialectic of debates and discussions. Dialectics is the optimism of the mind, whereas dialogue is the optimism of the heart. Therefore, we need to go constantly beyond the pragmatic/political, philosophical/ideological levels of dialogue, and even beyond the ethical/moral level of dialogue, to the mystical/spiritual level in which the differences are accepted, valued and celebrated. Such a dialogue will have four moments: i. Dialogue of life; ii. dialogue of action; iii. dialogue of religious experience; iv. dialogue of theological exchange (Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, 1991). This will help us, according to the author, to go beyond Nehru's rationalist secularism of keeping equal distance from every religion, *dharma nirapekshata*, to Gandhi's dialogical secularism of giving equal respect to all religions, *sarvadharmasambhava*.

In this chapter on rethinking conversion, Heredia also makes another important point. If the conversion debate helps us to grow in the art of healthy tolerance and genuine dialogue, then it will also help us to accept and celebrate **multiple belonging with multiple identities**. He illustrates the need for this by using the linguistic paradigm of having a mother tongue while learning and mastering many other languages, without giving up or impoverishing the mother tongue. People who have experienced how

language can become a passionate issue like religion leading to spontaneous eruption of violence and vandalism, even self-martyrdom, will agree with the legitimacy of this analogy. The same conclusions can also be drawn from the paradigm of medical practitioners who have specialised in one school of medicine and consider it very sacred, yet have become familiar with other medical traditions and develop a facility to use all of them according to the need of patients. Today to be human is to be inter-human; to be cultured is to be inter-cultural. So also, to be religious is to be inter-religious, which would imply multiple belonging and multiple identities without losing one's rootedness.

The final chapter's title "Religious Disarmament" echoes the current discourse on 'nuclear disarmament' for ensuring lasting peace and prosperity in the world. In this chapter the author looks with creative hope at the way ahead. After having scanned the '**model of**' the existing conflict-ridden society, especially in the context of religious conversion, he tries to propose a '**model for**' an ideal society, built on religious tolerance and dialogue, reaping the fruits of social harmony, freedom and justice, enjoyed by all, especially the least and the last of the earth.

All the past efforts aimed at addressing the problem of conversion through aggressive conversion by the converters, violent opposition by the resisters, and legal prohibitions by the State have not truly helped us to find a constructive solution acceptable to all. Rather the situation is steadily worsening, threatening with more blood baths. It is in this context Heredia proposes the project of '**religious disarmament**' as a viable alternative. It is to let go of the existing conflicts and competition, prejudice and antagonism between the religions, in order to evolve a new utopian vision acceptable to all, eliciting the commitment of all for its realisation.

For this, Heredia begins with a fresh project for a constructive dialectic between **faith and reason**. Reason should be made faithful, and faith should be made reasonable (critical) and responsible to human and cosmic wholeness. Proposing an effective pedagogy for this, he formulates and explains eleven *sutras* (pp. 339-341):

1. Faith and reason are complementary, not contradictory.
2. *What we believe depends on whom / what we trust.*
3. *A rational methodology transgressing its inherent limitations can never yield rightly reasoned knowledge.*
4. *Where we position ourselves influences how we think.*
5. *Whether or not we believe depends on our self-understanding.*

6. *If to believe is human, then what we believe must make us more human, not less.*
7. Faith that is 'blind' is never truly humanizing; faith that is not humanizing is to that extent 'bad faith'.
8. A self-reflexive, experiential methodology is meaningful to the discourse of faith; a rationalist-empirical one is alien to it.
9. As the act of faith is constitutively human it necessarily has a common religious basis across varying cultures and traditions.
10. An inclusive humanism must embrace both 'meaningful faith', as well as 'sensitised reason'.
11. The dialectic between faith and reason should be pursued in the context of *tolerance and dialogue*, or it will degenerate into a hostile debate across an unbridgeable divide.

Once our reason is made faithful and our faith is made critical, and both made responsible to authentic humanity, then the task is to move from the '**moral monism**' of individual religions towards a **global ethic** founded on faith and reason, as well as on the basic goodness of the common *humanum*, and therefore acceptable to all parties irrespective of their religio-cultural differences. Today's world citizens require multiple frames of references and multiple identities for self and group. Only then will they be able to believe with certainty, as the World Social Forum's slogan goes, that *another world is possible*.

The time has come for us to situate our discourse on religious conversion within the context of individual rights and dignity, freedom of conscience to make religious choices, as well as a community's freedom for equality of opportunity and partnership in economic and political spheres, religio-cultural identity, etc. Therefore, a **constructive agenda for the future**, as far as religious conversion is concerned, should have the following thrusts:

Conversion as a process should be oriented more in terms of continuity and harmony than discontinuity and contention.

Conversion as change should be more an affirmation than a negation.

Conversion as tolerance must be more ethical and religious, mystical and spiritual, than just pragmatic and political, or intellectual and philosophical.

Conversion as dialogue should be engaged in at all the four levels of life, action, experience and articulation, in free and equal, not coercive and alienating, partnership (pp. 348-349).

The UN's Universal Declaration on Human Rights of 1948 proclaimed the universal right of every individual to 'change' and to 'manifest' one's religion or belief in 'teaching, practice and observance'. But during the 1960s protection against proselytization was recognised as the right of a community to its own tradition, similar to its right to its language and culture. Under this new orientation the 1966 UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights emphasized the individual's freedom to change or maintain one's faith, while being silent on the right to convert others. In 1977, the Supreme Court of India reflected this view in its judgement on the Freedom of Religion Act of Madhya Pradesh.

In this context the author emphasises that a delicate balance should be maintained between the rights of the individual and those of the community. They are complementary, not contrary to each other. Therefore, cultural collective rights cannot override fundamental individual rights, or vice versa. A community's cultural and religious rights should be seen as an extension, not as a curtailment, of the individual's fundamental human rights. Caste inequality, gender discrimination, and similar practices that infringe upon the individual's rights and dignity, cannot be perpetuated in the name of a community's cultural rights. Reconciliation is possible in this dilemma if we concede a priority to the universally human over the culturally specific, without allowing homogenizing universalism to override and negate the cultural and religious diversities, to privilege some hegemonic forces.

Heredia concludes this book by reproducing the **10 point recommendations** of an inter-religious meeting held in Larino (Italy) in May 2006 on the theme *Conversion: Assessing Reality*, jointly organized by the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, the Vatican, and the Office of Inter-religious Relations and Dialogue of the World Council of Churches, Geneva. This document will stand as a remarkable milestone in the development of inter-religious consciousness.

In the final analysis, according to Heredia, the merit or demerit of conversion should be adjudged not on the basis of scriptural passages and doctrinal pronouncements or ideological assertions, but on the basis of what it does to the poor and the oppressed people here and now. Not the 'harvest of souls', but the harvest of authentic humanity should be the aim of religious conversion. There should be a *crusade*, a *jehad*, a *satyagraha* not for the souls of Indians, but for the authentic soul of India. It will not sow the poisonous seeds of conflict leading to a harvest of hatred and violence.



Rather, it will sow only the seeds of peace and harmony, yielding a hundredfold harvest in tolerance and dialogue, peace and justice, forgiveness and reconciliation.

### **Personal Comments**

I find this book quite profound in its content, systematic in its methodology, extensive in its research, convincing in its arguments and lucid in its language. It is a timely contribution as the spectre of conversion is whipping up irrational passion and phobia, not only in India, but all over the world. I am sure that this book will generate further debates on conversion reaching further depths.

In this book, Heredia shatters many popular and popularized myths that are currently doing their rounds:

Some religions, especially Christianity and Islam, are demonised as proselytizing religions while others are glorified as non-proselytizing religions. With convincing empirical data he proves that every religion, at different times in history, has been busy with conversion, either overtly or covertly, by aggressive methods or by hidden and gradual absorptions or assimilation.

On the basis of the continuous migration to this sub-continent, the author effectively debunks the popular myth, which glorifies some religions as native and indigenous, while excluding others as foreign.

He also establishes clearly that no religion is entirely homogeneous, either in doctrines or in socio-political interests. He agrees with Antonio Gramsci that "Every religion ... is in reality a multiplicity of distinct and contradictory religions."

He also effectively contests, with adequate historical data, the popular myth that Islam was spread by the swords of Sultans, and Christianity by the guns of colonial powers. Traders, Sufi saints, and selfless missionaries, social movements and so on have played a greater role as converting agents than the sword or guns.

The author breaks another myth that glorifies some religions for their tolerance. He shows, with sufficient evidence both from the distant and the recent past,

how intolerant and violent Hinduism and Buddhism also could become.

With official demographic data he demolishes another myth that presents conversion as a dangerous anti-national act supported by foreign powers for increasing the population of Muslims and Christians, threatening the very existence of Hinduism.

The relevance of the book comes also from its specific perspective. Rejecting the downward perspective of the aggressive proselytisers or the violent opponents, Heredia has deliberately employed for this study the upward perspective of the converts, especially the poor and the powerless. This has helped us to see the issue of conversion in greater depth and breadth. Going beyond the purely spiritual and dogmatic dimensions, the social, cultural, political, economic and psychological dimensions are treated as essential for the study of conversion.

Abstaining from the temptation of being aggressive either in promoting or opposing conversion, or advocating an idle indifference, this book invites and challenges the readers to be actively engaged in the urgent task of building a harmonious multi-religious and multi-cultural society on the firm foundations of healthy tolerance and genuine dialogue, realizing the *sarvadharmasambhava* of Gandhi.

The way the issue of multiple belonging is handled in this book seems to be rather weak. This issue needs further probing. The book has an extensive bibliography on conversion and a very useful thematic index.

I think that this book has contributed a fresh thinking on conversion that can radically change the discourse on and practice of conversion. I recommend this book to everyone who is committed to the protection and promotion of our secular democracy in the context of religio-cultural pluralism. This can become a basic source book for designing an effective course on conversion to train Seminarians, men and women Religious, Lay leaders, and inter-religious youth groups. *Changing Gods* is not a book to be hurriedly read through. It is a book meant for serious study and reflection, because it is meant to convert the competing religions and come to a consensus regarding everybody's common mission to humanity.

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