

CONVERSION IN INDIA TODAY

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I. Introduction

A little more than a decade ago I was attending a seminar on Christian Fundamentalism held in Manila, Philippines. I had the opportunity of meeting various groups of fundamentalists including those with military names like the Navigators of the Lord, Crusaders for World Conquest, etc. For the seminar, we had invited the representatives from some five groups for a panel discussion. All of them propounded the ideal that only those who have been baptized through the Holy Spirit and have had the experience of having been born again could attain eternal salvation. According to them, not only the Non-Christians but also the Christians of the Main Line Churches (who constitute more than 90% of Christians) will go to eternal hell. Since the seminar was organized by the Catholics, they made an effort to find some loopholes for the salvation of some of the Catholics under certain conditions.

When I asked them whether they believed that the Christian God is a God of love, two of them with many biblical quotations tried to prove to me that he is love itself. One spoke about God's unconditional love and said that any sin is forgiven by God, provided that we go to him in repentance. In fact, they brought to my notice a number of Biblical quotations unknown to me, about the unconditional love of God.

I told them bluntly that in spite of their quotations, the God whom they believed in is very much like the devil I had read about in the Bible. In spite of the uproar and shouting, "blasphemy, blasphemy!" I managed to put in the following words, when silence was being restored:

Please listen to me. You say that God created, as an expression of His love, the whole of humanity within the universe. But this God watches daily more than one and a half billion Christians of the Main Line Churches move towards eternal damnation day-in and day-out. Similarly, he watches with no particular concern or interest more than a billion Chinese, a billion Muslims, and some 800 millions

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Hindus move towards eternal hell "where the fire never gets extinguished and where the worms die not." So can be said about other millions of non-Christians including the illiterate tribals all over the world. He is not a loving person if he does not do anything to stop this horror. He is sadistically cruel to watch the eternal torture and pain of his creatures when he could stop this horror by his supreme power. Certainly, he is totally unwise to create and preside over such a horrible creation. The attributes of sadistic cruelty, supreme power not willing to help the hapless tortured billions, and unwise and loveless decisions, and so on, belong to my concept of the devil.

The basis of Christian faith is the experience of God as love (1 Jn. 4:8, 16), as an unconditionally loving Father (Lk. 15), and all humans as brothers and sisters (Mt. 23:8, 9). This experience of varying degrees of intensity and depth is called *Abba Experience* by the Biblical scholars. Departing totally from the Jewish awe and dread of God, Christ called God *Abba* (Mk. 14:36), the Aramaic word with which little children addressed their fathers, similar to the English word *daddy*. Jesus wanted His disciples too to address God by this name (Mt. 6:9-14; see also Rom. 8:15-17 and Gal. 4:5-7). The translators of the Bible keep the word *Abba* in its original Aramaic form (in Mk. 14:36, Rom. 8:15 and Gal. 4:6) because of its speciality and shocking novelty in the Jewish situation. On the background of the above experience of God one can affirm that the Manila episode is a typical example of exclusivistic religious fundamentalism which becomes not only intolerant to other religions but destructive of one's own religion.

From this extreme fundamentalistic Christian position let us go to a Hindu fundamentalistic view of Christianity. Almost half a century ago when I was a schoolboy I heard a story of the indoctrination of children by the Russian Communists. A group of little children were put into a bus to take them to a picnic spot. On the way the bus stopped. The driver "tried his best" to start the bus; but it would not. The children were asked to pray to Jesus in order that the bus might start. In spite of their prayers the bus remained dead. Then the children were asked to pray to Lenin. Lo and behold! The engine became alive and the bus began to move to the great joy of these little children! The Children were told to shout aloud: "We believe in Lenin. He is our one and only God."

Sādhana is a Gujarati magazine, considered to belong to a fundamentalistic Hindu group. In a special issue of this magazine on Christian Missionaries, Ajit Popat published a different version of this story.¹ Here the incident takes place in India, in a school run by the missionaries. Here, the God opposed to Jesus was not Lenin but Lord Ram and Lord Krishna. The dead bus which did not start when the children prayed to Lord Ram or to Lord Krishna, would become alive and start moving when the children prayed to Lord Jesus. As we shall see, it is totally forbidden to the Main Line Churches who constitute more than 90% of Christians, to convert people "by force, fraud or allurements." Even the Rightist Fringe Group Churches oppose force and fraud though I cannot say the same thing about allurements with regard to some of the groups which receive economic remuneration for converting people. In this magazine the story is given as a typical attitude of all the missionaries in converting people. The cover-page of this issue of the magazine consists of the picture of crying Mother India, strangled by a huge python. On the body of the python there is the caption in bold letters *missionary* and from the frightening mouth of this serpent a fiery cross comes out.

I present these two examples as two extreme understandings of *conversion*: the extreme Christian Right and the extreme Hindu Right. To make the treatment of this topic relevant, one has to take seriously the contextual realities of India. If in Papua New Guinea or in some of the African states the Non-Christian people stand in long lines with great eagerness to join the Christian community by baptism, in India with deep-rooted religiosity and culture, conversion is a very different matter.

II. Our Procedure

At first I shall make some conceptual clarifications on '*conversion*' and of concepts associated with this like '*missionary*', '*church*', etc. Such a clarification can be helpful to those who are not familiar with Christian philosophical and religious jargons, to understand Christian doctrines better. This will be followed by a description of conversion in the Indian context both from the point of view of the Hindus and from that of the Christians. Then I shall draw attention to the fact that Religious Freedom is one of the fundamental tenets of Christianity, and so forced-conversion

¹See *Sādhana*, "Ishai Dharmana Dushpracharne Samajiye," March 20, 1999, 40.

is totally objectionable. This will be followed in the fourth part by a brief survey of the evolution and degeneration of the concept 'conversion'. In the fifth and final part I shall point out what are the main issues involved in Christian mission today. The main point that will be treated here will be the question of re-reading the Scriptures according to the challenges of the context, especially in the Indian context. The final section of this part will be the treatment of Christian mission today in terms of "Dialogal Liberation," which implies not only inter-religious understanding and dialogue, but also cooperation with all the religions and *NGOs*, for the integral development of India, especially of the economically poor and the socially marginalized.

III. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

1. Conversion

Etymologically, the term conversion is derived from the Latin '*conversio*' (root: *con* + *vertere* = turn round, as in a 'U' turn) which has its Greek Progenitor in '*metanoia*'. This New Testament (NT) Greek term has its Old Testament (OT) Hebrew Progenitor in '*shub*' with practically the same meaning as that of '*conversio*'. In its less specialized meaning it could be understood as "change of heart and mind." If anybody wants to improve oneself and progress, he or she needs to change his or her heart and mind. What an innocent origin this much-condemned term has!

Jesus begins His public life in Palestine with the following declaration in which its Greek verbal form as an imperative appears: "The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand, *metanoiete* (= be converted, i.e., repent, i.e., change your heart: Mk. 1:15). What He meant was this: "I am going to establish the "Kingdom of God" for which you have been longing and praying. In the process of the realization of this ideal, God will be experienced as a loving Father (*Abba*) and fellow human beings as brothers and sisters. This calls for new socio-economic and political structures and relationships. Turn away from the worldly values which are materialistic and temporary and turn to eternal, divine values which are contained in my God's Kingdom Project."

This call for conversion to the values of God's Kingdom is very similar to the first and chief element of *sādhana-chatushtayam* (the four-fold *sādhana*), namely, *nitya-anitya-vastu-viveka* (= discrimination

between the eternal and temporary values) proposed by Sankaracharya. A perceptive reader will see that it is a call for 'conversion' from worldly or transitory values to eternal values.

2. Missionary

This term is intimately connected with 'conversion'. It too has a very innocent origin. After proclaiming the God's Kingdom Ideal through various sermons, examples, deeds, Jesus gave a command to his disciples before his ascension into Heaven: "Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... (Mt. 28:19). He gave a *mission* to his disciples and when they took up this mission they became *missionaries*. What Jesus meant was this: "I called you as my disciples in order that you may be with me as my friends and may carry on my mission of working for the cause of God's Kingdom, by your words, deeds and by your life" (See Mk. 3:14-15). "As the Father sent me I am sending you" (Jn. 20:21).

The term 'missionary' comes from the Latin root *mitto-mittere* (= to send) and its derived nominal forms are '*missio*' (= mission) and '*missionarius*' (= messenger). The Greek equivalent of '*missionarius*' is *apostolos* from the verbal root *apostolein* (= to send). In the NT the twelve disciples who were very close to Christ were called *apostles* in the sense that he sent them out to preach the Kingdom Ideal (Mt. 10:2-4; Mk. 3:13-16), and because of them the term begins to get a specialized meaning. A *missionary* is someone who is sent with a divine message. Is there anything more auspicious than having a person in our midst with a divine message? Indeed, Jesus himself is called an apostle or missionary in the NT (Heb. 3:1), insofar as he was sent by God. In fact, one of the most dynamic and enlightened Hindu sects is blessed with a title of which '*mission*' forms its latter half, viz., *Ramakrishna Mission*. But, unfortunately, due to various historical reasons, including the wrong approaches and attitudes of the missionaries themselves, this term has got a very pejorative meaning in India today.

In the Indian tradition '*doot*' or '*preshit*' (= messenger, delegate, ambassador, etc.) is mostly used in the secular context and both terms have the meaning of "the one who has been sent." Some *gurus* and *sants* seem to speak in God's name as though sent by God. For instance, Sant Tukaram says: "These are not my words, I know nothing of their

meaning... It is Panduranga who speaks; he pervades every limb of my body. How can a clown like me have the sense or strength to declare the final truths of the Vedas?"²

Any description of the concept 'missionary' must bring to the notice of the readers the numerous types of missionaries with ideologies not only opposed to each other but even contradictory which lead to inter-missionary conflicts. In my book *Conversion* I have described more than a dozen types of missionaries with opposing and even clownish ideologies.³ There are missionaries who are totally opposed to conversion, on one side, and there are missionaries who consider causing opposition against them as a value not only for the "crown of martyrdom" but also for "sowing the seed of Christianity through their blood," following the third century dictum authored by Acharya Tertulian, viz., "*The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christianity.*" For them those people who burned alive Graham Staines and two of his little children are real instruments of God for the spread of Christianity. There are, of course, the Don-Quixotic militant outfits who want to conquer the whole of the Non-Christian world. There are the "Jokers of the Lord" who consider their duty to preach the Gospel without bothering whether there is any audience at all present to listen to their eloquent sermons, since Jesus had commanded only to preach, not to gather people to listen to them. These people are outdone in blind beliefs by the "Bible Peddlers" who place this Sacred Book anywhere or in the hands of anybody, believing in its occult power and ignoring the fact that such Bibles in India, usually, end up in the grocers' shops. Fortunately, for countries like India these "Jokers of the Lord" are outnumbered by those missionaries who consider their mission to co-operate to build up the nation through good education, health-care, and through struggles for human rights for the least and the lowest. There are even missionaries, like Sister Prasannadevi of Junagadh in Gujarat, who live in the forests or in the wilderness doing *tapas* for the good of the nation and *sadhana* for God-experience.

²Frazer and Marathe, trans., *The Poems of Tukaram*, Madras: SPCK Press, 1931, no. 1394.

³See Ishanand Vempeny, *Conversion*, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1999, 24-45.

3. 'Church' and 'Churches'

The Non-Christians are baffled by this concept. Usually, they understand it as the building with certain peculiarities like a façade topped by a cross, where Christians meet for public worship. But in our context it means the community or body of Christians. Since there are varieties of Christian communities divided into various sects and denominations there are different churches. When it is spoken of in the Western Context with regard to "Church-State relationship" this concept may be as extensive as 'religion'.

This one sacred institution founded by Christ has been divided into numerous denominations or sects each of which claiming the title 'church'. There are three main branches to the Church: the Roman Catholic Church headed by the Pope, the Orthodox Church majority of its members living in Eastern Europe including Russia, and the Protestant or Reformed Churches separated from the Roman Catholic Church around the 16th century, since the time of the reformers like Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and the like. For our study one of the most useful ways of categorizing various Christian denominations is by distinguishing the Main Line Churches (MLCs) from the Fringe Group Churches (FGCs).

I include those churches under the title MLCs which follow the teachings of a central, authoritative body, whose life-style and activities could be predicted within certain limits and which interpret the Bible not fundamentalistically but by using various modern scientific and critical tools of interpretation. In this group I include the Roman Catholic Church with more than 1.1 billion followers, the members of the World Council of Churches (WCCs) to which are affiliated most of the Orthodox and Protestant churches. The MLCs may constitute more than 90% of more than two billion Christians. In India, the Catholic Church, the Church of South India (CSI), the Church of North India (CNI), the Methodist Church and the like are included among the MLCs. As regards the FGCs, it is rather difficult to count them since even while we are engaged in counting they may divide among themselves into more groups. They interpret the Bible rather fundamentalistically and one-sidedly, and they do not consider other religions as valuable paths for salvation and liberation. One of the chief concerns of the FGCs is to convert the Non-Christians to their churches.

IV. CONVERSION IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

If we ask the question whether any single religion encourages its members to embrace another religion, the answer would be an emphatic no. No religion has such a *suicidal* tendency. The answer, however, is not that simple. It depends very much on time and space, historical times and geographical regions. When Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire by the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, there was a rush among the Romans to become Christians abandoning their ancestral religion. In some countries people line up enthusiastically for instructions in Christianity and to get baptized. They consider it a privilege to become Christians.

In India the "Anti-conversion Bill" has been passed in a number of states. A millennium or so ago, such a bill would have been almost unthinkable. In the fourth century (345 CE), according to some documents, a few St. Thomas Christians went to the king of all Malabar 'Sharkun', who "gave them as much land as they wanted, conferred on them royal honours and inscribed the grant and the honours on copper plates."⁴ Among other famous rulers of the same millennium, it was Cheraman Perumal who gave special privileges for the Christians in Kerala, and built churches and mosques for Christians and Muslims. In fact, the Emperor Akbar invited the Jesuit missionaries to his court to discuss matters religious and moral. But a number of historical and political factors have intervened to make conversion so negative and criminal in today's India.

1. Conversion from a Hindu Point of View

After the passing of the "Anti-Conversion Bill" in a number of states in India, Christians are just awakening to the reality of Hindu antagonism against conversion. Some of them still think that this Hindu anti-conversion stand is a perversion of Hindu thought. They do not see any serious reason for this opposition to conversion. If the Christians and Muslims feel so outraged when the members from their own religions embrace other religions, why don't they see that the Hindus too can feel outraged by the conversion of their co-religionists to other religions?

⁴A. M. Mundadan, "Origins of Christianity in India: The First Centuries," in *Christian Encyclopedia* (1982), Vol. I, 7.

The vivisection of Mother India was caused by the demand of a minority religion in favour of a separate theocratic state. (We shall not enter into the complexity of reasons for this demand). If so, was it not legitimate for the Hindus to desire and struggle for making India also a theocratic state, a *Hindu Rāshtra*? But the Hindu liberals, in their broadmindedness, did not fall into this temptation in spite of the powerful Hindu Right. They opted to make India a "modern state," after the fashion of USA and UK, on the basis of democratic values with universal franchise and secularism in the sense of *sarvadharmā-samābhav* (i.e., giving due respect and appreciation to all the religions) in the Gandhian sense. Is it not adding insult to injury if the Christians and the members of other religions indulge in winning converts from Hinduism? In a democracy, number counts: number means power, number means money, and number means various desired ends. If this is true, Hindus can quite rightly accuse those who win converts from Hinduism for their religions, of injustice insofar as it reduces its democratic advantages. But the Christians point out that the number of Christians has been going down from one census after another and so this is an unfounded fear.

Let us look at another aspect of this sensitive issue. It is well known that Mahatma Gandhi was opposed to conversion. Why? The odious language implied in a proselytizer when he tries to win converts is the following: "I and my religion are better than you and your religion. I and my religion possess more valuable truths than you and your religion." In ordinary human discourse, the language of "I am better and I know more and better" is only grudgingly tolerated even when the discourse is between superiors and inferiors, as in the case of parents and children, teachers and students, and bosses and their subordinates. But such a language is repugnant when the discourse is between adults with more or less equal status. Besides, proselytism is in a danger of making unhealthy comparison between one's own religion and other religions, especially when it degenerates into commercialism.

There is another sore point too with regard to conversion from Hinduism to Christianity or Islam. Since these two religions being international, it is normal that they relate to extra-territorial centres of leadership, learning, pilgrimages, etc. But such relations can quite easily give the impression of extra-territorial allegiance and loyalty even at the cost of one's own country of birth, as it happens, for instance, in cricket

matches between India and Pakistan. This becomes all the more so when the Christians or Muslims become culturally alienated by adopting cultural patterns in food, dress, entertainment, etc., which are very different from those of India.

Some Christian missionaries point out a covert reason of the politicians, businessmen and industrialists for opposing conversion. Christian missionary activities begin with education, health-care, co-operative banking systems, developmental projects, etc., usually with foreign money. Now, the politicians need illiterate vote-banks to win an election cheaply, industrialists need cheap labour for the success of their enterprises, and businessmen need uneducated masses to sell their goods with great profit and buy agricultural products cheaply. Indeed, there are examples of these people paying money to tribal parents not to send their children to schools, especially those run by the missionaries. Examples are too many to deny these allegations. But if the Christians think that such vested interests are the only or even chief reasons for Hindu opposition to conversion, then they are sadly mistaken. Why do the Muslims oppose conversion so vigorously even where no such vested interests are involved?

2. Conversion from a Christian Point of View

It is a fact that the missionaries usually go to the economically poor and the socially marginalized. The Biblical word, in the Hebrew original, to indicate such people is *anawim*.⁵ In India most Dalits and Tribals belong to the category of *anawim*. The politicians and the businessmen know that this category of people can be easily bought and sold. When the missionary approaches this category of vulnerable people with all their goodies, they easily can be won over by them. This is not an idle speculation but has been happening all over India. Hence the Hindu prejudice against the Christian works of "compassion and love." The truth of the matter has to be understood with a lot of openness from the Hindu side.

⁵*Anawim*, literary, means a person who cannot stand straight, a person with diminished human dignity due to economic poverty, social oppression, and marginalization. The untouchables in India do merit this name.

One of the most unnegotiable teachings by Jesus for Christian life and Christian struggles for salvation is compassionate help for the *anawim*. One of the typical texts in the NT is Mt. 25:31-46. It is a description of the scene of Last Judgement (*kayamat*) by Jesus himself as the Eternal Judge. This is what Jesus tells the good people who would be made to stand on his right side as considered worthy of salvation:

The King will say to those on his right. "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me..." (Then he replies to their query how they did such things to him). "Amen I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Mt. 25:34-36, 40).

In Lk. 16:19-31 there is a parable of a rich man (*Dives*) and Lazarus. Here the rich man is condemned to hell because he failed to be compassionate to the poor Lazarus. At the beginning of his Public Life, in his inaugural speech (Lk. 4:16-22) Jesus declares that his primary mission is to liberate the *anawim* from all sorts of oppression and slavery. This idea is graphically and powerfully expressed in his *Sermon on the Mount* (Mt. 5-7; see parallel in Lk. 6:20-26). This is the chief reason, if may not be the only reason, why missionaries in India have been going after the SC and ST, especially when untouchability and bonded labour were rampant.

If we look at the film *Mission* which had many Hollywood stars like Niro among its actors, and which secured many international awards, we can see how this very same motive led the missionaries to South American Tribals who were sold in slavery all over the world. The opponents of these missionaries were not indigenous landlords and businessmen but European traders and landlords. This is the primary motivation behind the works of Mother Teresa in India, of Father Damian among the lepers of Molukai Islands, Peter Claver among the slaves of Latin America and Albert Schweitzer among the tribals in the African forests. This will partly explain why the minuscule Christian community of India run more than 40% of orphanages in India, and a little less percent of leper-asylums, homes for the abandoned, and the like. It is this commitment to the service of the *anawim* which motivated the Australian Missionary Graham

Staines, who and whose two children were gruesomely murdered in Orissa, to work in the forests of Orissa for the tribal people, giving up the comforts of an affluent Australian Family.

Soon after the Korean War, once an American nun was cleansing the stinking sores of a leper in South Korea. Her brother who came to visit her happened to see this work. He said: "Judy, if I were to get 50,000 dollars a month I won't do such a work." "Tony, neither would I have done this work had I been offered hundred thousand dollars," came the swift reply. "But for the sake of Jesus who loves me and makes me experience his resurrection every day, I will do even more repulsive works than this."

Many Hindus, even the enlightened ones, ask the question why such good works are vitiated by proselytization. Even if the primary motivation of the missionaries for the compassionate help they render to the SCs and STs (*anawim* in the Indian situation) is to respond to their Christian duty, thereby to realize their Christian identity and attain salvation, there can be other mixed motives and vested interests. But the SCs, STs, and the other marginalized people like the orphans and the handicapped people, after receiving compassionate help from the missionaries through good education, through various self-help economic projects, like the cooperatives and fair-price shops, and through cheap but effective medical care, naturally feel attracted to them, to their gods and to their religion. Let us take an example. Ekalavya was rejected by Dronacharya to be his disciple as he was a tribal. But suppose that another competent teacher told him that he considered his duty and privilege to teach him archery. Would he not have accepted this inviting and expert teacher of archery as his Guru? No less a person than Sangma, the first Tribal Speaker of Indian Parliament, would substantiate this point from his own life and education, as, in fact, he had done on several occasions in public functions.

Let us take a real example. In January 1999, when anti-Christian propaganda and attacks were going on in full swing in Gujarat, some six hundred people from the Dalit families of a village called Undhai, near Mehsana, declared that they were going to convert themselves to Christianity. There were no Christian missionaries nearby to entice them. The *Indian Express* reported: "The saffron brigade has been affected by a deeper shade of red. For, tired of the continued harassment and social boycott by upper-caste Patels, a large clutch of Dalit families in Gujarat

has decided to convert to Christianity. The Dalits have little or no idea of what Christianity is."⁶ The mass conversion of a large number of Dalits, in Meenakshipuram, Tamil Nadu, some years back has the same story to tell. Hence, it is a travesty of truth to say that the missionary activities among the SCs and STs are purely for alluring them to Christianity.⁷

V. T. Rajshekhar, the editor of *Dalit Voice*, writes in his magazine:

Religious conversion is the best, the simplest, most inexpensive and also the most non-violent way of not only liberating the Dalits but also the country as a whole. It is as simple as that... Such a conversion will bring happiness to both SSC/ST/OBCs as well as their oppressors. As long as the Dalits remain within the Hindu fold, they have to fight daily. See what happened in Jhajjar (Haryana) recently.⁸ India is full of caste wars between the Hindus and the Dalits. Conversion will once for all end this war and violence and there will be peace in countryside and India as a whole.⁹

There is another aspect to Christian stance with regard to conversion: it is the fact that there are far more Hindu missionaries in the Christian countries of Europe and America than Christian missionaries in India. When I visited the Ramakrishna Math, in Hyderabad, some years back, I was introduced to a number of American young men who have become members of Ramakrishna Mission. As an admirer of Swamy Vivekanand and the Ramakrishna Mission I did not feel any outrage at the conversion of these Christians into Hinduism. I have seen various Hindu sects, especially the members of the Hare Krishna Movement in practically all the big cities of the West I have visited. P. Ram writes:

While our VHP brethren decry the transparently beneficial Christian services in India, they have no word of criticism about their co-religionists engaging themselves in proselytization work in the most

⁶*Indian Express*, January 31, 1999, 2.

⁷For a more elaborate study on this topic, see Vempeny, *Conversion*, 12-19.

⁸Some four Dalits were killed on the accusation that they killed cows. But the fact is that they were doing the work assigned to their caste (*chamars*) of skinning dead animals including cows for selling the skin.

⁹"Conversion as the Best, Simplest, Surest, and the Most Non-violent Way to Liberate Dalits," January 1-15, 2003, 21.

degrading manner in the West, or becoming *billion dollar Bhagavans*... They offer the experience of levitation for \$1500. They promise Nirvana for \$100 a day. They assure you of instant salvation ... Acharya Rajneesh is supposed to have converted hundreds of thousands of Westerners to Hinduism. So did Maharshi Mahesh Yogi. So did other sanyasis, Godmen, Bhagavans, Acharyas ... and Hare Krishna propagators... Gopal Krishna Goswami Maharaj is quoted in *Times of India*, 2. 9. 99 as saying that devotees living in temples are engaged in *full time missionary activities*.¹⁰

Swamy Vivekananda was one of the greatest of modern Hindu missionaries to the West. He instructed his followers saying: "You must go out to preach your religion, preach it to every nation under the sun, and preach it to every people."¹¹ He cites passages from Lord Buddha and from Guru Govind Singh which express the mission given to their disciples for propagating their religions. Among the various passages quoted by him from the ancient scriptures I shall quote the following one from the *Yajur Veda*: "May I speak these blissful words (of the Vedas) to the masses of men ... to my own people and the foreigner (26:1-2),¹² Describing how the Hindu Missionaries were propagating Hinduism in South East, North, and West Asia, he writes:

Referring to colonial expansion of Brahmanical religion into the Malay Peninsula, Cambodia, Annam, Sumatra, Java, Bali, and Borneo, the renowned historian Dr. Majumdar states that "Brahmanical religion flourished in these regions, though Buddhism was not unknown. The indigenous people adopted the civilization of their master." He says that the Brahmanical religion and culture imported from India moulded the lives of the races all over this wider region.¹³

In the light of the historical fact of Hindu missionary expansion in the past and today, the Christians do not understand the outrage, which even some

¹⁰P. Ram and Ishanand Vempeny, *Conversion and Missionary*, Varanasi: Satya Manthan Sanstha, 2000, 15-16.

¹¹Cited in Ram and Vempeny, *Conversion and Missionary*, 14.

¹²Cited in Ram and Vempeny, *Conversion and Missionary*, 10.

¹³Ram and Vempeny, *Conversion and Missionary*, 11.

enlightened Hindus feel with regard to Christian missionary preaching. Haven't they the duty of following the command of Jesus to preach his message all over the world?

V. RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND THE CHURCHES

One of the complaints against the missionaries is that their methods imply force and their beneficiaries are not free to say no to Christian propaganda. During the crusades, during the interdenominational wars in Europe, and during the colonial period political force had been applied for conversion. It must be remembered that all over the world, perhaps till the French Revolution, the axiom *Cuius regio eius religio* (the religion of the ruler is the religion of the ruled) was almost universally accepted, except perhaps in India during the reign of some kings like Ashoka, Akbar, and the like. But today religious freedom is upheld vigorously in the Main Line Churches and also in the Fringe Group Churches, though they can be accused of allurements even today when fundamentalistic concept of salvation or commercialism is involved.

One of the fundamental values of the Kingdom of God Ideal preached by Jesus is freedom. In his inaugural address Jesus expresses the goal of his mission as freedom, saying: "He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives ... and to set the downtrodden free" (Lk. 4:18). Here there is no point in elaborating the NT ideal of freedom when we realize that this ideal was not lived by the Christian nations during the colonial period.¹⁴ Here our concern is to point out how religious freedom, one of the values of Christ's Kingdom of God Ideal is being implemented by the two most authoritative bodies of Christianity, viz., the Vatican Council II and the World Council of Churches. Vat. II asserts:

The Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. Freedom of this kind means that all men should be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups and every human power, so that within due limits nobody is forced to act against his convictions in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in association with others. The Council further declares that

¹⁴For a brief discussion on Christ's ideal of freedom, see my books, *Conversion*, 70-71, and *Games We Religious Play*, Delhi: Media House, 1977, 103-105.

the right to religious freedom is based on the very dignity of the human person as known through the revealed Word of God and by reason itself. This right of the human person to religious freedom must be given such recognition in the constitutional order of society as will make it a civil right.¹⁵

The WCC, too, have made a number of declarations on human freedom and the freedom of religion. Here I shall present just one of them equally strong as the declarations of Vat. II:

We acknowledge and affirm that authentic witness to Jesus Christ should be carried out in a spirit of respect for the beliefs and devotion of others. It can never be simply a 'telling' but must be a sensitive 'listening'. Furthermore, *it must always respect the freedom of others and should not be coercive in any way*. We acknowledge that God has not left himself without witness anywhere (AA. 14:17).¹⁶

As has been mentioned earlier these two documents cover more than 90% of two billion Christians. Since the Christian churches are centralized with authoritative officials these documents may not remain just an ideal but are implemented by and large. Even the Fringe Group Churches mostly accept the spirit of these documents. Therefore, the accusations against the missionaries for using force, fraud, or illegitimate allurements in converting people stand in need of stringent scrutiny and must be, by and large, exaggerated, if not untrue

VI. 'CONVERSION' DOWN THE AGES

Until the Edict of Milan, in 313 CE, by the Roman Emperor Constantine, Christianity was outlawed in the Roman Empire. During this early period of this religion, known as the *age of martyrs*, especially during the reign of emperors like Nero, Diocletian and Decius, any known Christian was imprisoned, tortured, and killed. The Romans found entertainment in making the Christians fight with wild animals in the Roman Amphitheatre. Literally, thousands of Christians were put to death mercilessly. But the strange thing was that when one man died for his

¹⁵*Dignitatis Humanae*, (DH), no. 2.

¹⁶See J. A. Scherer and S. B. Bevans, eds., *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization*, New York: Orbis Books, 1992, 71.

Christian faith hundreds became Christians. When the Romans saw the people of a new religion valuing their faith more than their very lives more and more Romans began to embrace Christianity. This phenomenon made the fourth Century Christian Philosopher Tertulian make the following famous statement: *The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christianity*. At that time conversion to Christianity was a very heroic deed which called for great sacrifices including that of one's own life. The Roman Emperor Constantine himself began to be attracted by the New Religion and eventually became a Christian in the 4th century CE.

But after the Constantinian Era, conversion became a matter of prestige and status rather than one of self-sacrifice. When, however, Christianity was declared the State religion of the Roman Empire by Emperor Theodosius I, in the latter part of the fourth century, there was literally a rush towards Christianity, especially by the Roman Patricians and aristocrats. Because of this rush for baptism by the vast majority of Romans, the Christian authorities could not cope up with the needed instructions (Catechism) before giving baptism. Gradually, the motivation for conversion began to get more and more vitiated.

During the Crusades in the Middle Ages, religion became the centre of political activity, and forced conversion was not that rare. To my mind, forced conversion is as bad as rape. But religious wars, as any wars, cause rape, plunder and other evils, including religious rape.

Further vitiation of 'conversion' took place during the colonial wars, conquests and domination. Even during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of the colonial period the ancient *dictum*, "The religion of the ruler is also for the ruled" was uncritically accepted practically all over the world. This uncritical acceptance of this *dictum* was chiefly responsible for the persecution of the Jews by the Greeks during the pre-Christian era, of the Christians by the Romans during the early centuries of the Christian era, of the conquered people especially of North Africa, by the conquering Muslims at the beginning of the Middle Ages. In the sixteenth century when King Henry VIII refused to obey the Pope, the majority of English people followed him paving the way for the Anglican Church. There has been, however, a reversal of this process when the rulers willy-nilly accepted the religion of the ruled, to show that the underlying spirit of the *dictum* is to have some sort of harmony in the ideals and practices of the

rulers and the ruled. Thus we have the examples of the conquering Romans accepting the religion of the conquered Greeks, the conquering Germanic Barbarians accepting the religion of Christian Roman Empire and the conquering Moguls like Kublakhan and Timur accepting the religion of the conquered Muslims.

The well-known historian of Portuguese colonialism in India, Delio de Mendonca, writes how conversion and re-conversion from Islam had become bound up with aggression when the Portuguese began to re-conquer from the Muslims the regions of North Africa which had a large Christian population:

When the Portuguese arrived in India, peaceful methods of conversion had given way to more aggressive methods in Europe. Conquest of land had to precede conversions. Re-conversion of the peoples of the lands once in control of Christian Europe, like in parts of Northern Africa in possession of Islam from the fourteenth century, could be effected only through the re-conquest of these lands. It was necessary to bring these lands under their control before thinking about any work of re-converting their population.¹⁷

The author, then, mentions how the conquered people experienced coercion in getting converted by socio-economic pressures if not by sword. He says:

How were the new citizens made? It is alleged that conversions were effected violently rather than evangelically. It must be stressed that conversions were also effected with decrees, social and economic pressure that left, at times, little alternative or freedom of choice to the Hindus. Often migration became the only solution to those who refused to convert. Conversions were not made at the point of the sword but under its protection.¹⁸

The British colonialists were not that eager for conversion, especially after the 1857 revolution for independence. Their leaders began to appreciate Hinduism in a special way and were highly influenced by the

¹⁷Delio de Mendonca, *Conversions and Citizenry*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2002, 21-22.

¹⁸de Mendonca, *Conversions and Citizenry*, 20-21.

thinking of the reformers, like Raja Ram Mohan Roy. But they encouraged the missionaries to convert people in the Tribal States of the North East to bring them under an ideological umbrella so that they would be politically less hostile.

VII. CONVERSION TODAY

On April 6, 2003, under the heading "*It's Conversion Time in Valley*" there appeared an article in the front page of *The Indian Express*, by Tariq Mir. In this article there are reports of people who have been baptized more than once as different groups of 'missionaries' promised different amount of monetary awards. I am not the one who outright denies this report on the basis of Christian theories of modern times. We can hardly say anything about the missionary policies of the Fringe Group Churches. Even among the Main Line Churches there are lunatic fringes. The few Christians who have been living in Kashmir for centuries in peace with other communities are annoyed with this missionary work of fishing in troubled waters. The report quotes Pastor Leslie Richards who said: "The conversions they are doing are Biblically wrong. There are umpteen cases in which one person has been baptized thrice within a few months."¹⁹ But one cannot count out what Pastor Neethi Rajan said merely as the expression of a Lunatic Fringe Group, since such people enter into conversion work with martyrdom-complex: "God spoke to me clearly and asked me to go to Kashmir."²⁰ In spite of these facts, here I must discuss the new understanding of conversion among most of the Christians.

1. Re-reading the Scriptures

In modern Christianity one of the theologies²¹ is *Liberation Theology*, very much the product of Latin America. Whereas in traditional

¹⁹"*It's Conversion Time in Valley*," *The Indian Express*, April 6, 2003, 3.

²⁰"*It's Conversion Time in Valley*," *The Indian Express*, April 6, 2003, 3.

²¹The term 'theology' is not used in the Hindu or Indian religious language. In this religious philosophy, scriptures (*śabda-pramāna*) have the pride of place as the chief source of knowledge. In India, the *Advaita* of Śankara or the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* of Ramanuja are examples to it. In Christian theology, too, the primary sources of authentic knowledge are scriptures interpreted giving respect to the early Christian tradition, especially of the apostolic tradition. In Christianity liberation theology had enormous influence on the religious conscience, politics, economics, social movements, etc. of different countries where Christians are in the majority.

theology the starting point was either the existing Christian dogmas (regressive theology) or the scriptures themselves (Genetic Theology), in this liberation theology the starting point was the context, chiefly the socio-economic context, especially in the original brand of this theology in South America. The Asian brand of this type of theology highlights also the multi-religious context, the context not only of inter-religious dialogue and co-operation but also inter-religious rivalry which often gets inflamed into bloody riots and carnage.

One of the basic principles of liberation theology is that the context changes the text, which would mean that the interest of a particular group, decides to a great extent the interpretation of a scriptural text. If the poor people read the Bible especially the NT from their point of view and the rich from their own, we will have different results. If the upper caste people read the *Śruti* literature, from their own standpoint and the lower caste from their own, the conclusions will be very different. This has something to do with what the epistemologists speak of the pragmatic concept of truth according to which truth is that which works. In the Vedantic concept of truth, *pravrtti-sāmarthya* (workability) is added to the aspect of correspondence between the intellect and the world out there.

Hinduism has a long tradition of interpreting the scriptures according to the context. As we have already hinted, the contextual interpretation of the scriptures by the great Acharyas like Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhava, and Nimbarka gave rise to four different schools of Vedanta. In modern times, during the freedom struggle, Tilak and Gandhiji interpreted the *Bhagavat Gītā* giving very different meanings and emphases according to the attitudes with which they approached the freedom struggle. One of the most modern Acharyas who re-read the scriptures most effectively and successfully was Sri Naryana Guru. This great Guru taking the side of the Dalit community of Ezahvas interpreted the Hindu scriptures from this community's point of view presenting them with a new philosophy of life and worship without getting out of the Hindu fold as Periyar and Ambedkar did. This philosophy of life, resulting from the contextual re-reading of the scriptures made this community one of the most influential, progressive, and dynamic communities of Kerala.

The newly born Christianity, with the firm belief that their divine founder rose again from the dead and was with them inspiring and guiding

them, started preaching the Christian message with great enthusiasm and zeal. As more and more opponents of Christianity, like St. Paul, began to embrace this religion, the Christian movement became exceptionally attractive and powerful. There are a number of statements in the NT on Jesus and his way as exclusivistic in the sense that the followers became persons with exceptional enthusiasm, loyalty and love. The following statements in the NT belong to this group of love-language which smack exclusivism, absolutism, and intolerance:

I am the Way, the Truth, and Life. No one can come to the Father except through me (Jn. 14:6).

For all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved (AA. 4:12).

For there is only one God and only one mediator between God and mankind, himself a man, Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5).

It was quite all right with the initial enthusiasts who used the love-language or with the people of countries where Christianity is the majority religion, and dominated in matters religious and secular as in the mediaeval Europe. The Origen-Cyprian axiom *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (= Outside the church no salvation) is quite understandable when we look at the early church or the church of Christendom of the mediaeval period. Most Christian Acharyas considered the church as the embodiment of Christ, indeed, the spatio-temporal extension of Christ, and so extended the absoluteness of Christ to the church making itself absolutely necessary for salvation.

But even in the early and later church there were objections to such absolutistic interpretations. Acharyas like St. Augustine with the awareness of holy men outside the church before the coming of Christ, coined another axiom, *Ecclesia ab Abel* (= church from the time of Abel), which means that there was Church from the time of the just progeny of Adam, the first just man of God's creation, according to the Bible. The Acharyas like Ireneus, Justin, Clement of Alexandria and the like who were deeply involved with the Graeco-Roman religions began to see wonderful religious values which can give one salvation according to the Christian point of view. The following statement of St. Justin (100-163 CE), one of the earliest Christian philosophers who sacrificed his life for his Christian convictions gives a broadminded view of his faith. He says:

Christ is the first-begotten of God, his word of whom all mankind partakes (this is what we have been taught). Those who lived by the Word are Christians, even though they have been considered atheists: such as, among the Greeks, Socrates, Heraclitus, and others like them; among the foreigners, Abraham, Elias, Ananias... So also they who lived before Christ, and murdered those who did live by the Word. But those who lived by the Word and still do are Christians, and are fearless and untroubled.²²

The early Acharyas of Christianity, in their encounter with the Graeco-Roman religions, began to see great salvific and liberative values in these religions and considered these values as belonging to the transcendental dimension of Christ, which they called the *logos*-dimension of Christ. Hinduism is not unfamiliar with such transcendental dimension of an *Avatārin*. In the *Gītā* 9:23 we read: "Those devotees likewise who, endowed with faith, offer worship unto other Divinities: they... worship (*yajanti*) no one but myself, though not in the prescribed way" (see also 7:21). The early Christian Acharyas expressed the transcendental Christic influence through the concept *logos*. St. John begins the Gospel introducing this concept: "In the beginning was the Word (*logos*), the Word was with God and the Word was God... The Word was true light that enlightens all men; and he was coming into the world. He was in the world that had its being though Him" (Jn. 1:9-10). Without getting into any exegetical sophistication we can get some meaning to the concept 'Word' (Greek: *Logos*; Hebrew: *Dabar-memra*), which helped the early Acharyas to speak of Christic influence right from the beginning of history. According to Sts. John and Paul, Christ is the beginning, middle, and end of all creation. John expresses this idea by the Greek alphabets *alpha* for beginning and *omega* for the end,²³ meaning that Christ is *alpha* and *omega* (Rev. 22:12). The openness and reaching out of the Acharyas to the Greco-Roman religions was very much according to the spirit of the NT writings.

²²1 Apol. 46:1-4, cited in J. Dupuis, *Jesus Christ and Spirit*, 7.

²³For an extensive study of this topic, see Vempeny, *Inspiration in Non-Biblical Scriptures*, Bangalore: TPI, 1973, 148-68.

2. Re-reading the NT in the Context of Religious Pluralism

When a new political party is formed with the awareness that the existing parties are not capable of delivering goods, in the proclamation of its manifesto and in its drive for membership its primary concern will be to bring to the notice of all and sundry how there is a party with a difference, and how here there is party which can respond to the challenges of the nation adequately unlike the existing parties. In its drive for membership and followers if it may not malign the existing parties, it will not make efforts to highlight their relevance, greatness and positive sides. This example could be metaphorically used, albeit with some limitations, with regard to a new religion and the propagation of its original intuition and ideals. If a holy founder would joyfully sacrifice his very life for the truth of his convictions and ideals, and his followers too would joyfully die for their martyred Guru and his ideals, especially when they are fully convinced that this Guru was raised from the dead by God in approval and appreciation of his life and ideals, we cannot expect from his enthusiastic and zealous followers sermons on the great relevance and values of the other existing religions. But the truth is that in the NT there are a number of positive references to the existing religions beyond Israel and Judaism.

In the NT one of the chief books which speak of the encounters by the disciples of Christ with the Non-Jewish religions, is called the *Acts of the Apostles* (AA). This book describes the activities of Christ's immediate disciples, especially of Sts. Peter and Paul. We have various scenes of their encounters with the people of the Greco-Roman world.

a. The Cornelius Episode (AA. 10)

The Acts of the Apostles gives a fairly long account of Peter, the chief of the immediate disciples of Christ, meeting Cornelius, a Roman Commander (Centurion), belonging to the Roman Religion, whom the Christians might have called 'gentile' or 'pagan'. Peter had a vision indicating that he should meet this commander and the commander had a vision of an angel telling him that God was pleased with his prayers and works of charity and that he should meet Peter (AA. 10:4).

When Peter was praying on the terrace of a Christian friend he sees "heaven thrown open and something like a big sheet being let down to earth by its four corners; it contained every possible sort of animal and

bird, walking, crawling or flying ones" (11-13). Now the Bible scholars see a connection between this vision of the sheet let down from heaven with all sorts of animals, and the Ark of Noah (Gen. 6:13-22) which contained a pair each, male and female, "from all living creatures" (6:19). Now the exclusivistic axiom, "Outside the Church there is no salvation" is inspired by Peter's metaphorical use of the Ark to represent the church (2 Pet. 2:5). As the animals outside the Ark would perish so too humans outside Peter's Ark, viz., the church would perish. Whereas the Ark of Noah represented a select group of humans, the sheet came down from heaven represented the whole of humanity.

Peter like other Jews considered some animals pure and some other impure, following the prescription of the OT Book of Leviticus (Chapter 11). In this vision Peter shows his unwillingness to accept the 'impure' animals. But the heavenly voice said: "What God has made pure, you have no right to call impure" (10:15). As Peter was thinking about the meaning of this vision two messengers from Cornelius came to meet him. Immediately Peter realized the meaning of the vision. He said: "You know it is forbidden for Jews to mix with people of another race and meet them. But God has made it clear to me that I must not call anyone profane or unclean" (10:28). Peter's concluding statement in Cornelius' house is even more revealing. He said: "*The truth I have come to realize is that God does not have favourites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him*" (10:34-35). Paul, in Rom. 2:11 and Gal. 2:6, makes the same statement saying, "*God has no favourites.*" If the Acharyas of the church were familiar with this episode perhaps they would have preferred the symbol of the sheet coming down from heaven with all sorts of animals expressing God's universal plan of salvation rather than the Ark of Noah which represented an exclusivistic view of God's plan of salvation leading to the "chosen-people complex" of the Semitic religions.

b. Paul's Athenian Speech (AA. 17:22-31)

For us who live in a situation of religious pluralism Paul's speech in Athens, standing in the *Areopagus* can be quite revealing.²⁴ Though he was fired with the zeal for the message of Christ, the whole tone of his speech

²⁴London's Hyde Park like places in ancient Athens, where new philosophies were propagated.

is one of recognition of the 'nations' (which has a religious connotation). His purpose was to preach to them a God whom they truly worshipped without giving any specific name. "What, therefore, you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (17:24). He was referring to an altar in Athens with the inscription "To an unknown God." He appreciates their scrupulous religiosity saying, "I have seen for myself how extremely scrupulous you are in all religious matters" (17:23). He, then, continues:

From one single stock he not only created the whole human race so that they could occupy the entire earth, but he decreed how long each nation should flourish and what boundaries of its territory should be. And he did this so that all nations might seek the deity, and by feeling their way towards him, succeed in finding him. Yet, in fact, he is not far from any of us, since it is in him that we live, and move, and exist, as indeed some of your own sages have said: "We are all his children" (AA. 17:26-28).

Paul in his speech quotes two Greek sages, Epimnides of Knossos and Aratos. It is the only place in the NT a non-biblical, 'gentile' sage is explicitly quoted. Bible scholars point out great resemblance in Paul's discourse to the beginning of the poem of Aratos. Paul not only cites Arato's statement "We are all his children," but also accepts his teaching saying, "Since we are God's children we should not suppose that his nature is anything like an image of gold or silver or stone" (17:29). Paul proposes the Christian message as complementary to the Greek religion. It is precisely this attitude that can help inter-religious dialogue and co-operation.

3. Christian God of Love and Christian Universalism

Right at the outset of this paper I hinted at the fact that 'Abba-experience' is the basis of Christian spirituality. It is the experience of God not only as almighty but also as unconditionally loving. The God preached by Jesus on his *Sermon on the Mount* is so universally loving that "he makes his sun to shine on good and bad people alike, and gives his rain to those who do good and to those who do evil" (Mt. 5:45). In fact, one of the constant themes of the NT is that "God has no favourites" (See AA. 10:34-35; Rom. 2:11; Gal. 2:6). The NT teaches that "God wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth" (1 Tim. 2:4) because "God is love" (1 Jn. 4:8, 16). And so gives every human being, no matter what

religion or ethnic group he belongs to, ample means of salvation. This is the gist of what Paul said to the people of Lystra, a Greek town, that God leaves his own symbols of his existence and loving activities, so that all can reach Him (AA. 14:16, 17; see also, 17:27). St. John says that "God loved *the world* so much that he gave his only son" (Jn. 3:16), not that he loved only this particular nationality or religion. This is precisely what he meant when he said "God loved us first" (1 Jn. 4:19; see also Rom. 5:6-9). The truth of these statements is that it is God who takes the initiative in human salvation, as the parable of the Good Shepherd who goes after the lost sheep leaving the 99 in the wilderness (Lk. 15:4-7). This is, precisely, what Paul means when he says interpreting Isaiah: Isaiah said more clearly, "I have been found by those who did not seek me; and have revealed myself to those who did not consult me" (Rom. 10:20).

It is in a situation of religious pluralism that the universal saving plan of God comes to our mind powerfully. All the Semitic religions suffer from what I call a "chosen people complex" based on the OT concept of God's election of Israel as a chosen people (Ex. 19:6; Dt. 7:6). The Jews call the non-Jews *gentiles*, Christians call the non-Christians, *pagans*, or *heathens* and the Muslims call the non-Muslims *kafirs*. Election is not primarily a privilege but a call to service. Often God chooses the 'unworthy' people for a particular task or mission as we saw in the case of Prophet Jonah. Yahweh chooses Abraham saying: "In you all the nations of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:2) which means that Abraham was chosen as an expression of his love and concern for the whole of mankind.²⁵ The Sri Lankan theologian, Wesley Ariaraja, reflecting the thoughts of WCC, affirms that the God of the NT who loves all and sundry going beyond the particularities of peoples and beyond the barriers that divide races, religions, linguistic families and ethnic groups:

For it (the Biblical message) insists on the 'previousness' of grace and God's acceptance of us before our acceptance of God... If we cannot accept others as God's children until they believe as we do, we do not act or speak from the message of the Gospel. If we say that those who do not believe in Christ or do not belong to the Christian

²⁵For an extensive study of this topic, see Vempeny, *Inspiration in Non-Biblical Scriptures*, 125-130.

community are outside the saving providence and power of God, we are talking about a God who is not the God of Jesus Christ.²⁶

VIII. CHRISTIAN MISSION AS DIALOGAL LIBERATION

Never before in the two millennia history of the church there was an International Council, with more than 2500 Bishops and with many other experts and scholars, representing practically all the nations of the world, prepared such a long, authoritative document, dealing exclusively with the people of other faiths with respect, concern, and love as the Vat. II. As in the case of the beginnings of any great ventures, here too there have been a lot of hesitation, fumbling, and opposition to the coming to be of this document called *Nostra Aetate* (= In our times; abbreviation: NA). As a person living in a situation of religious pluralism, I consider the following statement the most inspiring:

... So the Church has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness to the Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods as well as the socio-cultural values found among them (NA 2).

Here the terms, *acknowledge, preserve and promote* are crucial in the Indian context. The Christians are commanded not only to acknowledge but also to preserve and promote the "spiritual and moral goods as well as the socio-cultural values found in the World Religions." There is another document, which taking seriously religious sociology, affirms the validity of religious structures through which faith and salvation commitments are made by the people of World Religions:

However, the social nature of man itself requires that he should give external expression to his internal acts of religion; that he should participate with others in matters religious; that he should profess his religion in community. Injury therefore, is done to the human person and to the very order established by God for human life, if the free exercise of religion is denied in society when the just requirements of public order do not so require (*Dignitatis Humanae* [DH], no. 3).

²⁶Wesley Ariaraja, *The Bible and the People of Other Faiths*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 32.

Earlier, the council missionaries were primarily concerned about preaching their message without taking seriously the people of other religions. Today they have not only begun to listen to them, but also to learn from them. This is precisely the beginning stage of what is called *inter-religious dialogue*. The WCC, too, have strong statements commanding the Christians to enter into dialogue with people of other religions:

Dialogue helps us not to disfigure the image of our neighbours of different faith and ideologies. It has been the experience of many Christians that this dialogue is indeed possible on the basis of mutual trust and a respect for the integrity of each participant's identity... It is a joyful affirmation of life against chaos, and a participation with all who are allies of life seeking the provisional goals of a better human community.²⁷

By the end of the third session of Vat. II, in 1964, *dialogue* became the watchword in missionary activities. Some missionaries began to affirm that to be religious means to be inter-religious. One of the signs of this dialogical attitude was the mushrooming of so many Christian ashrams through the length and breadth of India with saffron clad missionaries. They began to use for worship many of the Hindu symbols like 'Om', *arati*, *mantra*, *pranams*, etc. Many of the new churches being built had a distinct Indian touch. Hindu Scriptures and Sanskrit *slogas* became components of Christian worship. Various groups began to organize inter-religious prayers and discussions.

In the early seventies liberation theology began to make inroads into the Church with its slogan of "option for the poor," "grass-root level involvement," and "structural transformation," with an emphasis on socio-economic and political involvement, began to sweep across Latin America with great socio-economic and religious repercussions. Under the influence of this theology a number of capitalistic and oligarchic dictatorships turned into democracies and the voice of the voiceless began to reverberate through the length and breadth of this continent with impact also elsewhere in the world, including India.

²⁷Scherer and Bevans, eds., *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization*, nos. 17 and 18.

The liberationists began to show the basis of this theological movement in Vat. II. They are right in it. The document called *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church Today) very emphatically teaches the need of giving whole hearted attention to the economically poor and the socially marginalized. Let us cite a small passage from this long document:

Whatever the forms of ownership may be, as adapted to the legitimate institutions of people, according to diverse and changeable circumstances, attention must always be paid to the universal purpose for which created goods are meant. In using them, therefore, a man should regard his lawful possessions not merely as his own but also as common property in the sense that they should accrue to the benefit of not only himself but of others. The Fathers and Doctors of the Church held this view, teaching that men are obliged to come to the relief to the poor, and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods. If a person is in extreme necessity, he has the right to take from the riches of others what he himself needs. Since there are so many people in this world afflicted with hunger, this sacred Council urges all, both individuals and governments, to remember the saying of the Fathers: "Feed the man dying of hunger, because if you have not fed him you have killed him. According to their ability, let all individuals and governments undertake a genuine sharing of their goods (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 69).

Under the influence of this theology, the churches in India began to work for the social uplift and economic development of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes with a new vigour and enthusiasm.

There were ideological struggles between the dialogists and the liberationists. The liberationists pointed out that a religion which does not care for the fundamental needs of the people, especially of the poor and the oppressed, will work as *opium* for the people and will degenerate into ritualism, fundamentalism, etc. The dialogists argued that the Christians in India are just drops in the mighty ocean of a billion people. If any worthwhile liberation of the oppressed people has to be achieved it has to be in dialogue and co-operation with the members of other religions all of which uphold compassion and love. Besides, if the goal of Christian mission is the establishment of God's Kingdom, in a dialogal situation the Christians can notice similar ideals in Hinduism, Islam, etc., and could

very well co-operate to create a better world, better India. After much 'sword-crossing' there emerged the formula that *any meaningful dialogue has to be liberational and any meaningful liberation has to be dialogal.*

IX. DIALOGAL LIBERATION FOR A BETTER AND GREATER INDIA

In the Conclave organized by *India Today* between February 28 to March 2, 2003, with the question whether India can be a global giant or will remain a pygmy, there were speeches by great minds and visionaries like Abdul Kalam, President of India, Bill Clinton, the former president of United States of America, and Alvin Toffler of 'Future-Shock' fame. After going through the speeches or summarized versions of them given by *India Today*,²⁸ I could 'hear' from many of them a challenging call for national integration, chiefly in terms of inter-religious understanding and cooperation. President Kalam, one of the great visionaries of modern India, said:

I consider that no other nation has got a civilizational heritage like India to live a near-peaceful life. Indian minds were capable of absorbing the best of cultures from successive invasions. Now we should not allow any religion or any individual fanaticism to endanger our nation.²⁹

Bill Clinton, a great friend and well-wisher of India, was unsparing in his criticism of the inter-religious tensions and riots that make India remain a global pygmy rather than a global giant. In his mind the horrifying images of 2002 Gujarat riots, transmitted all over the world by TV channels, were very vivid, as he himself stated. What we say of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, Clinton said in his American style: "The whole of history ... had been one long struggle to explain the definition of 'us' and shrink the definition of 'them'."³⁰ Knowing, at least, vaguely the world family ideals of India he said in response to a question as to what he would do if he were the Prime Minister of India: "His overarching priority, Clinton said, would be to make India a place where people of different faiths and backgrounds

²⁸*India Today*, March 17, 2003.

²⁹*India Today*, March 17, 2003, 23.

³⁰*India Today*, March 17, 2003, 21.

actually wish to live together and understand why that is consistent with and not in conflict with India's deepest religious traditions."³¹

It is beyond the scope of this essay to quote the opinions of other great minds, Indian and foreign, of this Conclave. During a meeting of Narendra Modi, Chief Minister of Gujarat, with the chief Indian Industrialists, some of them like Godrej and Bajaj emphasized that unless the Gujarat government gives priority to communal peace it is a risk to invest money in Gujarat.

Often it is said that communal riots harm chiefly the minority. But this is far from the truth. There is a saying in Gujarati, *Ek maraniya sone bhare* (= One desperate man can successfully take on a hundred others). The civil war in our neighbourhood, Sri Lanka, is a typical example. Though the Tamils are just about 10% they gave sleepless nights chiefly to the members of the majority community. Though Sri Lanka, as far as its natural resources are concerned, is one of the richest islands in the world, the inter-ethnic and inter-religious strife has kept it a poor island instead of becoming rich like the neighbouring islands Singapore and Taiwan.

'Majoritism' follows the law of the jungle "Might is right." Minority communities are usually insecure even before a benign majority. But if the majority community follows the above law of the jungle by bullying the minority communities these latter would become several times more aggressive and dysfunctional, and will prevent the country from becoming great and prosperous.

Few things can unleash as much energy, both constructive and destructive, as religion can. How many wars have been fought in the name of religion! Most of the architectural wonders of the ancient world like the pyramids of Egypt, the rock temples of Ajanta and Ellora and the great cathedrals of Europe symbolize the power of religion. There is no sacrifice too great when fired by zeal for the cause of one's religion. This is specially so with regard to our country where the whole atmosphere has been and is charged with religious sentiments and ideals. But, unfortunately, for our country religious energies are wasted for destructive purposes of inter-religious rivalries and riots. In the bargain *adharma* conquers *dharma*

³¹ *India Today*, March 17, 2003, 21.

thereby making India the second most corrupt country of Asia and one of the most corrupt ten countries in the world preventing its economic growth and moral greatness.

It seems to me that dialogal liberation is an answer for all religions to the challenges of India with regard to national integration, massive poverty of the millions, caste-atrocities against the Backward Castes, exploitation of the tribals, etc. This has to be the church's answer to her mission of establishing and spreading God's Kingdom. The Kingdom of God Ideal, as far as human relations are concerned, advocate, equality, fellowship, serving leadership, corrective forgiveness when relations are strained and special option for the economically poor and the socially marginalized (Dalits, etc.). This ideal, as has been hinted at earlier, is very similar to the world family ideal (*vasudhaiva kutumbakam – atraiva vishvam bhavati ekanīdam*), and is deeply rooted in the Hindu ethos, and in the Indian ethos as a whole. Similar ideals can be found in Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, and Sikhism. The *Preamble of the Indian Constitution* declares this ideal in terms of equality, fraternity, freedom, etc. '*Conversion*' for Christians today, then, is *Dialogal Liberation*, and propagating this ideal among other religions to create a better and greater India. This ideal is implied in the following statement of Jesus, known as the "Golden Rule": "Do for others what you want them to do for you: this is the meaning of the Law of Moses and of the teachings of the prophets" (Mt. 7:12). The following ancient Sanskrit verse attributed to Vyasji and given as though the summary of Hindu ethos is the negative expression of Christ's Golden Rule:

*Ślokārdhena pravakshyāmi yad uktam shāstra kotibhi
Ātmani pratikūlāni na pareshām samācharet*

(= I shall say with just half of a verse (*ślōka*) what has been expressed through millions of scriptures: Do not do to others what you do not want others do to you).