



January 2002

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Recommended Citation

Amaladoss, Michael (2002) "Religious Conversions: An Indian Christian Point of View," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 15, Article 5.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1272>

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Religious Conversions: An Indian Christian Point of View

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THE phenomenon of conversions as changing one's religious affiliation has become an issue for lively discussion and even controversy in India today. Some do not see the need for them. Others are ready to tolerate them, but decry the use of allurements or force. Force need not be physical: it could be psychological, social or even spiritual. Democracy is a game of numbers. Therefore the increase in the numbers of one religious group becomes a political problem, when religion has become a factor in politics. Some would like to keep religion a private affair that should not get mixed up with politics. Where religions do not have a strong institutional structure, religious identity itself becomes an ambiguous phenomenon. While some count every one who does not belong to 'foreign' religions, namely Islam and Christianity, as belonging to the broader Hindu fold, Buddhists, Sikhs, some Dalits and tribals have declared that they are not Hindus.

A brief look at Indian history offers us a mixed picture. Even before the common era, many people became Buddhists and Jains and many of them were reconverted. Religious controversies were not lacking. In the Middle Ages groups of people converted to Islam and Sikhism. In the modern period, some have converted to Christianity. In more recent times, Ambedkar led thousands of his followers to Buddhism. There have

been some like Keshub Chandra Sen and Subba Rao who declared themselves followers of Jesus, but did not feel the need to join any Church. There have been others like Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, Manilal Parekh and Pandita Ramabhai, who had been baptized into a Church, but later distanced themselves from it. Gandhi was against conversions, since he believed in the equality of all religions, though each one may be imperfect in its own way. Every one must search for Truth in the circumstances where God has placed him/her by birth, though one could always learn from other religious traditions.

Christian mission in the past had focused on converting other people to Christianity as the only way to salvation. Today, most Christian theologians in India agree that all religions facilitate salvific divine-human encounter. John Paul II has affirmed the presence and activity of the Spirit of God in other cultures and religions and the need for us to respect the freedom of the Spirit and the freedom of human response in every divine-human encounter. (Redemptoris Missio, 28) However, if some people feel called to become disciples of Jesus in the fellowship of the Church, they will be welcomed wholeheartedly and joyfully. Such conversion is always a response to God's call and it is not for us to interfere with the freedom of God calling

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and the freedom of the people responding to God's call. At this level one is open to accept conversions, not only to Christianity, but also to other religions.

Conversions are not purely spiritual acts. They are human events. As such they are conditioned by or expressive of many dimensions of humans in society like the psychological, social and cultural, not to speak of the economic and the political.

Psychologically, conversions, particularly of individuals, can be very deep personal events. They are stages in a person's search for and growth in ultimate values in his/her life. At this level the person is totally free. There are occasions when observers or friends speak of brain-washing techniques. But we also know of genuine experiences that involve struggles and difficult choices. Such personal choices have to be respected. It is the respect due to human dignity and to the supremacy of conscience in personal moral and spiritual behaviour.

Religion is also an element of deep personal and social identity. A person interiorizes this as a part of growing into the membership of a group. Psychologists suggest that this takes place already at a pre-school age of three or four, mediated by the practice of religion and participation in life-cycle and social rituals and celebrations. The question is whether a person or a group is forever condemned to belong to this identity or are they free to change it or even build new ones. This is not an abstract question. Individuals may find this a difficult process, but people have been doing it everywhere and at all times. The reasons need not be strictly religious. This may be difficult to understand in a Hindu context. According to this a person is born into a particular caste and state of life because of his/her karma. This cannot be changed at least in the course of a life-time, though one can hope for a change of social status in the next birth. In India, some Dalit groups have chosen to become Muslim, Christian or Buddhist precisely to become free of such

identity at birth. At a merely sociological level they may not have achieved this, because their status in society does not depend only on them. But at a personal psychological level they feel free from such an assigned status. The motive of conversion here is not purely religious, but also social. I think that these groups do have the freedom to construct a new social identity for themselves. They need not be victims forever of the identity in which they were born. Since their social identity is linked closely to their religious identity, a change in social identity involves also a change in religious identity.

We can raise a wider question in this context. A particular religion seems attractive, not merely for religious reasons, but also for non-religious ones. Of course, they have their roots in religious beliefs. But they are not directly religious. For example, some individuals and groups seem to be attracted by phenomena like healing. Others may be drawn by similar factors like economic development or political liberation. Some religions like Christianity accept that God can speak a human, social and even economic and political language. The Bible is full of stories of liberation and healing. They do not see a dichotomy between the human and the spiritual/divine. It is easy to see such non-religious factors as inducements. They can be so abused. But they can also be symbols of a deeper religious dimension, perceived as such by people who are responding to them. Sometimes there is a tendency to question the judgment of people who are economically poor or socially marginalized. But this is to question the very basis of democracy. People have shown repeatedly that they know exactly what they want.

Culture is as important an element of personal and social identity as religion. Culture and religion are closely related. Both mediate and express the human quest for meaning, though religion concerns itself with ultimate questions. But such close relationship does not mean identity,

especially in the case of metacosmic or developed religions. Buddhism is a good example of a religion that is present in various cultures. In the case of Christianity in India, Roberto de Nobili in the 17th century affirmed the principle that one can become a Christian while remaining an Indian socially and culturally. People today accuse him of meekly submitting to the caste system. Christianity itself remained foreign in its official self-expression, though the people made it their own in popular religiosity. In such a situation, conversion to Christianity may be seen as a partial abandoning of one's cultural identity. However there have been half-hearted efforts at indigenization after the Second Vatican Council. On the other hand the Euro-American culture has had and is having an increasing impact on Indian culture. It is possible that people who feel attracted to Christianity are also enticed by a foreign culture, especially when it is compared to the local culture which is experienced as oppressive.

Some people in India may experience conversion as a rejection of their culture. This seems an exaggeration in two ways. First of all, the inter-cultural encounter brought on by colonialism in the past and by the process of globalization in the present is much more deep and problematic than the foreign cultural impact through religious conversions. The latter can be seen as one small element of the former. Secondly, it is not proper to simply identify religion and culture. Unfortunately, this is what the advocates of the ideology of Hindutva seem to be doing. They do not see the distinction between Hindu and Indian meaningful. They demand that every Indian must see India as their sacred land and the Hindu myths as their sacred history. This is an

unacceptable mixture of religious and cultural identity. Modern Vedantins have no problem with people who are not Indian culturally nor Hindu religiously practicing the Vedanta, because it is seen as supra-cultural and supra-religious. They should be able to understand other religions claiming to be supra-cultural.

As a matter of fact, there have been and are Christians in India who look upon themselves as Hindu-Christians, seeking to integrate with their Christian faith, not merely Indian culture, but also aspects of Hindu religious experience. But they do not foresee Christianity becoming a sect of Hinduism without losing its identity.

An easy identification of culture and religion may be further complicated when they are linked to nationality. This has led some to consider Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, not merely as Indian, but as belonging to the Hindu family. As a matter of fact, the Hindu personal law is applied also to the followers of these religions. Here we see the identification of religion, not only with culture, but with society. So a convert to Islam or Christianity is seen as leaving not only Hinduism, but Hindu society. Some would like to equate it with Indian society and so consider Islam and Christianity as foreign religions. Hinduism may have developed and may have existed longer in India. But it also has its roots outside India.

When India became a republic, it chose a secular political order that is neutral and positive to all religions. If such a secularism is maintained, then one's religious affiliation, and therefore conversion from one religion to another, need not become a political problem. It is to such a situation that we in India need to be moving.