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# Evangelization and Conversion Reconsidered in the Light of the Contemporary Controversy In India A Hindu Assessment

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THE contemporary controversy in India, centered on the issue of evangelization and conversion, has elicited a variety of responses from both Hindus and Christians. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, a well known Vedanta teacher and founder of Arsha Vidya Pitham, equates conversion with violence because of the pain it causes to the family and community of the convert. He likens the religions of the world to ancient historical monuments and argues that these religions, like the pyramids of Egypt, must be preserved and protected. He expresses his approval for what he describes as 'nonaggressive' religions that do not seek to win converts. Swami Dayananda equates Hinduism with Indian culture and contends that conversion implies the destruction of the entire culture.<sup>1</sup> There have been calls, also, on the Hindu side, for the enactment of laws to prohibit conversion from one religion to another. Many of the responses, on the Christian side, present the issue as one of religious freedom and argue for the liberty of religious choice and the right to convert. Like proverbial ships in the night, passing each other without engagement, these representative arguments seem to

provide no common basis from which the issue of conversion may be satisfactorily addressed and a meaningful dialogue initiated.

Let me state, at the outset, that religious diversity and interreligious relations are not problems exclusive to Christianity. Appearances are sometimes deceptive and we must be careful that we do not condemn others for attitudes and problems that are also found in our own traditions. Hinduism is not unfamiliar with religiously motivated efforts to win over another to one's point of view. Traditional biographies of the famous Advaita teacher, Shankara, celebrate his debates and victories over rival schools and the conversion of the defeated to the Advaita viewpoint. The Bhagavadgita (18:68) commends the person who shares its teachings with the interested listener and a similar sentiment may be found in other Hindu texts. The neo-Advaitin, Swami Vivekananda, spoke of the world of religions as "only a traveling, a coming up of different men and women, through various conditions and circumstances, to the same goal."<sup>2</sup> The goal, in this case, is *brahman*, the undifferentiated reality

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underlying and uniting everything. In the spectrum of theological responses to religious diversity, Vivekananda would be an inclusivist. The language of the inclusivist is not demeaning and antagonistic towards other beliefs. There is, however, a hierarchical scheme in which all others are included and in which one's own viewpoint stands at the apex. Most Hindu attitudes to religious diversity are inclusivistic and not different, in essence, from many contemporary Christian interpretations.

The Hindu tradition has also generated its own brand of exclusivism characterized by unsympathetic denunciation of other traditions. The Arya Samaj founder, Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-83), took his stand on the Vedas. He understood the Vedic canon to be the infallible repository of all knowledge, secular and sacred. On the basis of his interpretations of the Vedas, he launched a vigorous attack on Jainism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. He was selective in his reading of the texts of other traditions and his method was apologetic and polemic. Examples could be multiplied, but my intention is to make the point that the challenges of diversity are not limited to Christianity and that the Hindu heritage ought not to be construed as entirely irenic in history and character. There are resources in Hinduism for discussing diversity, but Hindus cannot be arrogant in their attitude to others on this matter.

From the Hindu point of view, the issue of conversion is not reducible to one of the right of choice. In numerous ways, Hinduism has acknowledged the diversity of human beings, religious paths and the freedom to exercise choice among the latter. It emphasizes multiple ways of being religious, in the doctrine of the *margas*, and in the notion of the *ishtadeva* (chosen God). The *ishtadeva* concept developed in a context where different religious and cultural communities existed, each with its own distinctive images, doctrines and ways of worshipping God. From among these, a person chooses one that becomes her or his

*ishtadeva*. The Hindu tradition is also explicit about the human character and limits of all theological language and about the importance of perspective and context when we speak of God. In the light of its historical pluralism and its philosophical insights for accommodating and explaining pluralism, what are the specific problems of Hinduism with Christianity and, more specifically, with Christian evangelization and conversion? Clearly, any answer to this question must take into account contemporary social and political developments in India and, more specifically, the rise of Hindu nationalism and its effects on Hindu attitudes towards Christianity. Such an analysis, however, is beyond the scope of this presentation. Contemporary tensions should not also obscure the long history of peaceful co-existence and interaction between Hindus and Christians on the Indian subcontinent. In troubled times, this fact is easily overlooked.

While Hindu traditions honored the freedom of individuals to select and commit themselves to different religious ways, these choices were exercised among the religious alternatives which evolved in India and which, in spite of their differences, affirmed significant elements of a common worldview. Discussions among these traditions were dialogical in nature and there was no organized agenda to completely supplant other viewpoints. Relationships were not aggressive and the metaphors not militaristic or triumphant. Traditions were viewed as members of a single family tree. Hindu orthodoxy did not require doctrinal uniformity but recognition of the Vedas as one of the sources of valid knowledge. Buddhism and Jainism are regarded as non-orthodox because of the formal rejection of Vedic authority, but these originated in India and reflect many elements of the general worldview. While orthodoxy was important for the small number of philosophers and theologians in the various traditions, the general emphasis was on orthopraxy. Doctrinal divergences among the orthodox

traditions were also easily accommodated because none of these fundamentally challenged the legitimacy of the hierarchical system of caste. The social order remained intact. Although many *bhakti* teachers in the medieval period preached an anti-caste doctrine, they were not successful in effecting any widespread social change. Equality remained an ideal of the religious and not the social sphere and social reform was peripheral to the reconstitution of religious belief.<sup>3</sup>

As we reflect on Hindu-Christian relations in India, we must be cognizant of both the antiquity and diversity of Christianity. The Christian tradition in India has a long history. The Eastern Orthodox churches, for example, trace their arrival to the first century and have a history that is not connected with any colonial enterprise. We must also be cautious not to causally equate colonial and Christian expansion in India. Christian friends in India remind me that their encounter with the tradition was through fellow Indians and not western missionaries.<sup>4</sup> Yet it is also true that Christianity made an impact in India as a carriage in the train of Western colonialism. It became associated, in reality and in the minds of Hindus, with imperialism and with the arrogance and disdain of the colonizer towards India and especially towards India's cultural and religious forms and expressions. This association lingers and continues to inform and influence Hindu attitudes to Christianity in India. Unfortunately, there is little familiarity with the varying histories, faces and complexity of the tradition in India. This leads to monolithic characterizations and stereotyping. Many Christian attitudes towards Hinduism were seen as echoing Western claims to political and cultural supremacy. These were reflected in exclusive theological claims to revelation, salvation and truth and in the denunciation of Hinduism. There was an insistence that the Christian understanding of the human condition and its salvific resolution to the human problem is the only

true way. Hindu paradigms were denounced as entirely false.<sup>5</sup> Corresponding to the British intent to dominate India politically and to extend its authority to all parts, many western Christians proclaimed an agenda to overcome and replace its indigenous religious traditions. Social customs, for which religious legitimation was claimed, especially the institution of caste with its acceptance of untouchability, were condemned. A functioning alternative to the hierarchy of Hinduism was offered, challenging Hinduism both theologically and socially. Christianity's explicit wish was to become *the* religious tradition of India and not to exist humbly alongside other traditions. Its theological stand was aggressive, arrogant and replete with militaristic metaphors. There was a systematic and institutionalized character to Christian proselytization that contrasted with Hinduism's decentralization. In the context of prevailing religious attitudes, the Christian challenge was both unique and discordant.

In spite of the fact that Christianity has made revisions in its theological response to Hinduism and continues to discuss and assess its relationship with other religions, such theological movements have had a minimal impact on the way in which most Hindus think about or encounter Christianity. These have not transformed, I may also add, the thinking of most Christians about Hinduism. The consequence is that Hindus continue to imagine and encounter Christianity as an exclusive religion which is not genuinely open to the religious claims and experiences of others and which is concerned primarily with increasing its institutional power and domination through evangelization and conversion. It is still seen as an ally of westernization. Such perceptions and experiences induce uneasiness, resentment, defensiveness and, on occasions, hostility. Hindus have the perception that mission is the most important concern of Christianity and they are not generally aware of the

internal theological diversity of the tradition and the divisions that currently exist about the meaning of mission. They will be surprised to discover voices of support within Christianity for their struggles with evangelization.

While it would be inappropriate and presumptuous for me, as a Hindu, to prescribe an acceptable Christian theological attitude towards Hinduism, it is important for Christians to understand and take seriously the historical and experiential causes for Hindu attitudes to Christianity and to consider the reasons why its exclusivity is apprehended as a discordant note. If, as Michael Amaladoss, claims, "most Christian theologians in India agree that all religions facilitate salvific divine-human encounter," and if the Catholic Church affirms "the presence and activity of God in other cultures and religions,"<sup>6</sup> the implications of such a different theological stand towards Hinduism must be widely communicated to Hindus and Christians in order that relationships be transformed and Hindus encounter and experience Christianity as a religion which not only recognizes plurality but which is also able to positively affirm the value and significance of other traditions. Traditionally, Christian theology has functioned in the service of missiology, providing the rationale and justification for the missionary enterprise. It seems to me that one of the consequences of this relationship is that even when Christian thinking about other religions changes, this does not generally translate itself into review of the nature and meaning of mission. Theology seems unable to reverse the historical nature of its relationship with mission.<sup>7</sup>

While Hindus find it difficult to understand and relate to traditions that profess exclusive theological claims, it would be wrong for Hindus to ask that such traditions renounce these claims as condition for acceptance. The right of each tradition to define itself must be honored, including those like Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism

that have their origins in India. We must not be too ready, as is often the case, to overlook differences, to see these as largely semantic in nature or to relegate differences to what are regarded as the non-essential aspects of religion. Such scant regard for differences is frustrating for those many who seek engaging relationships with Hindus. They perceive in such approaches an attempt to deny them a distinct religious identity and to assimilate and absorb them in the wider Hindu fold. Inclusivism, whether of the Christian or Hindu variety, denies the other the space for an authentic self-definition. At the same time, Hindus have an obligation, in dialogue, to question and present theological alternatives to Christian exclusivism.

Hindus can understand the Christian desire to share religious experiences and truths and are urged to do so themselves where there is sincerity of interest and inquiry. In recent times, several Hindu movements and teachers have developed programs which seek to make the insights of Hinduism available to persons whose ancestral roots do not lie in South Asia. We must also be aware of ways in which proselytization can be disruptive to the life of a community and can provoke antagonism and resentment. This is especially so when the methods are aggressive and coercive, where social, economic or political rewards are offered and when other traditions are falsely represented either through ignorance, arrogance or deliberate misrepresentation. No tradition is served if converts are gained through the employment of such questionable methods. Religious faith is meaningful only when it is freely chosen in truth. Unfortunately, too many encounters between Hindus and Christians occur only through proselytizing efforts that are usually monological in nature and where there is no mutual sharing of convictions. We need to create more occasions where members of both religious communities have opportunities to listen and to share, to ask questions and to be questioned in an

atmosphere of mutual respect and inquiry. If on the basis of freedom and mutual sharing, a person makes a decision to embrace another faith, the integrity of such a choice must be accepted and respected.

The rhetoric of contemporary Hinduism and its self-understanding has been deeply influenced by India's colonial past in which Christianity, as noted before, was seen as the servant of Western imperial interests. Cultures and religious traditions that were subject to the arrogance of colonialism have emerged with a bruised sense of self. They are defensive in their relationships with other traditions, concerned with the restoration of power and preoccupied with pride building. While the historical roots of these characteristics are understandable, it is a response dictated by historical circumstances and, in this sense, not a choice of self-determination exercised in freedom. The focus on pride building does not easily accommodate a critical approach to tradition. These are among the reasons why, I believe, Hindus still see Christianity as a tradition which is concerned with extending its power and influence by drawing large numbers of Hindus into its fold. In the eyes of Hindus, Christianity is able to accomplish this because of its better economic resources and its aggressive evangelization. Hindus respond to evangelization as a power struggle and seek, through various means, to limit it and to win back converts to the Hindu fold. There is more concern about stemming the tide of conversion and little or no agonizing about what the tradition has to offer to those whom it wants to retain within its fold.

What is painfully missing in the Hindu response to Christian evangelization and conversion is a spirit of introspection and self-critical appraisal. It appears to me that there are no serious Hindu attempts to understand the attractiveness of Christianity to the convert. Granted that the motives for conversion are many and complex, it is clear that many Hindus, especially those from the so-called untouchable castes,

experience their tradition as oppressive and as negating their dignity and self-worth. For such persons, the Christian message of the inclusive love of God and acceptance in a community where human equality and value are affirmed is liberative. In a social context where occupation may still be determined by caste and where the ability to change one's identity and work must await future birth, the opportunity for a new identity, which may afford choice and better economic opportunities, will be compelling. For such persons, the argument that the religion into which one is born is best, only adds to the oppression. Hinduism must be challenged by conversion to understand the many ways in which the tradition may not be meeting the needs of those who are born into its fold. We cannot celebrate the interest of many, in the West, who are disillusioned with Christianity and Judaism and who turn to Hinduism for spiritual succor, while failing to understand and be compassionate to those, in India, who find Hinduism to be anything but liberative and who seek nourishment elsewhere.

Many Christians unfortunately see the Hindu struggle against conversion as a disguised effort to preserve the privileges and power relationships inherent in the caste system. Such a perception reflects a monolithic and stereotypical view of Hinduism, not unlike the Hindu perception of Christianity as a tradition concerned only with increasing power through conversion. Such a view ignores the controversial nature of the caste structure in Hinduism and the continuing history of challenge to the system by distinguished Hindu leaders and movements. It also ignores the fact that even the Christian Church in India has not been able to free itself from the social inequities and expressions of caste. While some are able to escape the oppressive features of caste through conversion, greater good and change for many more may be achieved by the transforming influence that the example of one religion can have on another and by its catalytic effects. The ability of one religion

to influence another in this way, however, depends on developing a relationship of trust, sorely lacking among many Hindus and Christians in India today. Trust provides the secure ground on which we can stand in order to be self-critical in the presence of people of our own and other traditions. It is the soil in which truth can flourish and where difficult questions that we want to ask of each other can be raised. It offers our best hope for mutual understanding and transformation.

One significant dimension of the evangelization and conversion controversy, where the Hindu and Christian approaches differ and where the potential for fruitful dialogue exists, has to do with the nature and meaning of liberation. Traditionally, the quest for liberation (*moksha*), as articulated in the Upanishads, occurred after a life of success in the world and the fulfillment of material (*artha*) and pleasure (*kama*) needs. The path to liberation was associated with renunciation and disinterest in the world (*vairagya*). In those forms of Christianity which emphasize the role of Jesus as social prophet and his criticism of systems of domination, liberation is construed, not only as the overcoming of estrangement from God, but also as liberation from systems of domination and the creation of a just and inclusive social order. Activity directed towards this end, such as the provision of education, health care, housing, food and clothing, are seen, from the Hindu viewpoint as inducements to conversion and, by Christians, as an inextricable expression of the meaning of their religious commitment and the quality of human relationships that this commitment requires. While both Hindu and Christians could agree that it would be wrong to use material rewards as means of enticing another to join one's religion, Hindus also need to understand better the significance of works of compassion in the lives of Christians and why, under conditions of oppression and deprivation, the caring face of God attracts. There is a lot of Christian humanitarian work, both past

and present, which is not linked to conversion, but this commendable expression of Christian values is made suspect by differing perceptions on the Hindu side. This controversial matter can be addressed, in part, by Christians cooperating with people of other traditions in bringing relief to the poor and dispossessed. Such joint effort will help to make the point that it is the overcoming of suffering and not conversion which is the primary concern of religious persons. We both need a more comprehensive understanding of the sources of human suffering and the role of religion in the midst of injustice and oppression.

As far as the complexities of the relationship between religion and culture are concerned, the ideology, at the center of the controversy, was articulated by Vinayak Damodar Sarvarkar (1883-1966) in his influential work entitled, *Hindutva*.<sup>8</sup> Sarvarkar contended that Hindus were the original indigenous people of India and constituted one single nation (*rashtra*). Hindus constitute not only a nation, but also a race (*jati*) with a common origin and blood. Sarvarkar defined Hindus as those who consider India their holy land (*punjabhumi*) and the land of their ancestors (*matribhumi/pitribhumi*). "A Hindu means a person who regards this land of Bharatvarsha from the Indus to the Seas as his Fatherland as well as his Holyland."<sup>9</sup> One of the important distinctions made by Sarvarkar is between "Hinduism" and "Hindutva (Hinduness)." In his understanding, "Hinduism" refers only to religious beliefs and practices. It comprises only a small part of the totality of "Hindutva." "Hindutva" refers to the historical, racial and cultural factors constituting the Hindu nation. It is the unifying socio-cultural background of all Hindus. In Sarvarkar's view, Sikhs, Jains, and South Asian Buddhists are Hindus. By defining a Hindu as one who regards India as both fatherland and holyland, Sarvarkar excludes East Asian Buddhists, Western converts to Hinduism and, most importantly,

Indian Muslims and Christians. For Sarvarkar, Muslims and Christians were essentially alien communities in India.

While the advocates of "Hindutva" appear to suggest a distinction between "Hindutva" and "Hinduism," this distinction is, in reality, very difficult to make. The insistence on "Hindutva" as a requirement for participation in the national life of India denies the freedom of cultural and religious self-definition to those communities who find "Hindutva" to be incompatible with their core beliefs and values. This controversy is an opportunity for the Hindu tradition to reflect more critically on its own relationship with culture, nationalism and ethnicity. Although the historical relationship between Hinduism and Indian culture has been very close, the major traditions of Hinduism understand their truth claims as universal in nature and relevance. However, since the majority of Hindus have always lived in India, Hinduism has not wrestled, in any significant way, with the challenges of adapting itself to a cultural environment where it was not dominant. There are several factors, however, which may bring about a reevaluation of the relationship between religion and culture in Hinduism. Today, Hindus, through immigration, find themselves as minorities in many parts of the world. They desire to participate fully in the lives of their new homelands while, at the same time, preserving a distinctive identity as followers of Hinduism. They would shudder at any definition of nationality that required them to relinquish their historical identities as the price of participation. In addition, their exposure to alternative cultures will challenge them to consider the relationship between Hinduism and the dominant cultures in their homelands. The adoption of Hinduism by people who do not have ancestral roots in the Indian sub-continent will also push the tradition to emphasize those aspects of its world view that are not culture specific. Under these circumstances, those beliefs and practices will survive

which address, in a more universal manner, the human condition while those that are inseparable from particular historical and cultural contexts will be left behind. The identification and articulation of those elements of its worldview that are relevant, more broadly, to the human condition will extend the Hindu appeal across the frontiers of ethnicity and culture. As the tradition begins to understand itself as compatible with a variety of cultural expressions, it will cease to demand cultural conformity of other traditions in India. The readiness to completely equate Hinduism with Indian culture makes it difficult for the religion to offer a detached critique of cultural traditions that may be inconsistent with its core claims and values.

While Sarvarkar's articulation of the relationship between religion, culture, nationalism and ethnicity is an extreme one which may not be shared widely among Hindus, we must still wrestle with the mistrust that the matter of the relationship between religion and culture engenders. Hindus, as already noted, see Christianity as inextricably linked to western cultural values and this continues to be reinforced by the influx of missionaries and funds from abroad. Even genuine attempts at indigenization are regarded suspiciously by Hindus as tactical strategies in the task of proselytization. There is a fear, unsupported by stagnant Christian numbers, that the growth of Christianity will result in the decimation of the unique cultural traditions of India and the desire to see a face of Christianity that is distinctively Indian. Christians, on the other hand, interpret expressions of this fear and concern as indicative of a wish to "Hinduize" Christianity and thus deny its special character. The relationship between religion and culture, in India, needs to be addressed not only by Hindus, but by both traditions in dialogue as a way of confronting current ungrounded fears and mistrust on this issue.

There is an ancient and powerful tradition of pluralism in India that made it



possible to accommodate a wide diversity of religious beliefs and practices and to offer shelter to persecuted religious groups for centuries. It is this genuine hospitality to pluralism that can, once again, point the way forward as India agonizes over its <sup>identity</sup> as a nation. While no political system can afford to ignore the concerns of its majority community, if the Hindu tradition backs a form of majority rule that is unable to accommodate plural religious identities, it would send a tragic message to other countries that are struggling with the challenges of pluralism and seeking to build cohesive communities out of their diversity. India has the resources in its tradition for constructing a national identity out of the wealth of its plurality. This may yet be its greatest contribution to our world.

### Notes

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1. See *Hinduism Today*, November 1999, 52.
2. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 8 vols, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1964-1971), I, 4.
3. For more discussion on this issue see Anantanand Rambachan, *The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of the Vedas* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1994). Chapter 1.
4. St. Thomas Christians would also point out that Roman Catholics attacked their worship practices after the arrival of the Portuguese in India.
5. It is important that we do not overgeneralize here since there are examples of missionaries who took a more open attitude to the Hindu tradition.
6. Michael Amaladoss, "Religious Conversions: An Indian Christian Point of View," *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin* 15 (2002), 3.
7. S.W. Ariarajah, "Religion and Plurality: Central Theological Issues in the Christian Faith" Paper presented at Interreligious Meeting, Malibu, California, important attempt at reformulating the nature of Christian mission see, Thomas Thangaraj, *The Common Task: A Theology of Christian Mission* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999).
8. Hindutva, p.1