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## NEW SCHOLAR

### THE GREAT COMMISSION VERSUS THE ANTI-CONVERSION BILL:

#### A Study of the Anti-conversion Bill in India against the Background of the Great Commission in Matthew's Gospel

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#### Introduction

Before ascending to heaven, Jesus entrusted his disciples with the mission he had received from the Father. He commanded them to go everywhere to make disciples by teaching and baptising them. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to

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obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:18-20). It is the culmination of all of Jesus' teachings and ministry. It is not an option but a command of Christ, and everyone must "Go and make disciples of all nations. All the baptised persons are called for this mission, and the Church, as the 'universal sacrament of salvation' (LG 1), exists for this great task.

This research examines the missionary command of Jesus 'The Great Commission' in the present 'Anti-conversion Bill' that is promulgated in different states of India. It says, "No person shall convert or attempt to convert either directly or otherwise any other person from one religion to another by use of misrepresentation, force, undue influence, coercion, allurement or by any fraudulent means or by any of these means or by the promise of marriage, nor shall any person abet or conspire conversions." More than ever, a study on the Great Commission of Jesus in the context of India's anti-conversion laws is a pressing need of our time. This research seeks to uncover the true meaning of mission and conversion, offering valuable insights for carrying out the mission in India during this challenging period. It also calls missionaries to undergo a "missionary conversion," which is urgently needed today.

## **RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY**

India has long been recognized as a land of diverse faiths and religions. However, the peaceful coexistence of people from different religious backgrounds is increasingly being challenged in the present time. In modern India, certain political parties and fundamentalist groups have propagated the notion that embracing another religion amounts to betraying one's country and culture. There is a growing tendency to misinterpret social services—such as schools, colleges, hospitals, and efforts to uplift the poor and marginalized—as mere strategies for religious conversion. In reality, the mission of the Church is not in conflict with the laws of the country. The Church consistently upholds respect for the people and cultures among whom the Good News is proclaimed. A study of the Great Commission of Jesus in the context of India's anti-conversion laws helps clarify the Church's true position on mission and conversion. It also highlights the enduring relevance and importance of Christ's call to mission.

## **Main Focus of the Research**

The principal aim of this study is to find different ways to fulfil the great mission of Jesus in the present anti-conversion context in India. A proper understanding of the term ‘conversion’ is also one of the main purposes of this study. Understanding the real meaning of conversion is necessary for those who are actively engaged in a mission where they will face lots of challenges and oppositions. Studying the present situation in India and the new laws and regulations regarding our mission activities is part of this research.

## **Scope and Limits of the Study**

The ‘Anti-Conversion Law’ is examined from a missiological perspective. The primary aim of this study is to explore a missiological response to the challenges posed by these laws. Legal procedures and implications will not be the central focus of this research. When this study began in 2019, seven states introduced or amended existing anti-conversion legislation. In Karnataka, for example, the BJP government enacted the law in 2021, but it was annulled when the Congress party came to power in 2022. Currently, eleven Indian states have such laws in place. This research does not analyze the anti-conversion laws of each State individually, but rather identifies the common elements found across them. In practice, these laws are often used against minority groups, particularly Christians and Muslims. However, this study approaches the issue specifically from a Christian and Catholic missiological perspective. While these laws have many political, social, and cultural dimensions, the core focus here is on “missionary conversion” – a renewal of missionary identity and commitment that the Indian Church urgently needs today. This study seeks to deepen our understanding of the call to missionary discipleship in the challenging context in which we live.

## **Field and Methodology of Study**

Mission is a single but complex reality that develops in various ways (RM 41). My thesis includes different fields of study. It is, first of all, a missiological research based on the great commission of Jesus. It gives a biblical foundation for the mission. We discuss mission in the present Indian context, specifically focussing on the anti-conversion law that the fundamentalist groups advocate. In this context, my study includes the field of interreligious and intercultural relationships. This study is based on the Gospel values and those proclaimed by the Constitution of India. The methodology

of the thesis is mixed; it includes historical, analytical and synthetical methods. For the sources of my research, I have depended on sacred Scripture, Biblical commentaries, Second Vatican Conciliar and Post-Conciliar documents, Papal documents and teaching, Documents of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India, the Constitution of India, and library references comprising

### **Overview of the Chapters**

This research is organized into four chapters, each addressing a vital aspect of mission and conversion in the contemporary Indian context. The first two chapters present the core arguments, the third chapter centers on the theme of conversion, and the final chapter synthesizes the study, proposing a renewed approach to missionary conversion for the future of the Church's mission in India.

The opening chapter explores the Great Commission of Jesus as presented in the Gospels, particularly emphasising the Gospel of Matthew. Before delving into Jesus's mission mandate, this chapter introduces the broader theme of mission through various models and agents. The "why" mission is central to this discussion, which is essential, providing a foundation for deeper reflection in subsequent chapters. We examine key elements of the Great Commission, such as authority, the call to make disciples, inclusiveness, teaching, baptism, and the promise of Christ's abiding presence. The chapter concludes by identifying both internal and external challenges that missionaries and the Church face today.

The second chapter focuses on the context of anti-conversion laws in India. While the Preamble of the Indian Constitution upholds secularism—implying that the State shall neither interfere with nor favour any religion—the recent implementation of anti-conversion laws in several states reflects a growing ideological trend toward Hindu nationalism. This chapter examines these laws' historical, political, social, and religious dimensions. It also raises critical questions about the political motivations and implications of such legislation on religious freedom and missionary activity.

The third chapter analyses Church documents concerning the theme of conversion, highlighting the contrasting interpretations of conversion by the Church and the State. A particular focus is placed on the relationship between conversion and baptism. The Church firmly opposes coercive or manipulative conversion methods, as *Ad Gentes* (AG 13) articulated: "The Church strictly forbids forcing

anyone to embrace the Faith, or alluring or enticing people by worrisome wiles.” In *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II emphasizes that “the proclamation of the Word of God has Christian conversion as its aim: a complete and sincere adherence to Christ and His Gospel through faith” (RM 46). The proclamation of the Good News leads to personal conversion to Jesus Christ and incorporation into the Church through baptism and the sacraments, enabling full participation in communion with the Triune God. As *Dignitatis Humanae* (DH 22) affirmed, the certainty of God’s universal salvific will intensifies the urgency of proclaiming the Gospel and inviting all to conversion in Christ.

The final chapter brings together the insights gained from the previous chapters and reflects on how to faithfully fulfil the Great Commission amid the challenges posed by anti-conversion laws in India. This chapter proposes a pastoral and missionary approach marked not by force, but by witness and attraction. As Pope Francis notes in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG 15), “It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but by attraction.” Conversion is presented not merely as a one-time event for those receiving baptism but as a continuous journey for all, including missionaries. Missionary conversion—ongoing personal renewal and transformation—is essential for authentic witness. Furthermore, *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG 25) calls for a “pastoral and missionary conversion” that refuses to remain stagnant, urging the Church to respond creatively and faithfully to the signs of the times.

## Major Findings and Recommendations

### Findings

The evangelizing mission is carried out in obedience to the missionary mandate of Jesus Christ. This great commission is foundational and non-negotiable—it remains the cornerstone of the Church’s mission. A deep understanding of the significance of Jesus’ commissioning profoundly shapes the commitment of believers to His mission. In the face of contemporary political and social challenges, particularly in the Indian context, seeking new and creative ways of fulfilling this mission is imperative rather than offering excuses or retreating in fear.

When the Great Commission is studied or practiced in isolation from the broader message of the Gospel, it risks degenerating into a narrowly anthropocentric or ecclesiocentric approach—one that

focuses merely on increasing baptismal numbers. Such an interpretation may foster an aggressive, transactional style of evangelization, resembling salesmanship rather than authentic witness. This passage, therefore, should not be reduced to a directive focused solely on baptism. Instead, it is best understood as an invitation to mission-oriented discipleship – a call to a way of life for all Jesus followers, not just those designated as missionaries. Rather than presenting a rigid model or strategy, the Great Commission invites the Christian community to participate actively in Christ's mission. It encourages engagement with the world, inspiring believers to embody and proclaim the Gospel through word and deed.

In contrast to this inclusive and liberating mission, the anti-conversion laws enacted in several Indian states contradict the fundamental values of freedom and equality enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Article 25 guarantees all individuals the right to freedom of conscience and to freely profess, practice, and propagate their religion, subject to public order, morality, and health considerations. These laws, however, increasingly challenge and infringe upon other constitutional rights, including Article 21 (the right to life and personal liberty) and Article 19 (the right to freedom of speech, expression, and association).

The Indian Church's opposition to anti-conversion legislation arises not from an interest in coercive practices but from a concern for the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution. The Church stands against these laws because they rest on baseless accusations, infringe upon the right to profess and propagate one's faith, and contribute to the persecution of religious minorities. The vague and overly broad definitions found within these laws enable accusations to be made without evidence, leaving individuals and communities vulnerable to false allegations. As a result, peaceful and lawful expressions of faith are increasingly criminalized. At stake is the vision of a society marked by peace, justice, and equality – values intrinsic to the Constitution of India and the Gospel message.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Second Vatican Council's document *Ad Gentes* affirms that the Church's missionary nature flows from God's abundant love and charity (AG 2). Accordingly, the "Great Commission" given by Jesus must be fulfilled in and through love – love for Christ and humanity.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 850) reinforces this foundation, stating, “The Lord’s missionary mandate is ultimately grounded in the eternal love of the Most Holy Trinity.” The “Great Commandment” of Jesus—love of God and neighbour—serves as a vital link between the “Great Commission” and the complex challenges posed by anti-conversion laws. In this light, the reflection of Pope Francis remains compelling: “If we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?” (EG 8).

A renewed missionary conversion is urgently needed in the current socio-political and religious climate. One cannot preach conversion without being personally renewed and converted each day (RM 47). This transformation must take place on several levels: theological, personal, ecclesial, social, and cultural. Theological conversion requires a fundamental reorientation: recognizing mission as *missio Dei*—the mission of God—where God remains the primary agent (EG 12). The mission does not originate from the Church’s initiative but is rooted in God’s loving outreach to the world. Personal conversion calls for an internal shift in identity. It moves beyond a functional view of “doing mission” toward the more profound realization: “I am a mission.” In this way, Christian identity itself becomes missionary in nature, as believers are called to live as missionary disciples (EG 120).

Social and cultural conversion challenges the Church and her members to work toward building God’s Kingdom—a Kingdom that extends beyond ecclesial boundaries and embraces all people of goodwill who embody Gospel values. Mission, therefore, includes collaboration with those of other faith traditions and cultures, recognizing the seeds of the Word already present in them. Ecclesial conversion involves a reimagining of the Church’s structure and pastoral practice. A synodal, participatory Church is needed—one that listens, walks with, and serves humanity in building the Kingdom of God. This shift urges openness to reform, humility in leadership, and a renewed sense of co-responsibility among all the faithful.

Missionary conversion also unfolds through three interrelated movements drawn from the Indian context: *samvāda* (dialogue), *sauhr̥da* (genuine friendship), and *samskāra* (transformation). Mission is inherently dialogical. Its power often lies not in public or formal engagements but in personal encounters—everyday conversations

that cultivate trust and mutual understanding. These are not strategies or tools for conversion; they are authentic expressions of love and respect for the other. Mission without a dialogical spirit falls short of the dignity of the human person and the heart of the Gospel itself, which calls for openness, hospitality, and transformation (DM 29).

The mission's ultimate goal is to draw people into communion with the Father and the Son, united in the Spirit of love (RM 23; CCC 850). True dialogue, rooted in reciprocal communication and genuine friendship, fosters this communion and reflects the Kingdom of God. As Dialogue and Proclamation (DP 9) emphasizes, such dialogue is an instrument of peace and a path to shared life.

In the Indian cultural and religious context, the term transformation is often more appropriate than conversion. The Sanskrit concept of *samśkāra* captures a richer vision of inner change, including religious conversion, sacramental life, and liberation from all forms of bondage. Evangelization, therefore, seeks not simply an external shift in religious affiliation but a profound interior transformation (EN 18). It is a journey of grace, shaped by the mutual conversion of the evangelizer and the evangelized, the missionary and the Church itself.

## Conclusion

The Church fulfils the Great Commission of Jesus while upholding and promoting the core values enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The mission of evangelization is deeply aligned with the principles of religious freedom, human dignity, justice, and equality—values safeguarded by the Indian Constitution. In this Spirit, the Church firmly opposes all forms of violence against citizens, infringements on religious liberty, cultural coercion, and any expression of religious or national fundamentalism. The impetus for mission arises from a profound encounter with the love of God—an experience that necessarily leads to love for all humanity. Authentic Christian witness, expressed through a life of integrity and compassion, becomes the most powerful proclamation of the Gospel. Christians are called to be visible signs of the Good News through their daily lives and actions. In moments of injustice and persecution, the faithful are sustained by the consoling words of Christ: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account...” (Mt 5:11-12).



Love, which originates and ends in God, unites the “Missionary mandate of Jesus” principles and the challenges posed by “anti-conversion laws.” Through her evangelizing mission, the Church does not seek merely external conversions but aims at the inner transformation of individuals. The most effective way to proclaim Jesus is through a life of authenticity and witness. It is ultimately God’s mission, and He touches and transforms hearts.