

EDITORIAL

Our uniqueness as human beings does not consist merely in possessing a rational nature, but in constantly and consciously exercising it in order to arrive at intelligent decisions and ensuing actions. This gives a humane face to whatever we are and whatever we do. Indeed, it is characteristic of our nature that we are able to meaningfully modify our responses taking into account the things and events in and around our lives. It is not a one-time action, but an all-encompassing and ever-continuous phenomenon covering every moment and dimension of human life, pointing to the dynamism that is integral to our nature.

Although all of us commit ourselves to certain foundational (and, hence, firm and unchanging) decisions at certain moments in life, the ensuing commitment to them does not mean that our life should be a stagnated one. Instead, being loyal to such vital decisions, without exempting ourselves from exercising our humane faculties, demands us to involve in a becoming process; it, in fact, requires a constant and continuous conversion process that would make us worthy of ourselves as human beings. For, being endowed with intelligence and rationality, it demands that we are open to new opportunities and prospects, making the avenues open for the blossoming of our humanity and human faculties to their optimum. In short, we are never (and we cannot be) frozen in time. Human responses, therefore, shall not be fixed for all times, but they must be ever vibrant and active, at least, as far as our intelligent human nature is concerned. Any attempt to reduce all our responses to a single pattern or final formula in content or style, ascribing it absolute, or necessary and universal validity, becomes all the more unbecoming of our basic human constitution. This is equally pertinent whether the case in point is that of an individual or a group.

The perspectives we cherish, the standpoints we adopt, and/or the convictions we hold dear with regard to any dimension of our life, whether it be individual or societal, emotional or intellectual, profane or religious, must be subjected to an intelligent scrutiny and transformation, necessitating a constructive conversion essential. Such a conversion, in order to be positively constructive, shall not result from any external force, or even an outside suggestion *only*, but an affirmative internal decision consciously arrived at by a personally accepted novel or "ground-

breaking" standpoint or conviction. In many cases, a positive change in the internal dynamics may require, naturally, a corresponding change in their exterior aspects, too, although a mere acceptance of the latter cannot in any way substitute or vouchsafe the former.

Against this backdrop, it is interesting to take note of the stress almost all religions place on the need of conversion as an ever continuous phenomenon, which must accompany any genuinely motivated neophyte or full-fledged religious person. In fact, the moment such a person stops to respond to the inner call to *convert*, either from *untruth to truth*, or even from *truth to truth* (perhaps higher levels or unseen dimensions), it shall be marked as the *death* of such a person as authentically religious. Hence, charismatic or institutionalized religions and their affiliated organisations that shun conversion at any stage in the life of their believers seem to act against the very foundation of intelligent human nature that qualifies them to subscribe to such organisations or ways of life as appropriate and meaningful. Equally culpable are those religious zealots who involve in forcefully 'converting' people having other religious affinities or subscribing to religious organisations of divergent nature: it shall never be a conversion proper, if the internal dynamics of real conversion in awareness and attitudes are considered to be foundational to it. The fact that such 'conversions' do take place at times does not authorise any party – even under constitutional or judicial provisions – to challenge and reject the very possibility of genuine conversions that are fundamentally possible at any time in the life of an individual human person; much less is the possibility to make legal provisions against it, leading to the very dehumanizing treatment of a person who, in fact, intellectually, emotionally, and morally wants to act *precisely* as a human being. Furthermore, to provide for penalizing such a person and anyone who has been directly or indirectly instrumental in the whole process, also does not fit into an intelligent pattern of human response on the issue of conversion.

In recent times, particularly in India, it is interesting to observe certain so-called religious organisations that want to ostracize and shelve every question related to conversion, so as to make us believe that conversion as a fundamental human response does not exist at all (or, at least, they do not want to make any room for it). It is all the more striking (or, alarming?) to notice that the renewed interest in legislating against "conversion activities" is seen when the overall rate of genuine or even

forced conversions (if at all they do take place in the twenty-first century India) from one religion to another is constantly on the decline. Then, naturally, the questions emerge: are they creatively *responding* to the basic human nature and its deep-seated capacity to accept and accommodate changes in foundational perspectives and belief systems, or are they (over) *reacting* to some other historical realities that they do not want to face, or seem to be scared of? When they make such a powerful and concerted effort to put an end to conversions in any form, doesn't it betray the fact that they have something at stake which they do not want to lose, even if it is at the cost of our own humaneness? Or else, is it merely the political tactics to woo the majority electorate of the nation? However, they do not realize that that which is at stake for them is not more valuable than that which makes us distinctly human, and, hence, any religion or religious entity possible. Moreover, they seem to comfortably forget that neither physical force nor any amount of legislation can put an end to the internal dynamics of a human person, and the human drive to change and convert. It is a capacity that we possess by virtue of our very nature. In other words, it is our birthright as human beings, and no one, by any means, can take it away.

This issue of the *Journal of Dharma*, hence, is dedicated to explore the dynamics and dimensions of "Religious Conversion." Although traditional religions and religious issues apparently take backseat in many of the modern (and technologically advanced) cultures, given the possibility of looking at religion, at least, as a foundational perspective that everyone subscribes to, our effort to address religious conversion in this number is a relevant one, indeed. We approach the theme from a variety of perspectives, namely existential, philosophical, judicial, biblical, Hindu, and Islamic, and such explorations into the inner dynamics of conversion shed light into our understanding, and call for an ever open attitude towards human outlook and awareness. In his reassessment of the insight that is at the back of any conversion, Thomas Kadankavil examines the polarization of people on mutually opposing intellectual positions and the possibility of undergoing a change from one standpoint to another, involving an alteration of the basic data of intelligibility "with an irresistible force of emotion and insight." Paul Kalluveetil and Lucien Legrand have made a rewarding appraisal on the biblical sources from two different perspectives, and have brought out their implications on present-

day conversions. A Christian invitation to conversion, according to Kalluveetil, primarily implies a call "to turn back from the evil ways, and to *turn* to God," necessarily involving personal, communitarian, and cosmic dimensions. Thomas Manickam undertakes an extensive analysis of the fourth fundamental right of all citizens of India, as envisaged in the Article 25 of the Constitution of India, and critiques various anti-conversion bills attempted or promulgated by different legislative bodies. Deploing the failure of the legislators and the legal machinery in upholding the spirit of the Constitution of India, he calls for reinstating this fundamental right because, "so long as religion is religion, conversion by free exercise of the conscience has to be recognized." Surveying the history of conversions in Christian as well as Indian traditions, and exploring the dynamics of conversion in the present Indian situation, Ishanand Vempeny, in his article on "Conversion in India Today," asserts the need to accept genuine conversions, and the necessity on the part of Christians in India to practise a *dialogical liberation* as well as a *liberative dialogue*. George Koovackal explores the complex phenomenon of conversion from the theological, sociological, and historical perspectives of Islam. He highlights the positive and spiritual dimensions of the process of conversion in Islam, and, at the same time, dares to point out that "as long as Islamic religion and politics are aligned together, [the image of forced conversions] would continue to remain, at least, among the followers of other faiths."

Almost all these articles that address the issue of conversion converge on the fact that it is natural for a human being to transform and convert, which would also include, at least, the acceptance of a different intellectual position or religious outlook, and, many a time, the ensuing alteration of an external framework. Thus, the *Journal* hopes that the basic right of every human being to change one's own intellectual perspectives and religious affiliations, if that were demanded by one's own inner convictions and attitudinal alterations, shall not be condemned and violated, but, instead, shall be welcomed, supported, and honoured by everyone else, paving the way for a society that does justice, at least, to our basic human nature.

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