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Contents

Editorial	3
Letting the Converted speak . . .	
Towards an Emic Approach to Conversion	5
<i>John D'Mello</i>	
Tribes, Conversion and Sangh Parivar	23
<i>Virginius Xaxa</i>	
Conversion: Psychological Perspective	37
<i>Jose Parapully, SDB</i>	
Conversion: Legal Perspectives	51
<i>P.D. Mathew, SJ</i>	
Hindu Missionaries and Conversion	65
<i>Antony Mookenthottam, MSFS</i>	
The Muslim Attitude to Conversion	75
<i>Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui</i>	
Conversion: The Buddhist Way	81
<i>Rosario Rocha, SJ</i>	
Conversion: Turning or Returning?	
The Biblical Background of a Controversial Concept	87
<i>Rui de Menezes, SJ</i>	
Conversion in Mission History	101
<i>Jacob Kavunkal, SVD</i>	
Conversion in Church Documents	115
<i>Julian Saldanha, SJ</i>	
Conversions: The Gandhian Critique and Our Response	121
<i>Subhash Anand</i>	
Conversion: Christian Perspectives	141
<i>Kurien Kunnumparam, SJ</i>	
The Challenges to Christian Mission Today	161
<i>Consolidated Report of a CCBI Consultation</i>	
Bibliodrama: A Modern Body-Mind Hermeneutics	169
<i>Peter Erlenwein</i>	
Book Reviews	181

Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies

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Editorial

For more than a year now conversion has been a hot topic of discussion in India. Newspapers and news magazines have been devoting a lot of space to it. Several people have openly expressed their opposition to conversion, especially to Christianity. Some even raised the question: Is not the Christian community using its educational activities, health services and social involvements to win converts? Others have come out in support of the Christian missionaries and showed their appreciation of the remarkable service the Church is rendering to the people of India. A few have even suggested that the opposition to conversion is politically motivated and that those who are vehemently opposed to conversion have a hidden agenda.

It is against this background that this issue of *Jnanadeepa* has chosen to deal with the topic of conversion. By treating the issue in an interdisciplinary manner we hope to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of religious conversion in our country.

There are three articles which deal with conversion from the perspective of the social sciences – sociology, psychology and anthropology. They are meant to shed light on the facts regarding conversion (how many are really being converted?) and the explanations as to why people get converted to Christianity. Since those who support conversion and those who oppose it have very different explanations, it will be very helpful to let the converted speak. This is precisely what the paper by an anthropologist does, as he is himself a tribal Christian.

Closely related to this is the article which discusses conversion from a legal point of view. It deals with Article 25 of the Constitution of India which confers on all persons the right “freely to profess, practise and propagate religion.” There is some doubt about the meaning of “the right to propagate” one’s religion. Does it include the right to convert another person to one’s religion? The article sheds light on this question.

Historically, the followers of practically all religions have been engaged in the work of winning new adherents to their faith. Hence, we have included in this issue articles dealing with the theory and practice of conversion among the Hindus, the Muslims and the Buddhists. Because of the recent controversies it was thought necessary to have several articles on Christianity and conversion. One paper develops the biblical perspective on conversion, while another deals with the understanding of conversion in mission history. A third inquires into how the documents of the magisterium of the Church view conversion. A fourth article suggests a rethinking of the whole issue in the context of India today.

Since Mahatma Gandhi seriously had reflected on the question of conversion and taken a clear stand on it, it was thought useful to study his views in depth. They can help us in our efforts to rethink our position. An article is devoted to it.

There are two new features in this issue. The first one is the report of a Consultation organised by the Commission for Proclamation of the Conference of the Catholic Bishops of India (LR). This Consultation dealt with the Challenges to Christian Mission Today. Many points discussed in the Consultation are closely related to the issue of conversion.

The other one is a paper on bibliodrama which is a holistic way of approaching texts/traditions. It is based on the conviction that a purely intellectual/academic way of dealing with texts/traditions is inadequate.

It is hoped that the articles in this issue will stimulate a lively discussion of the issue of conversion. In the situation of our country today, we need to develop an understanding of and attitude to conversion which will promote peace and harmony among the followers of various religions and contribute to national integration.

Kurien Kunnumpuram, SJ
Editor

Letting the Converted Speak... Towards An Emic Approach to Conversion

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Ever since Prime Minister Vajpayee called for a debate on conversions, there has been a flurry of articles in the press either defending the ‘right to convert’ or violently criticizing ‘forced conversions’. Most of the articles however are written by journalists and several have political or polemical overtones. The issue continues to be severely clouded with bias and emotion. There is also a vast scholarly literature on the topic of “missiology” and “conversions” but it is mostly historical in nature. In addition, the topic has been dealt with politically, theologically and even psychologically. There remains nevertheless a great deal of ambiguity. To my mind, the ambiguity concerns two sets of issues: 1) regarding the facts about ‘conversions’ and 2) regarding the explanations for ‘conversions’. A sociological

perspective may help clarify issues and lay the groundwork necessary for understanding the real focus of the debate. Using a socio-historical method, this paper will begin by clarifying these two types of problems: factual problems and explanatory problems. Only after this is done can the basis be laid for a true and open dialogue about conversions.

I. Facts about Conversions

The first question concerns *factual data*. *Is there really an exorbitant growth of Christians? Are conversions to Christianity taking place?* If yes, to what degree? To answer these questions, we need to turn to Census data. Taking a look at the six major religions of India and their growth from 1951 to 1991, this is what we discover.

Table 1: India: Population by Religion

	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991
Muslim	10.00	10.70	10.76	11.21	12.12
Sikh	1.74	1.79	1.89	1.96	1.99
Buddhist	0.05	0.74	0.70	0.71	0.77
Hindu	84.99	83.51	82.72	83.19	82.41
Christian	2.35	2.44	2.60	2.45	2.32
Jains	0.45	0.46	0.47	0.48	0.41

Census of India: Religion Tables :1951-1991

Of the six religious communities shown in the table, there are three which show a gradual growth: Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists; of these the growth of Muslims is highest. From 10.00 percent in 1951, it increases to 12.12 percent in 1991. Likewise, there are three religious communities which display a slight decline in growth: Hindus, Christians and Jains, of which the Hindus show the greatest decline: from 84.99 percent in 1951 to 82.41 percent in 1991. The fact however remains uncontested that the percentage of Christians has actually dropped from 2.35 percent in 1951 to 2.32 percent in 1991. It is a very slight decrease no doubt, but it is a decrease nonetheless. In fact, speaking of actual numbers, while the growth rates of the population during 1981-1991 among Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Sikhs were 22.78, 32.76, 35.98 and 25.48 per cent, it was only 16.89 per cent in the case of Christians.¹ So the first fact is that there has been no geometric growth of the Christian population from 1951 till today.

We turn now to the ‘other side of the coin’: *the decline of Hindus*. Is the Hindu population currently declining? And if so, where is the decline taking place? To answer this question, we first need to clarify the question of *who is a Hindu*, as the number of Hindus is intimately tied to the question of *who is a Hindu?*

The amorphous nature of Hinduism: According to the Census Reporter of 1891, the term ‘Hinduism’ is only “justifiable by convention and definable by a process of successive exclusion. For the purposes of the Census

it has been defined as the anti-thesis of Islam and includes all Indian forms of faith in which are detected signs of the worship of idols.² According to several Hindus themselves, Hinduism is not a religion in the Western sense of the word, it is an entire cultural system, a “way of life”. The great French scholar of Hinduism, Monier-Williams, spoke of the ancient fortress of Hinduism with its *four* sides, Monotheism, Pantheism, Dualism and Polytheism,³ and Nirad Chaudhuri, a Bengali Hindu, himself speaks of the evolving nature of Hinduism giving rise to at least three types: Archaic or Vedic Hinduism, Brahmanic or Classical Hinduism, and finally Contemporary or Neo-Hinduism.

Further, since Hinduism has no prescribed characteristics of creed, cult, code or community, it becomes difficult to consider as *one religion*, as *one unbroken strand* existing from 4000 or 3000 BC until now; or as *one monolithic religion* prevailing across the length and breadth of India, from among the northern-most Himalayan tribes to the southern-most fishermen of Kanya Kumari. If Hinduism then is not *one* religion, but a “league of religions”, then the classification of “who is a Hindu” becomes contentious to say the least.

The Origin of Tribals: The second question pertinent to the decline of Hindus is the classification of tribals. Do tribals belong to the category of Hindus? Or are they Animists? The number of Hindus in the Census will depend on the way these questions are answered.

Since the Census of 1891, tribals were marked separately under the cat-

egory of Animists. The definition of Animism as given then by Dr. Tiele is as follows:

"Animism is the belief in the existence of souls or spirits, of which only the powerful acquire the rank of divine beings and become objects of worship. These spirits are conceived as moving freely through earth and air, and either of their own accord, or because conjured by some spell, appear to men. But they also take up their abode in some object."⁴

Thus, the notion of Animism was just as vague and amorphous as the notion of Hinduism. Often, the distinction between the tribal form of faith and some types of Hinduism was extremely elastic. Further, with the gradual 'Hinduization' of tribals, it became extremely difficult to separate Animists from Hindus.⁵ While some believe that tribals are Hindus, most anthropologists are of the opinion that they have a separate history and belong to a separate category.

According to the latter theory, the tribals were the original inhabitants (or Adivasis) of the land. After the invading Aryans conquered the land and imposed their hegemonic culture and caste system, these indigenous peoples were forced to flee to the forests. Those who did not were incorporated and assimilated into the dominant Brahmin culture.⁶ "Once a tribe came under the influence of the Brahmin people and was converted into a caste enjoying monopoly in a particular occupation, a strong tendency was set up within it to remodel its culture more and more closely in conformity with the Brahmin way of life".⁷ According to Bose, it is

absolutely certain that some *jatis* are undoubtedly of tribal origin.⁸ At times, the process of assimilation involved incorporating tribals gods into the Hindu pantheon.⁹

Other tribals kept their independence, refusing to worship in temples, with no priests and no holy books, having their own rituals and festivals, and maintaining their egalitarian gender structure.¹⁰ Yet, even these were gradually "Hinduized" through organized festivals and Sanskrit symbols and rituals. "It is well known that the process of Brahmanizing (Hinduizing) has been long and continuously in progress amongst tribes, so that those who dwell in closer proximity to the plains are already affiliated to the Brahmanic faith."¹¹ This process of converting tribals to Hinduism goes on even today with great vigour by organizations such as the Hindu Jagran Manch.¹²

Problems of Classification: Since the 1931 Census, "Animism" was abandoned and replaced by a new category "Tribal Religions". After independence, Census enumerators have been told to write in the religion column whatever the tribal states as his or her religion. The question asked is "What is your dharma?" The term "dharma" is generally not understood by the tribal and so often the enumeration depends on the whims and vagaries of the enumerator. It is a categorization more by the enumerator rather than by the adivasi (tribal) respondent.¹³

A new development: What is new in the last few decades is that the tribals who were enumerating themselves as Hindus or as Christians in the past, today

are asserting that they have their own religion and are asking to be enrolled within the category of "Other Religions and Persuasions". Their number has been increasing and the 1971 Census carried a special statement on the distribution of all those who said that they belonged neither to Hinduism, nor to Islam, nor to

Christianity or any of the six major religions, but in a special category. They asserted that they had their "own religion" whatever it was called (sometimes called by the name of the tribe). Table 2 shows the distribution of persons who opted for the "Other Religions Category" according to state.

*Table 2:
Percentage of those claiming other religious persuasion
(different from the major six religions) by state
Census 1971*

<i>States</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Bihar	44.72
Meghalaya	14.56
Arunachal Pradesh	13.58
West Bengal	8.89
Nagaland	4.95
Orissa	4.21
Manipur	3.81
Maharashtra	3.66
Gujarat	0.86
Tamil Nadu	0.28
Rajasthan	0.20
Andaman & Nicobar	0.06
Andhra Pradesh	0.05
Madhya Pradesh	0.04
Kerala	0.03
Delhi	0.02
Mysore	0.02
Punjab	0.02
Uttar Pradesh	0.02
Goa, Daman Diu	0.01
Himachal Pradesh	0.01
Chandigarh	N
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	N
Haryana	N
Jammu & Kashmir	N
Laccadive, Minicoy & Amindivi Islands	N
Pondicherry	N
Assam	-
Tripura	-

The above table shows that 44 per cent of those who claim their own version of religion are from the tribal population of Bihar. Next is Meghalaya with (14.56), followed by Arunachal Pradesh, (13.58), West Bengal (8.89) Nagaland (4.95) and Orissa (4.21). In other words, large groups of tribals in certain areas are claiming that they have

their own religion and do not wish to belong to the traditional religions. To confirm this point, a select sample of the numerically larger tribes viz., the Hos, the Mundas, the Oraons and the Santals were studied to understand the pattern of how they enumerated their religion in the states of Bihar and Orissa.¹⁴

Select Individual Tribes by Religion – 1961 – 1981

Hos of Bihar: Table 3a

	Hindus	Christians	Other Religions
1961	26.15	0.54	73.30
1971	21.45	1.14	77.40
1981	16.33	1.43	82.22

Hos of Orissa: Table 3b

	Hindus	Christians	Other Religions
	99.97	0.02	0.00
	86.76	0.44	12.79
	81.48	0.87	17.63

Mundas of Bihar: Table 3c

	Hindus	Christians	Other Religions
1961	53.73	26.23	20.02
1971	48.57	25.71	25.70
1981	45.56	27.76	26.72

Oraons of Bihar: Table 3d

	Hindus	Christians	Other Religions
1961	58.34	23.84	17.81
1971	61.13	23.73	14.02
1981	45.63	26.60	23.50

Oraons of Orissa; Table 3e

	Hindus	Christians	Other Religions
	76.16	23.83	0.00
	64.31	21.00	14.82
	61.41	37.12	0.54

Santals of Bihar : Table 3f

	Hindus	Christians	Other Religions
1961	91.47	-	6.74
1971	85.31	1.78	11.74
1981	82.75	3.17	14.08

Santals of Orissa: Table 3g

	Hindus	Christians	Other Religions
	99.61	0.01	0.34
	86.48	0.07	13.49
	53.41	0.35	46.23

What is clearly noticeable among the tribals in all the seven tables is that as the percentage of Hindus decreases, the percentage of Other Religions increases. In other words, there is an inverse proportion between the decline of the Hindus and the assertion of "Other Religions". What appears to be happening is that the tribals are stating that they are no longer Hindus. Some are stating that they are Christians, but an increasing proportion wish to assert for the first time their own tribal religion.

In the state of Bihar, in 1981 as much as 82.22 per cent of the Hos (table 3a), 26.72 per cent of the Mundas (table 3c) and 23.50 per cent of the Oraons (table 3d) returned "Other Religions" as their category and among the Santals of Orissa 46.23 per cent returned "other Religions" as their category. Except in one case, the Oraons of Orissa, there was a drop from 1971 to 1981 in the "Other Religion" category and that was compensated for by an increase in the number of Christians. As for the Khasis, the Garos, the Mizos and the Nagas, most of them claim to be Christians. (Unfortunately, the 1991 census data relating to the distribution of the scheduled tribes by religion professed is not yet available.)

So, the statement that Hindus are declining in the Census is very ambiguous. What is true is that the tribals, who in the past were classified as Hindus, today are claiming (because of influences yet to be determined) that they have their own religion or (as in the North-Eastern states) that they are Christians. This then is the heart of the problem. So the question "Are Conver-

sions taking place?" should be turned around to read "*Why are tribals desiring to enumerate themselves as Christians?*"

But before we answer that question, we first need to ask: *Why is the image created that Christians are growing in numbers?* There are three reasons for this:

1. The past: One reason of course is that in the past, specifically in the nineteenth century, from about 1840-1901, Christians grew by leaps and bounds.. This extraordinary growth however is largely due to the mass movements of the *depressed classes*, who embraced predominantly Protestant Christianity mainly in the South of India, but also in other parts.¹⁵ These movements however were the result of a specific socio-political context in the nineteenth century and this has been well documented by historians.¹⁶ But that was a long time ago.

2. The present: A second reason for the impression that Christians are growing is because of the high concentration and rapid growth of Christians in the 4 states of Manipur (34.11 per cent), Meghalaya (64.58 per cent), Mizoram (85.73 per cent) and Nagaland (64.58 per cent). However, these are very small states with a total population of 0.70 per cent (*less than one percent*) of the total population of India. And the total number of Christians in these 4 states is only 0.4 per cent of the 816 million people of India;¹⁷ in other words a minuscule figure. Yet it has been projected as 'eye-catching' probably because tribals are concerned. By contrast, even though the actual num-

ber of Christians in the traditionally Christian-dominated states of Kerala and Goa has dropped considerably (Kerala saw a decline from 20.85 per cent in 1951 to 19.32 per cent in 1991) and Goa, Daman and Diu witnessed a decline from 36.26 per cent in 1961 to 32.78 per cent in 1991), this decline does not count for as much “in the public eye” as the high visibility of Christians in the numerically smaller four North Eastern states.

3. Fundamentalist trends: A third reason for the image that Christians are increasing is because of certain “Fundamentalist” Protestant Evangelical groups. Some of these groups are as fundamentalist and ethnocentric as the Sangh Parivar, believing in the literal inerrancy of “their” Scriptures, in a ranking of non-Christian and Christian civilizations in a hierarchical framework, where to be different is to be inferior.¹⁸ These evangelical groups tend to disparage other religions and often come across as aggressive and militant in their evangelizing work.¹⁹ Their activities often arouse criticism from Christians themselves and from caste Hindus, who are unaware of or fail to make any distinction between fundamentalist groups and others. Arun Shourie, for instance, who is otherwise quite knowledgeable about the history and theology of Christianity, in his book “Missionaries in India” speaks repeatedly of the efforts of “the Church” in North-East India as though “the Church” was a homogenous body and not a diversity of denominations with different and varied ideologies.²⁰ It is precisely such a facile identification of groups with such differing perspectives

that cloud the topic of conversions. In places like Nagaland and Mizoram, evangelical groups outnumber Catholics, for instance, by a ratio of 10 to 1.²¹

It has been shown that in the last two decades Christianity as a whole in India has not grown. There is just a small pocket of the North East where it has a conspicuous presence and the tribals there are claiming to be Christians. We now come back to our original question: why do tribals want to declare themselves Christians? Why are tribals eager to convert to Christianity?

Explanations for Conversion

There is a host of explanations for conversions. It is precisely an area where most of the research has focused on. The literature is replete with theories trying to identify possible causes. Roland Robertson identifies *push* and *pull* theories: (*push* theories focus on background conditions of the converted, *pull* theories emphasize what convertees seek to get out of conversion).²² Snow and Machalek classify the literature into three waves of conversion theory - the first wave dominated by theological-psychological explanations, the second wave featured development of the “brain-washing” or “coercive persuasion” model and the third wave signaled reliance on sociological thinking.²³ The above sociologists however have in mind largely “individual conversions” which are more common in Western countries, whereas the focus in this paper is on “group” or “mass” conversions, pertinent to the Indian context. Beginning from the last century, there are a large number of historical case

studies describing the mass conversion movements of various depressed classes that took place in different parts of India. Frykenberg however complains about the lack of theoretical framework in such historical studies.²⁴ More recently, Vempeny in a topical book, describes about 14 different styles of conversion practices - ranging from street preaching to militant outfits and from social action to ashram style missions."²⁵ but his aim is polemical. Saldanha provides perhaps the most cogent and consistent taxonomy with his 'different patterns of conversion'.²⁶ In this paper, I would like to use a very simple principle, based on the sociology of knowledge, to classify the different explanations for conversion. According to the social construction of reality,²⁷ all explanatory theories are constructed according to a particular point of view thus giving rise to at least three types of explanations:

- Explanations from the Converter's point of view
- Explanations from the point of view of those who "feel" they are losing membership
- Explanations from the Converted group's point of view

All these explanations are not to be understood as water-tight compartments, but merely as heuristic devices. It is perfectly imaginable that some kind of overlapping might also exist; it is possible that in the case of one group one explanation may apply, but for another group, a combination of explanations might be more fitting. For Louis Rambo, conversion is "a process of religious

change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations." Thus, there is no one cause of conversion, no one process, and no one simple consequence of that process.²⁸

Having said this, I now propose to describe some of the explanations that have been cited in the literature to examine which of them will be the most suitable for an explanation of why tribals want to convert to Christianity.

Explanations from the Converter's (Missionaries') Point of View:

1. *Horton's Theory of pre-disposing cognitive orientation:*

Writing mainly about African religions, Horton is of the opinion that conversions take place because of a predisposition in the attitudes of the converted.²⁹ Horton discovered a belief in a two-tiered structure among African tribes: 'the first tier being that of the lesser spirits and the second that of the supreme being.' 'The lesser spirits,' he suggests, 'underpin events and processes in the microcosm of the local community, while the supreme being underpins events and processes in the macrocosm i.e. the world as a whole. The world of the lesser spirits was especially appropriate in communities, which were comparatively isolated and dominated by subsistence farming. However, as these communities became increasingly exposed to the wider world and as communications improved, people began to feel the need for more satisfactory systems of 'explanation, prediction and control'. The attention paid to the lesser spirits slowly shifted

to a focus on the character and cult of the supreme being – towards a cosmology which appeared to be more meaningful and appropriate in the macro-cosm. Notions of a supreme being however were already present in Christianity and Islam, thus offering a world view which would better equip the tribal person to cope with the problems of the wider world.’. This, according to Horton, is one of the factors, which led to African tribes embracing Christianity.

Horton’s theory proposes two variables:

Pre-conversion beliefs and ideas which predispose a group to accept the worldview of a new religion. There must be a foundational framework for the new religion to latch on to.

The impact of modernization as a catalytic force that triggers or speeds up the process of conversion or movement from one fellowship to another.

Thus, the historian Lal Dena suggests that one of the factors enabling the tribals of the Manipur and Lushai hills to accept Christianity was their cosmological belief system. Though Animists, they believed in a Supreme being (*pathien*) and found it easy to reconcile the Christian idea of a Supreme God with their own idea of a Supreme Being (the same word *pathien* is used).³⁰ Similarly, Richard Eaton, uses the theory of Horton to explain the quick rise of Christianity in Nagaland.³¹ The Nagas today are almost 95 per cent Christian, 90 per cent belong to Protes-

tant denominations and less than 5 per cent belong to the Roman Catholic Church. The second variable, the modernizing force, in the case of tribals, is provided by the missionary schools and social work programs. These have introduced the tribals to the modern world stimulating a new consciousness in them. The problem however with Horton’s approach is that it is too intellectualist and does not sufficiently take into account socio-economic factors.

2. *Caste or Status Mobility Theory:*

The second theory, called the Caste or Status Mobility theory, was predominantly used by historians to account for the numerous mass conversion movements to Protestant Christianity in the last century. The theory concerns mainly the depressed classes, whether the Nadars or Ezhavas of Travancore, or whether the Malas or Madigas of Andhra Pradesh. It has even been used to explain the conversion movements of the Mahars of Maharashtra and the Chuhras of Punjab. These communities experienced indescribable discrimination at the hands of the caste Hindus. The classic example is that of the Nadars of Tamilnadu, who were caught in a social limbo somewhere between the Shudras and the outcaste untouchables. Hardgrave reports two instances of such discrimination: 1) Nadar women were not allowed to wear the breast cloth before the higher castes 2) The Nadars were not allowed to enter the temple of the caste Hindus.³²

Thus, the avenues of caste mobility within the Hindu social system were closed to them. Sanskritization was a cul-de-sac because of concerted and ef-

ficacious rebuffs from the higher castes. The Nadars even tried to change their caste through the Census enumeration but were unsuccessful in their attempt. Hence, ‘the weakening of social links within the community, set the depressed caste groups free to fend for themselves and to look for new patrons.’³³ It is no wonder that they joined the Anglican churches in large numbers. In the south, since, it was the Christian missionaries, who supported them in fighting discriminatory practices, the depressed classes became Christian. In the Punjab, depending on who supported them, the sweeper community of the Chuhras joined either Anglican Christianity or Islam; the Mahars, under the charismatic leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, chose Buddhism, since the latter religion, it was felt, was more native to India than Christianity or Islam.³⁴

A significant factor in the caste mobility model is that it is not the lowest classes who first left Hinduism, but the classes that were just above the lowest rung.³⁵ They were the first to become economically independent and that gave them the necessary social strength to break away and join Christianity.

3. Identity Theory:

The third theory proposed in the literature is the *Identity Theory*. According to this theory, certain groups or communities experience a crisis or social dislocation. This results in a loss of identity and hence they choose a new religion, which is part of discovering their identity. A conversion movement then is like a kind of group identity crisis in which the group passes from a negative rejection of its lowly place in the Indian/

Hindu cultural system to a positive affirmation of a new religious identity. This new identity does not depend on its acceptance or rejection by the higher castes; indeed it has been chosen and sustained despite their refusal to accept it. Very gradually the new identity leads to significant alterations in behaviour and occupation and sometimes to an enhancement of status.³⁶ This explanation has been pertinently applied to the tribals of India, who have experienced a sense of loss of identity. Their loss of identity has a two-fold cause: economic and cultural.

Economic

Tribals were always excluded from the rest of Indian society. They lived in forests and hills with very little contact with modern society. Down the ages, they have been victims of exploitation. First, they were alienated from their land. When the British introduced the system of land ownership and revenue, annual tax was trebled which was beyond the paying capacity of tribal cultivators. As outsiders increasingly settled in tribal regions, money-lending practices soon became exploitative. Lacking written records, more and more of the tribals began to lose their land and became landless cultivators, soaked in debt. Next they lost the use of the forests. As a result of the draconian Forest Laws, they were deprived of their very sustenance, treated like strangers in their own environment.³⁷ Finally, came displacement as a result of mega projects. “Everywhere I go I find more and more evidence of the exploitation of the aboriginal by malguzars, traders, contractors and others...” wrote the Deputy

Commissioner.³⁸ For tribal peoples, their independence, self-respect and human dignity are closely linked to the forests and land. When these things are taken away from them, their very community and identity is under attack.³⁹

Cultural

With Independence, the whole sub-continent of India was divided into various linguistic states. But this division of states did not take into account the tribal communities. As a result their communities were broken up and the various tribes scattered and divided. They became isolated. This was an enormous blow to their cultural identity. Further, the education system simply passed them by. Even today the level of education among tribals is very low. Literacy for males is 16.35 per cent as against 41.3 per cent in the general population. For females, it is 8.04 per cent as against the 29.4 per cent for the non tribals. Schools are only in the registers.⁴⁰ Consequent to the denial of education, the final attack upon their cultural identity came with the process of Hinduization. Through rituals, festivals and customs, tribals were absorbed into the Hindu cultural system through a gradual process of Sanskritization.⁴¹

Given this scenario, it is quite understandable that when the missionaries came in with their schools, the tribals began to enter the education system and gradually the process of modernization set in. Modernization brought with it questions of identity and an awareness of their exploitation. Bit by bit, the indigenous peoples developed a consciousness of themselves as a tribe. One of the first expressions of this new found

identity was to declare themselves in the Census as either Christians or as followers of their own tribal religion.

The missionary J. Clough narrates a similar process that took place among the Madigas, lower caste peoples in Andhra Pradesh, who were helped by the missionaries during a food crisis. "Vast number of Madigas came seeking not so much material help as human dignity." When Clough tried to dissuade them from Baptism, a cry arose from every portion of the crowd. "We do not want help. By the blisters on our hands we can prove to you that we have worked and will continue to work. If the next crop fail, we shall die. We want to die as Christians. Baptize us, therefore."⁴²

The above three explanations are all from the Missionary or Converter's point of view. The next set of theories emanate from those who "feel" that they are losing adherents. (The words "*feel*" that *they are losing adherents* is crucial.. Others have called them the "defector group" or the "loser group" or the "mono-culturalists" (One religion, one culture) but all these are 'unhappy' terms. According to a prominent group of anthropologists, tribals are not really Hindus; hence, to consider them 'defectors from Hinduism' would not only be misleading but inappropriate.)

Explanations from the point of view of those who "feel" they are losing membership

1. Force, Threat or Coercion:

The first theory of "force" or "coercion" has been used as an explanation

for conversions that took place in the past. It is not very popular with social scientists as it is difficult to find adequate proof. This theory has been used to explain the conversion of some Buddhists into Hindus at the turn of the century, the conversion of some Hindus into Muslims under the Mughals and most recently the conversion of the Goans by the Portuguese. In most instances, the term force is to be understood in an “indirect” manner. The Portuguese, for instance, granted a series of privileges to those who converted and denied them to those who did not. The letter of Miguel Vaz, to King John of Portugal, suggested the following measures: “idolatry was to be disallowed, temples were to be destroyed, Hindu festivals to remain uncelebrated, Brahmin preachers to be debarred from the island.” King John of Portugal gave his approval to these measures.⁴³ Other methods used was the Christian upbringing of orphans and the method of outcasting persons, (making them eat beef for instance) and thus obliging them to turn to Catholicism.⁴⁴

At the present time, there are scarcely any reported instances of “conversions to Christianity by force”. However, there are instances of tribals being converted to Hinduism by force. (called Reconversion) Thus, the Hindu Jagran Manch in Gujarat has gone about converting tribals to Hinduism through the method of force or by instilling fear. They have distributed leaflets making false allegations against Christian priests. One leaflet contains the following words: “wherever Christian priests have gone in the world, they loot people.

They teach people to tell lies...to steal in the name of religion.. Awaken Hindus! and struggle against these thieves who lie, who rob you of your rights and bring these people to their senses..”⁴⁵ More directly, the HJM launched a campaign to harass and pressure those Christian tribals in Gujarat who did not agree to the “Reconversion” ceremony. Fourteen incidents were reported in the press or in police records of harassment. Christians were beaten up, stones thrown during the Sunday prayers, houses and hospitals were damaged, bibles burnt, prayer houses razed to the ground.⁴⁶ These are instances of blatant force. Many such stories of “forcible conversions” were reported by the Human Rights Watch Report. Interviews of tribals conducted on site report them as saying:

“Once police protection goes away we will kick you out of your houses. If you don’t convert we will burn you and your house. We will destroy your church.”⁴⁷

Similar stories are also reported by the All India Federation of Organizations for Democratic Rights.⁴⁸

2. *Inducement or Allurement:*

Inducement or Allurement is a second explanation for conversion, put forward by those who “feel” that they are losing membership. It is a common allegation made against Christian Missionaries by Hindus who belong to the Sangh Parivar. Virulent attacks have been made against missionaries (vide the three Anti-Conversion laws in the three states of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Arunachal Pradesh). It was an allegation subscribed to by Gandhiji⁴⁹

when he had in mind a certain type of missionary. It was also made against Mother Theresa with regard to her ‘anxiety to save souls’.⁵⁰ It refers to the motives of the missionaries as well as to the methods used by them. Primarily, the accusation consists in giving material help to destitute or poor people so as to entice them to become Christians (the so-called ‘rice’ Christians). In its broadest sense, it has been interpreted to include all forms of education, medical help, social work and social animation. These too are liable to be considered as allurement if the motives behind them are “to convert”. The rationale behind this allegation is that marginalized people, whether tribals or from *the depressed classes*, because of *their socio-economic status* are in a susceptible state and in this state of simplicity, they are more receptive to conversion. The allegation is considered to be proven when, after the material aid ceases, the converts relapse into their former religion. Obviously, the allegation is not applicable to missionary schools and programs run for the *educated middle and upper middle class* Hindus.

Examples from history include the famous statement of Abbe Dubois, speaking of his converts. “Two thirds were pariah and the rest were Sudras, who being without resource, turned Christians, in order to form new connections, chiefly for the purpose of marriage, or with some other interested views.”⁵¹ This explanation was also used post-eventum to describe the Karta bhajas’ conversion to Anglican Christianity. 3000 of them from Krishnagar,

Bengal, were baptized as Anglicans during a local famine. But their motives were supposedly mixed. J. Long, in his *Handbook of Bengal Missions*, reports: ‘With Christianity they found pity as also money and rice which they did not obtain from the zamindars’ But by 1857 large numbers of converts had relapsed and a number of mission out-stations had to be closed.⁵²

By way of contrast, the Parava caste of pearl fishermen around the southern tip of the Peninsula were much harassed and oppressed by the Arab pirates and powerful Hindus. Duncan Forrester theorizes that they sent deputations seeking Portuguese protection and offering to adopt Christianity as a kind of *quid pro quo*. By 1537 practically the whole caste had been baptized.⁵³ However, the fact that there are hardly any relapses shows that material help was not the only motive.

The same allegation of allurement has also been labeled against the Prarthana Samaj, which was established because its founders felt that the conversion of the untouchables to Christianity was a big loss to Hinduism. The Samaj devoted itself to educational and social work among the untouchables and tried its best to lure the untouchables back to Hinduism.⁵⁴ Many secularists, however, and even those from within the Hindu fold, question this broad interpretation of the allurement thesis. ‘If lower caste people or tribals wish to change their religion because of material or compassionate help, what harm is there?’ they ask. ‘In religion as in all things, there is no one whose motives are absolutely pure. The paths by which

people move closer to God are diverse and if this is the way that tribals choose, who are we to interfere?"⁵⁵

3. Fraud or deception:

This last explanation, from those who "feel" that they are losing members, is not so much an explanation as an allegation. "There has been no known or proven instance of conversion by force or fraud" says the Report of the All India Federation of Organizations for Democratic Rights.⁵⁶ This explanation is therefore used to describe events in the past. Primarily it refers to the 'De Nobili experiment' (even though he himself may not have been aware of the interpretation given to his strategy).⁵⁷ De Nobili believed in the 'filtration strategy' i.e., first convert a few upper caste Brahmins and the other castes will follow suite. His experiment is considered to have failed though a few Brahmins and upper caste Hindus were converted in the South of India. De Nobili himself dressed in saffron, wore the Namaam, ate vegetarian food and lived in an Ashram. He believed that Christianity had to shed its 'colonial' trappings and incarnate itself in the native Hindu culture. Today the modern followers of De Nobili believe in an "inculturated" Christianity, an "Indianized" Church and some of them live in Ashrams, even though their motive is not to convert. However, disbelieving the motives of such experimenters some caste Hindus⁵⁸ are very wary of the whole process of inculcation in Christianity and label the Ashram movement in Christianity a subtle form of deceptive Sanskritization, a strategy "of

apparently identifying with Hindus with the ulterior motive of eventually converting them".

Explanations of Converted Groups:

Finally we come to the last group of explanations. These are explanations that arise from the converted peoples themselves. And here we find a big lacuna. *We hardly have any explanations at all.* We do have autobiographies, but these are only of individual, mostly spiritual, conversions like those of V.N. Tilak, Nilakantha Goreh, Ram Chandra, etc⁵⁹ But there are scarcely any explanations for *group conversions* from the "converted" group's point of view. We do have statements of individual tribals, like the one quoted in the *Indian Express* of Jan 31, 1999, "We will choose a religion that will help us live!" but there are hardly any explanations (from the perspective of the tribals) as to the social forces that make them want to declare themselves Christians. A genuine exception is the book *Christianity and Social Change in North-East India* by David Snaitang, a Khasi.⁶⁰ More of such books are needed. It is the contention of this paper that at the present time, most of the debate about conversions is polemical, is between two groups – the converter and those 'claiming' defections – both trading explanations and allegations from their own perspectives. For the dialogue to be truly fruitful we need to engage the 'converted' themselves and draw them into the debate.

One reason of course for the lack of theory is that there is a very low education among tribals. Nonetheless, there is a great need to listen to indigenous

peoples' *oral* reflections on their own conversion experiences, word-of-mouth explanations as to why they chose Christianity or why they wish to identify with their own ethnic religion. When the converted, i.e., tribals and lower castes are allowed to voice their own opinions, then the debate will become a 'dialogue' and the real issues will come to light.

In cross-cultural research, the literature distinguishes between two primary approaches - etic and emic approaches.⁶¹ An **etic** approach is an outsider's approach. It examines many cultures, compares them and tries to arrive at universals, commonalities, general principles and explanations. The theory is created by the analyst. An **emic** approach, on the other hand, is an insider's approach. It studies behaviour from within the particular, specific system. It does not look for "universals" in that it examines only one culture in depth. In the emic approach, the theory, principles and explanations arise from the culture itself and are "discovered" rather than created by the analyst

It is only when emic explanations of "conversions" abound; when the tribals explain in their own language and in their own manner whether they changed religion because of force, fraud or inducement or because of cognitive pre-disposition, status mobility or a genuine search for identity or for reasons completely unthought of before, it is only then that a rightful move will be made in the direction of dialogue.

In the last century when depressed classes started embracing Christianity 'en masse', there was a hue and a cry about conversions. However, when leaders of these groups, like Ambedkar, voiced their own reasons and explanations for conversion, the hue and the cry stopped. Today indigenous peoples are changing their religion. When they start giving their version or their own explanation of why they changed religion, then again the hue and the cry will stop.

A longer view of history tells us the same thing. When the caste structure became too oppressive, various groups from within Hinduism reacted; first, it was the Buddhists and the Jains. Next it was the Sikhs; during the period of the Mughals, it was the Muslims; recently it has been the turn of Christians.⁶²

The economist and columnist Swaminathan S.A. Aiyar made the very same point in an open letter to Mr. Govindacharya, the Sangh Parivar ideologue:

Your real problem in competing is not that Christians are using money or false advertising. It is that traditional Hindu society has behaved so abominably to some of its members, notably Dalits and tribals, that they seek a rival religious brand. As long as this persists, not all the wealth of Hindu temples and not all of the fancy miracles of Babas will stem the defection of disillusioned consumers of your product to rival brands. Some have gone to Islam, some to Buddhism and some to Christianity." ⁶³

Notes

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Tribes, Conversion and the Sangh Parivar

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The religious conversion issue has been the subject of major news headlines and controversies from time to time. Interestingly on every occasion that such controversies have erupted in India, the population at the centre of the debate has been the communities that have been generally called 'tribes'. It was the issue of conversion of tribes in Madhya Pradesh that sparked off the first major controversy in Independent India in the early fifties. The issue of conversion there led to the setting up of an inquiry commission, known more popularly as the Niyogi Commission. The issue of conversion made major news headlines again in 1978, first with 'The Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Indigenous Faith Bill' and later with the 'Freedom of Religion Bill' that was introduced in the parliament by O.P. Tyagi. The bill aimed at regulating conversion at an all India level. Earlier the 'Freedom of Religion Bills' was passed in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh in 1967 and 1968 respectively. In Madhya Pradesh even before Independence, some princely states had already initiated enactments to ban conversion. These included the Raigarh State Conversion Act, 1936; the Surguja State Hindu Apostasy Act, 1945 and the Udaipur State Conversion Act, 1946.¹ What is interesting is that all these bills were introduced 'or passed primarily

with a view to banning conversion of the tribes to Christianity. Even in the 1998-99 controversy on conversion, tribes have been on the centre stage of the debate.

Concept of Tribe

In order to place the issue of conversion among the tribes in proper perspective, it is necessary to locate their social setting. The use of the term 'tribe' to describe a certain category of people in India began during colonial rule. It was, however, not clear in what sense in which the term was used, at least in the initial stage. There were instances of 'tribe' and 'caste' being used either interchangeably or even in cognate manner. Despite the synonymous and cognate use of the term, the British did view the segment of the population that later came to be more generally described as 'tribe' as different from the dominant sections of the Indian society. That this was so could be inferred from the nature of administration they aimed at evolving for the tribal areas. Laws in force in respect of the general population were not usually applicable in case of such groups and communities. More often than not special laws, that is, laws in consonance with the traditional 'tribal' system of administration were

framed for their regulation and governance.

Hence, when the attempt was initiated to provide detailed and classified information about people in India following the introduction of the census, the difference referred to above became handy for the British administrators. The groups/ communities seen as different from the dominant communities were by and large categorized as tribes. Yet, when an attempt was made to conceptualize the basis of such categorization, the British were far from clear as to the basis on which the two types of communities could be differentiated. This is obvious if one looks into the censuses. In the 1891 census, for example, the term used was not 'tribe' but 'forest tribe' and that too as a sub-heading within the broader category of 'agricultural and pastoral castes'. Since 1901, however, a somewhat clearer criterion began to be used. Tribes were identified and described as those who practised animism, later the expression 'tribal religion' was used in its place. The criterion so introduced was continued in the subsequent censuses with the exception that there was qualification by other dimensions as well. Through descriptions such as the 'Hill' and 'Forest' tribes or 'primitive' and 'backward' tribes, the tribes were being categorized as falling into different types. What was considered common was that they all practised a form of religion that was different from the one practised by the dominant sections of Indian society. That is, tribes were identified as those who did not adhere to religions such as the Hinduism, Christianity, Islam etc. In the case of Hinduism, however, if groups were

shown to be Hindus in beliefs and religious practices, they were also viewed, as constituting a social organization that was markedly different from those of tribes. They were considered to be part of the caste social organization as against those of tribes. The dimension of caste thus assumes central place in the religious tradition of Hinduism.

While drawing up the list of tribes with a view to giving them certain political and administrative concessions, the consistent application of the criteria towards defining tribes took a back seat. The list of the scheduled tribes included in the Constitution had its genesis in these administrative and political considerations. After Independence, greater attention was paid towards identification of the criteria in terms of which tribes can be distinguished from the others. These include one or more of such characteristic features – as physical features, distinctive language, simple technology, distinct social and political organization, geographical isolation or combination of one or more of them. And yet, there has been no agreement over the use of these characteristics. Ghurye, for example, has shown how factors like religion, occupation and racial features have proved inadequate when attempt was made to distinguish the tribal people from the non-tribal people.² Thus, the question as to how the term tribe is to be used in the Indian context and what we mean by the tribal people is not easy to answer. In general, geographical isolation in the sense of living in forests, hills or inaccessible tracts, simple technology and modes of living etc. in one or more of such combinations have been taken as the crite-

ria for identifying tribes. And yet, there is a large number of groups and communities, which are identified as tribes but do not conform to attributes such as those referred to above. Many among them, in fact, share characteristics that approximate more to non-tribes than the tribes. Thus, tribes include within them a wide range of groups and communities differing in language, technology, geographical locations, ecological settings, level of development etc. In short, they stand at different stages of social formation. And yet, they have all been considered tribes mainly because, as Beteille puts it, they have been more or less outside civilization.³ They were outside civilization at the time when attempts began to be made on the conceptualization of tribes. It is indeed important to keep note of this aspect if one is to understand the issue of conversion among the tribes. Conversions, after all, draw tribes to the wider aspects of civilization.

Hinduism

Conversion may be viewed from several angles. Hence, it may mean different things to different people. I am, however, using the term conversion in the sense in which it is used in every day parlance viz. change from one faith and practices to another. Now in the sense of change from one religion to another, the transformation has been going on among tribes in India well before the onset of the colonial rule. All the same, it is with the coming of colonial rule that the conversion of tribes is generally talked about. In order to understand the issue of the conversion of the tribal people rightly, it is necessary

to place the issue in a wider perspective of transformation of the tribal societies.

Though the distinction is maintained between tribes and civilization, the two are not treated as isolates but in interaction with each other. Hence, the dichotomy posed between tribes and non-tribes is viewed as a distortion. The changes occurring in the tribal society due to interaction with the wider society has invariably been conceived in terms of tribes moving in the direction of becoming a part of civilization by getting assimilated or absorbed into the society the civilization represents. Both the historians and anthropologists have made such observations not only in the context of the past but also the present. Kosambi has referred to tribal elements being fused into the general society. Bose makes reference to tribes being absorbed into Hindu society⁴. Such a claim has not gone unchallenged as a large number of anthropological works of the post-Independence era still point to phenomena such as tribes being absorbed or assimilated into the Hindu society or tribes becoming castes. In this journey to absorption or assimilation, tribes are said to stand at different levels or stages. Nowhere is this better reflected than in the classification that sociologists and social anthropologists have provided of the transformation of tribes and tribal society.

The change in the direction of absorption into Hindu society is said to occur through certain processes that are far from uniform and identical. That this is so is evident from the range of terms used to capture the processes at work in the social anthropological literature. The

most common terms used are sanskritisation and Hinduisiation. Of course the processes described by such terms overlap in actual empirical reality and hence there is a tendency among social scientists to use them interchangeably or synonymously. Often, the difference expressed by these terms is covered under the use of such generic terms as acculturation, assimilation, absorption etc. It is in relation to the processes denoted by these terms that the change in tribal society has been mainly studied. And because of these processes tribes have invariably been described or conceptualized in the literature as those absorbed into Hindu society. Accordingly, they are said to have accepted the ethos of caste structure and have been absorbed within it. They are treated as hardly differentiable from those of the neighboring Hindu peasantry.

The study of the transformation of tribes into Hinduism/caste has led to a concern with other kind of related issues. These are issues like the kinds of forces that compel tribes to come under the influence of the non-tribes and the nature and types of interaction they enter with them. With regard to the manner in which such transformation has taken place, there exists some controversy among scholars in India. The controversy has gained momentum after it has been claimed that the tribes are aggressively being absorbed into Hindu society. It is argued that there was frictionless co-existence between tribes and non-tribes until the 19th century, but since then as a result of the spread of railways and roads, land hungry peasants, traders and moneylenders pen-

etrated into the tribal areas, exploiting them on the one hand and on the other compelling and coaxing them into accepting their own cultural traditions and values⁵. The question that arises is whether the Hindu civilization was tolerant up to the 19th century and became intolerant only later. Now on this issue there are diverse views among the scholars of Indian society. Studies of the history of Indian civilization show that the growth and expansion of Hindu society was a prolonged and complex process, both forcible and peaceful, of absorption of the tribal people into the Hindu society. In fact, history discloses various methods of tribal absorption or assimilation that was adopted by different societies at different times or epochs.⁶ It was, however, not the aggressive but the peaceful process of absorption that has generally been highlighted in the literature on tribes in India.

The transformation of the tribes under this process has been conceived to occur through certain methods that have been diversely conceptualized among the scholars. Kosambi considers the adoption of the technology of the Hindu society by tribes to be the major method of getting integrated into the Hindu society⁷. Bose talks of the Hindu method of tribal absorption. This, according to him, takes place mainly under the system of the organization of production based on caste. For Bose the system is based on mutual reciprocity and hence its characteristic feature has been cooperation and not conflict. Hence, under the caste system of production, productive activities of the various castes were protected against competition from other castes. It is this that

the tribes found attractive in the system, according to Bose, and were drawn to the system, although it entailed low status for them within the caste hierarchy.⁸ The other significant method of tribal absorption into Hindu society is what Sinha calls ‘state formation’. He states that the process of acculturation, Hinduisisation and social stratification within the village could not be properly understood unless they were examined in the broad context of the formation of the principality. He further writes that the formation of the state provided the decisive socio-political framework of the transformation of the tribal systems into the regional caste system⁹. Some have even considered sanskritisation as the method through which tribes are integrated into the Hindu society. To me, this seems to be more of a process than method, which occurs only when tribes are drawn into the larger society through processes that are economic and political.

Under these methods the transformation of tribes and their absorption into the Hindu society was a long and protracted process. The process of acculturation to a new culture including religion followed as a corollary of increasing economic and political contacts of the tribes with the larger society. The process was slow, gradual and spontaneous. The term used to describe this process is generally known as sanskritisation. It is a process whereby a group lower down the hierarchy tries to adopt the life-style of the group above it. In the context of tribes, the term has been used to understand the process of acculturation to the value and customs of the dominant society. Hence, it was

far from easy and clear to mark when this transition could be said to have been made. There was also no intermediary or outside agency involved in this process and hence transition was said to be made without any aid from outside. The transition has been therefore broadly described as natural. Given the fact that the acculturation is slow, gradual and natural and that Hinduism, besides being a religion, also represents a particular social framework. In fact, it is difficult to conceive of Hinduism outside this framework. Hence, the acculturation process at work among the tribes is not considered to be confined to mere life-style but to go beyond and form an integral feature of the caste structure of Hindu society. In view of such features of acculturation processes, the term conversion can hardly be used to depict changes in the tribal societies. The terms that have been frequently used in the context under reference have been absorption or assimilation into the Hindu society. The transformation of tribes in the context under reference has thus been in the direction of fusion with the larger society, which invariably entailed loss of the autonomy and identity of the tribal society. If at all there was an identity then it assumed the form of a caste identity within the wider framework of the structure of the Hindu society.

Christianity

Next to Hinduism, it is to Christianity that one can see the phenomenon of conversion of the tribes in any substantive scale. The conversion of the tribes to Christianity is spread over the length and breadth of the country. Yet the conversion of tribes to Christianity

is far from even. It varies both across regions and communities. Its presence is more strongly felt among some communities and regions than others. Except for Northeast India and to a lesser extent the Chotanagpur plateau of central India, the presence of Christianity among the tribes of India is by and large not strong.

The conversion of tribes to Christianity, unlike that of the non-tribal population, began during the colonial rule and continues on some scale even today. Hence, considerable concern and anxiety has been shown over the matter in certain social and political circles. This concern over conversion, in fact, is the real concern but it is camouflaged under the garb of the means employed, on which Christianity can easily be attacked. It is important to note that the concern over the former holds no legitimacy unless it is shown to be linked with the latter. The Christian missionaries have been accused of using methods that have invariably been considered to be bad and unjustified. These methods are cited as those of inducement, coercion, fraud etc. Now as was the case with Hinduism, the conversion to Christianity among the tribes too took place by certain methods. These were in striking contrast to the methods adopted under Hinduism that have already been discussed above. The characteristics of the methods were however more or less similar to those at work in the context of Hinduism. They were aggressive, forceful and coercive on the one hand and peaceful, free and frictionless on the other. What, however, has been most impressed upon in the public mind in the context of Christianity is that the meth-

ods adopted by it were and are invariably one of force, coercion, intimidation, allurement etc. While the use of such means could not be ruled out both in the context of past and also present, what is important to bear in mind is that these were and are not the dominant patterns of conversion of the tribes to Christianity in India. If these were to be the dominant patterns, Christianity would not have been able to sustain itself among the tribes, as it has been able to do for so long. The Christian missions have also been attacked on the ground that they were/are engaged in the mass conversion of the tribes. Mass conversion refers to conversion of a group en bloc. In the context of tribe, it may mean either the whole tribe or a village or segments of it. It is worth noting that until recent years there was little differentiation in a tribal village other than those based on clans/ lineage. Yet conversion of a tribe or a village or a clan/lineage as a whole was hardly a reality. What was a reality was that significant portions of a village or a group of families made a decision to join the new religion. This they did either by following a kin leader or a decision arrived at democratically by a group of families. The common thing in such conversion was the desire to keep and maintain the social bonds of a group or families. Such conversions assumed the form of mass conversions only over a period covering many years. It is very difficult to find a lineage/clan or village that has embraced the Christianity as a whole. One can therefore hardly talk of the mass conversion of the tribes in India.

While the employment of means considered unfair, unethical or illegal has not been altogether absent in history and may ever be practised even today, these do not constitute the dominant methods of conversion used by the Christian missionaries. The more common methods used by them have been what may be called developmental and social service oriented works. These comprised mainly, to begin with, education, health and medicine, legal aid, credit etc. In more recent years they have moved to other fields as well. These range from agricultural development and harnessing of water resources to increasing articulation of the issues of the tribal people's aspiration such as autonomy as well as those that have been drastically affecting their life such as displacement and rehabilitation. The extension of legal aid, in the face of distressing land alienation, was in fact one of the main methods through which conversion was sustained in Chotanapur during the colonial period. These methods acted as a powerful means of deliverance or emancipation of tribes from the oppression and exploitation of the rajas, zamindars and moneylenders. These methods also emancipated them from the clutches of ignorance, illiteracy, superstition, and diseases and opened up the way for reaping and enjoying the benefits of development and modernization. In fact, it was this emancipatory role of Christianity, especially from the exploitation and oppression of outsiders, that was the moving force behind the spread of Christianity in Chotanagpur¹⁰. Only when Christianity/ the Christian missionaries were perceived as not going far enough in this

task viz. deliverance from the British was resentment aired and articulated towards Christianity¹¹. Birsa Munda and his movement's problem with the Christian missionaries precisely lay in this. The spread of Christianity among the tribes of the Northeast India too may be to a great extent explained in reference to the articulation of the similar issues inherent in the structure of their respective societies. That this may have been the case is inferred from the fact that it was the commoners that found Christianity the most attractive in this region too. At least this was the case in Mizoram and even the Khasi Hills. In both these regions, the Chiefs were opposed to conversion and were against it. It was the commoners who embraced Christianity¹². However once Christianity had made its foothold, there arose other factors that drew tribes increasingly to Christianity in the later phases. In short, the methods under which conversion to Christianity took/takes place among the tribes in India may be better summed up in Bose's observation viz. the Christian missionaries were perhaps the first people from whom the forest tribes of Chotanagpur could claim their rightful status as human beings¹³.

It may be further noted that any conversion invariably entails some interests. They may be material or ideal. But even when there is pursuance of such interests, it may not be without loss of some other interests. These again may be either material or ideal. Conversion was often followed by great loss of many rights that the convert had earlier enjoyed in the community. The converts were often denied food, shelter, inherit-

ance, succession as well as participation in rites and rituals of the family and the community. They were at times excommunicated from the community. There was thus both gain and loss in conversion to another religion. It invariably entailed weighing of the pros and cons before decisions were made. The fact that conversion also entails some loss is too often ignored. Even in the context of Hinduism, Bose refers to tribes being drawn to Hinduism in exchange for protection and social security. Conversion hence requires to be treated more as an exchange than pursuance of a simple one-sided self or group interest¹⁴.

While these constitute the methods under which conversion generally takes place, conversion to Christianity is invariably, unlike in Hinduism, effected by a priest or a missionary. This is in marked contrast to the phenomenon of conversion to Hinduism. In the case of the Hinduism, the transition is more of a process than the event. It is slow, gradual and staggered over many years. It almost takes the form of a natural process. As against this, in conversion to Christianity, although some process is invariably involved, it is marked more by an event and hence transition from one to other can invariably be located and identified. The other interesting thing about the conversion of tribes to Christianity is that the transformation of the tribals has never been all-encompassing. Rather than entailing transformation in all dimensions of social life, as has been the case with Hinduism, the transformation is expected only in a selected or limited aspect of the total social life. The change or shift was gener-

ally related with only those aspects of the social life that were considered religious in nature or had religious overtones. Hence, while there was change in respect to one or more of the social aspects, there were other aspects, both structural and cultural, that were common among the converts and the non-converts. The converts, for example, continued with their languages, food habits, rules, customs, traditions etc. that were an integral part of the social organization of tribal society. The surrender of the old was thus never total. A tribal, even when he was/is converted to Christianity and was/ is expected to live a particular way of life, he was/is expected to do so without surrendering his membership of the wider community, whether it is described as tribe or otherwise. The transformation thus did not lead to a total break from their erstwhile and traditional community. Neither did it lead to an absorption or assimilation into an alien society. This is however not the case with Hinduism.

Religion involves both faith and practices and binds all those who adhere to it into one moral community. Conversion, as observed earlier, invariably led to the formation of new social groups. This had/has certain implications for groups and communities within and outside, and, therefore, also for relationships among them. Conversion entailed observance of not only new rules and practices but also abandonment of some of the old ones of the community. Even though converts retained much of the attributes in common with those of non-converts and maintained some continuity with their traditional social structure, the changes that were

enforced following conversion brought about a rupture in the relation between converts and non-converts. This no doubt partly stemmed from the religious teachings of the new religion but much of it was rooted in the style of life that the converts imposed upon themselves. In this they were greatly aided by the missionaries. To begin with, the converts abandoned many customs and practices. At the same time they observed many others. And while they did observe these others, they did so in total isolation from the rest of the community. The missionaries discouraged and even prohibited the converts from socializing and mixing with the non-converts. Through such exclusive living the converts completely isolated themselves from the rest and formed an exclusive group. They developed a feeling of superiority vis-a-vis the non-converts and even looked down upon the non-converts. Due to the edge that the converts enjoyed over the non-converts, in respect of education, occupation and modern values and exposure, this sense of superiority further widened the gap between the converts and the non-converts. The result is that there is a big divide between the converts and the non-converts today. Indeed there is hardly any social space left between the two to enable them to come together to revive or evolve common ties. In fact, the only platform that the two shared together was confined to the domains of politics, but even here there has come about a rupture now. Both the groups had in past rallied strongly behind the Congress. All the same, even here differences were already visible, but it had not crystallized into distinct identity.

With the erosion of the common platform, the cleavage and antagonism that was hitherto dormant have now come in the surface, and the differences are now not only ideologically being articulated but also politically exploited.

Conversion and the Sangh Parivar

At the level of politics and ideology the differences have given rise to a new orientation to the conception of tribes in India. The conception hitherto dormant and latent came to the surface during the recent attack on the Christians in India. In the course of media coverage on attacks on the Christians, it was time and again forcefully and aggressively articulated by the activists of the Sangh Parivar that the tribals cease to be tribals once they become Christians. It was also articulated that they must register themselves as Christians and not as tribes when they apply for jobs and other benefits from the government. The implication is that when they become Christians they cease to be tribes, and are, therefore, ineligible to apply for state benefits as tribes. Now such a conception of tribes not only goes against the general anthropological knowledge of tribes, however diverse they may be, but also against the basic conception and spirit underlying the Indian Constitution.

Individuals have been identified as tribes because they belong to groups or communities which have been enumerated as scheduled tribes in the Indian constitution. These groups or communities in turn are scheduled as tribes not because they practise a particular religion but because they constitute a particular

community distinct from the dominant regional community. They generally speak their own languages and have a distinct social organization and way of life that is quite different from that of the regional community. They may also happen to practise their own religions. Tribes are thus differentiated from the non-tribes not only on the basis of religion but also other elements that we have referred to above. Even when they have been drawn into the larger social structure and have become considerably differentiated among themselves in terms of income, occupation, religion, world-view etc, they do not cease to be members of the community they belong to. An individual enjoys the status of a tribe by virtue of being a member of a particular community and not because of the status of being an animist or Hindu or Christian. The denial of the constitutional provision to certain members of the community just because they have come to practise another religion goes against the very spirit of the Indian Constitution.

By bringing religion to the forefront of the conception of what constitutes tribes, the Sangh Parivar shows marked continuity with the colonial tradition. And yet there is a departure in certain respect from that tradition. In the colonial literature tribes were no doubt conceived in terms of religion but they were also seen in conjunction with other dimensions. What is new as far as the advocates of Hindutva are concerned is that they have begun to conceive tribes solely in terms of religion. Yet even here the advocates of the Hindutva are different from the colonial tradition. Under the colonial tradition tribes were

classified as animists and hence belonged to a religious tradition other than those of major religions of India. The advocates of Hindutva, however, conveniently overlook the fact that tribes have distinct religions of their own. They have in fact begun to categorize them as the Hindus.

The tendency of Sangh Parivar to conceive and identify tribes as Hindus is based on the observation made many years ago on the subject by G.S.Ghurye, a noted sociologist and the Niyogi Committee Report that endorsed the observation made by Ghurye. Since then it has become a constant refrain among the right wing Hindu social and political activists. This is done on the ground of somewhat similar religious observances and practices between groups identified as tribes and the backward sections or castes of the Hindu society. Ghurye in his book, ‘The Aborigines “So-called” and Their Future’ made arguments in justification of describing the tribes as Hindus; the expression he used was the ‘backward Hindus.’ The book, since then, has come into print under several editions with a new title called ‘The Scheduled Tribes’. He made this argument on the ground that there was much similarity between the Hindu religion and the animistic tribal religions that the two could not possibly be distinguished from one another. He made this point based not on fieldwork data collection but on observations and comments of the Census Commissioners between the period 1891-1931 where they had expressed their dissatisfaction over the fact that tribes were described as animists¹⁵. It is of course an open truth that Ghurye made his observation on very inadequate

data and very selective use of the comments and observations of the Census Commissioners.

The categorization of the tribes as Hindus leads to difficulties both conceptual and empirical. To begin with, whether tribes are to be treated as Hindus is a debatable question. There are both similarities and differences in the religious practices of the Hindus and tribes. The protagonists of Hindutva have, however, conveniently overlooked the differences. Even on similarities, it is not tenable to treat tribes as Hindus. The similarities have been drawn based on two sources. One is the influence of Hinduism on tribes and the other is similarity due to the fact that both are to a greater or lesser extent natural religions. There is no doubt that there has been much give and take between the two religions. However, the influence of Hinduism on tribes, though necessary, is not an adequate ground for describing tribes as Hindus. The other reference made is the dimension of natural religion. As a natural religion, tribal religion shares many attributes in common with the religious practices of tribes in the Americas or Africa as also with Hinduism in India. Yet it is doubtful if the religious practices of tribes in the Americas or Africa can be described as Hinduism and those tribes as Hindus. To categorize tribes as Hindus in the event smacks of cultural and religious imperialism. Just because there are some similarities, tribes cannot be denied their distinct identity and autonomy. Secondly, if tribes are to be treated as Hindus then the whole historical process depicted by the historians to understand Indian civilization is open to contest and

even rejection. And so would be the case with the conceptual apparatus such as Hinduisation, acculturation, assimilation, absorption that have been developed and used to understand the dynamics of Indian society. Hinduism is intricately linked with the structure of caste and it is not so much against religion as against caste, that the social organization of tribes has generally been posited in social science literature. This makes it impossible for a tribal to be a Hindu and member of a tribe at the same time. He can be a Hindu only at the risk of losing the tribal status. The two cannot go together. He can, of course, acquire a new status but that is of caste rather than of tribe. At the same time while tribes continue to undergo changes of many kinds, these are no longer in the direction of caste. The changes in the direction of caste and therefore to Hinduism had a set-back, if not a halt, during the colonial period despite the fact that it opened up the floodgate for contact with people from outside. This was so mainly because Hinduism was no longer able to give the protection to the tribes that Bose has referred to above. Rather it led to domination and subjugation of tribes on the one hand and their oppression and exploitation on the other. Instead of continuing to become cooperative as was considered to be the case, Hinduism became competitive and exploitative. In addition to this there were other factors that arrested this development. Of these the administrative and political concessions extended by the colonial state and the spread of modern education introduced by the Christian missionaries, often with the help of the colonial state,

were the most decisive. While this was the case with Hinduism, the phenomenon was quite the other way round with Christianity. The Christian missionaries addressed themselves to a great extent to the problems created by the movement of the Hindu population. It was hardly surprising that the tribes were increasingly getting attracted to Christianity. By posing the issues of exploitation, oppression and domination that had become common in the relationship between tribes and non-tribes and by addressing such issues as health, disease, education and language etc., Christianity heightened the mark of identity of the tribes as against those of the larger society, especially the Hindu population. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Christian missionaries have been accused of depriving the aborigines of their Hindu heritage or obstructing the natural florescence of the tribes towards Hinduism.

Despite this claim of natural florescence for Hinduism among the tribes, the social and political activists of Hindutva have been building pressures, working out strategies and manipulations both at state and local levels to ensure that tribes return themselves as Hindus and not as animists or the followers of the tribal religion in the cen-

sus enumeration. Through measures such as these, the tribes have been coerced and socialized to declare themselves as Hindus. This has been done by removing primarily the separate enumeration of the category of animists and minor religions, as was the practice in the census before Independence¹⁶. Pressures and manipulations in this direction that began during colonial period have been maintained in the period after Independence. By ensuring the return of religion only in terms of the major religions, tribes were coerced to return themselves as Hindus if they were not practitioners of a religion such as Christianity, Islam or any other major religion.

As observed earlier, tribes were conceived as tribes primarily against civilizations, which in the context of India were marked by Hinduism or Islam. This being the case, it is rather absurd that one could talk of reconversion in the context of tribes as the advocates of Hindutva do. They can in fact talk of only conversion from tribal religion to Christianity or from Christianity to Hinduism. If one were to talk of reconversion then it would only mean conversion from Christianity/Hinduism to a tribal religion.

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Conversion: Psychological Perspectives

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

The psychological dimensions of religious conversion are complex and can be understood from a variety of perspectives. The scope of this article is limited to the following: it first presents an overview of classical psychological understanding of religious conversion and then attempts a psychological exploration of the phenomenon of religious conversion and the controversies surrounding it in contemporary India. It seeks to present an explanation of the motivational dynamics operating in the convert, the missionary, and the antagonists of religious conversion. This explanation is based on the insights provided by Self Psychology, a dynamic

relational theory of human development formulated by Heinz Kohut (1913-1981)³ and further developed and refined by his colleagues and students.⁴

Classical Understanding of Religious Conversion

Even though Sigmund Freud sought to dismiss religion as "an illusion,"⁵ many well known psychologists have explored the phenomenon of religious conversion. G. Stanley Hall delivered a series of public lectures in 1881 at Harvard University on the topic of religious conversion. Much of the material he covered was incorporated into his two-volume study of adolescence.⁶ James H. Leuba, a student of Hall's, published the first journal article on conversion in 1896.⁷ The following year Edwin Starbuck, another student of Hall's, wrote an article on conversion.⁸ Starbuck wrote a book on the topic in 1899.⁹ William James devoted two of his Gifford Lectures to the specific topic of conversion.¹⁰ Conversion has continued to hold the interest of psychologists.¹¹

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

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

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

This understanding of conversion as a radical transformation of self, particularly of the self-surrender type, was heavily influenced by the domination of the Pauline experience on the road to

Damascus as the prototype of all conversions in Protestant circles.

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

Psychological Explanations

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

come to the surface and are resolved through conversion.

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

Object Relations Theory

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

The Object Relations school²³ of psychology focuses on early parent-child relationships in the development of personality. The concept of “object relations” refers to “relations with significant others and their internal representation, starting with the mother”²⁴ According to this theoretical school, the functioning of the adult personality depends on the maturity of one’s object-relations patterns developed in early childhood. The basic assumption in object relations theory is that the crucial determinant of personality, whether normal or pathological, is the relations between self and others, real or imagined by the self.

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

Chana Ullman tested this explanation of religious conversion which emphasises problems in relationships with one’s father. In a comparative study²⁶ she did of 40 converts (to Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism, ISKCON, and Bahaism) and a control group of 30 non-converts (from the same groups) almost one-third of the converts reported the loss of their fathers by death or divorce before the age of ten. About half of them reported unsatisfactory and stressful relations with their fathers. The fathers, when present, were passive to the point of psychological unavailability or actively rejecting. Ullman interpreted the results “as showing that the most significant determinant in cases of conversion is found to be the role of the father, and conversion seemed like a means of attaining an idealized father-attachment”²⁷

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth and other researchers²⁸ “offers a rich and powerful theoretical perspective for understanding religious experience,” including conversion.²⁹ This theory “regards the capacity to make intimate

emotional bonds with other individuals...as a principal feature of effective personality functioning and mental health.”³⁰

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

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

Hence it is possible that some people with insecure attachment histories may seek and find in God the kind of emotional bond they never had in human relationships. In times of distress, this emotional bond with God can provide feelings of comfort and security. A study by Kirkpatrick and Shaver showed that adults who described their

childhood attachments to their mothers as avoidant were four times more likely to experience a dramatic conversion later in life than those who classified their maternal relationships as secure or anxious/ambivalent.³²

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

Interactional Models

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

Conversions in India are more understandable from this interactional perspective. The interactional model of conversion that Louis Rambo³⁵ presents is especially relevant to the Indian situation. Rambo considers conversion to be a “product of the interactions among the convert's aspirations, needs, and orientation, the nature of the group into which she or he is being converted, and the particular social matrix in which these processes are taking place.”³⁶

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

Conversion: The Indian Situation

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

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

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

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

Rambo presents a process model of conversion comprising the following

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

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

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

seeking a more meaningful and satisfying life.

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

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

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

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

Commitment is the consummation of the conversion process. It is a specific turning point or decision required and/or experienced by the potential convert. This commitment is often dramatized and commemorated—sealed with a public demonstration of the convert's

choice. Many traditions employ various rituals of rejection, transition, and incorporation to give public testimony to the commitment.

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

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

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

Toward a Psychological Explanation

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

The central idea in Self Psychology⁴⁴ is that healthy psychological development of the self depends on what Kohut called “selfobject” experiences. These experiences refer to functions that significant persons in one’s life served and continue to serve. More accurately, selfobjects are “*subjective* aspects of a function performed by a relationship. As such, the selfobject relationship refers to an *intrapsychic* experience and does not describe the interpersonal relationship between the self and other objects.”⁴⁵ Appropriate selfobject experiences evoke, maintain and give cohesion to the self. Faulty selfobject experiences lead to an experience of fragmentation and emptiness.

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

Mirroring satisfies the need one has to feel affirmed, confirmed and recognized. It satisfies the exhibitionist

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conversion

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

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

The pre-conversion environment of the converts was one in which they experienced little acceptance and affirmation. Their self-respect and human dignity were frequently denigrated by unempathetic and often hostile members of the dominant social class⁴⁷. They were too helpless to give expression to the resulting narcissistic rage. In such a situation, the hope of dignity and equality offered by the Christian faith and Christian fellowship would appear very attractive. They would find a way of out of an unempathetic and suffocating environment to one in which their sense of self would be recognized and affirmed. The communion and solidarity promised in the community of faith could soothe their wounded psyche. In Winnicott’s phrase they would be “seen” and feel they “exist.” (The fact that the hoped-for recognition and affirmation do not always materialize is one of the reasons why converts sometimes revert to their former religions).

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

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

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

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

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

Opposition to Conversion

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

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

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

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

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

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

indicative that the Church did not have "the deepest respect for these traditions" it claimed to have⁵³.

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

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

Missionary Motivation

What might be the psychological dynamics operating in the missionary?

The Object Relations interpretation of conversion (See above on p. 3) as seeking to create an internal representation of a strong and principled substitute father might be operating in the missionary too. It is possible that the future missionary grew up in an unempathic and unresponsive home where his or her need for mirroring and idealisation was not adequately met. George Atwood and Robert Stolorow⁵⁵ have suggested that messianic salvation fantasies appear in individuals who have experienced disappointments in relationships with early love objects. Disappointment leads to compensatory fantasy in which the image of the lost love object is conceived as a deity. Later on, identification with the lost object leads to the individual's declaring himself and behaving, albeit unconsciously, as a saving messiah.

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

Grandiosity and messiah complex is manifest in much of the social service activity that accompanies Christian missionary enterprise. Uplift of the downtrodden by doling out monetary

and material assistance as well as through educational and developmental projects feeds the missionary’s narcissistic grandiosity. The unverbalised and often unconscious internal experience of the missionary is: “I have, you don’t. I am able, you are helpless. I am superior, you are inferior.” It is some of these same grandiosity-driven developmental projects that, as we have already seen above, create animosity among the privileged upper classes and turn them against missionaries and the missionary enterprise.

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

Notes

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Conversion: Legal Perspective

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

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

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

Religion is meant to hold people together. It must lead people out of their self-centredness, help foster an attitude

of oneness and good will towards all people. All religions, in their essential teachings, urge their followers to reach out in love to their fellow human beings irrespective of the faith they profess.

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

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

plications that involves our standing as a signatory to the U.N. Charter on Human Rights. It is indeed a matter of irony that conversion has become a hated word for us, even though it was upheld in practise by none other than Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, architect of our Constitution. The most significant aspect of conversion is the right of a human being to choose his spiritual culture and destiny. The question is not if people should or should not convert. It is instead whether we should have a society in which people are frozen in the status quo, or free to fashion their own destiny.

Meaning of Conversion

In both Hebrew and Greek the underlying concept of conversion is “to turn”. In other words, a turning from sin and returning to God. It is believed that by the grace of God a person turns from evil to God. In its original meaning conversion is voluntary. Real conversion means a change of religion from one faith to another with corresponding change in attitude, motivation, character and morality.

The Right of Religious Belief

It is an essential human right for a man to be allowed to believe what he really believes. It is a matter bound up with a man’s personal integrity, his human dignity and honour. Deny it, and you have denied a man’s personality. Human nature is the basis of this right. This right should be asserted both on one’s own behalf and also on behalf of others. Since this right is an interior and spiritual one no question ought to arise of a clash with any other right.

The Right of Religious Expression

Religious belief is an inward and spiritual thing, but all inward and spiritual things in their very nature have, or seek, outward and open expression. There is an inner urge of a person with religious beliefs to express them. As soon as a religious belief becomes a conviction it must be seen in word, fellowship and service.

The outer religious expression is an important right of a person, because it is linked with the inward right of religious belief. However, it is not an unqualified right. The right of religious expression is limited by similar rights of others and the principle of public interest and public peace. The right of religious expression is a fundamental human right and its exercises must be restrained only for some grave and open public reason.

The Right of Religious Conversion

If the right of religious expression is granted, it is difficult to withhold some degree of recognition to the right of religious conversion, for the expression of a belief shades imperceptibly into the attempt to persuade others of it. Apart from this, the right to convert is an inherent right on its own account. It is a right that lays its own claim on a man’s sense of duty and integrity. Truth is universally true, and therefore good for all: hence, when it fully grips a man, it grips him not only as thing to hold, but as a thing to spread. And a man has a right to give due expression to so fundamental a conviction as this.

This right is a universal one. Any religion is entitled to it, if it cares to claim it. This right of religious conver-

sion, like the right of religious expression is not an absolute right, for it is concerned with externals, and therefore is liable to clash with other rights of other people. Like the right of religious expression, then, it too must not be allowed to be exercised when its exercise is anti-social. In addition, the exercise of the right of conversion must be limited by the ethics of sound propaganda. Not all means are fair in religious propaganda.

If any objections are to override the right of conversion they must be very serious indeed, for this right is one based on the principles of personal freedom and personal integrity. If despite conflicting claims, the right of conversion stands, then the law should guarantee it, for the function of law is to give sanction to rights.

Freedom of Religion Guaranteed by the Constitution of India

The Preamble to the Constitution proclaims that it is designed to secure to every citizen liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship. Articles 25 to 28 recognise the public and private aspects of religion. Article 25: Right to Freedom of Religion; Article 25 of the Constitution states: Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion.

Nothing in this Article shall affect the operation of any existing law or prevent the State from making any law (a) regulating or restricting any economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with re-

ligious practise; (b) providing for social welfare and reform or the throwing open of Hindu religious institutions of a public character to all classes and sections of Hindus.

Explanation I:

The wearing and carrying of kirpans shall be deemed to be included in the profession of the Sikh religion.

Explanation II:

In sub-clause (b) of clause (2), the reference to Hindus shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jain or Buddhist religion, and the reference to Hindu religious institutions shall be construed accordingly.

What is emphasised by Article 25 is the practise of religious freedom by individuals. But it is also available even where the practise of religion by individuals is through institutions.

Religion

Religion is not defined in our Constitution and it is not susceptible to any rigid definition. It is a matter of faith with individuals and communities and it is not necessarily theistic. It undoubtedly has its bases in a system of beliefs or doctrines which are held by those who profess that religion, but it is not correct to say that religion is nothing else but a doctrine or belief. In its broadest sense religion includes all forms of faith and worship, all the varieties of man's belief in a supreme being. Religion is not merely an opinion, doctrine or belief. It has its outward expression in acts as well. Hence religious practises or performances of acts in pursuance of religious belief are as much part of reli-

gion as faith or belief in particular doctrines. A religion may not only lay down a code of ethical rules, for its followers to accept, it might prescribe rituals and observances, ceremonies and modes of worship which are regarded as an integral part of religion, and these forms and observances might extend even to matters of food and dress.

The essential part of a religion is primarily to be ascertained with reference to the doctrine of that religion itself. A practise can be treated as a part of religion when it is regarded by that religion as its essential and integral part. Otherwise even purely secular practises which are not an essential or an integral part of religion are apt to be clothed with a religious form and make a claim for being treated as religious practises. Similarly practises though religious may have sprung from merely superstitious beliefs and in that sense it may be considered an extraneous and unessential part of religion.

What constituted an essential part of religion or religious practise has to be decided by the courts with reference to the doctrine of the particular religion and included practises, which are regarded by the community as part of its religion.

Article 25(1): Freedom of Conscience and Free Profession, Practise and Propagation of Religion According to Article 25 (1) all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience, and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion.

Right to Profess and Practise

“Profession” means to avow publicly; to make an open declaration of;

to declare one’s belief in. The term “to profess religion” means the right of the believers to state his faith freely and openly in public. The meaning of “a declaration of one’s belief” means a declaration in such a way that it would be known to those whom it may interest.

Therefore if a public declaration is made by a person that he has ceased to belong to his old religion and has accepted another religion he will be taken as professing the other religion “Practise of religion” signifies acts done in pursuance of religious belief. Religious practises to which Article 25(1) refers include practises which are an integral part of the religion itself. So a court is justified in rejecting a claim to be a religious practise where the practise in question is purely secular and not religious in character.

A community cannot conduct a religious worship in violation of an existing law or in a manner which violates statutory provisions made for the benefit of the public. As, for example, encroachment of a public street or footpath for offering prayers is contrary to the provisions of law. In a case the Calcutta High Court said that a sharp distinction must be drawn between religious faith and belief and religious practises. What the State protects is religious faith and belief. If religious practises run counter to public order, morality or health, then the religious practises must give way before the good of the people of the State as a whole.

Right to Propagate Religion

Article 25 gives every person the right to propagate his religion. According to the Oxford Dictionary the word

“propagate” means to spread from person to person, or from place to place, to disseminate, diffuse. According to Century Dictionary Vol.VI propagate means to transmit or to spread from person to person, or from place to place, carry forward or onward, diffuse, extend, as to propagate a report, to propagate the Christian religion.

“Propagation of religion” means to communicate a person’s beliefs to another person or to expose the tenets (doctrine) of one’s religion. So an institution or corporation cannot practise or propagate religion. That could be done only by individual persons, and it is immaterial whether they propagate their personal laws or the tenets for which the institution stood. It is the propagation of belief that is protected whether it takes place in a Church or monastery, in a temple or a parlour. Anyone who preaches the benefits of his religion is likely to extol his own and, to some extent, dispute the truth and efficacy of another religion. Propagation of religion cannot otherwise be carried on, and within limits, every person is free to dispute the truth of another’s religion.

Restrictions can be imposed by the State in propagating one’s religion. The expression “public order, morality and health,” excludes everything undesirable in propagating one’s faith. Force and fraud are covered both by public order and morality. But an approach with a view to convincing others of the spiritual benefits to be acquired from the faith preached is a necessary foundation of the religious freedom guaranteed under the Constitution. That freedom cannot be taken away, except perhaps in the interests of public order, morality and health.

The State has the power to enquire whether methods adopted by a particular person or group to propagate religion in any way contravened “public order, morality and health” and whether any person is being harassed and whether the person or the group is transgressing the limits of law as to public order and morality. The right to practise and propagate religion does not include the right to insult the religion of other persons.

A Short Constitutional Debate for Formulating Article 25 (1)

The formulation of the right to profess, practise and propagate one’s religion was processed by a prolonged debate in the Constituent Assembly. This debate centred around the following points:

- a) freedom to practise one’s religion;
- b) freedom to propagate one’s religion;
- c) restrictions on conversions.

a) *Freedom to “practise” religion*

That there must be freedom of conscience, of belief and worship, subject to public order, morality and health was undisputed. The clause “right to freely profess and practise religion” was included in a draft submitted on 7 March 1947 by K.M. Munshi. This clause drew strong criticism from Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and other women members because they apprehended that the above clause might invalidate existing social legislations, so the word “practise” was later omitted by Sub-committee on Fundamental Rights. K.M. Munshi and Dr.

B.R. Ambedkar emphasised freedom of religion to "all citizens." The Fundamental Rights Sub-Committee then enlarged the scope of this phrase to embrace "all persons-(Citizens and non-citizens in India)". The Sub-Committee on Minorities recommended the restoration of the freedom to "practise" religion. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and Sir Alladi Krishnaswami Ayyar opposed the revision. The issue was finally settled in a meeting of the Advisory Committee under the chairmanship of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. It drafted a proviso to the above clause "practise", which read: "The freedom of religious practise guaranteed in this clause shall not debar the State from enacting laws for the purpose of social welfare and reform."

b) *Freedom to "propagate" religion*

In his draft on fundamental rights submitted on 18th March 1947, Mr. Harnam Singh conceded to all communities freedom to preach their religion, within the limits of public order and morality, and without offending the sentiments of other communities. Dr. Ambedkar, in his draft of 24 March 1947, was more explicit. He wanted every Indian citizen to have "the right to profess, to preach and to convert." In a memorandum, on 1.3.1947, to the Sub-Committee on Minorities, Mr. M. Ruthnaswamy (Madras) named the right to preach and propagate their religion among "the more important of the rights that must be safeguarded," for the minorities. In a like memorandum, on 3.4.1947, Mr. P.K. Salve said that every citizen must enjoy the right to freely propagate his religion in private and

'practise'. However, this right was not included in K.M. Munshi's draft (on 17.3.47) which was taken up for discussion by the Sub-Committee on Fundamental Rights. Objections were raised to this omission in the Sub-Committee on Minorities. Mr. M. Ruthnaswamy said that "certain religions, such as Christianity and Islam, were essentially proselytizing religions, and provisions should be made to permit them to propagate their faith in accordance with their tenets." Accordingly, the Minorities sub-Committee recommended (on 19.4.1947) to redraft of the disputed articles to include the right freely to "propagate religion."

The issue was then taken up by the Advisory Committee on 22 April 1947 under the Chairmanship of Vallabhbhai Patel. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur had already forwarded a note to the Committee, saying that propagation of religion was amply assured in the Article (19) which guaranteed freedom of speech and expression. In the meeting, Mr. C. Rajagopalachari observed: "propagation" comes under freedom of expression. There was a sharp difference of opinion on whether these words ("propagate religion") should be put separately. Mr. Ruthnaswamy said that the word "propagate" includes, not only preaching, but also other forms of propaganda like films and radio. But K.M. Munshi replied that the word might be used to cover even forced conversion. He added: "If the word 'propaganda' means something more than preaching, you must know what it is and therefore I am opposed to this introduction of the word 'propaganda'." Alladi Krishnaswamy Ayyar declared: "I per-

sonally do not recognise the right to propagation." Both he and K.M. Munshi stated that propagation of religion was covered by the "freedom of speech." However, Govind Ballabh Pant (U.P.) referring to the word 'propagate' said: "At the worst it is redundant, and so many members want it we had better introduce it." But when K.M. Munshi denied that it was a redundant word, the Chairman called for a vote through a show of hands. The result was that the word 'propagate' was retained.

In October 1948, the Drafting Committee together with the Constitutional Advisor examined some of the suggestions made by some members of the Constituent Assembly. Different Opinions and Suggestions were expressed. "The word 'propagate' must be deleted," said Mr. R.R. Diwarkar (Bombay). "The right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion' be deleted, or "practise and propagate religion be substituted by "practise religion privately," opined Mr. Tajamul Hussain (Bihar). But these suggestions were rejected by the Drafting Committee.

When the Constituent Assembly met again during the first week of December 1948, the controversy centred chiefly around the right to "propagate" religion. In this meeting the following proposals were made: "The word "propagate" must be deleted. Religion is a private affair between oneself and his Creator. It has nothing to do with others... Each one should allow the other to attain salvation according to his own religion. If you start propagating religion in this country, you will become a nuisance to others. So far it has become a nuisance," said Tajamul Hussain of

Bihar. Loknath Misra of Orissa said, "Partition of the sub-continent is caused by the propagation of Islam. 'Propagation' in the present article can only mean paving the way for the complete annihilation of Hindu culture, the Hindu way of life and manners. Religion was being propagated in order to swell the numbers of one's own community as a means of political advantage. In no other constitution was the word 'propaganda' (religious) mentioned as a fundamental right."

According to Mohammed Ismail Sahib of Madras, "Article 25 enshrines a right which human beings had from the very beginning of time; it is an inalienable right of every human being. It is not the propagation of religion as such but misunderstanding of religion, which causes troubles." Lakshmi Kanta Maitra of West Bengal, said, "The accusation of the Christian community that it has committed excesses in its proselytizing zeal is wrong. The Indian Christian community happens to be the most inoffensive community in the whole of India. I have never known anybody contesting that proposition. If the Christian community, which spends crores of rupees every year on educational, medical and social work for all classes and communities, had utilized these funds for seeking converts, it would have been ten times more numerous than it is today."

Supporting the views of the Christian community, L. Krishnaswami Bharathi of Madras said, "The expression 'propagate' refers not to the Christian religion alone. At any rate to hold that some people should not propagate their religious views, would amount to intolerance. The Christian community

has taken a ‘thoroughly nationalist’ decision to forgo reservation of seats in order to be more integrated with the nation. Therefore, in good grace, the majority community should allow this privilege (of propagating religion) for the minority communities and have it for themselves as well.”

Striking a positive view, K. Santhanam of Madras said, “Article 25 is an article on religious tolerance. At the same time it rightly circumscribes freedom within certain limits.” Removing the fear of forced conversions and possibility of abuse of the right by any religious group, T.T. Krishnamachari of Madras said, “I studied for about 14 years in a Christian institution. No attempt had been made to convert me to Christianity. People coming under a new government should not feel that it is a change for the worse. Therefore, the constitution must provide for the continuance of things as they are in religious matters, unless the status quo has something which offends all ideas of decency, equity and justice. The Arya Samajists are as free to carry on their Shuddhi propaganda, as are Christians and others to propagate their own religion.”

“I feel that if the followers of any religion want to subtract from the concessions given herein in any way, they are not only doing injustice to the possibility of integration of all communities into one nation in the future but also doing injustice to their own religion and to their own community.”

K.M. Munshi supported the idea of including the term “propagate” in the right to freedom of religion.

Emphasising this he said, “Those who objected to the word ‘propagate’ were thinking in terms of the old regime, where Christian missionaries, particularly the British derived influence from the political authority to acquire conversion. No such advantage accrues to any community today, “nor is there any political advantage by increasing one’s fold.” Even if the word were not there, the freedom of speech guaranteed by the Constitution would permit one to persuade others to join one’s own religion.” He further said: “Moreover, I was a party from the very beginning to the compromise with the minorities, which ultimately led to many of these clauses being inserted in the Constitution and I know it was on this word that the Indian Christian community laid the greatest emphasis, not because they wanted to convert people aggressively, but because the word “propagate” was a fundamental part of their tenet. Even if the word was not there, I am sure, under the freedom of speech which the Constitution guarantees it will be open to any religious community to persuade other people to join their faith. So long as religion is religion, conversion by free exercise of the conscience has to be recognised. The word “propagate” in this clause is nothing very much out of the way as some people think, nor is it fraught with dangerous consequences.” After his address, a vote was taken: thus Article 25, passed into the Indian Constitution on 6.12.1948. It read: “Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this part all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion.”

In the Constituent Assembly, out of 296 members, only 7 were Christians. A large number of Hindu Members agreed to recognise propagation of religion, as a fundamental right, by way of compromise with some minority communities, especially the Christians. In reference to the acceptance of ‘propagate’ by the constituent Assembly Fr. Jerome D’Souza, S.J. told the House that this act of theirs, “is so reassuring and so encouraging to the minorities, that we have no reason at all to quarrel or to ask for stronger assurances. That attitude must provoke on the part of the minorities an equally trustful attitude which I hope will inspire future relations and future discussions.”

c) *Restrictions on Conversions*

K.M. Munshi’s draft on fundamental rights (on 17-3-1947) contained the two following articles:

1) “No person under the age of eighteen shall be free to change his religious persuasion without the permission of his parents or guardian.”

2) Conversion from one religion to another brought about by coercion, undue influence or the offering of material inducement is prohibited and is punishable by the law of the Union.”

We shall refer to these as clauses 1 and 2 respectively.

The Sub-committee on Fundamental Rights adopted (27-3-1947) an amended version of the above clauses:

“1) No person under the age of 18 shall be converted to any religion other than the one in which he was born or be initiated into any religious order involv-

ing a loss of civil status. 2) Conversion from one religion to another brought about by coercion or undue influence shall not be recognised by law and the exercise of such coercion or undue influence shall be an offence.”

These clauses were then circulated among the members of the sub-Committee, together with an explanatory note (8-4-1947) by the Constitutional Adviser, Mr. B.N. Rau. The note said: “these clauses are meant to stop certain practises which, it is feared, are becoming increasingly common.” In its second discussion (15-4-1947) on the above clauses, the Sub-committee decided to substitute “converted to” in clause 1 with the words “made to join or profess”. The Sub-Committee also rejected Dr. Ambedkar’s proposal that the phrase “or undue influence” in clause 2 be omitted and that the said clause end with the words “recognised by law.” When the above clauses came up before the Sub-committee on Minorities (18-4-1947), Mr. M. Ruthnaswamy said that the provisions of clause 1 would break up family life. “A minor should be allowed to follow his parents in any change of religion or nationality which they may adopt,” he added. Mr. C. Rajagopalachari questioned the necessity of clause 2, since it was already covered by the Indian Penal Code. The Minorities Sub-Committee then recommended a redraft of clause 1 as follows: No person under the age of 18 shall be made to join or profess any religion other than the one in which he was born, except when his parents themselves have been converted, and the child does not choose to adhere to his original faith.....No conversion shall be

recognised unless the change of faith is attested by a Magistrate after due inquiry."

Clauses 1 and 2, together with the recommendations of the Minorities Sub-Committee, were next discussed by the Advisory committee (22-4-1947). The chairman, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, expressed the opinion that clause 1 should be left to legislation. So, with the concurrence of the House, it was deleted. The Chairman felt that clause 2 was equally unnecessary and ought to be deleted. It was not a fundamental right. Besides, even under the present law, forcible conversion is an offence. The recognition of conversion is a matter for society and not for the law. He was supported by M. Ruthnaswamy. But some others disagreed, e.g. S.P. Mukherjee (President of All India Hindu Mahasabha) and Bakshi Tek Chand (Punjab), an ex-High Court judge. The Committee finally decided to shorten the clause so that it ended with the words "recognised by law."

The amended clause became the subject of a heated debate in the Constituent Assembly on 1-5-1947, so that Frank Anthony (C.P. & Berar) remarked: "I realise how deeply certain sections of this House feel on this question of conversion." The debate was chaired by Dr. Rajendra Prasad (Bihar), President of the Constituent Assembly and first President of India. K.M. Munshi wanted an amendment to the effect that any conversion "brought about by fraud, coercion or undue influence or of a minor below the age of 18 shall not be recognised by law." He explained that the only effect of this clause would be that the convert "will

still in law be deemed to continue to belong to the old religion and his legal rights will remain unaffected." We have, in this remark, an indication that opposition to conversion is chiefly based on the fact that it breaks up the social cohesion of the Hindu family or community in which the convert was born. Hence K.M. Munshi wanted the convert to continue under his old personal law, notwithstanding a change of faith. When asked by Rohini Kumar Chaudhari to explain 'undue influence', his only reply was: "It is difficult for me to say." P.R. Thakur (Bengal), a member of the Depressed Classes, described the 'fraud' which the clause should cover: "The preachers of other religions approach these classes of people, take advantage of their ignorance, extend all sorts of temptations and ultimately convert them." K.M. Munshi was supported by Jagat Narain Lal, Algu Rai Shastri (U.P.) viewed conversion as an attempt to increase one's own fold. The British government saw in this a means of effecting a balance among the various communities, so that their quarrels might leave British rule intact. "Convert only those who can be legitimately converted," he exclaimed. Purushottamdas Tandon said that a minor was too immature to understand the teachings of the Scriptures. So morally and legally his conversion can never be considered valid; it must therefore be ascribed to some unfair influence. All the above speakers, with the exception of K.M. Munshi, hailed from North India.

On the other hand, the Rev. J.J.M. Nichols-Roy (Assam), a Khasi and representative of Backward Tribes, stated

that he was converted at the age of 15. [His conversion is recounted in A.J. Appasamy, *The Christian Task in Independent India*, S.P.C.K., London (1951), pp.143-144] No law should prevent a boy from changing his faith, when he feels that God is calling him. "But to think that a youth under the age of eighteen does not have a conscience before God and, therefore, he cannot express his belief is wrong", he declared.

Ramnath Goenka (Madras) said that the impugned clause would be inconsistent with Article 25 which guarantees freedom of conscience to 'all persons'. Now, conscience may develop already at the age of 12. B.R. Ambedkar wanted Munshi to drop his amendment, as had already been suggested by three Committees. He pointed out that if the conversion of minors were prohibited, orphans below 18 might have to be brought up without any religious instruction. Further, why should not a child of 5 be brought up in the religion of its converted parents? He did not mind a proviso being added that children should not be converted without the knowledge of their lawful guardians. Jerome D'Souza, S.J. (Madras) and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel regretted that a degree of heat had been imported into the controversy. They suggested that "one more effort" be made, and that the said clause be referred back to the Advisory Committee, "so that the wording of it may be most carefully weighed." This is what Rajendra Prasad did, with the concurrence of the House. It was one of three clauses which the Assembly referred back to the Advisory Committee for re-examination and report.

On 25th August, 1947, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel informed the President of the Constituent Assembly, that after further consideration the Committee recommended the deletion of the controversial clause. The clause, he said, "enunciates a rather obvious doctrine which it is unnecessary to include in the Constitution." Thus it came about that clauses 1 and 2 were excluded from the Constitution. It was with great difficulty and after much effort, especially by representatives of the minorities, that the freedom "to profess, practise and propagate religion" was explicitly acknowledged in the Indian Constitution. The fact that this was acknowledged is remarkable, in view of the fact that even the best intentioned Hindus, like Mahatma Gandhi, disapproved of the efforts of Christian missionaries at conversion. The freedom to propagate one's religion was reluctantly conceded as a compromise with the minorities, for relinquishing their right to reserved seats in the legislature. However, there was no genuine conviction concerning this aspect of religious freedom.

Conversion and Forced Conversion

According to the Shorter Oxford Dictionary conversion means to cause to turn to a religion, or the fact of being converted to a religion, belief or opinion, especially to Christianity.

A conversion according to the law of this country could be defined as follows: "An adult person out of his religious conviction willingly and knowingly, without force, fraud or inducement, renounces his old religion and accepts another religion. Every person in India has a right to convert himself/

herself. No one has the right to prevent a person from genuine conversion if done with conviction. What can be prevented by the state is “forced” conversion by means of force, fraud, allurement etc. Conversion by force, fraud or allurement is prevented on the ground of morality or public order. It is presumed that if forced conversion is not prevented by the State, it may create social tension, riots or public disorder in society. Forced conversion may deprive a person of his freedom of religion or freedom of conscience.

So far Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Arunachal Pradesh have enacted laws to prevent forced conversion. These laws prohibit conversion from one religion to another by use of force or allurement or by fraudulent means. The Constitutional validity of these laws were challenged in the Supreme Court of India. In *Rev. Stanislaus vs. M.P.* (1977)2 SCR 611 ('77) A.S.C. 908, Chief Justice Ray of the supreme Court held that “What Article 25(1) 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 his tenets. He further held that Article 25(1) guarantees ‘freedom of conscience’ to every citizen, and not merely to the followers of one particular religion, and that, in turn, postulates that there is no fundamental right to convert another person to one’s own religion because if a person purposely undertakes the conversion of another person to his religion, as distinguished from his effort to transmit or spread the tenets of his religion, that would impinge on the ‘freedom of conscience’ guaranteed to all citizens of the country alike.” But it

was felt by many legal critics that the above judgement delivered by the then Chief Justice Ray was not in consonant with the Legislative History of Article 25(1).

Criticising the above judgement Ram Jethmalani said, “It is the Supreme Court of the emergency period which sustained the constitutional validity of those measures. As a student of law without committing contempt of court, I am free to say that the Supreme court is wrong. I have no doubt that some day the Supreme Court more properly and adequately informed about the legal provisions, will reverse that decision.” “In my view the Supreme Court in the last case has put the narrow construction on the word ‘propagate’ and turned down the earlier case. With all respect, the right has not been given the full effect, but has only been reduced to a vanishing point. The case needs to be reconsidered.” [Hidayatulla, former Chief Justice of India]

Legal Formalities to Prove Genuine Conversion

When a person shows his desire to join your religion make sure that he/she is an adult (above 18 years of age) and is of sound mind. Enquire about the motivation for change of religion and check whether he is joining the new religion out of his personal conviction and without any force, threat, allurement or inducement. Ask him to make an affidavit, stating his disposition and reasons for joining the new religion, duly attested by the Oath Commissioner. In case the Oath Commissioner is not available then request the person concerned to produce two adult witnesses

who can give testimony to the circumstances and facts of his conversion.

Socio-Legal Implications of Conversion

The debate on conversion offers an opportunity to reflect upon the historical encounter of the Christian message with the Indian people, the reasons for its limited impact, and the possibilities in the future, to more fully fulfill its mission and convey its message to India.

In the past, the studies of conversion concentrated on the change of heart and faith in Christ, very much ignoring the legal and social repercussions of this event. A religious issue such as conversion must be viewed pragmatically and objectively in the context of law. There should also be an interdisciplinary approach in dealing with the complex issue of conversion.

Conversion cannot remain merely a private personal spiritual experience. It affects familial and socio-cultural aspects of life of the convert in society. By becoming a member of a church or another religious community, the convert is sometimes drawn out of the community of his birth, thus rendering it difficult for him to remain fully indigenous to his community. Often he is considered to be an outcaste from his social group and family.

By conversion a person is forced to adapt himself to modes of worship, art forms and theological categories, which draws little from his own religious heritage. Transition from his traditional milieu into another social group is accorded firm judicial sanction by a

change of his personal law. The present practise of immediately throwing the convert into the control of Christian law which is of European origin is to compel him to be subjected to an alien law. The switch-over leads to legal repercussions which result in an uncalled for upheaval in the convert's family relationship.

When a Hindu is converted to Christianity he is excluded from his caste and is no longer under the Hindu law. In practise, this has often been accompanied by a break with the past in social and cultural life. The convert is seen as joining the community of Christians governed by another set of personal law in matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, maintenance, guardianship and adoption of children.

Hence missionary activities are viewed by Hindus as a mode of communal and cultural aggression, a threat to the very existence of the Hindu society. Baptism is, in the eyes of Hindus, a symbol of a comprehensive shift of social alliance; it is devoid of spiritual significance and is an act of supreme disloyalty to the Hindu heritage. Symptomatic of this situation are the Bills introduced in various State Legislatures in order to control conversions.

Conclusion

Christians should not be a closed group called away from the main stream of society. The Church must rise up within every religious group like an indigenous growth and not set itself up as a rival unit. We must explore the possibility whether a convert from Hinduism can remain within the framework of the

Hindu society whilst being fully committed to Jesus Christ. One must also discover methods to integrate the Christian communities more effectively into the cultural and social life of the country. We must reflect more how the Chris-

tian message can be propagated in the Indian context, to bring about real transformation (conversion) in the cultural, social, economic and religious structures, which have great impact on the lives of the poor and the oppressed.

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Hindu Missionaries and Conversion

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Introduction

"Hinduism is a pacifist, non-violent, and tolerant religion." "It is a model for all religions." "Hinduism is not missionary." "It has no expansive designs and does not send any missionaries." These are some of the presuppositions and assumptions propagated by even scholars of international repute. The famous indologist Max Muller, for example, declared that Brahmins never proselytized.¹ Almost all the articles published in the leading secular dailies of India like the *Hindu*, *The Times of India*, and *The New Indian Express*, after the Indian Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee's call for a national debate on conversions in the context of the attack on the Christian communities and the murder of the Australian Missionary Steines, presupposed as self-evident that Hinduism is not missionary and does not convert. But is this true?

No serious research has been done on the missionary character of Hinduism so far. Obviously, there is a scarcity of historical records in this regard. Besides, the Hindu Scriptures and the Puranas do not give any direct evidence of missionary activity. These pose serious problems for a researcher.

All the same, even a superficial researcher cannot escape being struck by

the missionary character of Hinduism. Let us first of all search for evidences of missionary activity in Hindu Sacred literature. Then we shall investigate Hindu missionary activity in the pre- and post-Christian era, tracing some of the tendencies from the beginning up to now.

The Hindu Sacred Literature

Although there are no direct evidences of missionary activity in Hindu Sacred Literature, one could trace in them clear evidences for unmistakable missionary activity. The disappearance of *Dasyus* and *Panis* – referred to by *Rgveda* as enemies of the Aryans and described as "riteless, indifferent to gods"² – and the institution of *vratyastoma* sacrifice to receive outsiders into the brahmanic fold³ are undoubtedly such instances.

Absorption and Assimilation: The Aryans progressively absorbed non-Aryans into the brahmanic fold by absorbing their deities and assigning them a place in the vedic pantheon. Rudra, who later became Siva, is a non-Aryan deity.⁴ Sri Lakshmi appears only in the supplements to the *Rgveda* – an indication that it is a later addition.⁵

The Upanisads give further evidence of absorption and assimilation.

Non-Aryan doctrines like karma, rebirth, yoga are integrated, assimilated and become part of brahmanic heritage.⁶ This all-absorbing, all-assimilating tendency of Hinduism has become even more pronounced in recent times. Vivekananda mentions three religions which received tremendous shocks but survived by their internal strength; they are Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Judaism. About Hinduism Vivekananda declares:

... sect after sect arose in India and seemed to shake the religion of the Vedas to its very foundations; but like the waters of the sea-shore in a tremendous earthquake it receded only for a while, only to return in an all-absorbing flood, a thousand times more vigorous; and when the tumult of the rush was over, these sects were all sucked in, absorbed and assimilated into the immense body of mother faith.⁷

The Absorption of Buddha and Buddhism: Not only sects, but even heterodox religions are absorbed into Hinduism. Buddhism, as we know, arose in fact as a reaction against brahmin domination and casteism. Paradoxically, not only is Buddha accepted in the course of time as an avatara but Buddhism is itself presented as the fulfilment of Hinduism:

As the Jew did not understand the fulfilment of the Old Testament, so the Buddhist did not understand the fulfilment of the truths of Hindu religion. Again, I repeat, Shakya Muni came not to destroy, but he was the fulfilment, the logical conclusion, the logical development of the religion of the Hindus.⁸

Vivekananda continues⁹:

Hinduism cannot live without Buddhism, nor Buddhism without Hinduism. Then realize what the separation has shown to us, that the Buddhists cannot stand without the brain and philosophy of the Brahmins, nor the Brahmin without the heart of the Buddhist.⁹

This all-absorbing, assimilating tendency has been further enhanced in recent times.

Blanket-labelling: The term “blanket-labelling” may be used for the wholesale induction of tribals, dalits and other non-Aryan folks into the Hindu fold, though, in reality, they have nothing in common with Hinduism. Unlike other religions, Hinduism does not demand a change of heart or faith but only the prior acceptance of the label. Progressive integration of their culture is a slow and unperceived process. The following text expresses the just described attitude:

In the context of India’s modernization, the only section of the Indian society which can be considered really important is the Hindu majority. For legal, sociological and historical reasons, this community also includes the Jains and the Buddhists, and modern movements like Sikhism, the Radhaswamis and others. It is plain enough that while there are important differences of beliefs and world-view as well as of social organization, the ultimate foundations are the same. The word “Hindu” has covered and continues to cover all religions which took birth in India.¹⁰

This is an extremely subtle way of converting non-brahmanic religions and

bringing them under brahmin domination

Thus absorption and assimilation have been used as powerful means of conversion from vedic times to the present. It is evident that Hinduism was not averse to proselytization right from early times not only in India but also abroad.

Conversion of South-East Asia

We may take it as a well-established fact that there were Hindu kingdoms by the fifth century CE in South-East Asia. Both historical and archaeological evidence favour this view. How did this process take place?

Colonization: Jawaharlal Nehru writes in *The Discovery of India*:

From the first century of the Christian era onwards wave after wave of Indian colonists spread east and south-east reaching Ceylon, Burma, Malaya, Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Siam, Cambodia, and Indo-China. Some of them managed to reach Formosa, the Philippine Islands and Celebes.¹¹

There were four principal waves of colonization between the first century and about 900 CE. These were organized by the state. Colonies were situated on strategic points and on important trade routes. Most probably colonization started much earlier than the first century CE because such waves of colonization could not have occurred “unless they had been preceded for many generations or centuries by individuals or small groups intent on trade.”¹²

These colonizations were not always pacific:

The military exploits of these early Indian colonists are important as throwing light on certain aspects of the Indian character and genius which have hitherto not been appreciated. But far more important is the rich civilization they built up in their colonies and settlements and which endured for over a thousand years.¹³

It would not be wrong to conclude that colonization and conversions progressed hand in hand.

Two other factors contributed to conversions: i) in South-East Asia Hinduism enjoyed royal patronage because Hindu *raja dharma* firmly established the authority of the kings. ii) the missionary zeal of the Indian legates was another reason which brought about such a remarkable change:

It is only a story of great triumph against enormous odds. However, it seems that Brahmanical religion was not probably much behind Buddhism in respect of missionary zeal and proselytising activity.¹⁴

This proselytising activity never stopped except perhaps for brief periods. George Campbell in his report about his government in Bengal wrote:

It is a great mistake to suppose that the Hindu religion is not proselytising; the system of castes gives room for the introduction of any number of outsiders, so long as people do not interfere with existing castes, they may form a new caste and call themselves Hindus; and the Brahmins are always ready to receive all who will submit to them and pay them. The process of manufacturing Rajput from

ambitious aborigines goes on before our eyes.¹⁵

Campbell's report not only substantiates Hindu proselytising activity but also gives an insight into another dimension of Hindu missionary methodology, namely, formation of sub-castes under brahmanic supremacy. It also throws light on Hindu opposition to Islam and Christianity because they resist reduction into other Hindu castes, although both the Christians and the Muslims – but to a lesser extent – have castes in their own respective communities.

What we have seen so far illustrates that Hindu proselytising activity was going on right from the beginning of its existence till now with occasional interruptions caused by socio-political situations such as Muslim invasion of India and British colonization.¹⁶

In this missionary activity we may notice a threefold approach: i) peaceful, calm sharing of religious experience; ii) aggressive missionary activity; and iii) most subtle intellectual approach unsurpassed in the annals of the missionary history of any religion so far.

Sharing of Religious Experience

Seeking and sharing religious experience is a common phenomenon in the Upanisads. Yajnavalkya shares his experience of brahman both in public debates (BU 3.1-9) and in private (BU 4.1-4). There are others who seek realization like Narada who approaches Sanatkumara for instruction (CU 7.1-26). We may observe that both the sharing of religious experience and instruction lead to conversion of heart.

Though it may not be termed a missionary activity in the strict sense, the inherent missionary dimension cannot be ignored.¹⁷

With Vivekananda, the sharing of the experiential dimension of Hinduism becomes a real missionary approach, a method, a tool. Vivekananda declares:

You must come out from all form if you would see the Light. Drink deep of the nectar of the knowledge of God. The man who realises, "I am He," though clad in rags, is happy. Go forth into the Eternal and come back with eternal energy. The slave goes out to search for truth; he comes back free.¹⁸

This realization is the most important:

Religion is not in doctrines, in dogmas, nor in intellectual argumentation; it is being and becoming, it is realization.¹⁹

Then follows the subtle, implicit invitation:

We hear so many talking about God and the soul, and all the mysteries of the universe, but if you take them one by one, and ask them, "Have you realized God? Have you seen your soul?" – How many can say they have? And yet they are all fighting with one another.²⁰

Indirectly it means that Advaita does not fight, offers realization.

S. Radhakrishnan, one of the former Presidents of India, proclaimed the message of religious experience:

The Upanisads speak to us of different forms of genuine religious experience. whether it is contemplation of the Absolute, or meditation on the Supreme Person, or worship of the Cos-

mic Spirit or absorption in the world of nature, they are all genuine forms, as they aim at the same ultimate conclusion of self-transcendence.²¹

Then Radhakrishnan refers to other religions which seek union – an indirect reference to Christianity, Islam, etc. – and indicates what is beyond them:

There are others who wish to go beyond union to unity, a state of consciousness which is above subject-object relationship. Naturally the Upanisads do not adopt an attitude of dogmatism. This attitude of acceptance of all forms of worship has been a persistent character of India's religious life. The world of God is not bound by languages in which it is spoken. It is the one voice that is heard in all religions.²²

Indirectly, it is an affirmation of the superiority of advaitic experience, its non-dogmatic character and tolerance.

While these are indirect, implicit missionary approaches through an invitation to share religious experience, with Swami Prabhupada it becomes an open, public proclamation and missionary activity.

Conversion through Proclamation

With A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of the Krishna Consciousness Movement (ISKCON), sharing religious experience becomes a proclamation to conversion and adherence to the movement. The Swamiji embraced sannyasa in order to be a missionary:

In later years Prabhupada would recall, "I was sitting alone in Vṛndāvana,

writing. My Godbrother [Keśava Mahārāja in Mathura] insisted to me, 'Bhaktivedānta Prabhu, you must do it. Without accepting the renounced order of life, nobody can become a preacher.' It was my spiritual master who insisted through this Godbrother. So, unwillingly, I accepted."²³

The missionary activity of Swami Prabhupada produced marvellous results. Goswami describes this:

Before leaving India, he had written three books; in the next twelve years he would write more than sixty. Before he left India he had initiated one disciple; in the next twelve years, he would initiate more than four thousand. Before he left India, hardly anyone had believed that he could fulfil his vision of a worldwide society of Krishna devotees; but in the next decade he would form and maintain the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and open more than a hundred centres.²⁴

What was the reason for this marvellous success? To an intellectually overfed West, Swami Prabhupada offered a religion of the heart, of experience. The method he followed was the ecstatic singing of Kirtans which attracted people and he preached to them. Conversions followed.

While these are pacifist missionary activities, aggressive approaches are not unknown to Hinduism.

Aggressive Hindu Missionary Activity

Colonization of South-East Asia was not without violence. It is implied in the statement of Nehru cited earlier. India embraced Buddhism at the con-

version of emperor Ashoka (272-236 or 232 BCE). But by the end of the 12th century CE, Buddhism had almost become non-existence, a religion of no consequence in India. Scholars assign various causes for this - sudden internal corruption and decay, divisive effect of sectarianism, insufficient cultivation of the laity or the social failure of Buddhism, Brahmanic persecution, withdrawal of royal patronage and Muslim invasion.²⁵ the argument that Buddhism was simply exhausted and died in India seem ridiculous.

The most important cause for the disappearance of Buddhism was brahmanic hostility and Śankarācārya's persecution of the Buddhists and the reconversion of the masses to Hinduism:

Kumarila is said to have instigated king Sudhanvan of Ujjain to exterminate the Buddhists. The Tibetan historians Bu-ston and Taranatha record his wars against the Buddhists. The Kerala utpati describes how he exterminated the Buddhists from Kerala. A great role in the decline of Buddhism was played by Sankara. The ēankaradigvijaya of Madhava tells us that ēankara led a religious expedition against the Bauddhas and caused their destruction from the Himalayas to the Indian ocean. ēankara himself has described the Buddhist system as "VaināśikaÔ or hSarva-vaināśika". According to the Tibetan tradition, at his approach the Buddhist monasteries began to tremble and the monks began to disperse pell-mell.²⁶

Aggressive Reconversion²⁷

The Arya Samaj established in 1875 by Swami Dayānand Saraswati took "reclamation and reconversion" as

one of its main activities. There were and are two kinds of reconversions. One is the reconversion of Hindu converts to Islam or Christianity back to Hinduism. The other is the reconversion of Dalits and tribal Christians to Hinduism based on the assumption that all Dalits and tribals are Hindus. In reality, it is not reconversion but conversion of Christians to Hinduism under the guise of reclamation and reconversion.

The Methods Employed

Besides philanthropic and relief work, the Arya Samajists successfully employ two methods. The first is to raise the caste status of tribals by entitling them to wear the sacred thread. The second is to raise the untouchables to the rank of touchables.²⁸ To these we may add the disinformation and misinformation campaign against Christian missionaries by the RSS, Viśwa Hindu Pariṣad and other sister- and frontal organizations. Since some of these are semi-clandestine organizations, it is difficult to get details about their hidden agendas. While some of the activities of these organizations come to the fore at one time or the other, there is an open yet unperceived Hindu missionary activity going on all over the world under various guises.

An Intellectual Missionary Onslaught: Vivekananda began this missionary onslaught at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, and this was continued by Radhakrishnan and many others. This is carried out at the intellectual and popular levels. In fact, several dissertations could be written on this topic. I may mention some general

outlines of this missionary approach which on the one hand hid the ugly face of Hinduism such as untouchability, brahmanic domination, oppression of the poor and so forth and made Hinduism the most universally acceptable religion, more desirable than monotheism.

Devaluation of Monotheism: Monotheists believe that the highest idea of God is that of a personal God. The ancient thinkers of India think differently:

... the monotheistic idea with which the Samhita portion is replete, was thought by the Aryans to be useless and not worthy of philosophers and thinkers, and (...) struggled hard for a more philosophical and transcendental idea.²⁹

Radhakrishnan continued the attack:

Personality is a limitation, and yet only a personal God can be worshipped. Personality implies the distinction of self and not-self, and hence inapplicable to Being who includes and embraces all that is.³⁰

While devaluing monotheism, Hinduism (there is an implicit identification of Hinduism with advaita, although advaita is only a school of thought in Hinduism) was presented as the most tolerant universal religion.³¹ It is further claimed that Hinduism is a religion which is in perfect accordance with science.³² These together with other aspects that are appealing to people at large such as peace, tranquillity, and so forth have been exploited to the hilt by several Hindu Godmen to propagate their religion and ideology, too vast an area to be covered here.

Christian Response – the need for a new theology of Religion

A blind acceptance of the biased opinion of certain scholars is the reason why the Christians are blissfully ignorant about the Hindu missionary activity. As a result, no serious research has been carried out on this matter. In the face of today's multi-faceted and even violent campaign against Christian missionary activities, the search is on for an apt Christian response. Any response born out of an ignorance of the missionary nature of Hinduism itself is bound to be defensive and ineffective. A genuine and serious Christian response first of all calls for the courage to expose those open and subtle ways of Hindu missionary activities. Inter-religious dialogue does not mean tolerance of hypocritical standpoints! Undoubtedly there is the need to enlighten millions of sincere, honest, saintly and open-minded Hindus about the true nature of Hindu missionary activity.

Going a step further, it must be pointed out that it is the ignorance about the very nature of religion itself that makes theologians, missiologists as well as Hindus to cry out: "Don't Convert!". Conversion is indeed God's work, and not man's. God may convert one to Christianity, another to Hinduism. If the essence of every religion consists in its life-giving function, i.e. its very nature to show that way for anyone to find meaning and fulfilment for human life, and if the uniqueness of each religion consists in the uniqueness of the way it stands for, then the freedom to preach and propagate it is logically implied in the very nature of religion itself. Simi-

larly, the freedom of conscience to accept any religion of one's choice is a fundamental human right, which no state or organization can deny. It is therefore the need of the hour, as part of the Christian response, to develop a new theology of Religion along similar lines, which would definitely provide the basic orientation for true religious harmony.

Conclusion

A brief glance at the Hindu Sacred literature as well as the historical development of Hinduism makes it amply

clear that Hinduism is not only not averse to proselytization, but it has also its own manifold ways of conversion, from the very aggressive to the quite subtle very effective types. Any meaningful Christian response, therefore, should be born out of an awareness of this naked fact and the courage to expose it. Since the freedom to preach and propagate the unique way that every religion is is part of the defining character of any religion, it is the crying need of the hour, as part of the Christian response to the 'loud' Hindu protests to stop 'conversion', to develop a sound new theology of religion.

Notes

1. Max Muller affirmed it in a lecture delivered in Westminister Abbey and prophesied that Brahmanism would die. See A.C.Lyall in *Asiatic Studies, Religious and Social*, Vol.I, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, 1976, pp. 99-100.
2. For details see Antony Mookenthottam, "Hindu Missionary: History and Methods," in *Jeevadhara*, XXVI /155, 393-395.
3. *Ibid.*
4. A. B. Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads*, HOS, 31, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, p.147-150.
5. Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation*, p. 90-102.
6. See *Chandogya Upanisad*, V.10.7; *Katha Upanisad*, 3; 5.6-7.
7. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. I, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 1963, p. 6.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 21. Keshub Chunder Sen (1838-1884) presented Christ as the fulfilment of Hinduism. It is very probable that Vivekananda is applying in a subtle way the same teaching to Buddhism and Hinduism. See Antony Mookenthottam, *Indian Theological Tendencies*, Peter Lang, Berne, 1978, p. 32-33.
9. *Complete Works*, Vol. I, p. 23.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 146. The author conveniently forgets that the Aryans came to India from outside carrying with them their own gods and religious traditions.
11. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1973, p. 202.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
14. For details see: Dawee Daweewarn, *Brahmanism in South-East Asia (From the Earliest Time to 1445 AD)*, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1982, pp. 23-24.

15. Quoted by M. G. Chitkara in *Hindutva*, p. 94.
16. It is beyond my scope to touch on the relaxation of Hindu Missionary activity due to invasions and colonizations. It is also perhaps too evident to need further development.
17. Sister Namita, *A New Paradigm for Evangelization in the Light of Mission in the Gospel According to St. John and the Early Upanisads*, Doctoral Dissertation to be published soon, St. Peter's Pontifical Institute, Bangalore, 1998, See Part Two.
18. *Complete Works*, Vol. 6, pp.82-83.
19. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 43.
20. *Ibid.*
21. S. Radhakrishnan (ed. & trans.), *The Principal Upanisads*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1968, p. 143.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 143-144.
23. Satsvarupa Dasa Gosami, *Prabhupada, He Built a House In Which the Whole World can Live*, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, Los Angeles, Bombay, 1994, Introduction, p. xxxii. Prabhupada's Guru was Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati. He asked Prabhupada, then a layman, to preach Lord Caitanya's message throughout the world when he first met him.
24. *Ibid.*, p. ix. This book details about Prabhupada's life and missionary activity as well as the methods he followed – though not presented as methods as such.
25. S. R. Goyal, *A History of Indian Buddhism*, Kusumanjali Prakasan, Meerut, 1987, pp. 384-386.
26. *Ibid.*, pp.394-395. See also assimilation of Buddhism by Brahmanism, *Ibid.*, pp. 397-399.
27. For details see, Gulshan Swarup Saxena, *Arya Samaj Movement in India (1875-1947)*, Common Wealth Publishers, New Delhi, 1990; Lala Lajpat Rai, *The Arya Samaj: An Account of its Origin, Doctrines, and Activities*, Reliance Publishing House, New Delhi, 1991, pp. 111-183.
28. Lala Lajpat Rai, *The Arya Samaj*, pp. 120-122.
29. *Complete Works*, Vol. I, p. 346.
30. S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol.I, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1962, p. 97.
31. *Complete Works*, Vol.I, p. 3; *Ibid.*, Vol.II, pp.359-396.
32. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 432-434; Vol. VIII, pp. 20-21.

The Muslim Attitude to Conversion

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Like Buddhism and Christianity, Islam is a missionary religion. From the day the Prophet Muhammad was entrusted by God with the mission to revive the Abrahamic tradition by conveying afresh the divine message regarding 'the concept of the unity of God and man, he and his followers were placed under obligation to preach Islam, i.e., submission to God. The Quran is the scripture of Islam. According to 'the faith of a Muslim', it is the word of God revealed to the Prophet through the mediation of arch-angel, Gabriel. No force or economic persuasion was to be used as the Quran accommodates and accepts variety and diversity in culture as a fact of human life. It says : 'If the Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind one people. But they will not cease to dispute, except those on whom they Lord has bestowed his mercy" (Quran.11 18-19). Influenced by the teachings of Quran, its followers showed tolerance to non-Muslims. In every conquered land, the non-Muslims were given full religious freedom and also conferred the status of 'protected person'. The burden of taxes upon the non-Muslims was alleviated as the Canon law of Islam permitted only the collection of Kharaj (one fifth of the agricultural produce) and poll-tax from them. Furthermore, respect shown by

the rulers to the principles of social justice and equity, and the egalitarianism practised by Muslims during the early centuries of Islam made their religion attractive to the downtrodden everywhere. Its success was both spectacular and phenomenal in the very first century of its rise.

Almost the whole of Arabia converted to Islam during the life-time of the Prophet (d.6). Soon, Iraq and Iran in the east, Syria, Palestine and Egypt in the north and north-west of Arabia were annexed to the Islamic commonwealth. In each country conquered by the Muslims, Islam made rapid progress. This phenomenal success led Western scholars of Islam (i.e. Orientalists) to seek explanations in terms of economic, political and other non-religious factors. Invariably, they put forward the view that Islam being a religion of conquest won converts both through peaceful means and the use of military might. This erroneous perception is being perpetuated even to day.¹ It is also worth recalling that many modern Orientalists, committed to world-peace through inter-religious dialogue are interested in scientific delineation of the role performed by a particular religion. To them the age of polemics is something of the bygone time. Here the example of Wilfred Cantwell Smith may be cited.

He is an arabist and a leading scholar of Islam. In an international conference on Indigenous Christian Communities in Medieval Islamic Lands, held in October, 1986, in Toronto, he sharply reacted against this perception of his co-religionists. First, he asked the question: "Why and how was it that a shift took place on a very large scale from one major religious movement to another?" Answering his question himself, he referred to the Jews who also lived in the same countries who did not convert to Islam like the Christians. He states: "We have what scientists like to call a "control group", in that the Jewish community in classical Islamic times was in much the same situation as was the Christian, yet the percentage of converts from it was drastically smaller." Thereafter he turns to explain the sectarian differences between the followers of the Latin, Greek and Syriac Church. He says: "These three were of comparable size and numbers. By the end of the millennium or a little later, the last had not quite disappeared, yet it was so minor in comparison that when, for instance, I myself studied Church history in a Western theological College early this century all the eastern Churches were together and in effect dismissed in one small chapter called "*The Oriental heresies*." My idea here is this: that the semitic speaking world never did quite understand, or any way was never fully at ease with, the Greek metaphysical concepts in terms of which the dominant Western church formulated its theology, nor the importance that Church gave to them, and indeed to theology generally to a person thinking in a semitic language (with its prac-

tical moralist orientation), the Islamic *Weltanschaung* might well have seemed to capture more faithfully than did official church doctrine the reality that Christians had been brought up to see, but seemed unable satisfactorily to clarify in words."²

By way of further illustration, mention may be made of the countries which were never invaded and conquered by Muslims but turned Muslim on account of their contact with peaceful Muslim traders, engaged in overland and over-seas trade. Unlike the modern missionaries, the primary aim of these traders was not to spread Islam but promote their trade in foreign lands. It was, however, the pattern of behaviour displayed by them in their dealings with non-Muslims that seems to have impressed the latter. In Malaysia and Indonesia the social elite was Hindu as the sanskrit words in their language and the remnants of Hindu temples tend to suggest. The Hindus having been impressed by Islam converted *en bloc* to Islam because of the conviction of the mind and the acceptance of the heart. Their example was followed by the masses even in the interior both in the Malaysian peninsula and the Indonesian islands. Consequently, these countries are Muslim majority countries.³ As regards other south-eastern countries of Thailand, Burma and even China, they received Islam both through traders and mercenaries. In these countries also the Muslims had their commercial establishments and married local women. They multiplied with the passage of time. The slaves purchased by the Muslims also added to their numbers. Today in communist China sale of chil-

dren is not possible, "but it is impossible to say how important the in-marrying of Han (Chinese) girls into Muslim families has become."⁴ In each country the Muslims are found in sizeable numbers. Even in communist China, Muslims maintain their cultural identity.

Lastly, we may discuss the factors responsible for the spread of Islam in the Indian sub-continent. India needs a detailed study of the problem because religious communalism is on the increase in this country and religious minorities, the Muslims and Christians, have become victims of persecution by the fascists in the majority Hindu community. The charge leveled against the Muslims and Christians is that they have been converting Hindus to their respective religions through inducements as well as by the use of force since medieval times. To say that Hindus turned to Muslim or Christian faith for reasons of prestige or monetary or other advantage is an insult both to Hinduism and the religion adopted. Nobody abandons his religion lightly or abandons it for reasons other than he considers attractive and valid. Neither Islam nor Christianity was successful in winning converts from among high caste people in large number at any time, because the members of high caste had their share in the greatness of Hindu Culture. Both of these religions attracted lower caste people because they were denied civil rights and had to live for the service of high caste people.

The coming of Islam to India may be traced back to the very first century of its rise in its classical land. The Ar-

abs had their trade relations with India since pre-Islamic times.⁵ They also had their establishments in the port cities along the Malabar Coast. These establishments were looked after by their wives and slaves who happened to be either of foreign origin or Indians who followed the religion of their master. The Muslims were granted religious freedom by the Hindu Rajas with the permission to purchase Indian slaves and have mosques constructed. This was possible because the foreign trade controlled by the Arabs constituted an important source of income to the Indian rulers. Later, the Muslim merchants and traders spread 'to the Coromandel, the Konkan and the Gujarat coasts and founded their colonies in different port cities.⁶ They married local women (generally low-caste or out-caste) and purchased slaves wherever they settled down. Their number also increased on account of the sale and purchase of slaves in India.

With the establishment of Muslim rule in North India towards the close of the twelfth century, far-reaching changes took place in the socio-political life of the country. The caste based towns were changed into cosmopolitan urban centres, as their gates were thrown open to all irrespective of birth and creed. The construction of new palaces, graceful domes and minarets transformed the skyline every where. In the changed circumstances the artisans who were low-caste people and lived outside the towns prospered as they were provided with work in the expanding towns and new cities. The progress of foreign trade attracted merchants from foreign countries. The foreign merchants came

in caravans with choice merchandise of different countries and also returned loaded with Indian products. The foreign trade benefited the artisan class, suggesting ideas for the introduction of new crafts and modification of old and indigenous ones. The Muslim rulers, officers and merchants established large *karkhanas* (manufactories) that created job opportunities for men of skill. In these *karkhanas* Hindus worked with Muslim slaves, skilled in different crafts and soon this intermingling brought about the mixing of ideas. The religious freedom enjoyed by a slave along with his master, at least in the mosque, seems to have impressed the Hindu artisans who were denied the privilege to worship gods in the temples. This was one of the main factors responsible for the spread of Islam among low caste Hindus belonging to the artisan classes. The landless labourers in the countryside who also belonged to the class of outcaste or low-caste people remained outside the pale of Islam on account of the absence of dedicated preachers in Islam. It was only in the urban centres or the surrounding area that one artisan caste was followed by another in accepting Islam, inspite of the fact that the Muslim rulers followed a policy of non-interference with the Hindu social system. They questioned the privileges of the high castes nor did they try to do away the degradation of the low ones.⁷ It is, however, to be emphasised that the centrality of the Sharia (religious law) in Islamic society did promote a sense of the equality of the believers. Islamic culture continued to be marked by an egalitarian under-current at odds with the social realities and the hierarchical

ideas of a stratified society. The Islamic principle that all believers are equal before God and the instituted law held a fascination for people suffering from the hierarchical models. The Islamic *sharia* takes no account of differences even between the free born and the slave.

It is also worth mentioning that the conversion of low caste Hindus to Islam during pre-modern times did not lead to estrangement between Hindus and Muslims. The change of faith among the low-caste or out-caste Indians was not a matter of concern to the upper caste Hindus. In fact, the castes which provided Islam with converts did not belong to the core of Hindu Society. Any importance of numerical increase or decrease in a religious community was out of question before the modern age; it began with the all India census, conducted in 1872 when each community was given representation on the local bodies in proportion to its actual numerical strength.

Similarly, the allegation against the Christians that they convert Hindus to Christianity through economic inducement is baseless. The language media project Christianity as if every Christian is for conversion. On the contrary the Pope and his followers have been taking an interest in promoting inter-religious dialogue the world over for creating an atmosphere of fellowship of believers in God to prevent people from turning wholly materialistic in life. The document on dialogue between the religions released at the time of the Council, Vatican some thirty years ago, affirms that all men, especially those of living faith, should rise above all dis-

crimination, should live in harmony and serve universal brotherhood. In response to this document, the Indian Church has been promoting inter-faith dialogue to serve the cause of peace. I have been attending conferences organized by them since 1990, but I have not found any priest or member of the Christian community interested in conversion. It is really sad that after the killing of Graham Staines and his sons by militant Hindus in Orissa no national leader was able to show moral leadership to the nation. The statement by the Prime Minister that a debate should be held on the issue of conversion was unfortunate. The murderers of the Australians got encouragement in this statement. Soon after they killed one Muslim trader and a native Christian priest in Orissa. Dara Singh, the leader of the murderers, has not been arrested as yet. In its role of protector of all believers, the secular state in India should not be an active partner of the majority community. No individual who wants to embrace a religion of his choice should be denied his right to do so. The Muslims and Christians may not preach their religion for converting people but they cannot prevent any person from embracing their religion if he makes such a

choice. In India Muslims do not preach their religion among non-Muslims; they avoid preaching it because they do not want to incur the wrath of the majority community. What matters for Muslims of India is not so much to spread the Islamic faith as to survive with it. Unlike India, the new converts to Islam in Europe and U.S.A.. show great enthusiasm in preaching the religion of their choice. Therefore, the conversions are a common phenomenon in the West. In 1985 one report published in the *London Times* mentioned the number of conversion as one thousand a year in the United Kingdom alone. All these conversions take place in the West on purely intellectual grounds.⁸ In India such conversions to Islam are few and far between after 1947. Recently Ms. Madhavi Kutty, a distinguished novelist of English and Malayalam, is a case in point. She says, "I have made a new discovery. Islam is the religion of love, it gives protection to women and I need protection. I am an orphan, I have no one. Hindu gods punish, Allah forgives sins. I want a forgiving God."⁹

The country needs leaders who can provide moral leadership and prevent the shedding of human blood in the name of religion.

Notes

1. Bolojun, I. A. B., *Religious Understanding and Co-operation in Igeria* (ed.) Proceedings of a Seminar, University of Ilorim, 1978, pp. 50-67.
2. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Muslim Christian Relations: Questions of a Comparative Religionist", *Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 8 (Jan. 1987) 1, pp. 18-21.
3. Cf. I. D. Fatimi, *Islam Comes to Malaysia*, ed. Shirle Gordon, Singapore, 1963, pp. Also N. A. Baloch, *Advent of Islam in Indonesia*, Islamabad, 1980, pp. 24-42.
4. Cf. Raphael Israeli, *Muslims in China: A Study in Cultural Confrontation*, London: 1980, pp. 5, 20; also Marshall Broomhall, *Islam in China: A Neglected Problem*, London: Margan and Scott, 1910, p. 228.

5. Mark J. Hudson, "Religion and Ethnicity in Chinese Islam", *Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 8., No. 1, p. 158.
6. Cf. Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui, *Islam and Muslims in South-Asia: Historical Perspective*, Delhi: 1984, pp. 1-6.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-50, for medieval Perso-Arabic Sources of information.
8. Cf. Carsline Moorheads, "Lure of the Islamic Faith", *London Times*, September 25, 1985.
9. *Indian Express*, New Delhi: December 13, 1999, p. 7.

Conversion: The Buddhist Way

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December 1998 witnessed a growing spate of atrocities against the Christians in several areas across India. The most gruesome were perhaps in the Dangs district of the Gujarat State. It is common knowledge that these were related to the acceptance of Christianity by a good number of tribals in South Gujarat. The Prime Minister of the country then visited the area. At a press conference on the occasion, he called for a national debate on conversion, namely, the acceptance of other religions by the Indians giving up the religion in which they were born. Much has been written since on the issue.

The context of conversion is mostly Hinduism and its entrenched caste system. It is often claimed that the hierarchical order of Hindu society, *varna-ashrama dharma*, is sanctioned by the Hindu religious scriptures. The Hindu society has not only the four varnas, priests (Brahmins), warriors/rulers (Kshatriyas), business/dealers (Vaishyas) and the menial workers/artisans (Shudras), but also the out-casts whose services to society are so menial and polluting as disposing of dead animals, cleaning of sewers etc. Their jobs are regarded as polluting, and their presence is capable of polluting the caste Hindus. Hence, they are classified into a fifth group, the Untouchables. In the

topography of an Indian village their dwellings were outside the village, away from the caste Hindus. They were subject to many disadvantages, like the prohibition on drawing water from the village well used by caste Hindus. Perhaps the anthropological justification for one to be born in such groups could not have been more outrageous, namely, that it is one's deeds that merit such a birth. Denial of social mobility for such despised of society was enshrined in one's bounden duty (*svadharma*) to carry on the services of one's caste or outcaste. Mercifully, the Indian Constitution abolished this inhuman practice.

Further, religion in India has served as a galvanising force for nationalism.¹ Its militant version advocated by Savarkar or Tilak has now been adopted by the Sangh Parivar, the umbrella organisation for the ultra right-wing nationalism of the Bharatiya Janata Party, or the moderate type by Mahatma Gandhi. The secularists respected the religion of the individual and communities, but did not wish to have any state religion.

The issue of conversion was a thorn in the side of the Hindu society. It was so not only in modern and contemporary India, but quite early in the history of this civilization when critical thinkers like Siddharth Gautam, the

Buddha, appeared from within the Hindu society. The Buddha, judging by the Sermons/Suttas attributed to him, available to us in the Pali canon, was a rebel who critiqued Hindu customs and institutions and challenged them to become a new, humane society. The Hindu polity has been subjected to such challenges from without as well. The coming of the Muslims was a serious affront when most Hindu rulers were replaced by the invaders, especially in north India. It was also a time when Hindus in the north embraced Islam in relatively large numbers. The dropping of anchor by the East India Company at India's shores led to a commercial turmoil. The transfer to the British Crown, after the initial resistance in 1857, would change the scene yet again. The arrival of Christian missionaries began to affect mostly, though not only, the periphery of Indian society. Opting for the Christian religion was again an issue.

In this article, it is not my intention to look at this range of developments on conversion in the Indian history. It is to the teaching of the Buddha that I turn to. The Awakened One's critique may awaken a civilization to be new and humane. The challenge is echoed in our times too. Dr B.R.Ambedkar reflects on *Why Go For Conversion?* Babasaheb, as he is affectionately named by his followers, accepted the Buddha's Dhamma. He had earlier in 1935 declared his intention for conversion, namely, that he was born a Hindu, but would not die a Hindu.

Some Indicators of Conversion

If for a moment we look a little away from the Indian scene, we notice

some indicators of conversion. Religious conversion in antiquity was marked by a change of name. In the book of Genesis of the Old Testament in the Bible, Abram is given a new name, Abraham, by God. Similarly, his wife Sarai's name is changed to Sarah.² In the New Testament of the Bible, Jesus did change the name of Simon to Peter. The suggestion is that the new name is divinely bestowed.

When Indians accepted Christianity or Islam, we notice that in the earlier period of conversion, the converts accepted a change of names. Among the Christians it would be mostly biblical or European names. In the context of the renewed understanding of culture, converts to Christianity nowadays retain their Indian names. A practice is also prevalent to translate the Christian names into Indian languages. In early Buddhism there does not seem to be any significant change of name. Even the criminal, Angulimala, whose name suggests that he wore a garland of the small fingers of his victims, after his conversion on hearing the word of the Buddha, did not change his name. Among the recent converts to Buddhism, however, a study has found that names such as Ashok, Milind, Siddharth, Gautam, Rahul, Sumedh are indicative of the affinity to the Buddhist culture and tradition.³ They are conscious that as Buddhists they have an identity and that their identity is separate from that of the Hindus.⁴

The Buddha and Conversion

The very first converts to the teaching of the Buddha were the five ascet-

ics, his former companions. He found them in the Deer Park, Isipatana, at Benares (modern Sarnath at Varanasi). He preached to them the first sermon about the Middle Path.⁵ Thereby he set rolling the Wheel of Dhamma.⁶ The five ascetics accepted his teaching and were received as his followers.

The Buddha went about sharing his insight for about 45 years. He gathered a large band of followers. His instruction to them is available in his mission command:

Go out, O disciples, and travel from place to place for the welfare of many people, for the joy of many people, in pity for the world, for the blessing, welfare, and joy of gods and men. Go not in twos to one place. Preach, O disciples, Dhamma, the beginning of which is noble, the middle of which is noble and the end of which is noble, in spirit and in letter. Preach the whole and full, pure path of holiness.

King Ashoka became the greatest Buddhist missionary in history. Under his patronage Buddhism became the religion of India. He had accepted the Theravada Buddhism. It was carried to Sri Lanka, beyond to Burma, and to Far East Asia. In all those lands and cultures, Buddhism was accepted by many disciples. It gained many converts. It is often noted in the Pali literature that the earliest followers of the Buddha were mainly from among the ranks of the Brahmans, nobles and wealthy merchant classes.⁷

The Buddha's Teaching

In the first Sermon of the Buddha, there is reference to the Eightfold Middle Path. Each of the eight aspects

is prefaced as *Samma*, generally translated as right. The first is *Samma Ditthi*, that is, view. It is in contrast to *Kuditthi* or *Miccha Ditthi*, false view, groundless or unfounded opinion. In the case of the *Samma Ajiva*, right livelihood, the Commentary on the *SuttaNipata* observes that "having given up the wrong mode of gaining a living, one must move forward with the right mode of livelihood only".⁸ With the adherence to the right view, there is a clear teaching to give up the groundless or unfounded view. It seems to be the Buddha's call to conversion.

In the *Brahmajala Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya* there is an exposition of wrong views. There are sixty-two kinds of wrong views held by the Samanas and Brahmans. We may cite just one of those that is related to eternity. It understands that the soul as well as the world is eternal and unchanging. The Buddha, in contrast, teaches the true view that compounded reality is changing, impermanent, touched with pain, suffering and is devoid of 'self'. The sense of conversion in this case is to accept the right view or the well founded teaching of the Buddha.

In the *Vasala Sutta* of the *SuttaNipata*, the fire worshipping Brahman, Bharadvaja reviles the Buddha. He calls him an outcaste (*Vasala*). At which the Awakened One asks of the former if he knows an outcaste or the cause of becoming an outcaste. He confesses that he does not know. The Teacher then preaches to him a sermon indicating who an outcaste is. Thereby he demolishes the principle of caste differences. He concludes that it is not by birth but

by action that one is really an outcaste or a Brahman. Bharadvaja is convinced of the Buddha's view and converts, accepting to be a devotee (*upasaka*) of the Awakened One. We come across other instances too of conversion to the Buddha's Dhamma.

In the *Mahavagga*,⁹ we have the stories of the conversion of Sariputta and Moggallana. They later became the chief disciples of the Master.¹⁰

Buddhist Notion of Sarana

Conversion in Buddhism is indicated by one taking refuge (*sarana*) in the Buddha, Dhamma, and in the Sangha. It is the understanding among the Buddhists that the movement into refuge represents "a new relationship which was the consequence of a profoundly personal reorientation of one's life".¹¹ The "going to take refuge" (*saranam gacchami*) is interpreted in the commentarial literature as a movement, as an activity of knowing, of understanding.¹² A convert to Buddhism seeks to take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Sangha. The community of the converts are those who have heard and accepted the teaching of the Buddha (*savakka*). The community of the Buddhist monks and the nuns too is regarded as the hearers of the word of the Buddha.

The Buddha had a vision of an alternative society. He wanted a society devoid of the castes and rituals of Brahmanism. His vision appealed to many. It was accepted as the right worldview where all were equal and women had their rightful place. Buddhist Scriptures are replete with conversion stories.¹³

In his own lifetime the Buddha had a large following. The missionary effort continued down the centuries after him. In our time we have witnessed a movement of mass conversions to the Buddha's dispensation under the leadership of Dr B.R. Ambedkar.

Dr Ambedkar and Conversion

Dr B. R. Ambedkar was a leader of the downtrodden depressed classes of people in India. He was born in a Mahar family, one of the untouchable groups in the State of Maharashtra. He was fully aware of the pitiable plight of the untouchables in the Hindu society. He is regarded as the Father of the Indian Constitution. He was the first Minister of Law of Independent India. He was aware that even in such high places he carried the stigma of being an 'untouchable'. He was resolved not to die a Hindu. The historic conversion of Dr. Ambedkar with 75,000 of his followers took place in Nagpur on October 14, 1956. A profound insight into the Indian psyche that Dr Ambedkar had is recorded:¹⁴

As a social scientist and a man of the masses, he knew the tremendous influence of the Hindu religion. Therefore, Marxism with its strong accent on atheism will not attract the illiterate masses. Religious solution alone can save the Untouchables.

Since then, the insight is vindicated. In the 1991 Census of India, the Buddhists in India number 6.4 millions.¹⁵

The pre-understanding of Dr Ambedkar's hermeneutics of conversion cannot be grasped without first examining the beginning, the nature, and

the practice of untouchability in the real life of India's Untouchables. The context of the social life of the untouchables is known by recalling the stories of atrocities perpetrated against them. There is a class struggle whenever the downtrodden begin to claim "equal treatment with others".

Untouchability is not a temporary phenomenon. The Hindus believe that Hinduism is an eternal/permanent (*sanatana dharma*) religion. The struggle of the untouchables is long-standing. Dr Ambedkar's hermeneutics of conversion breaks through the struggle for a new society, a Kingdom of Righteousness. He understands that the purpose of religion according to the Buddha is threefold, namely, to help human beings to attain the Kingdom of Righteousness by righteous conduct in relation to others; to train the human mind, instincts and dispositions; and to infuse courage to stand, alone too, when necessary, by what is right.¹⁶

Dr Ambedkar's hermeneutics of conversion focuses on the strength needed for individuals and community to survive the struggle. Life in the world revolves round three types of strength, namely, manpower, finance and mental strength. He assessed that the manpower of the downtrodden is low and demoralised due to abject poverty. Their financial strength is negligible. Mentally, their self-image and identity is battered by the insults and tyranny their stories are replete with. He concluded that Hindu society does not seek to strengthen them or empower them. Their existence in the present society will perpetuate their meaningless exist-

ence. He suggests that they secure the needed strength from outside. But how? Either by establishing close relations with some other society, or joining some other religion. His conclusion: "[i]t clearly means you must leave your present religion and assimilate yourselves with other society".¹⁷ He maintained that "[f]or annihilating castes and untouchability from among the Untouchables, change of religion is the only antidote".¹⁸ He understands that through conversion change of religion is followed by a change of name which bestows a new identity. The purpose of the hermeneutics of conversion can be stated in Dr Ambedkar's own words:¹⁹

To get human treatment, convert yourselves.

Convert for getting organised.

Convert for becoming strong.

Convert for securing equality.

Convert for getting liberty.

Convert so that your domestic life may be happy.

Conclusion

The biography of a person seems at most times to be the best introduction to his/her thought. The Buddha presented his view of a new society. Many accepted it giving up their native persuasions. He shook the Hindu community of his birth almost to its roots. His legacy was accepted by Emperor Ashoka. His social teaching was proclaimed from the much acclaimed Ashokan pillars and through his sending of missions to other lands of South Asia. Modern India has wisely accepted the Wheel of the Buddha's Dhamma and placed it at the centre of the Republic's

Flag. The hermeneutics of conversion that Dr Ambedkar's thought presents us with is the story of a leader of the down-trodden untouchables in search of re-

spect, equality and freedom. He has manifested the 'missionary' zeal of a visionary to challenge his people to a new way of life through conversion.

Notes

1. Robert F. Spencer (Ed.), *Religion and Change in Contemporary Asia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972) is a good source to study the issue. It deals with the major religions and countries of Asia.
2. G.H.R. Horsley, "Name Change as an Indication of Religious Conversion in Antiquity", *Numen*, Vol.34 (1987), p.7, rightly observes that the change does not actually indicate any difference in those names.
3. Ramesh H. Kamble, "Social Meanings of Conversion: To Buddhism among Nav-Bouddhas", *Indian Missiological Review*, Vol.17 (1995), p.28.
4. *Ibid.*, p.29.
5. *Mahavagga I*, 6-10.
6. See Dr H. Oldenberg, *Buddha*, London: Williams and Norgate, 1882, pp. 125-31. It has a valuable description and discussion of the Sermon.
7. In the *Vasettha Sutta*, we have the story of a Brahman convert ridiculed by fellow Brahmans.
8. *Micchajivan hitva sammajivan eva pavattayi* - SnA 382.
9. I. 23
10. See Henry C. Warren, *Buddhism in Translations*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsi Dass, 1993, pp. 87-91.
11. John Ross Carter, "The Notion of Refuge (*sarana*) in the Theravada Buddhist Tradition" in the *The Threefold Refuge in the Theravada Buddhist Tradition*, edited by J.R. Carter *et al.*, Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1982, p.2.
12. See J.R. Carter, *op.cit.*, p.6. He has some valuable considerations on the going for *lokya* (mundane) and *lokuttara* (transcendental) refuge as mentioned in the Theravada Buddhist literature. The other sections of the book deal with the Buddha as Refuge, Dhamma as Refuge and the Sangha as Refuge.
13. See Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha And His Dhamma*, Book II, for a collection of conversion narratives.
14. T. Rajshekhar, *Ambedkar & His Conversion*, Bangalore: Dalit Sahitya Akademy, 1983, p.26.
15. It is to be noted that the Tibetan Buddhist refugees are still citizens of their country. Some among them may have naturalized as Indian citizens.
16. B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha And His Dhamma* (Bombay: Siddharth Publication, 1974), Book III, Pt V, 31-33.
17. B. R. Ambedkar, *Why Go For Conversion?* (Bangalore: Dalit Sahitya Akademy, 1987), p.16.
18. *Ibid.*, p.17.
19. *Ibid.*, p.22.

Conversion: Turning or Returning?

The Biblical Background of a Controversial Concept

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1. Introduction

Proselytising, that is trying to increase the number of the followers of a religion, is a common practice among the followers of many religions. This practice of necessity needs some sort of a justification. And this will be found either in the injunction of the religion's founder or in some text that is considered canonical or normative by the religious community, interpreted mostly in a fundamentalistic fashion. It is the aim of this paper to inquire into the biblical background, both in the Old and the New Testaments, of the so-called practice of 'conversion' among Christians in order to dispel some misconceptions or misunderstandings of the topic under discussion.

2. Concept of 'Conversion' in Ancient Israel

The idea of conversion is found among the prophets mainly of the pre-exilic period like Hoshea, First Isaiah and Jeremiah, as well as to a lesser extent in those of the post-exilic prophets like Joel. There is no teaching on 'conversion' as such among any of them. In fact the abstract words *shûbâ* or *t^eshûbâ* are quite rare in the Old Testament. Surprisingly the abstract word *m^fshûbâ* which is its opposite and is

translated as 'backsliding', 'faithlessness' or 'apostasy' is more common (cf. Jer 2:19; 3:22; 5:6; 8:5; 14:7; Hos 11:7; 14:4/5). But the root *shûb* occurs in various verbal forms in the OT with relative frequency (c.1050x), with a concentration in Jeremiah (111 x).¹ As the same lexicon tells us "*shûb* is basically a vb. of motion, with the meanings return, turn back, go back, come back, often in reference to physical motion of returning to a point of departure".² And so the verb has been given the theological meaning both of turning away from evil and a turning to or returning to God. W. L. Holladay in particular treats 154 passages, both verb and noun, where the theological use of the term is in question, in this sense and terms it the "covenantal usage".³ In other words, when the covenantal relationship with God is broken by sin, 'conversion' is a returning, in the sense of a reconciliation with the covenantal partner.

2.1. *Conversion in Amos*

This is the first time that we meet with the verb *shûb* in the sense of a returning to God in the Old Testament. In the words of Amos, Yahweh has been sending Israel quite tough warnings that she should return to him. Thus Yahweh

had sent Israel famine, withheld the necessary showers, blasted her crops with mildew and locust, sent pestilence and the sword, visited her with earthquake, but Israel refused to heed his voice. Every time the refrain is the same, “Yet you did not return to me, *w^e lo’ shābtem ‘āday*” (Am 4:6.8.9.10.11). What is implied in this is that God had been urging Israel to return to him but each time Israel refused and so the hour for pardoning has passed. God will no longer make any more offers. Therefore, Amos threatens in the name of Yahweh: ‘Israel, be ready for the consequences!’ (Am 4:12).

2.2 *Conversion in First Isaiah*

The situation is very similar to that in his senior contemporary Amos. The only difference is that Isaiah always offers a ray of hope to Israel in spite of its rebellious and faithless attitude (Isa 1:2-3). But even in Isaiah conversion seems to be something that Israel as a whole has rejected. Israel simply does not want to return to Yahweh! This is found in the text quoted by Jesus in Mark’s Gospel to preserve the Messianic secret (cf. Mk 4:11). Isaiah is given a most strange commission to preach to the Israelites who as Yahweh assures Isaiah will not listen to him, because if they were to do, they would be converted. “Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn (*w^eshāb*) and be healed!” (Isa 6:10). This is even more clearly seen from the following text. Here the rejection is explicitly stated. “For thus said the Lord

God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning (*shûbâ*) and rest (*nâhât*) you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength. But you refused. . . “(Isa 30:15). Instead of relying on Yahweh the kingdom of Judah under her king Hezekiah preferred to rely on the dead crocodile that Egypt was (Isa 30:7) to whom messengers with heavy laden beasts carrying tribute are being sent across the Negeb (Isa 30:1-5).

And so Isaiah sees hope only for a few Israelites. His programmatic *she’ar y āshûb*, ‘A Remnant Will Return’, which was the name given to his son as a sign of future hope in the Syro-Ephraimitic crisis (Isa 7:3), is now given a new interpretation. But the hope is in the future: “On that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on the one who struck them, but will lean on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth” (Isa 10:20). There is once again, as is common among the prophets, a play on words. Those coming back to the land of Israel from the exile will also come back, that is, will be converted to Yahweh! “A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God!” (Isa 10:21).

2.3 *Conversion in Hoshea*

Hoshea treats quite often the theme of conversion and his influence will be seen on the younger Jeremiah. The exhortation to return to Yahweh, who is portrayed by the prophet as Israel’s spouse, is to be found in the prophet: “But as for you, return to your God!” (Hos 12:6a). But Hoshea is not interested in mere formalism. True conver-

sion implies a change of life-style, that is, “a holding fast to love and justice” (Hos 5:6b). Hoshea is painfully aware that the disloyal and faithless attitude of Israel does not allow her to return to Yahweh. This is stated in no uncertain terms by him: “Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God” (Hos 5:4). For this the punishment is clear, and once again with a play on words we are told that, since Israel refuses *to return* to Yahweh she will have *to return to* the land of Egypt, that is to say, to bondage under the Assyrian! (Hos 11:5).

According to prophet Hoshea, Yahweh Israel’s loyal Spouse will not abandon his bride for ever. And so conversion finally becomes a gift reserved for the eschatological times. “Afterward the Israelites shall return and seek the LORD their God . . . in the latter days” (Hos 3:5) when Yahweh himself will heal their *m^eshūbā*, that is, backsliding or disloyalty (Hos 14:5). As we know, the term *’ah̄arīt hayyāmîm*, “the latter days” is a technical term in the Old Testament for the post-exilic eschatological times.⁴ It is then that the invitation to return will once again be made to Israel (Hos 14:2), but this time Israel will respond to it (Hos 2:9), because God himself will help her to do it. Israel will not need to take any sacrificial victims along with her when she returns to Yahweh. She will have to take only words of repentance and gratitude and praise! “Take words with you and return to the LORD and say to him, ‘Take away all guilt; accept that which is good, and we will offer the fruit of our lips’” (Hos 14:2).⁵ The same idea is found in the post-exilic sermon on

covenant in the Book of Deuteronomy, where ‘Moses’ is foretelling Israel’s conversion at the end of days: “In your distress, when all these things have happened to you in time to come, (*b^e ’ah̄arīt hayyāmîm*), you will return (*w^eshabtā*) to the LORD your God and heed him” (Dt 4:30).

2.4 *Conversion in Jeremiah*

It is the merit of Hans Walter Wolff to have conclusively shown that the theme of conversion which appears exclusively in the invectives and threats of the prophets of the pre-exilic period, now for the first time from Jeremiah onwards begins to appear in their exhortations as well.⁶ From the statistics alone it is obvious that Jeremiah more than any other prophet treats at some length and in various passages throughout the book this topic of conversion. He is clearly dependent on Hoshea with whom he has some phrases and terms in common as we shall notice as we proceed. Jeremiah not only exhorts Israel as a nation to return to Yahweh, as the prophets before him had done, but he also urges every Israelite to do so. In fact this seems to be programmatic with him. He also gives the verb “to return” both meanings, that of “turning away *from* evil” and of “turning *to* God”. Thus more than once he exhorts: “Turn now, every one of you, from your evil way and wicked doings” (Jer 25:5; cf. also 26:3; 36:3; 36:7).

The traditional prophetic appeal to Israel is found elsewhere in the book, where Jeremiah says: “If you wish to come back, Israel – it is Yahweh who speaks – it is to me you must return!” (Jer 4:1 JB).⁸ From the conditional for-

mulation of the text it seems that Jeremiah like his predecessors has doubts about Israel's sincerity. In fact he states this very forcefully in another place. In his opinion it would be as difficult for Israel to return to Yahweh as it would be for an Ethiopian to change his skin colour or for a leopard to change his spots (cf. Jer 13:23). Jeremiah compares Israel to a faithless wife whom her husband has divorced and who has remarried. In such a case according to Israelite law, this woman is forbidden to go back to her first husband again (cf. Dt 24:4). That is the irony in the words addressed to Israel by Yahweh: "And would you return to me?" (Jer 3:1).

The show of repentance that Israel put up is according to Jeremiah only a returning to Yahweh in pretense. It was not something done with the whole heart (cf. Jer 3:10). Possibly there is an allusion here to the reform of king Josiah (2 Kgs 22-23) or to the covenant which king Zedekiah had made with the people of Jerusalem whereby they had agreed to set their Hebrew slaves free, and on which they soon went back and forced the liberated individuals into slavery once again (cf. Jer 34). But in spite of everything Jeremiah repeats his exhortation to the people of Judah to come back to their God. In contrast to her elder sister Israel, that is the Northern Kingdom whom Jeremiah calls *m^eshûbâ*, the backsliding apostate, he reserves the title *bōgēdāh*, "false" for Judah (Jer 3:6-11). And so he makes his appeal to Israel, as the people of God, to come back to their God. There is a play on words in the Hebrew original, *shûbâ meshûbâ yiśrā' e1*, which could be rendered as "Come back, you

backsliding, Israel!" (Jer 3:12. See also verses 14 and 22).

As was to be expected, Israel did not respond to the urgings of the prophet and so she had to go into exile in Babylon. But God did not abandon his people. He promised them the gift of repentance in the eschatological times. Once again as in Hoshea it is God who takes the initiative in the conversion of Israel when he says: "I will heal your *m^eshûbôt*, that is your faithlessness! (Jer 3:22; cf., Hos 14:5)⁹. By that time Israel will come to the realisation that by herself she is incapable of conversion. It is Yahweh who will have to effect her conversion. This is explicitly stated in the Book of the Consolation of Jeremiah: "Bring me back, let me come back, for you are the LORD my God. For after I had turned away I repented..." (Jer 31:18-19).¹⁰ The unmerited forgiveness of sins will be explicitly stated as one of the gifts of the new covenant (cf. Jer 31:34). There is a late psalm which deals with the same theme. Of course a double meaning could be given to the clause *hashîbēnî* both referring to conversion or causing to return to Yahweh as well as restoration in the sense of bringing Israel back from exile (Ps 80:3.7.19; see also v.14 turn). The Septuagint at any rate understands this as God bringing about the conversion of Israel. Here there is clearly no hint at a restoration after the exile. This same idea is also to be found in the Book of Lamentations: "Make us come back to you, Yahweh, and we will come back" (Lam 5:21 JB). Earlier in this book the idea of conversion is explicit (cf. Lam 3:40-42).

2.5 *Conversion in Ezekiel*

As is well-known Ezekiel stresses more than even Jeremiah the conversion of the individual Israelite rather than that of the nation, though this latter idea is not absent in him (Ezek 18:30-32). He considers the prophet's task to be that of a sentry who is supposed to warn the citizens of impending danger (cf. Ezek 3:16-17; 33:1-9). And so he contrasts the situation of the righteous person with that of the sinner. However, it becomes clear that conversion is not a one time decision but an ever-recurring phenomenon in the life of a believer. And so if righteous persons abandon their righteousness they are once again in need of conversion (cf. Ezek 18:21-32). Thus, there will be a recurring abandonment of Yahweh followed by a return to him and vice versa. But once again in Ezekiel too conversion in the final analysis is God's gift who effects a heart transplant in the believer. And so the exhortation to procure and acquire a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek 18:31) is an eschatological enactment of Yahweh himself who gives the Israelites a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek 11:18-21). In fact in the vision of the dry bones it is His own spirit that God will put into our hearts (Ezek 37:14).

2.6 *Conversion in Deutero Isaiah*

Similarly too in Deutero Isaiah, as Hans Walter Wolff has pointed out, the call to conversion is placed in the context of a promise and not that of a threat or an invective, and so it is an invitation of love.¹¹ It is not a question of a future possibility of forgiveness once Israel returns to Yahweh. Rather, Yahweh has already forgiven and redeemed his people: "I have swept away

your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you!" And so here conversion is an expression of a coming back in gratitude!

3. **Absence of a Mission Command in the Old Testament**

After the discovery of the sea routes to Asia by the Portuguese Vasco da Gama and to the Americas by the Spaniards under the leadership of Christopher Columbus, the Church in Europe began to send out missionaries to those distant lands to bring the newly discovered peoples into her fold. And the text on which she based her missionary activity was taken from the conclusion to the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus says: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19). But when we go through the pages of the Old Testament we shall not find any such command anywhere except perhaps the lone text in the prophetic midrash of the Book of Jonah,¹² where Yahweh sends the prophet Jonah to preach repentance to the Ninivites but even here there is no question of "converting" anyone in the sense of a change of religion (Jon 1:2)

In a previous article I have shown how Israel was open to other religions whenever its economic and political situation was favourable or prosperous, but that it tended to become chauvinistic not to say self-centred whenever it suffered from foreign subjugation as it happened in the times of the Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian domination.¹³ All the same Israel did not lack prophetic

voices like Deutero Isaiah and the authors of the Books of Ruth and Jonah who spoke of the universalism of salvation and castigated Israel for her wrong out-look and mentality, and for making of Yahweh a partisan God.

3.1 Prophetic Vision for the Nations

Jeremiah did not conceive of Yahweh as a mere national God of Israel. He is also the Lord of history who is in charge of all the nations of the earth. And so he will bring Nabuchadnezzar, whom he calls his servant (Jer 25:9) to destroy Jerusalem. He asks all the nations to submit to the Neo-Babylonians (Jer 25:14-29). Jeremiah thinks of Yahweh as the one who “fills heaven and earth”, and from whom no one can hide (Jer 23:23-24). He is the Maker of heaven and earth (Jer 10:12). Yahweh is the true God, the living God, the everlasting King (Jer 10:10). All the same, Israel remains the special tribe of his heritage (Jer 10:16). But Jeremiah sees a plan of salvation that also includes the other nations. And so Yahweh heals not only Israel, as we have seen, but all nations. Thus, in the eschatological times there will be hope and salvation for all. In his own words: “At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem, and they shall no longer stubbornly follow their own evil will” (Jer 3:17). But there is no going out or being sent to the nations. Rather, it is they themselves who will come to Jerusalem.

Similarly too a contemporary of Jeremiah, the prophet *Zephaniah*, shows that Yahweh is interested not only in the

Israelites but even in the peoples most distant from Israel in the far away mountainous regions of Cush or Ethiopia. And once again it is Yahweh himself who will purify the lips of those peoples so that they can invoke him. And as according to Jeremiah so here too the inhabitants of the lands beyond the Blue Nile will come bringing their offerings to Yahweh (Zeph 3:9-10).

And even in a cultic prophet like the *First Zechariah* who along with the prophet Haggai is deeply concerned about the rebuilding of the Temple, there is interest in other nations. And again no missionary will be sent to convert the nations. It is they themselves who will come flocking to Jerusalem to entreat his favour. We quote only a part of the last paragraph of the First Zechariah: “Thus says the LORD of hosts:: ‘In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew grasping his garment and saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you’” (Zech 8:23). The initiative to go to Jerusalem (cf. the previous verse), is coming from the other nations and not from Israel. But it must not be forgotten that it is an oracle of salvation that the prophet is making as is clear from the formula “in those days” which, as we have seen, is a reference to the eschatological times.

And finally we come to the classical text which shows that there is no concept of mission in the Old Testament. It is to be found in the *Book of Isaiah* (Isa 2:1-5), but there is not the slightest doubt that it is not from the First Isaiah. It is probably a post-exilic interpolation which with slight varia-

tions is also found in the Book of Micah (Mic 4:1-5). The stereo-typed phrase “in days to come” (*b^e’ ahārît hayyāmîm*) which refers to the post-exilic eschatological times, speaks for its lateness. In symbolic language the late post-exilic writer tells us that Mount Zion, where Yahweh dwells, will be lifted higher than any other mountain, and that all nations and peoples shall stream to it to learn from the newly promulgated Law. As a result of this, wars will cease from the earth and all the peoples shall work in collaboration for the common welfare of all humanity, a goal that still remains unfulfilled in our own days. To anticipate the New Testament, it is Luke, the author of the third Gospel and of Acts, who will base his two volume work on this text. He will show how in the Gospel Jesus is going up to Jerusalem (Lk 9:51-57; 10:38; 13:22), where he will be crucified, but after his Resurrection the Spirit will descend on his disciples in Jerusalem. And it is from here that the disciples will go out to preach the Good News beginning from Jerusalem and through the length and breadth of Judaea and on to Samaria and the ends of the world (Act 1:8).

4. Conversion in the Post-biblical Period and in Judaism

How important the concept of ‘conversion’ in the post-biblical times was can be understood from the fact that Greek speaking Jews coined a new term *proselytos*, which means a ‘proselyte’, or “one who has come over”, that is a convert from another religion to Judaism. It appears for the first time in the Septuagint, that is the Greek translation

of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁴ Thus we read in the deutero-canonical Book of Tobias about Tobit, the father of Tobias, that he had the custom of giving a third tenth in the form of money to the orphans, the widows and the “converts who had attached themselves to Israel” (Tob 1:8, Synaitic Codex). In general Philo the Jew and Flavius Josephus avoid the word *proselytos* which is not found in classical Greek, since their writings were addressed mainly though not exclusively to non-Jews whom they wanted to win over to their faith. Philo mostly uses the classical *epēlys* or *epēlytēs*, whereas Josephus uses the verb *proserchesthai*, “to come over” or a circumlocution like “to accept the customs of the Jews”¹⁵

4.1. Old Testament Background of Proselyte

The Old Testament law codes in particular mention the word *gēr* which is variously translated as ‘alien’, ‘stranger’ or more accurately, ‘resident alien’, that is a foreigner who lives under the protection of the Israelite law. This was originally a sociological term but gradually, especially in post-biblical times, it got a religious colouring and came to be used for what we call a ‘convert’. But already the Priestly Code seems to be giving this sense to *gēr*, and reserves a sociological connotation to the new term *tōshāb* that it introduces (Lev 25:47). Thus, the *gēr* who is given equal status before the law (Num 15:15) may, however partake of the Passover provided he is circumcised (Ex 12:48).

4.2. Proselytes in Judaism

Due to constraints of space we need to summarize the available data and have recourse to generalisations. But right from the outset it must be noted that some of the post-exilic biblical books in glaring contrast to the inward-looking and intolerant attitude of Ezekiel (cf. 44:9) already show that Israel was open to receive non-Israelites into its fold. These are known as “those who had joined themselves to Israel” (cf. Isa 56:3-7 and Est 9:27). In fact the author of the Book of Esther has coined a new term for such converts, *mityahădîm*, that is, those “who professed themselves as Jews” (Est 8:17).¹⁶ The most important difference that we have to make when speaking of Judaism is that between the so-called Palestinian Jews and the Jews of the Diaspora. In particular due to the ruthless suppression of all things Jewish by Antiochus IV Epiphanes during the time of the Maccabees, there was a bitter hatred of the Gentiles among the pious Jews in particular. But the Jews who dwelt outside their Palestinian homeland were of necessity more open to people of the host country, and were keen to win them over to their faith as can be seen from the efforts of Philo.

At this juncture mention must be made of the forced conversions in the time of the Hasmoneans. Thus, John Hyrcanus forced the Idumeans, descendants of Old Testament Edomites, who had migrated to the Negeb under pressure from Arabs and Nabataeans, to become Jews (*Ant* 13:9:1). The family of the Herodians are the descendants of these first converts. John’s son Aristobulus forcefully converted

Galileans who belonged to various races (*Ant* 13:11:3). Finally Alexander Jannaeus massacred the Moabites of Pella who refused to convert (*Ant* 13:15:4). However, it must be noted that all these instances were more politically than religiously motivated. The Hasmonaeans were utterly corrupt and did not care for religion at all but only for their personal interests. Further, it has to be stressed that the Pharisees never approved of forced conversions, not even of slaves.¹⁷

4.3 Attraction of Judaism

It is also to be kept in mind that the religion of the Jews with its monotheism and elevated morality was a great attraction to many Hellenistic Greeks, especially after the criticism which Greek philosophers had voiced against any form of polytheism, superstition and immorality. Thus, proselytes from these countries, especially in Egyptian Alexandria, were not uncommon. In fact there would have been many more converts were it not for the painful requirement of circumcision especially among the more rigid Jews like Rabbi Shammai. All the same, the more liberal rabbis like Rabbi Hillel did not demand circumcision as a *sine qua non* condition for converting. Whatever it be, Pharisaic zeal for acquiring proselytes is attested to by Jesus himself (cf. Mt 23:15). Consequently the uncircumcised proselyte was called *gēr 'arel* or *gēr tōshāb*, and the circumcised convert was called *gēr bēn bērît*.¹⁸ And so the full conversion of a Gentile to Judaism involved three steps, (1) the so-called proselyte baptism (2) circumcision and (3) a sacri-

fice to be offered by the candidate in the Temple. The last step was of necessity dropped after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans. The reason why there were more women converts to Judaism than men was because circumcision was not a requirement for women. And so a half-way house was constituted, whereby some would join the Jewish ranks without undergoing circumcision. According to M. H. Pope these were “in an intermediate state between pagans and Jews.”¹⁹ They were called *yir’ê shāmayîm* or “those who feared God”.

4.4 Cessation of Proselytising in Judaism

Kuhn calls the conversions of king Izates of Adiabene, of the queen mother Helena and of his brother Monabazus, which are narrated by Josephus (*Ant* 20:2) “the greatest achievement of Jewish missions.”²⁰. Besides these, Josephus also mentions two other important personages from Rome, both ladies, first of all Poppea, the wife of the emperor Nero (*Ant* 20:8:8), and the second, the lady Fulvia, “a woman of great dignity” (*Ant* 18:3:5). In fact, the zeal of Jewish proselytism was so great in Rome that emperor Tiberius banished all the Jews from Rome, from among whom four thousand were enlisted into the ranks of soldiers and sent to Sardinia as Josephus informs us (*Ant* 18:35). Finally conversion to Judaism was forbidden under Domitian, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and Septimius Severus.²¹ During the Roman persecutions of the Jews a good number of converts became turncoats as a result of which Jewish missionary ardor weakened considerably,²²

and this turned out to be to the advantage of Christianity which under Paul had dispensed with circumcision altogether.

5. Conversion in the New Testament

When we pass from the Old Testament prophets in particular to John the Baptist and Jesus we notice that there is, as is to be expected, a continuity with regard to the theme of ‘conversion’, but there is also a break. In fact there is a break even between the thinking of John the Baptist and that of Jesus, as we shall see.

5.1 Antecedents in the Septuagint

It must be kept in mind that the Septuagint never translates the Hebrew word *shûb* (turn or return) with *metanoeô* but almost always with *apostrephô* (turn away from) or *epistrephô* (turn towards or return). The Hebrew verb *nîham* on the other hand is almost exclusively rendered by the Greek *metanoeô*. The verb *nîham* basically means ‘to regret’ and hence ‘to pity’ or ‘to alter one’s purpose out of pity’. All the same it is to be remembered that in the Hebrew Bible quite often the verbs *shûb* and *nîham* are seen in parallel (cf. Ex 32:12; Jer 4:28). But when we come to the writings of the New Testament there seems to be a jump. The normal translation of the Hebrew *shûb* in the New Testament is not *epistrephô* or *apostrephô* but *metanoeô*!

5.2 Antecedents in the Inter-Testamental Literature

And the explanation for this is to be found in the inter-testamentary lit-

erature including the deutero-canonical Greek books. As we read in Kittel: “The linguistic material leads to the conclusion that for the Jewish Hellenistic world of the 2nd cent. A.D. *metanoeô* was a common and even preferred equivalent of *epistrephomai* = *shûb*, ‘to turn’, ‘to convert.’”²³

5.3 Conversion in John the Baptist

John’s preaching of *metanoia* or conversion is to be seen against the background of the impending judgement of the eschatological New Age which he is proclaiming. His message of conversion is addressed to all human beings, including Pharisees and Sadducees, and not merely to the sinners. No one can escape from the coming wrath (Mt 3:7). And hence he is proclaiming a baptism of repentance (*metanoia*) for the remission of sins (Mk 1:4). For John conversion has to be genuine and not mere lip service.. “Bear fruit worthy of repentance!”, he urges his listeners (Mt 3:8): The evangelist Luke also stresses this point both in the Gospel and in the Acts (Lk 3:8; Act 26:20). No one can escape the judgement! “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Mt 3:19).

5.4 Conversion in the Proclamation of Jesus

Jesus begins his public ministry to Israel by proclaiming the message of the Old Testament prophets but in real fact he is transcending both the ancient prophets and John the Baptist himself

as we shall see: “Repent and believe in the Good News!” (Mk 1:15). But the context of the preaching of Jesus is the kingship of God which he is announcing in his person. There is no question here of legalism or a theory of retribution. The kingship of God is to be received like a child, for it is God’s gift which is to be received in faith! In the words of Jesus as given in the Gospel of Matthew: “Truly I say to you, unless you change (*eán me straphete*) and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:3). In fact this is the only text in the New Testament which uses *strapho* instead of *metanoeo*²⁴ Another important difference between John and Jesus is that the baptism of Jesus involves the imparting of the Spirit and fire (Lk 3:16), which will effect a transformation of the human being as foretold by the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 36:26-27). According to Ezekiel it is the Spirit that will enable human beings to keep God’s statutes and ordinances. For, human beings of themselves are unable to keep God’s laws.. And so we realise that conversion in the proclamation of Jesus is not a task left to the human beings but is a pure gift of God. This idea is stressed repeatedly in the deutero-canonical Book of Wisdom. According to its author God not only grants an opportunity to humans to be converted but conversion itself is God’s gift (Wis 11:23; 12:10; 12:19).

5.5 Conversion in the Theology of Luke

Luke in particular while treating of conversion rules out any theology of retribution. Conversion according to him is God’s unmerited gift to Israel.

God raises Jesus from the dead after he had been put to death on the Cross and “exalted him as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance (*metanoia*) to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (Act 5:31). But in Luke’s theology this is not reserved exclusively for the Jews, for the Gentiles are also chosen to be recipients of God ‘s gift in faith. Simon Peter who had witnessed personally the granting of the Spirit to the Roman centurion Cornelius even prior to his baptism (Act 10:44-48), defends his position to the assembly of Christians at Jerusalem:“If then God gave them (the Gentiles) the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I, that I could hinder God?” (Act 11:17). As a result they promptly realised God’s impartiality and praised Him who had given “even to the Gentiles the repentance (*metanoia*) that leads to life” (Act 11:18).

As a result of all this the church at Jerusalem sends apostles to the regions of Phoenicia and Samaria to preach the Good News, who on their return to home base narrate to the brethren the “conversion (*epistrophē*) of the Gentiles” (Act 15:3). This openness of the Hellenistic non-Jews, many of whom probably already were semi-converts to Judaism, that is to say, had embraced the Jewish religion without being circumcised, (the *yir’ê shaumayîm*), now gladly became adherents of Christianity which tutored by the apostle Paul had dispensed with the painful rite of circumcision as an indispensable condition for conversion to Christianity (cf. Gal 5:6; 6:15).

6. Conclusion

It has been a long journey as we turned from one prophet to another in the history of Israel in our search for the meaning of conversion as they understood it. And from there we passed to the inter-testamental period of the Maccabean and Hasmonaean periods both in the Palestinian homeland and in the Diaspora until we came to John the Baptist, Jesus and the New Testament. The pre-exilic prophets from Amos to Jeremiah showed us how Israel did not heed their God’s message as delivered by them. Israel showed herself incapable of turning away from evil and turning to Yahweh. The First Isaiah gave Israel some hope for future conversion through the name of his son ‘A Remnant Shall Return’. Hoshea and Jeremiah promised Israel that Yahweh himself would heal their disloyalty and bring Israel back to himself. In the time of the Maccabees and Hasmonaeans some of the petty kings of Judah resorted to forced conversions of their subjects for political motives. More enlightened Jews sought to win over Hellenistic non-Jews tired of the polytheism , the superstitions and the immorality of their contemporaries. Finally, Jesus himself came and proclaimed conversion in the context of the new age where God’s kingdom was ushered in by himself. He addressed his message to each individual whatever his denomination. Never was there a question of one individual trying to convert another, for all human beings, irrespective of their nationality and creed, are in need of God’s grace. And the infant Church continued this proclamation of her Founder. Christ never preached division

but only harmony, a harmony that can only come when all human beings submit themselves to God's rule. And so the greatest teacher of the infant Church, Paul of Tarsus, who dispensed with the painful requirement of circumcision as a prerequisite for conversion, puts it in his address to the nations of the world:

'God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ Jesus. Therefore be reconciled to one another' (cf. 2 Cor 5:17-19). In other words, since God has turned to human beings in Christ Jesus, human beings must turn to one another, and together return to the one common Father of us all.

Notes

1. *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. by W. A. VanGemeren (sic), Vol. 4, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997, under *shûb*, p. 56.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Quoted by J. A. Soggin, in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Vol. 3, ed. by E. Jenni & C. Westermann, Hendrikson, Peabody, Massachusetts, 1997, under *shûb*, p. 1315. He refers to Holladay's book, *The Root shûbh in the OT*, 1958, pp. 116-157.
4. See the article of E. Jenni on "Eschatology of the OT", in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2, ed. by G. A. Buttrick, Abingdon, Nashville, 1962, p. 126, (From now on *IDB*). Jenni makes a distinction between 'prophetic eschatology', still on the historical plane (broader sense) and 'apocalyptic eschatology', at the end of history, mythic plane (narrower sense).
5. The Hebrew has "the bulls of our lips". Both the JB and the NRSV have emended the text which can be done by slightly altering the Massoretic text and punctuation. The incorrect Hebrew *pārîm s̄e pātēnû*, "the bulls of our lips", is altered to *p̄x̄ s̄e pātēnû*, that is "the fruit of our lips", which suits the context.
6. See his article, "Das Thema 'Umkehr' in der alttestamentlichen Prophetie" (1951), reprinted in *Gesammelte Studien zum AT*, Kaiser Verlag, Munich, 1973, p.141.
7. For 'turning away from' the Greek uses *apostrephô* and for 'turning to' it has *epistrephô*, whereas the Hebrew *shûb* could mean both things.
8. The NRSV has: "If you return, O Israel, says the LORD, if you return to me,", which is a tautology! The Hebrew has: '*im ta'ushûb yiśrâ'ēl, n̄'um yhwh, 'elay tāshûb*'.
9. Hoshea uses the singular *m̄eshûba* (backslding) whereas Jeremiah has the plural *m̄eshûbot* (backsldings), which is not clear from the English.
10. The Hebrew has *hashibēnî w̄ 'āshûbāh*, the first verbal form is causative while the second is intransitive., that is" Make me come back and I shall come back!"
11. *Op. cit.*, p. 145.
12. The books of Esther, Tobit and Judith are known as theological midrashim, that is, narratives that are ahistorical but which convey a theological or kerygmatic message.
13. Cf. the author's article, "Communalism in Israel", in *Vidyajyoti*, Vol. 56, March 1992, pp.135-150.

14. Cf. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, transl. and ed. by W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, University Press, Chicago, 1957, under *proselytos*, where the Latin equivalents, *proselytus*, *proselyta* and *advena* are also given.
15. See *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. VI, ed. by G. Friedrich, transl. and ed. by G. F. Bromiley. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1968, pp. 731-732. Henceforth TDNT.
16. The term *mityahādîm* comes from the Hebrew *y^ehûdî*, which means a Jew. And so *mityahadîm* would mean literally ‘to make oneself a Jew’. This is the Hithpael or intensive reflexive form of the nominal verb.
17. Cf. M.H. Pope’s article, “Proselyte”, in *IDB*, Vol. 3, col. 1, p.925 (See footnote 4)
18. Cf. *TDNT*, Vol VI, p. 741.
19. Cf. *IDB*, Vol. 3, p. 929, col. 2. (See Footnote 4).
20. Cf. *TDNT*, Vol. VI, p. 735
21. Cf. *IDB*, Vol. 3, col. 1, p. 931 (See footnote 4)
22. Cf. *Ibid.*
23. Cf. *TDNT*, Vol. IV, ed. by G. Kittel, p. 990.
24. Cf. *TDNT*, Vol IV, under “E. ‘metanoëô and metanoia in the New Testament”, p. 1003, footnote 160.

Conversion in Mission History

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

Apostolic Period

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Middle Ages

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Inquisition & Crusades

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

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

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

Colonial Expansion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conversion to the Fullness of Christ

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conversion to the Kingdom

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

Notes

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28. C. Webster, *The Christian Community and Change in Nineteenth Century North India*, Bombay: Macmillan Com. 1976, p. 29.
29. *Ibid*, p. 61.
30. In G. S. Hinge, *Hindutva Reawakened*, Delhi: Vikas Publ., 1999, p. 175.
31. J. Neuner & J. Dupuis (Eds), *The Christian Faith*, Bangalore: TPI, 1973, p. 272.
- 32 . R. Bassham, *Mission Theology*, Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979, p. 345.

Conversion in Church Documents

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For the purposes of this article, I divide Church documents into two groups: those which were issued during the "colonial mission" and those which date from "*Ad Gentes*" (AG) to the encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II, "*Redemptoris Missio*" (RM). I give greater attention to the latter group of documents, since they are of greater contemporary significance.

1. Documents of the Colonial Mission

Pope Clement X (1670-76) had the mission of Tongking in mind when he issued the Brief, "Apostolatus officium", in order "to promote the greater glory of God and the conversion of the infidels". An Instruction of Propaganda Fide (18/10/1883) to the Vicars Apostolic of China refers to the "conversion of the gentiles to Christ the Lord" as "the chief goal of missions." A Decree of the same Congregation in 1920 exhorts the missionary "to hold no other goal, propose no other measure than the conversion of people to God and the salvation of souls".¹

1.1. Popes of the 20th Century up to Vatican II

For this period we can count five encyclical letters. According to these, the mission is to aim at the conversion

of people to the Christian faith, with a view to the "expansion" or "extension" of the Church. In continuity with his recent predecessors, Pius XII described the "final goal" of the missions as "the establishment of the Church in new territories". Accordingly in "*Fidei Donum*" (1957) he issued a special appeal on behalf of Africa, where Islam was spreading: "Twenty more priests in a particular region would make it possible to plant the cross there today, while tomorrow this same land, tilled by other workers than those of the Lord, will probably have become impervious to the true Faith." Conversion is clearly implied here, as a means to plant the Church. Conversion is understood primarily in terms of Church membership.

The next important text on conversion comes from Vatican II and bears quoting at length. The following exposition is based on the comments of various Council fathers as well as the "*Relatio*" of the Conciliar Missionary Commission (CMC), charged with the task of drafting the mission decree. This material is here being published for the first time.²

2. *Ad Gentes* 13

After urging the proclamation of Christ to all people, "wherever God opens a door of speech", the Council

describes the process of conversion: “Thus, when the Holy Spirit opens their heart (cf. Acts 16.14) non-Christians may believe and be freely converted to the Lord, and may sincerely cling to Him who, as ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (Jn 14.6), fulfills all their spiritual expectations, and even infinitely surpasses them.”

Some Council fathers wanted conversion to be defined more “theologically”, taking up what had been defined by the Councils of Trent and Vatican I. But the CMC judged this useless and preferred to stick to the pastoral bent of chapter II.

The second paragraph of AG 13 describes the stage of conversion in which there must be a consciousness of sin and a reference to Christ. The text speaks of a spiritual journey in the Christian faith, whose primary object is the paschal mystery. It does not mean, as five Council fathers felt, that non-Christians may not be living religiously and fighting sin or that they have no spiritual life/journey: “This conversion, to be sure, must be regarded as a beginning. Yet it is sufficient that one realizes that one has been snatched away from sin and led into the mystery of the love of God, who has called him/her to enter into a personal relationship with Him in Christ.”

The following section describes conversion and its consequences, as desired by Bp. Paul Seitz of Kontum (Viet Nam) and several others:

For, by the workings of divine grace, the new convert sets out on a spiritual journey. Already sharing through faith in the mystery of Christ’s death

and resurrection, he journeys from the old man to the new one, perfected in Christ (cf. Col 3.5-10; Eph 4.20-24). This transition, *which brings* with it a progressive change of outlook and morals, should manifest itself through its social effects, and should be gradually developed during the time of the catechumenate. Since the Lord he believes in is a sign of contradiction (cf. Lk 2.34; Mt 10.34-39), the convert often experiences human breaks and separations. But he also tastes the joy which God gives without measure (cf. I Th 1.6).

Four Council fathers had wanted the phrase “which brings” to be replaced by “in so far as it brings”. They felt that the text as it stands gives the impression that all non-Christians are ‘simply bad’, since they have to be carried progressively from complete wickedness to a changed mentality and behavior. The CMC denied that the text supposes this; Christ himself calls all to *metanoia*, in which true conversion consists.

The next section enjoins respect for religious freedom, with reference to Vatican II’s “Declaration on Religious Freedom”, Nos. 2, 4 and 10: “The Church strictly forbids forcing anyone to embrace the faith, or alluring 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.”

The point is not new, as pope Alexander VII (1658) had rejected the use of inducements and force in this context.³ An earlier draft of the above quoted text had prefaced this section with the statement: “The freedom of this

conversion should be established". However, this was objected to by three Council fathers, including Bp. Oscar Sevrin of Ranchi. He felt that the statement added nothing definite to the following clear sentence. He referred to the infamous Niyogi Commission Report (1956) on Christian missionary activity in the state of Madhya Pradesh, as an example of how hostile governments could use such a statement to legitimate their official 'inquisitions'. In deference to this objection, the CMC deleted the said statement and inserted the word "freely" (underscored above) in the opening paragraph of N. 13.

The controversy did not end there, for 54 Council fathers wanted to replace the opening sentence of the present section ("The Church ... techniques") with the following: "The act of faith cannot arise out of external constraint nor out of unfit artifices or from promises of temporal goods, but from the free and sincere will of the person."

These Council fathers were moved by the desire to avoid insinuating that Catholic missionaries induce non-Christians to the faith by means of compulsion. But the CMC pointed out, that the new redaction in fact insinuates that such means are indeed used; it is open to the same false interpretation by those who seek scandal. Further, added the CMC, it can smack of Pelagianism. Accordingly, the proposed amendment was rejected.

Conclusion

The Council describes conversion in holistic terms. It is basically a total spiritual renewal focused on Jesus

Christ and takes place in an ecclesial context. This renewal is a life-long process, which is to manifest itself in personal change and renewed relationships with others. The freedom of the person must be respected in this 'journey'.

In the Indian context, a peculiar problem arises regarding large numbers of Hindus, who while choosing to remain outside the Church, are converted to Christ who is sometimes understood in a different manner from what the Church professes in its creeds. Paul Palathuruthil, Exarch of Chanda, drew attention to this phenomenon in an observation which he submitted to the CMC. He noted that the words and deeds of Jesus make a profound impression on many non-Christians. They even have sympathy and reverence for the Church. But they do not wish to become Christians. Apart from the fact that this phenomenon should be more profoundly investigated, we seem to ignore this group. They are Christ's, he said. And as for their syncretism, "Who is not against us is for us." There is no juridical or liturgical term to designate them. The Gospels, translated into different languages, should be distributed among them. Some sort of permanent bond should be established between the Church and non-Christians who read and love sacred Scripture. In response to this Note of the Exarch, the CMC agreed that the Church should have regard for these "sympathizers". This is sufficiently taken care of wherever the text speaks of dialogue and the presence of charity. The CMC added: How these principles should be translated into practice, depends on such diverse circum-

stances that the matter cannot be dealt with here.

It is plain from the foregoing that the responsibility for dealing with this issue devolves primarily upon the Indian Church. The matter would be brought up again in the Synod of Bishops held in Rome in 1974 on the theme of evangelisation. In a written intervention at the Synod, bishop Patrick D'Souza of Varanasi referred to the 'sympathizers', who "would seem to surpass Christians in number". (*L'Osservatore Romano*, 24/10/1974, p.12).

3. Conversion in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*

This is the Apostolic Exhortation on evangelisation in the modern world (1975), published by Pope Paul VI as a sequel to the Synod of Bishops of the preceding year. The pope asserts that salvation in the Kingdom of God is obtained through a process of abnegation required to imbibe the spirit of the beatitudes. Each individual gains this salvation "through a total interior renewal which the Gospel calls *metanoia*; it is a radical conversion, a profound change of mind and heart" (N. 10). It is plain that such an interior renewal must always accompany a change of social structures, because "the best structures and the most idealized systems soon become inhuman if the inhuman inclinations of the human heart are not made wholesome, if those who live in these structures or who rule them do not undergo a conversion of heart and of outlook" (N. 36). This is a matter of daily experience in India, where many excel-

lent laws and directives remain largely confined to paper. So there is no new humanity if there are not first of all new persons. The Church is very conscious of the importance of this interior change as forming the heart of evangelization:

if it had to be expressed in one sentence, the best way of stating it would be to say that the Church evangelizes when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the Message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieux which are theirs (N. 18).

It is clear that the pope does not limit conversion to the narrow sense of Church membership, though some persons may opt for such membership. But even for such persons, the process of conversion is never complete, for the Church is a people "immersed in the world and often tempted by idols". Hence she "is evangelized by constant conversion and renewal, in order to evangelize the world with credibility" (N. 15). Conversion is understood as a process of interior renewal, which may in some cases culminate in faith in Jesus Christ. This "profound change of mind and heart" must affect society: the activities and concrete milieux of people.

4. *Redemptoris Missio* (1990)

This is the encyclical letter of pope John Paul II on the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate. It was published on the 25th anniversary of "*Ad Gentes*". Here the terms "conversion" and to "convert" are thrice more numerous than in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, but they are used in the nar-

rower sense of faith in Christ and baptism (See Nn 20, 23, 35, 44, 46, 47). Conversion refers to adherence to Christ within the Church. The pope makes it clear that conversion to Christ must not be separated from baptism and membership in the Church. It is this “Christian conversion” which is the aim of proclamation and which is forbidden in certain countries. No doubt, “accepting the saving sovereignty of Christ” implies a continual turning away from sin. And this remains a life-long task, for: “We cannot preach conversion unless we ourselves are converted anew every day”.

The pope seems cognizant of the situation obtaining in India, when he refers to historical, cultural and social factors which militate against the acceptance of baptism. In some places:

conversion is seen as a rejection of one's own people and culture... socio-logical considerations associated with baptism obscure its genuine meaning as an act of faith. This is due to a variety of historical and cultural factors... many profess an interior commitment to Christ and his message yet do not wish to be committed sacramentally, since, owing to prejudice or because of the failings of Christians, they find it difficult to grasp the true nature of the Church as a mystery of faith and love (Nn 35, 47).

The pope exhorts the local ecclesial communities to remove such blocks where they exist, “so that the sacrament of spiritual rebirth can be seen for what it truly is”. At the same time he reminds prospective converts 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”. Nevertheless, many such persons continue to exercise their religious freedom in adhering to Christ outside the Church.⁴ In this context we would do well to heed the remarks of pope Paul VI while describing the signs of that love which the evangelizer should have for those being evangelized. One of these signs is: “Respect for the religious and spiritual situation of those being evangelized. Respect for their tempo and pace; no one has the right to force them excessively. Respect for their conscience and convictions, which are not to be treated in a harsh manner” (*EN* 79).

A Colloquium organised by the CCBFI Commission for Proclamation in December 1998 reflected on this issue, as recorded in its final Statement:

Due to various social, religious and cultural situations in India and the nature of the prevalent Church form in our country, many who have been decisively influenced by the person, message and values of Jesus are facing real difficulties in embracing the full Christian fellowship in the existing form of Christianity. In view of this situation we have to develop certain forms of ministry for and living relationship with such persons. Their relationship to the Church should be further explored.⁵

5. Concluding remarks

Conversion, understood as including baptism, cannot be isolated from the overall goal of mission. This goal needs to be clarified further in Church documents, so as to achieve an harmonious integration of the various elements which make up evangelisation. For in-

stance, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* sees evangelization as aiming at the transformation of humanity and the evangelization of cultures (Nn 18-20). In *Redemptoris Missio*, on the one hand it is stated that “the Church is effectively and concretely at the service of the Kingdom”, of which she is “the seed, sign and instrument”. On the other hand, it is asserted that “the proclamation of the word of God has Christian conversion as its aim ... This must be our motto: All the churches united for the conversion of the whole world” (Nn 46,

84). And: “The mission *Ad Gentes* has this objective: to found Christian communities . . .”

So we have: promoting the Kingdom of God, evangelization of cultures, conversion, Church planting. All these elements have their place in missionary activity. However, it is important to be clear about their mutual relationship and relative value in the context of the goal of mission: not least because this has practical and pastoral consequences for the conduct of missionary activity.

Notes

1. T. Ohm, *Machet zu Jüngern alle Völker*, Freiburg: Erich Wewel Verlag, 1962, p. 279.
2. My sources are: 1) *Observations, emendations proposed in writing or in speeches in the Aula, by Conciliar Fathers and Observers* (8 Vols.). 2) *Schema Decreti de Activitate Missionali Ecclesiae, Textus Emendatus et Relationes* (1965). 3) *Schema Decreti de Activitate Missionali Ecclesiae, Modi a Patribus Conciliaribus propositi, a Commissione de Missionibus Examinati* (1965).
3. Collectanea S. C. de *Propaganda Fide*, Rome, 1907: n. 129, xv, t. 1, p. 40.
4. J. Saldanha, “Unbaptised Disciples of Christ”, *Third Millennium*, 1998, N. 3, pp. 20-27.
5. *Ishvani Documentation and Mission Digest*, 1998, N. 3, p. 364

Conversations: 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 (*Suddhi*) 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 *svadesī* 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 (*desa*), 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-missionology, 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 Eurocentrism – 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 *sākṣī*, 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, <i>Christian Missions: Their Place in India</i> , ed. B. Kumarappa, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1941.
EGT	A.T. & G.A. Hingorani, <i>The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts</i> , New Delhi: All India Congress Committee, 1985.
ISS	M.K. Gandhi, <i>In Search of the Supreme</i> , 3 vols., ed.: V.B. Kher, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1961.
MJ	M.K. Gandhi, <i>The Message of Jesus Christ</i> , ed. A.T. Hingorani, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1964.

SMEWT *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. Vellarangatt, "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, "Gandhi 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 Suddhi 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-missionary 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.
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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.
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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.
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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.
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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".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.

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"?¹³

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

Swami Dayananda 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹

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.²⁰

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.²¹

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.²²

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.²³

1.8. Christians are often accused of converting people through force or fraud.²⁴ Besides, there is a growing suspicion that Christians are engaged in education, health services and other charitable activities in order to win converts.²⁵ This is particularly true of the work done among the poor, the Dalits and the tribal people.²⁶ 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*.²⁷

Most likely, there is a lot of exaggeration in what is said against conversion.²⁸ It is possible that the people who oppose conversion are politically motivated.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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).³¹

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."³² 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.³³

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

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.³⁵

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.³⁶

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.³⁷ 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).”³⁸

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.³⁹ He terms that conversion “lower” which is “undergone more for socio-economic reasons than the desire for the highest spiritual enlightenment.”⁴⁰ 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.”⁴¹ 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.⁴²

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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶

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

tic 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.⁴⁷

In the multi-religious context of our country we Indian Christians need to rethink 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.⁴⁸

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.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰

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 inescapably offers reconciliation and fullness of life to the world."⁵¹ 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?"⁵² Can there be any human formulation which is appropriate to every time, place and culture? Or, should one speak of alienation? That is what Sebastian Kappen believes.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴

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.⁵⁵

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.⁵⁶

4) In a thought-provoking article, Joseph Neuner has called our attention to the dangers to which a Christo-centric approach to mission is exposed.⁵⁷ 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.”⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰ After that it was widely held that outside the Church there is no salvation.⁶¹ 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."⁶²

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."⁶³ This statement created a furore in this country.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵

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 he Creator who does not abandon creation) and its concerns embrace (like the biblical story) every aspect of human and cosmic liberation.⁶⁶

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.⁶⁷ In his opinion, the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus "is ultimately his *revelation of God's unconditional love*".⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹

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".⁷⁰ 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."⁷¹

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.⁷²

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 interreligious 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.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴

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 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.⁷⁵

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.⁷⁶

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.⁷⁷

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.⁷⁸

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. *Inculcation*

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.⁷⁹

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

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 incultured.

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 incultured.

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

1. As reported in *The Hindu*, Chennai, November 4, 1999, p. 13.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, "An Open Letter to Pope John Paul II," in *The New Indian Express*, Bangalore, October 29, 1999, p. 8.
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.
19. *The Times Of India*, Mumbai, October 13, 1999, p. 18.
20. A. Shourie, *Missionaries in India*, pp. 234-235.
21. S. Shahin, "Expanding the Empire with Conversion," in *The Times Of India*, Mumbai, November 2, 1999, p. 12.
22. As quoted by I. Vempeny, *Conversion: National Debate or Dialogue*, Delhi: Media House, 1999, p. 10.
23. S. Naqvi, "Mission in the Antique Land," in *The Indian Express*, Vadodara, November 5, 1999, p. 6.
24. A. Shourie, *Missionaries* . . . , pp. 13-32.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. *The Times Of India*, Mumbai, November 2, 1999, p. 12.
28. See Acharye K. K. Chandy, "An Open Reply to Swami Dayananda Saraswati: Leave it to Individuals," in *The New Indian Express*, Kochi, November 8, 1999, p. 8.
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.
30. X. Leon - Dufour, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967, p. 431.
31. J. L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968, p. 728.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 729.
33. George M. Soares-Prabhu, "The Kingdom of God: Jesus' Vision of a New Society", in D. S. Amalorpavadas, *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981, pp. 599-600.
34. See L. Legrand, "Conversion in the Bible: A Diological Process," in J. Mattam and S. Kim (ed.), *Mission and Conversion - A Reappraisal*, 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.
38. *Ibid.*
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!" *Maharashtra 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.
51. *Ecclesia In Asia*, Nr. 12.
52. *Ibid.*, Nr. 20.
53. See S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, New York, Orbis Books, 1977, pp. 18-24.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
55. *Ecclesia In Asia*, Nr. 12.
56. G. Soares-Prabhu, "The Church as Mission: A Reflection on Mt 5: 13-16", in *Jeevadhara*, 24 (1994) 142, pp. 280-281.
57. See J. Neuner, "Mission in *Ad Gentes* and *Redemptoris Missio*," in *Vidyajyoti*, 56 (1992) 5, pp. 228-241.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
59. *Ibid.*, pp. 239-240.
60. See K. Kunnumparam, *Ways of Salvation*, Pune: JDV Publications, 1971, pp. 13-14.
61. In 1863 Pius IX referred to it as a "well-known Catholic Dogma," Neuner-Dupuis 814.
62. E. C. Dewick, *The Christian Attitude to Other Religion*, London: 1953, p. 116.
63. *Ecclesia In Asia*, Nr. 1.
64. See Arun Shourie, "The Pope Dispels . . .," p. 4.
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68. *Ibid.*, pp. 598-599.
69. *Ibid.*, p. 601.
70. S. Sarkar, "Conversions and the Sangh Parivar," in *The Hindu*, Delhi, November 9, 1999, p. 10.
71. *Ibid.*
72. W. Fernandes, "Debate Poverty, Not Conversion," in *The Times Of India*, January 15, 1999, p. 9.
73. See Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*; John Paul II, *RM* 55-57.
74. T. V. R. Shenoy, "A Time for Conversation, not Conversion," in *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, November 5, 1999, p. 8.
75. John Paul II, *Ecclesia In Asia*, Nr.31.
76. *Ibid.*, Nr. 20.
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 Sanskritic 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

of Christian life, namely, organisation and administration, theological reflection, role of laymen and women, formation of the Church-leaders and fostering of liturgy. In the context of rising neo-colonialism and religious fundamentalism the Church needs to express in unambiguous terms the purpose of her dialogue with the situation of poverty and injustice, the plurality of religions and cultures and the implications of such a dialogue for her life and mission in India.

6) An important factor in our reflection was identified when the *sixth* paper showed that people did not act on the basis of “chemically” pure truths about things, but on the basis of their perception. We need to be aware of the different ways in which people understand and think about religion. This is true about our own discourses as Christians as well as of those of our neighbours. There is a difference in the understanding of religious belonging. Whereas in the Christian understanding belonging to a religion is by free choice (“contract”), for our neighbours religious belonging is perceived as a matter of birth. This has consequences for our understanding of conversion. These and other difficulties need to be taken into account in our relationship with our neighbours. In responding to the current situation and dealing with contentious issues, we should not rely entirely on the state assuming that it is always an impartial arbiter. We should rather interact actively with, and foster the creation of, a vibrant civil society. Our theological orientations often tend to be one-sided. This needs to be corrected. Finally, we have to be guided by the

conviction that mission is the work of God, as the parable of the seed which grows by itself illustrates. The Christian community in India should recognise God’s Kairos (God’s plan) for the people in our country, discern it and co-operate with it with a deep spiritual composure, free from the kind of anxiety and restlessness about mission which will only compromise the spiritual message of the Gospel.

7) The *seventh* and final paper “Mission: An Alternative Model,” showed that the old model of evangelisation was very often negatively oriented to the cultures, religions and autonomy of peoples which are the concrete expressions of the identity of India. The Church that originated from such an act of evangelisation was not fully rooted in the soil of our country. This model of mission is easily susceptible to being accused of an anti-national activity, especially in the post-colonial era when nationalism is emerging as a defining element of an authentic Indian identity. The paper also advocated the necessity of a change of model based on divine incarnation and the complementarity of the word-in-creation and word-in-history. In this model the Christian faith can be positively and intrinsically related to all the genuine concrete expressions of the various cultures, religions and aspirations of our peoples. Here, evangelisation should follow a reverse order, that is, an evangeliser should first of all be him/herself be evangelized by the cultures, religions and peoples to whom he/she is sent; he/she should be converted to them, i.e. be enriched by God’s presence and grace present in them and be-

come part of them before he/she starts evangelising others.

B. Group and General Discussions

The workshop discussions and general sessions highlighted specific areas of concern:

1) *Hindutva and Cultural Nationalism*

Regarding the Hindutva vision of the Indian nation, a distinction is to be made between Hindutva which is an ideology and a political movement to gain political power using religion, and Hinduism which is intrinsically pluriform as it has incorporated different religions and cultures.

In the perspective of Hindutva, the establishing of Christian communities through mission is viewed as efforts to destroy the cultural identity that binds together the people of India. Hence, Hindutva considers the Christian community to be inimical to its interests. It is reasonable to believe that its hidden agenda is to preserve the dominant hold of the higher castes on the others as in the Brahmanic form of traditional Hinduism.

2) *Conversion*

Conversion may be looked upon as a religious issue, a political issue and a cultural issue. As a religious issue, it is concerned with the inner freedom of a person to embrace the religion of his/her choice. As a political issue, it calls for efforts to oppose all anti-conversion laws which deny the human right to

choose one's own religion; as a cultural issue, deep respect and sensitivity should be shown to all peoples so that they may preserve their Indian cultural identity.

Some may choose to see in the decision of the illiterate poor to convert to Christianity the fruit of allurement. At times, conversion to another religion—as in the case of Ambedkar—is a sign of social protest. On the part of the Church there should always be scrupulous honesty and respect in dealing with such people so that they truly decide for themselves.

3) *Indian Christian Identity*

Taking into account the multi-faceted aspect of the Indian Civilisation, our Indian Christian identity will have to assume pluriformity because there are different groups and communities that make up the Indian polity. To define a typical pattern of Indian Christian identity is difficult. This is more so because the Church bears the burden of its colonial past and experiences difficulty in disentangling herself fully from it. She must exercise a fair measure of autonomy and learn to cope with the tension that will arise between the vision of Christ and the evolving structures of the Church.

4) *The Church*

We envisage a Church that is an authentic and credible witness to the Kingdom. It should manifest a living interaction between universality and particularity and an organic unity in which all social barriers that dehumanise people are demolished. Pluri-cultural di-

versities are to be seen as challenging opportunities for enrichment. Respect for pluralism, gender equality, the principle of subsidiarity, participatory leadership, especially greater laity involvement, and a leadership that distances itself from images of power and identifies itself with those of service will enable the Church to fulfil her God-given role. Official interventions in the form of statements should not give conflicting signals to the Church in general and become a source for confusion to those who attempt true dialogue with other religions.

5) *Mission*

The Church understands her mission as offering the Good News to others. This mission is articulated in terms of an inner house discourse but unfortunately enough care has not been taken to bring to the public the changes that have been taking place within the Church especially with regard to the understanding of evangelisation and other religious traditions. From the Christian point of view change of religion suggests a choice expressed in a free option whereas for a large part of the Indian people religion is a matter of birth.

The mission mandate of the risen Lord is not restricted to a few words abstracted from their context in Matt. 28 or Mk 16. It should be understood in the context of the creative and saving purpose of the God of the poor as unfolded in the entire Bible. It should take into account the images of salt, light, leaven, and the concepts of life and witness. This puts the mission in the perspective of a continuing dialogue and

interaction with the poor, the cultures and religious traditions of Asia and the ecological concerns of the world. The Church at all levels has to be convinced that social justice is an essential part of evangelisation. This will have an impact on our mind-set and our life style.

C. *Recommendations*

1. A practical response to the harassment of Christians should be multi-pronged:
 - a) Encourage the laity and set aside funds for their training to participate in public life.
 - b) Foster inculturation.
 - c) Renew ourselves spiritually.
 - d) Make use of mass media, contact journalists for dissemination of genuine information and avoid false propaganda.
 - e) Set up P.R. offices at CBCI and diocesan levels.
 - f) Encourage a Christian presence at public celebrations and national festivities.
 - g) Cultivate good relations with neighbours.
 - h) Encourage dialogue with neo-Pentecostals and unattached evangelists regarding methods of evangelisation.
 - i) Collaborate with other minorities and secular movements and associations on common issues.
2. The rapid advances made in the field of technology call the Church to keep abreast of the times. We need to make use of technology especially information technology. There is a felt need to develop a Centre for Policy Research.

3. The promotion of a sustainable Church demands more serious commitment to faith formation of the laity, investment for integral education of the Catholic youth and an attitudinal change on the part of everyone with respect to the role of lay people in the Church.
4. To be constantly aware of the need to be in solidarity with the Dalits and tribal people and other oppressed sections of society. Then our discourse will be on their wavelength. We should stress the equality of all peoples vis-à-vis the caste hierarchy advocated by Hinduism. Calling ourselves Indian Catholics and not Roman Catholics will help us to be more rooted in the cultures where we are placed. Further, the missionaries working in areas other than their own native places should be aware of the danger of their colonising the people they serve.
5. Since *Ecclesia in Asia* is meant for the whole of Asia, it seems necessary for the official Churches to do the needful to interpret the document for believers in India. The CBCI is requested to put together guidelines to help understand the correct relationship between the imperatives of Christianity and the legitimate claims of Indian nationalism. Christian fundamentalism must be given no opportunity to define authentic Christian identity.
6. To be creative we need more freedom and hence we request our Bishops to encourage and empower theologians, liturgists and others in their sincere efforts to be responsible and innovative and to defend them against undue Roman interference. Episcopal conferences should exercise their responsibilities and wean themselves away from unnecessary dependence on the Vatican.
7. To be credible, the Church should respect pluralism, gender equality, the principle of subsidiarity, participatory leadership especially greater laity involvement. Further, the official Church must create structures through which the leaders will be accountable to people. This may necessitate changes in the existing canon law. The Church must be a true family of equals.
8. We should continue to accept and promote the positive values in Hinduism, foster collaboration with secular movements and associations that will bring together Dalits and tribal people into the larger community. Faith formation programmes to deepen the faith of those who practise the faith should be vigorously pursued. The laity should be trained to appreciate other religions and cultures.
9. The gap between the Christian community and its leaders can be bridged by the following: participation in the decision-making at various levels of the Church administration; building up small Christian communities, creating or recognising ministries for the laity in the Church.
10. We should foster a broad-based spirituality in the Church that respects other religions and cultures. Given the diversity of cultures and religions in our country, we should

strive to build Basic Human Communities.

11. We need to have a ministry to those who wish to be identified merely as disciples of Jesus without being affiliated to the Church.

Conclusion

The consultation was an occasion both for affirming our solidarity with each other and for exercising our common responsibility for the Church so that she may continue her mission of service to the Indian nation. A better realisation of the threats from the rightist forces—the followers of the Hindutva ideology—came to all the participants

through the papers, workshops and discussions. A mature response would be in the nature of stressing our unity with all peoples and religions in India and at the same time engaging in self-introspection. Above all, we became more deeply aware of the implications of God manifesting himself in Jesus Christ and of the Church carrying out her mission today in the power of the Spirit.

The proponents of Hindutva are driven by the destructive myth of a strong Hindu Rashtra. Obviously, a myth cannot be countered by rational arguments, hence we must search for an authentic myth which will unite and enoble all the peoples of India.

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Bibliodrama: A Modern Body-Mind Hermeneutics

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There is a growing understanding today among many Church Communities in the West that a merely intellectual approach to past texts/traditions is inadequate. Hence, holistic approaches are being developed. Bibliodrama is one such approach, which creatively uses body and emotions in order to understand a text/tradition. It is based on an awareness that reaches out from the transparency of all senses over to the one great sense, that, erratic and unlocalizable, submerges the world and its appearance into an ever new light.

A consciousness which is closed to alternating views and perceptions must nowadays be considered a dead consciousness. It works, without being creative. This means being vulnerable to the pain that comes through opening up, regarding openness higher than security. A flowing perception leaves me in contact, without any final results. It is like a dancer who finds his balance again and again without actually ever 'having' it. Consciousness as a fixed concept on the other hand tends towards greed, towards that which is ideological, blending out reality as a *process*. This means, it fears the pain of transformation, correspondingly also the joy of liberation. This paper is a modest attempt to describe the theory and practice of bibliodrama, as such in unfolding 'spiritual' movement.

1. What is Bibliodrama?

"Bibliodrama is a flexible programme of an interactive process between the biblical tradition and a group of 12 to 18 members guided by one or many bibliodramatists. It is experience and text oriented: individual experiences come into contact with the experiences recorded in stories, situations and persons as well as prayer, meditation on biblical texts which have either come to life or in some cases have been distorted or submerged. The process seeks equally to make one conscious of irritations, projections, blocks in and against biblical texts as well as discovering that they can be potentially enriching and rewarding.

The content of the processes consists of historically probable as well as still to be acquired experiences, memories and expectations, and how they have found expression in biblical texts. The object of the process is that the members of the group work their way through positive and negative religious cliches to an understanding of situations and persons of the Bible, and imbuing them with new life. The aim is to promote and confront experiences either personally or vicariously to develop interchangeable exegeses of situations and tradition (resymbolising).

The entire process of a bibliodrama covers several work units and goes on for several days. The emphasis is on creating a “whole” of which physical, aesthetic and theologically reflecting work are indispensable elements. Bibliodrama works on the basis of body exercises and meditation. Depending on the qualification and the interest of the leader of the group, the emphasis could be on playful interaction, deep psychological work or theological and religious-pedagogical work. The chief difference between this and therapeutical work in a narrow sense is that the entire process is always steered back towards the biblical material. Individual work in the group is always the exception.

Bibliodramatical work has 3 stages. Body exercises come first. This is followed by a creative phase, very often as a game on the outer or inner stage (imagination). A part of this is conversations dealing with both the understanding of the text underlying the bibliodrama process as well as the group process and personal experiences. The concluding very often extensive, conversation is as exegetical as it is spiritual (therapeutic, soul-searching).

To give an initial idea/view of the proceedings, I am presenting some basic arrangements and some scenes typical of the bibliodramatical work.

- the story of creation puts forward the following philosophical as well as existential questions – how does something originate? With God, in the world or in us?
- Cain kills Abel and lives out his destiny not only in biblical texts but everyday, in every murderous intention

and deed and in a repetitive play with interchanging roles of God, Abel and Cain. What happens here must at least be conscious.

Ezekiel 37 (the death field and the Spirit of God) asks: How does a man become a prophet? Can the dead be brought to life? And who are the dead?

Meditation on Psalm 139 can make traumas as clear through religious upbringing (God as a cosmic policeman) as the possibilities of the feeling of an all encompassing security and stateliness by faith in God.”¹ For all these examples, the following rules apply.

a) *The Rule of the Inner Core*

“If we want to interpret or understand (grasp) archetypical images, then the method to be preferred is the conscious identification of the subject with appearing religious images.

In the same way we come close to the *religious* meaning of Logia or Parables, if we understand the relations, the things, persons, facts and tasks mentioned (in the Bible) as images of an Interior reality.

If for example in Mark 10: 7 the disengagement of oneself from father and mother is a precondition for marriage, or in Mark 10:29-30 even a precondition for the understanding of the message of Christ, then one should not see in this a sociological but a *psychological* step in the process of an *interior* maturation.

In the expression of the mountain moving faith (Mk 11:23) we have to see the mountain as a picture for *interior*

obstacles, etc. It is only in *interiorising psychologically* the words of an individual logion, that one touches the feelings and attitudes of fear, of enslavement and of a conversion, in whose context alone the *religious* meaning reveals itself to us.

b) *The Rule of Individuality*

From the above it follows that one's own personhood, one's own existence is the decisive proto-horizon of *religious* Speech. In religious speech there is never a question of what this speech may mean *for others*; the meaning is always for me, what does the word concerned here and now mean *for me*. It is only if I myself experience a religious word as spoken immediately into my presence, it is only then that I understand it as a religious statement. Therefore, I must experience the topic under discussion (the problem) against the background of the religious speech immediately as my own question, and equally spontaneously the religious speech must reveal itself as the sole evident answer.

Only in this way I find myself as hearer in the same moment of time, in the horizon of the some actuality, out of which the religious teacher speaks.

c) *The Rule of Paradoxical Reflection of Consciousness and Unconsciousness*

If religious speech questions the very foundation of the egocentric viewpoint, the "*cogito ergo sum*", then this religious speech must necessarily appear to our human reason *paradoxical*, religious speech throws the ... ego.. back

into a fear, which the rationalizing mind in its one-sidedness just wanted to avoid. If such is the case each religious speech passes through a movement which is always carried out in analytical psychotherapy and described in depth psychology! The Ego is exposed to the fear which it desperately tries to avoid; but just by doing this it (the ego) is liberated out of the narrowness of its self-imprisonment that which it (the ego) thought its duty to do by itself in order to be able to find to some extent its selfjustification, that itself is assured to it as something freely given, and in the collapse of its own moral, social and political efforts it learns to return to the unmerited grace of the experience of a simple "permission" to be.

With this that which appeared as something feasible "becomes the unattainable", and that which appeared up to now as the "unattainable" becomes that which is simply given. The total existence perverted in itself and suffering in the chains of fear is turned around, the judgement of the reason proves to be superficial, useless and erroneous, but the language of desire (homesickness), the images of the dreams, the lasting memories of one's own truth, awaken to life and prove themselves to be justified, valid and true.

d) *The Rule of the Living Centre of All Words*

If therefore, one tries to demonstrate of a "religious word" its meaning by studying its historical context this leads nowhere. There is only one single real criterion of its truth, its content, and its meanings. *The inner oneness* which

it generates, including the *oneness* of its tradition in the same spirit and the same basic attitude.

If one has understood deeply enough even a few words of religious truth, one will soon realize that all words of the same tradition fundamentally originate from the same light, a light which appears at first sight diffuse because it reflects same concrete questions and various levels of reality. Basically all sentences of religious teachers are only the interpretation of one single sentence. As St. Teresa of Avila once said about her own experience, it happens to one like to a bird, to whom God has given the task to sing only one single song.

"If one understands the teachings of a religious tradition in the way we have shown, namely sufficiently interior and *personal*, then one will soon realize, that they all form only one single song of grace against fear and a song of confidence against despair."²

"It often happens that theological discussions take place on the academic level as if the hermeneutical process were primarily an intellectual one. This is true of the Church and theology as well as philosophy and the social sciences. A statement of (a) is "understood" by (b). We speak about it. We reflect. We create connections. We criticize, analyze, do linguistic and historical research work. The bridges which we build are *intellectual acts*, from a thought about and understood statement to an intellectually assimilated answer. Words, structure, historical context, theological implication, semantics are

categories of a certain specific understanding. We write goals. We give a talk. We publish an article. We conduct a discussion.

But every historian knows that what I have just described is only partly true. "Understanding" is an *act*. The decisive events (of transmission) in history have never been purely intellectual process: here we touch the limits of the historical critical method.

The mimetic path is an alternative to the priority of the intellectual way of handling a text – an alternative which creatively uses body and emotions. The academic and ecclesiastical way of transmission seems to presuppose that grasping the meaning of a text is a purely intellectual matter. But in human "understanding" physical, mental, psychological, social and emotional factors play an important role. "Understanding" never is a mere thought process, a rational undertaking. If for instance we try to understand a person we not only use our intellect and our language but at the same time also our affective side. In fact, our whole body is involved. We see. We feel. There is a resonance of the body. The bridge from (a) to (b) is a many-sided one, where on both sides intellectual, psychological and physical elements are involved. (a) (b) therefore is never an intellectual process only, it is also an intellectual process.

If we think that "understanding" is opening a book and working with it at purely intellectual level we give a strange priority to one specific "element" out of a whole host of possibilities of rendering and handling a text.

- (a) - - - (b) intellectual
- (a) - - - (b) physical
- (a) - - - (b) emotional
- (a) - - - - (b) social

That means that we split the whole process of human activities by emphasizing one fragment of it: therein lies the reason for the hermeneutical curse!

In other words: The medieval “Drama of Daniel” is as much a statement about the Book of Daniel as a dissertation about Daniel is, and the mystery play about the shepherds is as much an interpretation as a medieval sermon about the shepherds is.”³

2. The Process of Bibliodrama Work⁴ (Exemplified by a workshop on the symbol of the Cross)

The basic idea of the seminar was to find out in what ways different experiences of the cross are still reflected in the present, modern-day ‘normal’ person’s life and how such experiences can take on an apparently visible form, which would still preserve the warm immediacy of everyday life. The hypothesis is that the cross, as an archetype symbol, is effective any-time and anywhere, independent of how much Christian upbringing a person had or if this person has become a Buddhist or an Atheist in the meantime. This could bring ‘intellectual distortion’ into the picture without destroying the basic primary impressions.

The concerns were directed toward expressing, by means of help through the various media, individual,

usually involuntary, perception and movements with regard to the effectiveness = reality of this great symbol, and finding out in which way its apparent form of depth is able to unfold. In other words, allowing experiences of the cross as the individual has felt and understood them for himself, to take on direct form without paying attention to the ‘correct’ or theological interpretation of what is to be understood by the Christian cross. The central focus could only be the body itself and its spontaneous gesticulation: facial expressions, gestures and rhythm – keeping the words of Kuekelhaus in mind, “The transforming and life-bringing human energy is based on the creation of the hidden ethereal body”,⁵ in terms of the ancient command, “Be who you are!”

The persuance of such phenomenology means beginning with the obvious, the simple first, which will be used to build up the complex; the phenomenon being the individual appearance, the ‘wonderful’, the all too apparent, which withdraws from the complicated focus of attention: The phenomenon invites one to roam, to be amazed, in face of its simplicity, directness and obviousness.

So the development of mimetic forms in play seems very often to be the first task on a bibliodramatic search for an authentic spiritual understanding, an inspiring new liturgy especially in post-modern agnostic societies. The individual is the starting point. Without his dreams, reasoning and needs there will be no direction and no companionship. Without his heavens and hells, there would be no understanding of the

present, but only being burdened by them which also means no future. The privileges have died out during the age of democracy. It's not the ruler, aristocrat, political party, priest or scientist that counts, but everyone, each and every one of us.

2.1 *The First Steps*

The group met for the first time in a room at the Protestant Community of a small village in Upper-Bavaria, Germany. The tiny Church building was constructed from various pieces of wood and resembled the type of Church often found in Scandinavia. In spite of its Protestant meagerness, we felt a large sense of warmth and security. During the winter nights, it reminded us a bit of a well-fortified little fortress, which offered protection from all sorts of danger. When one entered the quiet dark room, one forgot about what was going on outside. The silence was somewhat fine and brittle. The walls shut us off from the outside, but you could feel that it wasn't far away. The complicated criss-crossing ceiling beams made the inside look like an upside down ship whose bottom reached the top through a peculiar act of changing direction or turning around. Next to the Church and only separated through a large sliding door, was a spacious light-flooded room belonging to the Church. It was full of windows and presented a clear contrast to the dark ship's 'belly', and even seemed to produce cheerfulness. It was here that we met together.

After a short exercise, we all sat in a circle. Seven people, that number seemed to us as a good omen, stared at

each other. Silence. Next came the tentative approaches in beginning with the first encounter between the members of the group. How do we start? That pretty picture of the journey into the unknown was instantly covered with reality. Indetermination and insecurity settled like a dark cloud upon the group. It was as if each one of us were seeing the others for the first time, each one in his own character but foreign and under the pressure of being different. A storm was raging outside, which seemed to be a sign of that which lay ahead of us during our journey along the Christian calendar and through the darkness on our way to the light we were yearning for. Harmlessness scattered away.

I had set up a concept for the beginning, but a plan was definitely not proper at this time. It was not the idea or action that was missing. A loss of imagination came over us, original fear of the direct presence of a self-chosen situation, which seemed to be out of reach: The cross! What was it? It wasn't visible, too close, like the face of a beloved person that you suddenly cannot seem to picture anymore; you are terrified, as if you had lost something and it seemed to be your own fault that it was gone. The general confusion reflected the spellboundness of the shadow we had decided to enter. We could not see the woods for the trees, and even though each one of us was inside, nobody could move: There was no 'goal' – you were already there, without knowing or understanding how. Each step seemed wrong because we had lost every sense of direction. Once we entered the underground space of the great symbol, it seemed as if each move and each turn

immediately gained unpredictable significance. The paralysis that had taken hold of everyone, the suction of the symbol ran parallel to the temptation rather to walk in place than to set off blindly. The analogy of the group's course of direction and the history of the cross became visible, human: helplessness proved right from the beginning of our journey to be so strong that this 'equation' in retrospect affected each one of us extraordinarily.

While we were still searching for a beginning, in order to bear the feeling of being foreign in the eyes of the others (this quiet but perceptible agony of the difference between you and I), the symbol, whose tracks we were trying to locate, began to radiate, to unfold its invisible magnificence over us. None of the group assumed that he had called upon a *living* spiritual sphere and so it resembled a person in prayer, pleading for the presence of God but not noticing that God has been with him the whole time, waiting to be seen. But the eyes of the person in prayer stayed tightly shut, not perceiving what should have been obvious.

One person suddenly jumped up in the tormenting darkness and left the room. She opened the outside door and stood out in the middle of the storm. Others followed her. The wind blew away in a flash all that was grim, indecisive and paralyzing. The clear, star-filled night sky cleansed us of the stares and gave us new breath. Our group, our ship, had been caught in the breakers of its first storm, but now it was free.

It was immediately proved that one's everyday experiences of being all

the time divided between different choices as an extension between two poles – two opposite wishes, interests or decisions – and the worry of the right connection, which normally is never perceived as the imprint of the cross, but can be recognised as such through the individual's gestures. Just as in a crystal lye, the impression of (inner) impulses opened up a whole field of clearly felt cross experiences, before anything was even said or explained. The basic Christian symbol is often sensed as bondage, gagging or method of oppression. The extent as to how popular this sentiment really exists, throws a characteristical light onto the extremely far away distance, or the alienation from previous expectations or experiences pertaining to salvation.

2.2 *Individual Experiences of the Cross in Everyday Life*

'Take two sticks of either identical or different length and a hammer and nail. Place the sticks on top on each other forming a right angle in about the middle. Pound the nail through the wood. Feel the point of the penetrating iron and the yielding wood. Pound it in with all of your might. See and feel what you are doing. Taste the blows. Look at what you hold in your hands: Sword and cross, bar and axis, last meal and sign of the great order.'

Once, during a walk on Easter Sunday, a member of the group found a strong round piece of birch wood with a large nail through it, over by an old shed-type farm building. It was just lying there on the ground among many other articles, but a light terror ripped

through him as he felt the directness in which the symbol jumped out at him. It was the pain of the pierce that was still perceptible in the wood. He was instantly standing on the hollow grounds of history and metaphysics: the actual story of the eternal wound. There was nothing to misunderstand: The legend of Jesus took him by surprise during his Spring walk through nature. The symbol is not created. It happens here and now, and each ‘Once upon a time . . .’ is just the fairytale glossing-over of the fear of a hunch: It is happening now! It was hidden in our everyday life, died with it, and was born again. “If you have ever experienced the mythical shock even just one time, then a piece of your consciousness has been awoken. The awakening of consciousness is the beginning of transformation.”⁶

A woman related: ‘*The first impulse, the ancient, since childhood existing impression: Standing against the wall with opened arms; captured, the other's eyes pointed toward me like arrows, nailed-down under these stares with the feeling of a stiffening body. In the stillness of the night, I kept hearing the sounds of the Matthew's Passion coming from the Church next door. It was my very own passion.*’

The way she stood there, with her arms opened wide against the wall made us aware of our reactions that ranged from hopelessness and anger to aggressive provocation. You could smell the sacrificial lamb. You could smell its longing for contact, and the group’s unconscious instincts searched for injury. It was more than difficult to stand there and take her gesticulation. They hated

it; this form of helplessness, they hated it in themselves and each one insinuated the falseness of another or felt his own impotence. What does it mean to help? To hug, protect or comfort? Where no help or comfort was wanted! The woman’s eyes kept everyone at a distance, but were seeking closeness, touch and understanding at the same time. Oh, but this longing to hit the vulnerable; to spit in her face and to despise her. Like the daily violence at the school yards, in the barracks and on the job.

A man placed himself demonstratively in front of her. He was much taller and looked down on her. She did not move an inch; kept staring at him steadfastly as if she could put him under a spell. They stood there so closely, breath to breath, the one taller and the other shorter. Who was more powerful? The faintness of the ‘stronger’ compared to the helplessness of the weaker was clear. What a paradox! No winner would come out of this duel, but a martyr, the metaphysical winner. Was Christ a winner, or did a triumphant Church make a winner out of him in order to rule under his name?

Another man stood helplessly next to them, also crossspelled, victim of an insufficient helper’s ideology of past religious memories with the question, ‘what should I do?’ at the tip of his tongue. Afraid of his own presumption of a decision to take action. The woman’s gestures revealed the scandal of the cross, the unbearable challenges, that only seemed to allow violence, helpless wringing of the hands or cynicism. In an aggressive approach to her, he could feel the ancient magic of the

double, that never-ending ‘I am you – you are me’. He couldn’t flee from that spell of identification. He was afraid of it. He was just afraid as the others were of the gesture of extradiction. On top of it all, a *woman!* The demonic entanglement of culprit and victim was seldom so clearly depicted for the group, as in this unbearable challenge of a great redeemless devotion.

The undercurrent of the group work pointed toward learning to see the ancient symbol of the cross through the eyes of ‘ignorance’, allowing ourselves to be surprised. A woman’s words pin-pointed the situation exactly: ‘*When it crosses!*’. First of all, that could have many non-Christian meanings: Opposites coming together, the effect of centrifugal and centripetal force, a banal clash, moments in time, arguments etc. But regardless the form of gesticulation used, if hit at its highest point of agitation, at the actual basic impulse, it would certainly open up the centre of the cross. The human body itself, growing out of the symbol and infected by it, is what seems from the outside to be planted down within material things, the atomic fire; the huge lighthouse between chaos and order. Man, in this manner, is and remains the most fundamental symbol.

3. Problems with the Form

The transfer of an experience into a form by use of a medium (speech, movement, drawing, etc.) exposes many different types of problems. Without speaking immediately of an artistic process, we must admit that it does withhold fundamental elements of such, like a feeling for form, experience with the

respective material, fantasy and a good ability to reflect, with regard to one’s own aesthetic imagination. Nobody in the group was an explicit artist. Neither was anyone especially familiar with a medium. Therefore, the question of transfer created insecurity, tension and frustration, which altogether affected the climate: irritability, subliminal aggression and distance.

The basic scheme of our group-work was directed toward the continual transition from one medium to another in order to come, through a spiral circulating manner, closer to a specific experience, to relate to it, which means learning to understand its structure. All gestures, for example, were drawn free-hand in their baseline again and again to recognize clearly their strength of form and legitimacy, and to be able to develop a better feeling for the connections between inner and outer form, and using such ‘feeling’ in an expanded understanding to convert it into a new movement. Example:

‘Walk through a room, let yourself be guided by your impulses. Take time to feel, at the beginning, the slight change from disorientated walking to the form of a possible dragging pace. Absorb this form imperceptibly, until it, as if coincidentally, becomes rhythmic, maybe falling into a flicking step with a clear beat, in order to finally flow into a larger sequence of leaps. At last a small individual pattern of movement is the result, almost a small type of dance, which may vary in speed and expression during movement, without giving up its basic tenor. In time, the form will

become more restrained, slighter, till it eventually fades away.'

Running parallel to such an exercise was the description of the moment, informative telling of what was felt while 'doing' it. Speech, set parallel to movement until both have formed a rhythm, until word and gesticular expression succeed, in a gradually increasing antiphony, to greater conciseness! What was sometimes, in the medium of movement, only vaguely compressed into form, found in some circumstances easier to understand in speech, and was therefore able to help the gesture to take on a clearer shape, - which, on the other hand, opened up new perspectives by speaking simultaneously. Therefore, one thing led to another until a small clearly defined pattern was developed. This pattern reflected the centre of each individual's actual state – his cross. The thoughts and memories which were stirred up through this kind of body-mind work, all of which were in passage through the symbol as the centre of attention, reflected in a sentence from Joseph Beuys, the famous German artist which a woman recited: '*Show your wounds!*' Those words hit the spot of internal restlessness, i.e., each person's relationship to the cross. 'Show your wounds means, firstly, be aware of them, don't try to hide them; admit them to yourself and others! The process didn't solely revolve around the expression of feelings, moreover around the expanded awareness in a simple non-verbal form, the ability of showing various emotional qualities without immediately having to interpret them or, in other words, to lose one's self in the spontaneity of the emo-

tion. Beuys's sentence was joined by a second one, the often quoted saying of Jesus, which supplemented and explained the first: 'I have not come to bring peace, but a sword!' That hit the spot.

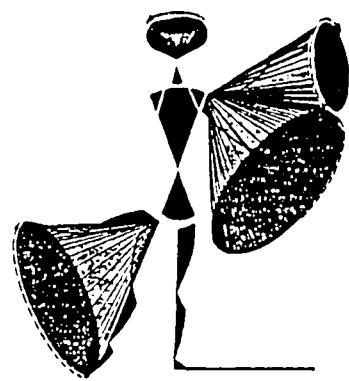
"The mimesis of myth is a modern form of the Dance of Death, a pantomime of the tragic encounter. A game with our unmastered destiny, like in the drama of Persephone, Shiva, the Resurrection, the Last Judgement. It is a code, which, if we dare touch it once, will penetrate us to the nerve. What are we touching? Our own darkness, maybe, what Jung called the shadow, the secret of our presence. The game cuts through all of the Hermeneutic-Gordian knots, through structure and chaos of culture and speech, or history and time."⁷

4. Solutions

The large variety of forms of the cross during the first centuries of Christianity have been, for some time now, considerably reduced down to the Latin cross, whose horizontal and vertical lines meet in its upper third. The sign of death has inhabited the churches without any real certainty of the resurrection. Nailed down, high above the heads of many hangs the One and Only: Still, bitter and painful; full of sorrow, his face averted – spellbound in the loneliness of the uncomprehending sympathetic stares. Us down here, him up there. He, a tortured man, God's son, his body destroyed and naked, crowned with scorn. In the meantime, the Western normal person seems to subconsciously identify this main symbol com-

pletely with death, that he inevitably turns away from it, forgets or suppresses it more and more. Or he has made his way off to search for signs of a more pleasant nature. After 2000 years of often bloody and dogmatic history, the cross seems to be inaccessible for western man. No salvation is to be expected anymore.

Nevertheless, gently, very gently, the one or the other, using movement, expression and meditation, truly dealing with the body, can feel which wonderful zest and bend of the spine can revive. Not only that, but which fine subtle line stretched arms show, and how both silently slide together at the joint and the shoulder blade, in order to allow each and every current to flow from the most inner part of the body through the top, and out into the world. With what ease and almost weightlessness do the currents allow the arms to rise to the top, effortless, as in a dream. No straightening up, no repairing or correcting – only gliding, softly and continually. While standing loosely upright one may feel, how the current, the life force, starts flowing up and down and finds its rhythm in the breathing. Closing one's eyes for a moment you may become aware that you are the proverbial reed in the wind waving back and forth, from left to right and right to left. The connection works in the *Two* – in circling back and forth. The figure that is usually formed by this gentle continual swaying is a blurred eight, which is the sign of infinity (¥). Out of the swinging spine of the human body (cross) the dance is born!



Dance is, as the figure shows, rotation, a movement that connects the two entities of space and body into a new form; out of which manifestation of life emerges the three is born. While a dancer is turning in space, he is creating it over and over anew. The space is always around us, is already here, but then again, it is always created freshly through our sight and bodies. Every real dancer knows this dialogic secret that enables him to 'melt' with this space: becoming one in spirit in this way giving birth to a new form.

A small but doubtless truth showed up in all of these spontaneous happenings during this workshop. It is the truth that all of a person's movements and gestures are not merely hints of a distant future, but the *event itself*, his own appearing body. The tree of life, hidden in the cross, stepped (similarly to the non-verbal gestures) briefly into the light, where language as well as gesture presented themselves in their beauty and simplicity as open prayer forms, open means – according to one's own manner. I purposely use the term 'prayer' because they were all forms of thankfulness, which were not aimed toward anything specific. One could even say, the body spoke its 'I am' or as in sense of the Bible, 'The word became flesh'.

Notes

1. Marcel Martin, *Sachbuch Bibliodrama*, Stuttgart: Kohmnhmmer Publication, 1995.
2. Eugen Drewermann, *Tiefenpsychologie und Exegese* Vol II, München: 1993, pp. 754 ff.
3. Samuel Laeuchli, *Das Spiel vor dem dunklen Gott. Mimesis – Ein Beitrag zur Entwicklung des Bibliodramas*, Neukirchen: 1987, p. 135.
4. Taken from: Peter Erlenwein, *Reise in die Mitte des Kreuzes. Transformationen eines Symbols im Spiegel des Körpers*, Inning: 1993.
5. Hugo Kükelhaus, *Urzahl und Gebärde*, Zürich: 1984, p. 57.
6. Laeuchli, *Das Spiel*.
7. *Ibid.*

Book Reviews

Authority: Its Use and Abuse, by C.P. Varkey, Mumbai: St Pauls, 1999, Pages 367, Rs.100.00.

It is a pleasure to read through the volume from cover to cover. That may not exactly be the purpose of this handy manual on effective leadership. Its format of chapters concluding with some Exercises suggests that it belongs to the genre of a Workbook

Among the topics highlighted are time management, delegation of authority, effective communication and animation of communities and apostolates. According to the author, the material in the Appendix is meant to complement and render greater credibility to the theme of the book. The experience of the author comes through the numerous anecdotes that have been narrated to focus on the themes. The language too is warmly conversational. Most religious leaders would find in this book some sort of a yardstick to measure the effectiveness of their leadership styles.

In the presentation, each chapter opens with a title page and the subscript is generally a quotation from the Bible. It looks quite impressive. There are useful psychological helps throughout the Volume.

The book is evidently not a digest on the theology of leadership as may appear at first sight from the title ? Authority, its Use and Abuse. The anticipated audience for the work who seem to be Church related religious leaders as were the participants of the initial Seminar may serve to enhance that notion. However, interspersed in the text one does find some remarks of a theological nature. They may lead to an impression that some form of quotable quotes of theology are relied on. In the Chapter on The Only Goal of the Church quotations from various sources are compiled to suggest that the leader should know the goal and work towards it. In the same Chapter there are quotes from various traditions with the subtitle: All religions teach the same truth (pp.38-39). No further elucidation is provided. In the Chapter to First Understand the other by empathic listening, the reason for incarnation is stated to be: “When God wanted to communicate to us for our redemption, he did not stand on his pedestal as I did when I spoke to the college lecturers. Rather he came down to our level; entered into our human culture and talked our human language” (p.132).

The manual is useful for training sessions on aspects of leadership.

Rosario Rocha, SJ

What Does Jesus Christ Mean? The Meaningfulness of Jesus Christ Amid Religious Pluralism in India. Proceedings of the 21st Annual Seminar (1998) of the Indian Theological Association. Edited by Errol D'Lima, S.J. and Max Gonsalves, S.F.X., Bangalore: The Indian Theological Association, 1999, Pages 186, p.n.a.

The Volume presents the Papers of the Seminar, the Workshop Reports on key questions about the significance of Jesus Christ in the multi-cultural and multi-religious context of India, and the Final Statement of the Seminar.

In undertaking a reflection on this key issue of the meaningfulness of Jesus Christ in the context of religious pluralism in India, the I.T.A. has highlighted that Indian theologians have now to address such serious issues. The Papers in general have dealt with the historical development of Christological thought. That effort is commendable.

The brief Introduction by Errol D'Lima is helpful to know the subject of each Paper. The clear tone to the proceedings of the Seminar comes from M. Amaladoss, S.J. The issue of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is of a theological nature. Since the context for understanding the question: Is Christ the Unique Saviour? is multi-cultural and multi-religious, our theological language would have to be dialogical. If it is not so, then Christians would risk being misunderstood. The author rightly suggests that we must create a space for the other within our own perspectives? (p. 8). Different approaches to "uniqueness" form the major section of this short, introductory article.

Jacob Parappally, MSFS, maintains that Jesus' significance for the whole humanity and the world is determined by his identity (p. 20). The article provides a good summary of the historical development of Christology and the significance of Christ for the Jewish, Hellenistic, Syrian and Latin traditions. The last section on Indian Christological Reflection is valuable to understand the influence of the main Christological Traditions on the three Individual Churches in India. The author merely notes the paucity of effort among Individual Churches to articulate the significance of Jesus Christ (p. 39). It would have served the Seminar well, if an orientation was presented for Individual Churches to respond the challenges to Christological reflection in India.

In contrast to the observation above (p. 39) that there is no concerted effort among the Individual Churches of India to articulate the significance of Jesus in the context of religious pluralism, Jacob Kavunkal, S.V.D. provides a survey of the Indian views on the significance of Jesus Christ to illustrate amply that India has produced a vibrant Christology responding to our particular context (p. 66). Commendable is his up to date information a survey of various paradigms for Christological reflection in contemporary India.

Kuncheria Pathil, C.M.I. has presented well a catalogue of the self-understanding of the Church from its origins to the Roman Empire, the Colonial Period to the Democratic and pluralist world. The author is aware of the specific task before the Asian theologians, namely, to develop a 'new theology of religions' (p. 84). The reader wishes that the author had developed the concrete notion of the Church's self-understanding in a context of precisely such a theology of religions.

The article of Joseph Pathrapankal, C.M.I., provides a biblical critique to the topic of the Seminar. It deals with crucial biblical passages that speak of the universal significance of Jesus Christ. His stance of interpreting the Bible, the Word of God, in an historical, cultural and religious context (p. 110) that includes religious pluralism is in line with the quest of the Seminar.

The Final Statement of the Seminar could have been an attempt towards a Theology of Religions, which was a felt-need among some of the authors, in the context of which to understand the significance of Jesus Christ.

The Editors have been quite exacting in their work. The Volume is presented with an attractive cover too. Some minor points stand out before the reader. At page three Contents, the Final Statement of the 21st Seminar should be of 1998 and not 1999 as printed. A

couple of names are printed wrongly: Kavunkal as Kavungal (n. 17, p. 105), and as Kavunckal (p. 160). Saldana (n. 19, p. 105) ought to read as Saldanha. At p. 180, Jesus would be true *yogi* and not *yoga*. The reference style of Jacob Kavunkal, S.V.D., is quite different from the others.

The Volume can be a valuable Textbook on Christology.

The Bibliography of every author, as seen in the Endnotes, is a good indicator that smaller attempts have been made towards articulating a Theology of Religions in India. A more integral Theology of Religions in India within which to understand the significance of Jesus Christ is a need of our times.

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jnanadeepa

Pune Journal of Religious Studies

In spite of all the talk about secularisation, religion still exerts a lot of influence on the life of people in India. The way religion affects people largely depends on the kind of leadership it has. How are religious leaders of the future selected? And how are they trained? These are some of the questions which the next issue, July 2000, of *Jnanadeepa* will seek to answer. Its theme is *the recruitment and training of religious leaders*, especially priests and sisters.

Back numbers of *Jnanadeepa* are available with us:

Vol. 1, No. 1: Our Commitment to a United India

Vol. 1, No. 2: Beyond the Colonial Past

Vol. 2, No. 1: Vision of a New Society

Vol. 2, No. 2: Contemporary Quest for Freedom & Liberation