

CONVERTERE AS THE CHRISTIAN IDEOLOGY

A Study of Biblical Perspectives on Religious Conversion

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I. Introduction

The controversial issue of religious conversion divides the Indians for or against it. Some stand for the fundamental right of every human being to choose his or her religion, and the freedom to leave the present faith in favour of another one. Usually, Christians ascribe to this position. Hindu fundamentalists militate against every kind of religious conversion, either by coercion, remuneration or out of one's conviction. The ideology behind the anti-conversion bills seems to be this Hindutva preoccupation. Christian missionaries are the targets of the present systematic and subtle propaganda war. In some other countries, which enjoy an Islam majority, the Muslims fight tooth and nail against conversion to Christianity. Perhaps the intolerant attitudes and wrong missionary approaches of Christians would have played a part in this anti-Christian wave among the populace of India. The pitiable fact behind this vicious atmosphere is that both Christians and non-Christians have misunderstood and/or misrepresented the biblical perspectives and Jesus' vision on conversion. Hence, this study is devoted to unearth the biblical foundations and ideals concerning this theme.

II. Etymological Observations

Etymologically conversion comes from the Latin *con+vertere*, which means turn to, turn about, turn around. The biblical words have the same meaning. The Old Testament (OT) Hebrew term *šūb* indicates 'turn' dynamics. Usually, it is translated as 'repent'. The New Testament (NT) Greek term *metanoia* literally means change of mind. It is also used in the Greek version of the OT to translate the Hebrew *sub*.

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III. The *śūb* Dialectics: Its Theology¹

A study of the biblical perspective on conversion should begin with the fundamental ideology implied in the *śūb* concept. Accordingly, we provide here the basic theology reflected in the idea of 'con-vertedness'. The existence of both humans and God consists in the *śūb* dynamics.

1. *Religious Person, a 'Con-verted' Being*

The term *śūb* in a religious sense indicates the turning act towards God. It has different dimensions: personal, communitarian, and cosmic.

a. Personal Dimension of 'Con-vertedness'

First of all personal *śūb* denotes turning to God with the whole being. Physical, psychic, intellectual, moral and spiritual faculties are to be totally involved in that process. Human beings have to turn to God in the nakedness of their being. They have to approach the deity in their existential situation. No sphere of human life is to be left out. Every attitude and aptitude has to find a place in that turning dynamism. Thus joy or sadness, elation or depression, pleasure or pain, love or hatred, amity or enmity, work or rest, tranquility or perturbation, earnestness or frivolity, enthusiasm or apathy, vigour or fatigue, success or failure, strength or weakness, achievements or aberrations, victories or vicissitudes, virtues or vices have to play a vital role in the *śūb* activity. Struggles and temptations, miseries and misfortunes, charisms and capabilities – all are to be reckoned with. One has to turn to God in his or her socio-economic, cultural and cultic, regional and geographical milieu. Thus a genuine *śūb* brings the existential person, and not merely a 'behaving' creature to the divine presence.

b. Community Dimension of *śūb*

Nobody can turn to God alone. Human person is a social being. He or she forms part of a community. Hence the *śūb* dynamics necessarily involve others. First of all one has to turn to God with his or her dearest people. Parents, brothers and sisters, husband or wife and children, and the

¹Paul Kalluveettil, "Prayer as Celebration," *Journal of Dharma* 10 (1985), 258-279.

relatives have to take the primary position in this turning. Next comes the community, religious congregation, village or town people, etc. The *šūb* has to embrace the people of the country, as well as the whole humanity. The problems of others have to become one's own problems. Their miseries, worries, infirmities, tears, trials, temptations, frailties and infidelities have to be understood as one's own personal miseries, worries, infirmities, tears, trials, temptations, frailties and infidelities. Thus one has to turn to God carrying to him others' miseries, worries, infirmities, tears, trials, temptations, frailties and infidelities, and complain, protest and plead before the divine presence on their behalf. The so-called "Lamentation Psalms" of the Bible poignantly articulate this kind of protest-dimension of *šūb*.

The altruistic orientation of 'con-vertedness' affects every aspect of human life. Thus the joys and gladness, delectation and exultation dimensions of others are to be taken to God. One participates in these jovial moods as if it were his or her own emotions, and rejoices, sings and dances in the presence of the deity. He or she thanks and praises God on behalf of himself or herself and others. In this act one becomes a 'con-verted' being. He or she fulfills the divine call, and, thereby, is converted to an authentic human person. The book of Psalms provides the paradigm and pattern of this kind of *šūb* existence.

c. Cosmic Perspective of 'Con-vertedness'

Humans' call to be 'con-verted' beings is not limited to the man-woman world. It embraces the whole cosmos. It extends to animal, vegetative, mineral, and heavenly kingdoms. Animate and inanimate beings play a vital role in the turning process. The whole creation is destined by God to form a cosmic family, in which all become brothers and sisters. Thus, Francis of Assisi could affectionately address wolf, sun, moon ... as my brother wolf, brother sun, sister moon... Human beings play the part of the *pater familias*. The entire universe is entrusted to them, and it is their role to bring or make the creation turn to its creator. They have to identify themselves with the joys and sorrows of the cosmos, and turn to God in company of these brothers and sisters. As Paul puts it, the creation groans and waits with the eager expectation for the total liberation (Rom. 8:18-22) through the agency of human beings. The entire cosmos finds its redemption when humans stand before God to plead for their

cause. Once more we may say that human persons realize their call, identity and being in their 'con-vertedness'.

2. *God's Life as a Dynamic 'Con-vertedness'*

Christians conceive their God, as Trinity in whom there are three persons, Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. One may understand the Trinitarian life from the *šūb* perspective. Father is the one who is turned to the Son and remains in that dynamism of eternal act of 'con-vertedness'. This divine *šūb* consists in his total giving of himself.² When the Father 'turns' to the Son, the Son, one may say, 'turns' to the Father. Then the Father and the Son 'turn' to the Holy Spirit, and in that act give themselves to this third person. The Holy Spirit, in turn, 'con-verts' to the Father and to the Son. Thus one may describe the life of God itself as a total and perfect *sub-* act. Humans, when they become 'con-verted' beings, are elevated to the status of divine entities, since they participate in the *šūb* dynamics of God.

III. History of Israel, a Cyclic Process of 'Con-vertedness'

In this section we look at the history of Israel from the *šūb* perspective. First, we provide a graphic presentation of her history; then some important OT *šūb* texts are studied. Finally, some conclusions are drawn.

1. *šūb Dynamics in the History of Israel*

The turning process in the history of Israel begins with God's 'con-vertedness' to them, who as slaves were languishing in Egypt. To these people who had no political existence or independent address, God deigned to turn. He identified with them, taking on himself their sorrows and miseries (Ex. 2.23-35; 3:7-9). His *šūb* process was completed in liberating Israel from Egypt (Ex. 15: 1-21), in making them his covenant people (Ex. 24:1-11), in leading them to the Promised Land (Jos. 6-22), and dwelling among them.

²Of course, we are using here anthropomorphic language. Humans can describe God who is an infinite and perfect Being only through human language, which is finite and imperfect.

When God turned to Israel, they also turned to him. The people led a life of faithfulness and grateful obedience. Thus God and Israel became 'con-verted' persons. The destiny of Israel consisted in turning with God to themselves, to other persons, to other animate and inanimate beings. This was the primary phase of *šūb* dynamics.

There happened an unfortunate turn in the history of Israel. They, without God or in opposition to God, turned to themselves, to others, and to other created beings. This is known as sin. When Israel turned away from God, God also seemed to have turned away from them, thus bringing punishment upon them. It is said: "the Lord sold them to their enemies" (Jd. 2:14). This expression needs not be taken in the literal sense. It merely denotes that the Lord did not come to their help in their battles with the enemies. Israel was defeated and had to undergo oppression and affliction. Then they turned back to God and cried for his help. As they turned to God, he himself turned once more to them. The so-called punishment was envisaged by God as a disciplinary action, in order to force Israel to turn back to him. Thus once more the purpose of election of Israel to live as a 'con-verted' people was realized.

The people of God tried to be faithful to their call for a brief period. Then, there followed a time of infidelity; they once more turned away from their liberator God. It brought the process of God's turning away from them ('punishment'), people's turning back and God's turning once more to them. This cyclic process was repeated again and again in the history of Israel. One may thus epitomize their history:

God turns to – Israel turns to

Israel turns away – God turns away

Israel turns to – God turns to

Israel's *šūb* story is indeed the story of every human being. It is the repeated dialectics of divine 'con-vertedness', human 'con-vertedness' – human anti-'convertedness', divine anti-'convertedness', human 'con-vertedness and divine 'con-vertedness'. The first eleven chapters of Genesis of OT, which narrates the human history beginning from the creation of the world, witness to this truth.

2. *Vision of 'Con-vertedness' in OT Texts*³

Here we deal with the important OT *šūb* texts.⁴ The verbal form occurs 1060 times in the OT with a concentration in Jeremiah.⁵ We can classify the religious usage under the following headings: appeal of Yahweh for 'con-vertedness', the 'con-verted' Israel, Yahweh as a 'con-verted' being.

a. Appeal of Yahweh for 'Con-vertedness'

The God of OT passionately and consistently appeals to wayward Israel to turn back to him. Their turning away from him amounted to infidelity and rebellion (Is. 57:17; Jer. 2:19; 3:14,22; 5:6; 8:5; 14:7; Hos. 11; 7; 14:4). Through his prophets Yahweh asks them to turn away from their evil ways (2 Kgs. 17:13) and return to him (Is. 44:22; Hos. 14:1). He makes use of imperatives, by way of warning and appeal.⁶ The texts from Jer. 3:11-4:2; 15:19 are studied in detail.

i. "Return, Ever-Turning People" (Jer. 3:11- 4:2)

Here Yahweh offers four summons to Israel to turn back to him.⁷ In 3:11-13 he appeals as an offended husband who seeks his wife back. The God of the Bible tries to win the people back by asserting that he will not be angry or frown on them, but he will be ever merciful towards his 'con-verted' wife. This is the portrait of the betrayed husband in his anguish and yearning.

In the second invitation to return (3:14, 19-20) the emphasis is on the grief of Yahweh. Metaphor after metaphor of familial relationship (father

³T. M. Raitt, *A Theology of Exile*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977, 35-49.

⁴Although the most important and frequent word for 'turning' is *šūb*, there exist two other synonyms, *swr* and *pnh*, which are seldom used for shift in spiritual loyalties.

⁵J. A. Soggin in *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, Vol. 2, München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1976, 884-891.

⁶J. A. Thomspson and E. A. Martens in *New International Dictionary of OT Theology and Exegesis*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997, 55-59.

⁷Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988, 45-51.

and son, husband and wife) is poured out. These verses unveil the heart of God who yearns in hope for the return of Israel, and at the same time grieves over the betrayal of his beloved. Both the fickleness of Israel and the pathos of God are depicted. The divine passionate lover is so resolute in his yearning for his beloved, that he unconditionally forgives unfaithful Israel and restores the marital relationship.

Verse 22 contains the third summons to 'con-vert' with an assurance that Yahweh will heal the 'turned-away-Israel'. There follows the fourth invitation in 4:1-2. However, God sets conditions for her *šūb* which are introduced by three 'if' clauses: if you return...; if you remove your detestable idols...; if you swear in truth, justice and righteousness... then..." Israel must cast off all other loyalties and reclaim Yahweh as sovereign Lord. She is asked to order her life according to the covenant norms, by practising justice and righteousness in her relation with fellow human beings. The 'con-vertedness' to God presupposes the 'con-vertedness' to others.

ii. "If You Turn, I will Make You Turn" (Jer. 15:19)

Yahweh addresses the prophet, who was complaining about the solitary life, which was forced on him. He wanted to lead a life like the ordinary people, but the Lord did not allow him to do so. Hence Jeremiah was angry towards Yahweh, and was lamenting over his fate. Now the Lord responds with a fourfold *šūb*:⁸ "If you *turn*, I make you *turn*...; they shall *turn* to you, but you shall not *turn* to them." Yahweh does not come with comforting words; indeed, he chides the prophet, and asks him to *con-vertere*. He stands with his people as sinful in the divine eyes. He has rebelled against the one who had called him. Hence he must turn from his sinful and rebellious attitude and come back to Yahweh. This is the meaning of the first *šūb*.

The second *šūb* is usually translated as Yahweh restoring the prophet to his office. But the modern scholarship interprets it as, "I will make you turn" in the light of Jer. 31:18b and Lam. 5:21. It is Yahweh who makes the prophet's *con-vertere* possible. Human beings by their own strength

⁸J. M. Berridge, *Prophet, People, and the Word of Yahweh*, Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1970, 132-137.

and power are incapable to come back to God. They need the divine prevenient grace to take the steps towards *con-vertere*. It is God who makes their turning possible. Still it presupposes their active role. Without their cooperation, God cannot save them. This mysterious fact is stressed in this second statement.

“You shall not turn to them”: here Yahweh warns Jeremiah not to imitate the life style of the people by continuing to show lack of faith, understanding and obedience. The divine words have a further deeper meaning. The prophet was tempted to lead an ordinary life like the people. But he has received a special call from Yahweh. Hence he should not be a person ‘con-verted’ to people.

“They shall turn to you”: By seeing the prophet’s re-‘con-vertedness’ to Yahweh, the people are supposed to follow his example. Jeremiah has experienced the salvific peace and joy of the forgiving love of God. Likewise they shall also become ‘con-verted’ persons.

To sum up, the text exhibits a fourfold direction of ‘con-vertedness’. The initiative for *šūb* comes from God. Thereby humans are strengthened to turn to him. They are asked not to embrace the evil ways of per-verted people. Their ‘con-vertedness’ to God should help the wayward folk to follow their example.

b. The ‘Con-verted’ Israel

Different texts of Bible speak about the turned-back Israel from her evil ways. Jer. 31:18-19 depicts in a pathetic way the heart of a penitent: “*After I had Turned Away, I Re-Con-verted’ and Repented*”

In Jer. 31:18-19 Yahweh cites the words of grief of Israel who have re-turned to him: “You disciplined me like an unruly calf, and I have been disciplined. ‘Con-vert’ me so I can be ‘con-verted’, because you are the Lord my God. After I had turned away, I turned back and repented, and after I came to accept (Yahweh as my lord), I smote on my thigh. I am ashamed, yes I blush, for I bear the disgrace of my youth.”⁹ The root *šūb* is used twice in both v.18 and v.19. Israel is swaying with sorrow for having

⁹Since the text is uncertain, different authors interpret it differently. Our translation is mainly based on *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.

turned away from Yahweh. She acknowledges that the misfortunes which she had to undergo, was indeed the disciplinary action of her beloved God, since she was behaving like an unruly calf. In order to turn back to him, she needs the preeminent divine grace. She begs for this grace, putting her trust in the compassionate Lord. In v.19 Israel continues her words of compunction. After receiving the divine grace, she once more confesses about her straying away and turning back. Vivid metaphors are used to describe her remorse. 'Slapping the thigh' is an onomatopoeic expression for gesture of sorrow (Ez. 21:17), similar to beating the breast.

c. Yahweh, the 'Con-verted' Person

The concept of 'con-vertedness' is not limited to the human sphere. Yahweh is often presented as the one who re-pents, although the root *šūb* is seldom attributed to him. Bible abounds in poetic metaphors and imageries in depicting the divine repentance.

i. "I Will Be 'Con-verted' to You" (Zec. 1:13; Mal. 3:7)

The root *šūb* in its absolute form without an object is used for Yahweh in Jer. 12:15; Joel 2:14; Jon. 3:9; Mic. 7: 19. In Zec. 1:13; Mal. 3:7; Zec. 8:3,15 the Yahweh is said to 'con-vert' to Israel. The God of the Bible makes use of every possible means to 'con-vert' his unfaithful people to him. He scolds them, threatens them, punishes them by turning away from them, and when all these methods fail, unconditionally turns himself to them. Thus, he proclaims: "After I have uprooted them, I will 'con-vert', I will have compassion on them, and I will turn each one to his heritage and to his land" (Jer. 12:15). The prophet Joel consoles his people that irate Yahweh may turn and have pity on them and leave behind a blessing. The king of Nineveh also puts his hope in the 'con-version' of Yahweh, which will induce him to retract from his fierce anger (Jon. 3:9). In the liturgical prayer of Mic. 7:19 Yahweh is addressed as the one who will be 'con-verted' and have compassion on his people. The biblical God is ever ready to undergo 'con-version'. Only one thing he demands from the people: "Re-turn to me, and I will 're-turn' to you" (Zec. 1:13; Mal. 3:7).

ii. "My Innermost Being Yearns for Him" (Jer. 31: 20)

The Bible is the story of Yahweh's passion and compassion for his

beloved people. In vivid anthropomorphic language is presented his yearning for humans and his readiness to be 'con-verted' to them. Many texts, without using the technical term *šūb* attest to this fact. Jer. 31:20-22 and Hos. 11:8-9 give vent to the deeper emotions of his suffering heart. "Is Ephraim my dearest son? My darling child? As oft as I mention his name, I so lovingly think of him. My innermost being yearns for him. I surely have compassion on him... Re-turn, virgin Israel, re-turn to these your towns... How long turn this way and that, O turn-about daughter?" (Jer. 31:20-22). Here Yahweh laments, complains and yearns for his dearest one who has turned away from him.¹⁰

3. *Concluding Observations on the 'Con-vertedness' in OT*

The Hebrew root *šūb* never denotes any ascription to a denomination, or joining a religious group or institution. Rather, it refers to personal allegiance and total commitment to God, and never to an institution or religion. It is used for Israel, the covenant people, and not for other nations. They are summoned to turn back from their evil ways to their God who has elected them, liberated them, and, continues to protect them. As Israel is called to be the 'con-verted' people, their God seems to find his self-realization in being 'con-verted' to them.

IV. 'Con-vertedness' in the Message of Jesus

After making some etymological and statistical observations, we study Mk. 1:15. Then we look at the gift character of 'con-version' for *agathis*, and study the demands of the 'con-verted' life. In Jesus one can find the authentic *šūb* person. Finally, observations are made on the great commission of Jesus in Mt. 28: 16-20.

1. *Preliminary Observations*

The OT *šūb* is translated by the Greek NT word *metanōia*. Its root occurs only 59 times.¹¹ The term denotes, like *šūb*, radical, total, and

¹⁰G. L. Keown, P. J. Sealise, T. G. Smothers, "Jeremiah 26-56," *Word Biblical Commentary*, Dallas: Word Books, 1995, 120-124.

¹¹J. Behm, in *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, Vol. 4, Grant Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967, 999-1006.

personal turning to God. Jesus uses it in Mk. 1:15 = Mt. 4:17; Mt. 11:21 = Lk. 10:13; Mt. 12:41 = Lk. 11:32; Lk. 5:32; 13:3,5; 15:7,10; 16:30; 17:3-4; 24:47. Of these texts some are clearly redactional¹² (e.g., Lk. 5:32; see also Mk. 2:17 = Mt. 9:13; Mt. 11:20; Mk. 6:12). Strangely the terminology is completely absent from the Gospel according to John, although the concept is present.

2. "The Kingdom of God is Present; Be 'Con-verted'"

Mk. 1:15 encapsulates the important message of Jesus. Whatever he said or did was the articulation and elaboration of this text. Indeed, his person and life style epitomized this central proclamation. According to Mark, these are the first words uttered by Jesus during his public ministry.

Jesus' speech consists of four statements: (1) The time has come. (2) The kingdom of God is present. (3) Be 'con-verted'. (4) Believe the Gospel. Scholars find that the first and second statements are synonyms. The same is true about the third and fourth clauses. The arrived time is that of the kingdom. Be 'con-verted' means to believe the Gospel.¹³ After analyzing the text the authors have concluded that the statements 1 and 4 reflect the terminology and ideas of the early Church; hence they do not form part of the original words of Jesus. It seems that he had proclaimed only about the arrival of the kingdom of God on earth in his person, and the people have to *turn* (*šūb*) to it.

By the invitation to be 'con-verted' Jesus meant that humans have to turn back from their evil ways, and *turn* to God who is incarnated in him. Their *šūb* action involved personal, communitarian, and cosmic dimensions, as we have explained in the section 2.1: *Religious Person, a 'Con-verted' Being*. Thus Jesus was not asking his audience to be converted to a new religion, or to join a different religious institution. What he demanded was a radical break with the past. Only those who are ready to forsake everything and to become *agathis* (who have nothing, who are nothing, and apart from God do not have any future in this life)

¹²J. Lunde, in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Illinois: Inter Varsity, 1992, 669-673.

¹³R. A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26, Word Biblical Commentary*, Dallas: Word Books, 1989, 40-46.

will be granted the grace to enter into the kingdom of God. All these ideas are implied in his request to be 'con-verted'.

3. 'Con-version', a Gift for the *Agathis*

In Lk. 5:32 Jesus categorically states: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to 'con-version'." He excludes, thereby, the so-called righteous persons from the kingdom of God. At the birth of Jesus the angels announced God's *śhālôm* (well being) only to those whom God favours, who are *agathis*. The members of the kingdom of God are gifted with the divine *śhālôm*. Now the sinners are really the *agathis*, since they are marginalized by the society of that time. But the self-righteous are filled with themselves, and thus God could not enter into their life. The Pharisee of the parable of Lk. 18:9-14, who boasted about his piety before the Lord, belongs to this type. Hence he was excluded from the kingdom of God. Such people built up their righteousness in relation to the Law by applying themselves with great vigour to the observance of legal minutiae. Jesus condemned such an attitude which resulted from self-interest motives (Mk. 12:38-40; see also Mt. 6:1-6, 16-18; Lk. 15:28-30).

Who are the sinners for whom Jesus has come to call them to 'con-version'? The tax collectors (Mk. 2:14-17; Mt. 5:46; 11:19), the harlots (Lk. 7:37) and possibly the Gentiles (Lk. 6:32-34; Mk. 14:41; see also Mt. 5:47) belonged to this category. Jesus would include among these *agathis* also the poor (Mt. 5:3), little children (Mk. 10:14-15; Mt. 18:3), and his disciples (Mk. 8:34).

There was nothing inherent in such persons that caused them to be singled out by Jesus except for their obvious need. The kingdom is a free grace of God, which confronts humanity precisely in its bankrupt predicament. Jesus the divine physician heals such people by moving them toward 'con-vertedness'.

While Jesus calls the *agathis* to 'con-version', he does not put corresponding emphasis on its cultic expression (Mt. 9:13; 12:7). In this he follows the OT prophets (e.g., Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6-8). Thus the 'con-vertedness' according to Jesus, does not indicate membership in a religious institution which prescribes obligatory participation in liturgical acts.

4. The 'Con-verted' Life: Its Demands

As Mk. 1:15 illustrates, 'con-vertedness' is the necessary response to the kingdom of God. Radical and total *turning* is demanded for entering the kingdom. Jesus uses drastic images to stress it (Mk. 9:43-48). Wealth and a turned-to-God-life cannot go together (Mk. 10:17-22). Anyone who seeks to establish life's security apart from trust in God has to undergo 'con-version', a "turning away" and a "letting go" of former supports to existence. These persons of *having* are called to be 'con-verted' to persons of *being*. They need to become 'poor' (*agathi*) in order to be granted entrance to heaven (Lk. 12:32; see also Mk. 10:27). One who is really 'con-verted' will sell and give up everything he or she has (Mk. 10:21; Lk. 14:33).

The demands which Jesus set forth for a *šūb*-life are, indeed, very harsh. The persons 'con-verted' to God should have a whole-hearted relationship to him. Hence they have to renounce the primary importance of all other relationships. In Lk. 14:26 Jesus categorically states: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple" (see also Lk. 8:19-21). The word 'hate' is used here as a figure to express the character of allegiance to Jesus demanded of the disciple.¹⁴ One has to be ready to reject natural affinities when they become an obstacle for total 'con-vertedness' to God. Lk. 9:24 puts the same idea in a poignant form. The *šūb*-person must lose his or her life for the sake of Jesus in order to save it.

5. Jesus, the Authentic *šūb*-Person

The whole life of Jesus may be epitomized by the word *šūb*. He practised the theology of the *šūb* dialectics (see the section 2 of this study). He turned to God with his whole being, with others, and with the entire creation. Thus he participated in the dynamic 'con-vertedness' of God's life (see the section 2.2). Like Yahweh he became the 'con-verted' person (see the section 3.2.3). Jesus fulfilled the demands of the 'con-verted' life (see the section 4.4). He led the life of a true *agathi*. The Gospels present

¹⁴J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, New York: Doubleday, 1985, 1062-1065.

him as one who was ready to reject natural affinities, as Lk. 2:49 and Mk. 3:31-35 attest. He actually lost his life for the sake of the kingdom, and thereby saved it (Lk. 9:24). Hence pointing to Jesus we can exclaim with Pilate, "This is the man!" (Jn. 19:5). In him we have the paradigm and model for the true human beings who are called to lead a 'con-verted' life.

6. *Jesus' Commissioning to 'Con-vert'*

During his lifetime Jesus sent his disciples out two by two with the mission to 'con-vert' the people (Mk. 6:7-13; Mt. 10:1-31). Mk. 6:12 explicitly uses the term *šūb*. Another instance of commission is described in the last verses of the Gospel of Matthew (28:16-20). This event occurred before the ascension of Jesus. He commissioned his apostles: "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." This text needs interpretation.

This so-called great commission text still remains a problematic and controversial passage. Almost all the scholars agree that the original words of Jesus would not have contained the phrase, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The command to baptize invites the opposition from the people of other religions. How then could we understand that commissioning? First of all, the baptismal ritual was practised by other cultures and religions. John, the precursor of Jesus performed this ritual as a symbol of the turning back to God. Thus it was called "baptism of re-pentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk. 1:4). During the time of Jesus this ritual took place by river. The penitent was dipped in the water. According to Paul it symbolized participating in the death and burial of Jesus (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12).¹⁵ In the vision of Jesus, baptism by itself did not make one a member of a new religion. It merely denoted human 'con-vertedness' and willingness to embrace his ideology and life-style. Further, the baptism envisaged by Jesus, was "with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Lk. 3:16). He called it a new birth, without which one will not be able to see the kingdom of God (Jn. 3:3). Thus, baptism in the biblical sense stands for the external manifestation of one's own

¹⁵L. Hartman, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 1, New York: Doubleday, 1992, 583-594.

personal allegiance to God, and of turning with God to other fellow humans and the entire creation for the sake of serving them.

Jesus introduces his commission with the statement, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." He claims that God has given him comprehensive sovereignty over the whole of the created order (see Mt. 9:6; 11:27). Now in turn he provides the apostles this divine authority. He sends them with the mandate to make disciples of all nations and teach them how to follow his footsteps.¹⁶ The disciples are to go into the whole world. The universal authority of Jesus is the basis of this universal mission. The term *disciple* means above all learner or pupil. Here the emphasis is on the arduous task of nurturing into experiential fellowship of Jesus. To be made disciple means above all to follow after righteousness as articulated in the teaching of the master. By the command to teach, the apostles are told to do what Jesus himself did during his lifetime (Mt. 4:23; 5:2; 7:29; 9:35; 11:1; 13:34; 21:23; 26:55). The apostles have to teach the method prescribed by Jesus for being 'con-verted' to the kingdom of God, which has come in his person.

This analysis of the great commission makes clear that Jesus did not demand for affiliation to a new religion or denomination or institution. What Jesus inaugurated was a movement, which was charismatic in character, with a demand to be radically and totally 'con-verted' to God, Jesus being its paradigm and model.

V. Conclusion: 'Con-vertedness' as the Characteristic of Christianity

This study of the biblical perspectives on religious conversion shows that *convertere* is the ideology of Christian religion. The followers of Jesus have to lead a 'con-verted' life, turning from themselves to God. This *śūb*-dynamics has personal, communitarian and cosmic dimensions. They have to turn to God together with the fellow human beings as well as with the entire creation. Only then could they participate in God's life and become members of the kingdom. Nobody can turn to God with his or her strength. One has to become an *agathi*. Then God will bless him or her with the gift of 'con-version'. A *śūb*-life demands heroic sacrifices. Only those who are

¹⁶D. A. Hagner, "Matthew 14-28, *Word Biblical Commentary*," Dallas: Word Books, 1995, 885-889.

called by God can dare to undertake it. Jesus serves as the metaphor of an authentic 'con-verted' person.

These biblical perspectives on religious conversion may help to dispel misunderstandings and misinterpretations, which vitiate the present Indian religious atmosphere. As this study has made clear, the call to 'convertedness' comes from God, and not from humans. Nobody can really 'con-vert' others by means of money or favours or benefits or promises of a better life. Nobody can coerce others to the biblical 'con-version'. The *śūb*-ideology does not champion the cause of conversion in the modern sense; it does not call on the people to join a new religion or an institution. It merely demands all to embrace a radical and totally new ideology and life style. As one turns to God, he or she has to turn with God to the whole creation, as its servant. Unfortunately, we seldom meet such 'con-verted' persons even among Christians.