

A Biblical Theological Reflection on the Theme of Conversion

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Introduction

The debate on conversion, which is picking up momentum in India and in Sri Lanka is not new. In India it dates back to nationalistic stirrings early in the 20th century. The first one to initiate that debate was Gandhiji himself. Gandhiji had been pestered by Christian missionary zeal when he was in South Africa. So when he came back to India he already had a strong prejudice against all forms of missionary endeavour in India. He had, however, been strongly influenced by Ruskin's book, *Unto This Last*, which commended God's justice which is concerned to pay wages in accordance with need and not merely according to the number of hours of work, based on the Parable of the Land Owner who went on hiring the unemployed workers until the 11th hour and who paid equal wages to all. Gandhiji had also been very positively influenced by the missionary C. F. Andrews who was later came to be known as 'Dheenabandu' (Friend of the Poor). The Sermon On the Mount had also become a favourite of Gandhi although when his prejudice against Christian zeal for converting people of other faiths became stronger he declared that he found greater comfort in the Gita than in the Sermon on the Mount. Gandhiji's advice to Christians was that they should attract others through their life and not through their propaganda. Just as ants gather around a lump of sugar, without sugar seeking to advertise itself and just as bees seek out flowers with nectar without the flowers having to advertise themselves so also Christians attract people by their lives and not with words.

There certainly was some legitimacy to Gandhiji's criticisms. His greatest grouse was that Indian Christians by and large were supportive of the British Raj without any patriotic zeal for national liberation from colonial rule. He also took exception to the cultural assimilation to western styles by all those who were educated in Christian Mission Schools.

Later Gowalker the Founder of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, wrote in *Our Nationhood Defined*,

"Non-Hindu peoples in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect the Hindu Religion, must entertain nothing but the glorification of the Hindu race and culture...***MUST CEASE TO BE FOREIGNERS OR MAY STAY IN THE COUNTRY WHOLLY SUBORDINATE TO THE HINDU NATION***" (emphasis mine)

These are reminiscent of declaring Buddhism as national religion and of the attempts at making Sinhala as the only official language of the country in Sri Lanka.

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The slogan of Gowalker the founder of RSS has been given a new fillip by Sudarsan its present day President. During the reign of Bharatiya Janata Party which is the political offspring of the RSS quite a lot was done to give practical expression to it. Soon after the Gujarat riots against tribal converts to Christianity, sponsored by the state government from behind, instead of condemning the riots the then prime minister of the nation, Vajpayee said that we need a national debate on conversion. Several state governments promulgated laws forbidding "Forced Conversions" during the regime of the BJP. All this is to please the increasing majoritarian sentiments on communalistic grounds so that the Hindu Vote Bank could be enlarged. The saving factor of Indian Democracy was that all such attempts backfired on the BJP and it got thrown out of power in spite of the fact that they were hoping to ride a wave of resentment by harping on Ms Sonia Gandhi's Italian origin and ipso facto Christian background. Now even Ms Jayalithaa our Chief Minister who hastily promulgated an anti conversion law without even consulting the Legislative body has now retracted the law.

If we could dismiss the anti-conversion lobby as a fringe phenomenon we need not worry too much. Very responsible Hindu and secular leaders have also given a call to desist from activities of conversion. On the other hand we need to admit that not all missionary activity could be endorsed by responsible Christians. For while we must go on affirming the rights of all religions to propagate their religion, we also need to take a strong view of exclusivist claims which unfortunately undergird much evangelistic activity and unethical ways of pressurizing people to change their faith affiliations. This calls for a biblical theological reflection on the whole theme of Conversion.

For a Christian the dilemma is this. No Christian can be free from the inner urge to commend God and the hope for God's Just Reign of peace and justice as was made known in Jesus Christ. We would always want our friends, our colleagues, neighbours and the poor at large to know the great hope God has given in our hearts. And, having tasted the inspiring and empowering friendship of Christ we cannot but desire that those who have not known him to come to know him. The only way we think this is possible is to call others also to become like us! We also, however, are painfully aware of the way in which the Christian Church has nurtured exclusivist attitudes among its members. The History of Missions leave much to be desired in that it has been a joint enterprise of imperialist onslaughts of the West. As already referred to Cultural alienation from ones own native culture has taken place not always because the new culture adopted is less domination endorsing and less hierarchically oriented and enshrines Kingdom values. And, finally we must admit that many devout people of other faiths and many secular humanists have exhibited much better commitment for justice than most Christians. What is the source of their inspiration? Would they be left out of salvation and we those who have done little to further the cause of justice be saved?

Prof T.K. Thomas in his little booklet, *The Impact and the Challenge* (published by ECC, Whitefield, Bangalore) has succinctly explained the dilemma " We need to rethink our strategy as to how best to continue in mission giving heed to the legitimate grievances without opting out of the

obligation to proclaim Christ as Lord expecting at least some to accept the call openly."

There are some allied issues to be considered as well. In India the Movement of the Arya Samaj has been encouraging Christians and Muslims to return to the Hindu fold. A lot of pressure is exerted by securing positive discriminatory benefits as most of their target population belong to Dalit and Adivasi backgrounds, benefits which had been hitherto denied because of their adhering to the Christian or Islamic faiths. The worst part of these re-conversions is the purification rites conducted indicating that as Christians and Muslims they had become polluted and unacceptable to God. Along with doctrines and sentiments of superiority which motivate conversion and re-conversion activities we also need to reckon with the socio-political and socio-cultural Agendas which tend to reinforce the divide one way or the other. I shall begin with a personal affirmation of my present day stand . We shall then move on to an exploration of the Gospel Commission Texts all of which are attributed to the Risen Lord and then seek to draw out the implications of Luke's map of the progress of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome in the Book of Acts of the Apostles with special reference to Paul's mission strategies. It is often assumed that the Risen Lord wanted the whole world to be converted to Christianity and that Paul faithfully tried to implement that mandate. We need first of all to verify whether this is an accurate representation of the Risen Lord's sending forth into all the world and Paul's own missionary journeys. The theological implications of our enquiry needs to be spelt out with care so that we can draw helpful insights to take sides in the debate on Conversion.

A Personal Starting Point

I am glad I am a Christian. As I was born to Christian parents my acceptance of the Gospel was not hindered by any cultural barriers. This means that I must understand the difficulties my peers who belong to other faiths will face when presented with an invitation to consider the Christian claims for God and God's purposes for the world and for all of creation. Because I am excited about the personal companionship of the risen Lord, and because of the deeper understanding of God and God's purposes for all of humankind into which I believe I am led day by day through that companionship the urge to commend Jesus is an unquenchable one. I do admit that this new meaningful life has come to me via the route of a cultural alienation from my native cultural moorings and adoption into a hybrid Indian Christian culture.

Honestly speaking, however, I am not totally unhappy about this colonized/hybridized state of affairs. For it is not without positive benefits. I do not any longer regret that I have been weaned away from what might have been way of life, that of a Sudra Toddy Tapper. In fact, if my grandparents on both sides had not embraced Christianity would I have come into existence at all? An interesting thought!

So, as I owe my very existence and all the meaning and joy which I now enjoy inspire within me a strong urge to see others come to experience the same joy and meaning.

At the same time, however, I am also aware that much that passes for Evangelism falls far short of commending the real Jesus witnessed to by the Gospels. Much missionary endeavour is arrogantly exclusivist for which there is no room in the thought of Jesus. There is no longer any excuse for cultural colonialism especially as it has become more and more evident that Christians as much as people of any other faith affiliation have adopted a domination endorsing and a hierarchically determined deference culture. i.e. Women should defer to men, children to parents, servants to masters, the poor to the rich, the non-formally educated to the formally educated The Gospel informed culture if ever there is one in evidence should reverse all kinds of domination and the master, the bigger, the higher...should serve the slave, the lesser, the lower...

The question now is, "With the inner urge on the one hand and the awareness of the barriers created by our own obduracy on the other hand, how do we proceed?"

In the following discussion I shall try to trace the way the double awareness i.e. of the unquenchable desire to share the Gospel and the knowledge of the likely unwholesome consequences has made me re-read the bible and to reach an understanding.

A Re-reading of Jesus' Views on the Standing of People of Other Faiths with God.

A. According to Matthew

Was Jesus inclusive or was Jesus exclusive in his attitudes towards people of other faiths ? But for that one single episode of Jesus saying to the Cananite woman that it was inappropriate for him to heal her daughter because he had been sent only to the Lost Sheep of the House of Israel, Matthew presents Jesus as one who had transcended the given prejudice of the Jews against other ethnic groups in the region. But even that episode shows Jesus finally giving in to the sheer power of the woman's faith. However, it could very well be that the phrase "Lost sheep of the House of Israel" was loaded with a particular meaning, which eludes those who simply take it as Jesus' preference for his own people. Rather, the phrase Lost Sheep of the House of Israel designates those who are socially depressed among the Jewish nation, i.e. the blind, the lame and the leprosy stricken, who were deemed as cursed by God and so unfit for community membership, for example, and those who are ostensibly stigmatized like the Galileans Therefore, Jesus' stance was not one of God's special favour to the Israelites but one of a preferential option for the oppressed, the marginalized and the stigmatized. If this is correct then at least in the intention of Matthew we should understand the episode as a deliberate dramatization of Jesus choosing to ignore the pleas of the woman, so that faith in Jesus could be defined as "Understanding-Partnership" in God's concern for the oppressed. Those who are not of the group of the Lost Sheep have to accept God prioritizing the most deserving and only thus can they avail for themselves the benefits of a faith relationship with God. Therefore, when the woman says, 'Yes, Lord' and concedes that the children of the household should be taken care first. But could she be at least the spill-overs? -not because she is an alien, but because she is not of the class of the oppressed- then Jesus commends her faith and grants healing to her daughter. Let us recall the fact that Matthew reports the story of healing

the Centurion's servant earlier and concludes that story with the comment that at the Messianic Banquet there would be many who come from outside of Israel who will sit at table with The Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In the light of that story, according to the Evangelist Matthew Jesus did not entertain any "Israel Only" view of God's relationship with people of the world at large. We also take note that for Matthew the phrase 'The Lost Sheep of the House of Israel' did not carry a purely ethnic particular meaning. It was paradigmatic of God's special favour to the oppressed, the marginalized and the stigmatized.

Let us now turn to the unambiguously inclusive attitudes in Jesus emphatically witnessed to by Luke and then move on to re-read the Fourth Gospel to discern Jesus' understanding as witnessed to by the Fourth Evangelist.

B. Luke's Radical Emphasis on the Inclusive Jesus.

Luke starts his account of the ministry of Jesus with the Nazareth Manifesto and then immediately goes on to assert that Jesus declared the fulfillment of that manifesto would be inclusive just as God chose the widow of Zarithath to look after Elijah the prophet and helped Naaman the Syrian to find healing from Elisha the Prophet. This universal and inclusive outlook of Jesus, however, was deeply resented by the people of Nazareth his home town and they even attempt to kill him simply because of his inclusive stance. Even more radically Jesus makes a Samaritan Traveller as a true model to be emulated by a Jewish Lawyer if he was really keen to follow the way of salvation. For hampered by the laws of purity and pollution a priest and the levite went to the other side of the road and followed the journey lest the stricken man lying half dead in an unconscious state was already dead. The Lawyer himself although fully aware that the love of neighbour was the second great commandment was hampered from being helpful to those in need because he thought his obligation to help the neighbour was limited to a fellow Jew. Whereas the Samaritan, fully aware of all the prejudice any Jew entertained against the Samaritans, still helped the stricken Jew with great philanthropic generosity transcending his legitimate anger and resentment. Jews prided themselves in being the people of the Covenant and regarded the Samaritans as those who had fallen out of their covenant relationship with God. But yet it was a Samaritan who truly followed the path of salvation! We do know that Luke also tells the story of the healing of the Centurion's servant commending his faith as something, which he never found among his own people who thought they alone were God's people. And again, it was only a deemed outsider, a Samaritan leprosy patient, who took the trouble to seek out Jesus to thank him when he found that he had been healed by the word of Jesus while none of the other nine Jews, deemed insiders, who had also been healed never cared to return to thank God. So as far as Luke is concerned it would seem as if the well-entrenched exclusivist tendency would of itself act as a barrier that would finally exclude exclusivists themselves! Before passing on to the Fourth Gospel, perhaps we could also remind ourselves of the common testimony of all the first three Gospels that it was the Centurion-Executioner who recognized that it was Jesus as he suffered and died on the Cross who truly deserved to be king. Jesus was thought to be the Devil's agent by the religionists, the deemed people of the Covenant! Pilate had Jesus crucified for he considered Jesus to be an impostor who tried to oust the emperor and get himself seated in Caesar's throne! Jesus' own

disciples gave up all hope and fled. But it was the Centurion-Executioner, a non Jew, a hostile alien who came to understand the true nature of divine kingship, for in his language the ascription "Son of God" was the title of the emperor of Rome.

C. The Witness of the Fourth Evangelist

Simply because we are not sure that the Beloved Disciple to whom the Gospel is attributed in the text was in fact John the son of Zebedee one of the Twelve, scholars now prefer to call it simply as the Fourth Gospel. The tradition of the early Church seems to have reached a hasty conclusion that the Beloved Disciple was John and attributed the Gospel to John. How does the Fourth Evangelist portray Jesus? Did Jesus, according to him, maintain an inclusive stance or was Jesus an Exclusivist?

Jesus, we know, reached out to an unfortunate Samaritan woman who had perhaps been thrown out of marriage by five men successively and finally she had to attach herself to another man who would not give her the status of a wife. (The narration, as it stands in the Gospel, perhaps had been redacted by a later editor to give the impression that the woman was a debaucherous person who lived without any moral restraint. But taking the cultural context of lack of freedom for women to divorce their husbands she should be understood as one who had been thrown out five times.) Through her the an entire village of Samaria accepted Jesus as the Messiah. It was at this occasion that Jesus declared that the time was coming when true worshippers of God would worship God in Spirit and Truth without worrying whether it was Jerusalem which was God's abode or whether it was Mt Gerizim as the Samaritans believed.

In spite of this episodal portrayal many believe that the Fourth Evangelist would with his own pen describe Jesus only as one who insisted upon a confessional acceptance of him as the only way to God. The well known text is ***"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the father but by me"***.

This text should be read with all the clues provided by the author in the Gospel.

First of all we need to ask whether "I Am" used in this text is a simple self reference to Jesus? We must admit that the self reference is unambiguously present. But there is something beyond the self reference, i.e. it recalls the divine Name, declared to Moses in Midian. This connotation is also deliberate. The author draws our attention to this in the Garden of Gezemene. Judas and his men are there to take Jesus prisoner. It is dark. Jesus asks who was it that they were after. The mob says, "Jesus of Nazareth". Jesus simply answers "I Am". Those who came to take him prisoner, the moment they heard "I Am" they draw back and fall to the ground. Why? Because in the forthright and unhesitant declaration of Jesus as "I Am" the people heard the never-to-be-uttered Name of God. It is clear then there is a double allusion behind the I Am declarations in the Fourth Gospel. Let us look at yet another text in the Gospel when Jesus is talking to the Pharisees who challenge him on his assertion that Abraham rejoiced to see Jesus. The inference is not to Abraham sitting in heaven, even as Jesus was speaking to the Jewish leaders,

was able to look into what was happening on earth. This is made abundantly clear from the further clarification Jesus provides yet again when he says "Before Abraham was I Am". Surely, the meaning we should infer was to how Abraham became a man of faith inspired by the "I Am" who is the Second Person of the Trinity. "I Am" means God's presence as Fellow-Sufferer-Enabler who led Abraham to renounce city dwelling in the City of Ur and take to a nomadic way of life. In the bible there is a running contrast between the land owning, settled and oppressive , ways of city life and the non land owning wandering nomadic shepherd life. This is why God chooses to be the Shepherd rather than the Great Ruler. What we should infer from Jesus' words "Before Abraham was I Am", therefore, is that the same Second Person of the Trinity whose nature is always to be on the side of the oppressed and who goes on inspiring those who do not belong to the class of the oppressed to take sides with the Oppressed, that very same Second Person was the One who was incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. To understand the real meaning of "I Am" we should recall the story of God speaking to Moses from out of the Burning Bush in Midian.

When Moses asked the name of God, God declared "I Am" to be the Name of God. This declaration was made from out of the burning bush. Though the fire was raging the bush remained unscorched. This was a symbolic communication. The bush represented the suffering people of Israel who not only did hard labour for their survival but who also suffered under the genocidal onslaught of Pharaoh. Yet, they could not be crushed or annihilated because God was with them as fellow-sufferer-enabler. God gave them powers of endurance, and also inspired women like the mother of Moses to save their children under the spell of destruction, inspired Egyptian women like Siprah and Puah the midwives who defied Pharaoh's order to kill the male babies as they were being delivered and probably many other women like the daughter of Pharaoh to adopt many abandoned boy babies of the Israelites... Thus the bush remained green in spite of the raging fire of persecution. So the meaning of "I Am" unambiguously is God as God is in solidarity with the oppressed. Conversely, when anyone or a faith community expresses its solidarity with an oppressed people we should understand that such a motivation is derived from the "I Am". This way of perceiving meaning has far reaching implications. For example, the incident of Moses stepping out of the Egyptian palace to visit fellow Israelites and in the course of the visit kills an Egyptian supervisor is interpreted by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews as an act of FAITH IN THE CHRIST WHOM HE HAD NOT SEEN. This most certainly was not a conscious act of faith. He had surely not heard anything about the coming of the Messiah as that faith was yet to be born. Irrespective of whether people come to a conscious confessional understanding of Christ, all action in solidarity with the oppressed and consequent suffering endured on behalf of the oppressed should be seen as indicative of real faith. Earlier when we were looking at Matthew's portrayal of Jesus we described the faith of the Canaanite woman as an expression of faith-partnership because it involved the recognition of the legitimate priority of the social outcastes of Israel. The same kind of thought seems to be in operation here. The same kind of thought is most definitely present in the Fourth Gospel also although it does not speak the language of the oppressor/oppressed. This comes out in two texts namely 8;27f and 12;32f. In 8:27 f Jesus says that when the Son of Man is lifted up (i.e. crucified on the Cross) " you will know that I Am. The Son of Man also has a double allusion. On the one hand it

refers simply to Jesus and on the other hand it bears the connotation of the Entire Human Collective of the Oppressed. So when we see pain and suffering inflicted upon the meek and powerless people and we do not interpret that as God's punishment but see God as One who is very much present sharing in their suffering and empowering them to overthrow yokes of oppression we relate to God I Am. The Cross of Jesus, then, is the one time historical and tangible evidence provided of the through-history reality of God's presence with those who suffer all forms of injustice. This way of relating to God in faith is seen as the only way to become free from the firm grip of the Prince of the World and to bring judgment on the entire world which has been lending support to the supreme power of evil which has been controlling the affairs of the world. So in 12:32 f Jesus asserts that when he the Son of Man is lifted up three things will happen. The world is judged, the prince of the world is thrown out and all people will be drawn to the side of the victim, the lifted up Son of Man. This needs a little unpacking. The entire world is polarized into two groups. On the one side is the Human Collective of the Sufferers, the Oppressed and Jesus the Son of Man is their representative who remains lifted up on the Cross. On the other side is the world lending active support to the powers of oppression and injustice as guided by the prince of the world. The moment it dawns on those on the other side that by their support to the legitimations cleverly planted by the devil through the means of religion, through exploitative economic structures, through social stratifications, through cultures of domination ...they have been crucifying the Son of God himself and not just the poor and the powerless they throw off the shackles of the prince of the world, they change sides and stand together with the Victim Collective. This act immediately makes it possible for everyone what the world has been like. Then automatically the devil gets exorcised.

We are now in a position to return to Jn 14:6. The I Am of the text is not simply Jesus of Nazareth. But it is God I Am who became incarnate in Jesus. The way is the way of recognizing in all the unjust suffering God's presence in solidarity, the truth is that it was that reality which was made known in Jesus and which leads every one on to a life of Faith-Partnership. As we have already seen for many this Faith-Partnership becomes a reality without any confessional relationship with Jesus and without any religious expressions of baptism and church membership simply through their expressions of solidarity with the unjustly suffering one way or the other.

The Mission Mandates of the Risen Lord

At the very outset we need to point out that if Jesus during his life time did not insist on a confessional faith in him or in His Name we should not assume that in his risen life he had become someone different. Faith for him was more Faith-Partnership in the work for the expansion of the Just Reign of God than confessional faith as a criterion for winning eternal life. With this in mind let us look at the ways in which the Mission mandate was understood by the Gospel Writers and as the Mission Praxis is narrated in the Book of Acts.

The Great Commission in Matthew

According to Matthew the Great Commission took place in a mountain in Galilee and not in Jerusalem as in the Gospels of Luke and John.

The Risen Lord's Commission mandated that the Galilean disciples go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. This could only mean that cell groups of disciples were to be formed in every nation to act as leaven and salt to bring the rest of the nation under the influence of the Gospel of the Just Reign of God in the confidence that all the powers of the adversary the Evil One had now been wrenched out of his hand. The nature of discipleship is to produce Faith-Partnerships. The baptism in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit was to signify a whole hearted commitment to be involved in God's business. The idea that baptism is the sign of having been sealed for eternal life is most certainly not present in the Great Commission.

The Commission in Luke & In the Praxis of the Early Church in Acts

Luke's account of the Commission takes place in Jerusalem. The Gospel is to be preached in the whole world. The Gospel is the Good News of Forgiveness to all those who Repent. There is no instruction to baptize mentioned in the Gospel account. However, we need to take into account the practice of baptism. Peter in his sermon on the day of Pentecost called upon people to repent and receive baptism. The baptism that was administered was in the Name of Jesus Christ and not as in Matthew in the Triune Name of God. Another important thing that we should not fail to notice is that all the first converts in Jerusalem were Jews. The repentance that was required from them was from their sin of acceding to the crucifixion of Jesus. In the case of Paul it was repentance from his sin of persecuting the Christians. He seems to be baptized after the laying on of hands by Ananias to receive healing from his blindness and to receive the Holy Spirit. Paul was baptized after the restoration of sight not as a precondition for receiving his sight. The Repentance that took place in the house of Cornelius was that of accepting the Lordship of Christ. Peter came to the household of Cornelius with great reluctance as he and the Church in Jerusalem seemed to think that the Gospel was to be preached to all the Jews only as they were scattered among all the nations. They never had the idea that non Jewish people would one day be brought into the fold of the Church. There was also no idea that those who had not accepted Jesus Christ and had not received baptism would be condemned in hell. Even the proclamation in Acts 4:12 that there is no other Name given under heaven whereby people should be saved was made only to a group of Jews.

It remains a puzzle to many who have studied the history of Mission of the Apostolic Church as to why Paul never indulges in any evangelistic activity when he visits where a Church is already planted and why there is never any exhortation in any of the Letters of Paul asking the Christians to go on evangelizing, to bring in the unsaved. The understanding seems to be that once there is a Church in a town we should understand that the whole town has come under the influence of the Gospel. He uses the practice of offering the first fruits of the harvest, i.e. a Bundle of sheaves placed on the altar as signifying that the whole harvest had been brought under the sanctifying power of God. Paul argues in his Letter to the Romans, that although many Jewish people had not accepted the Gospel of Jesus Christ, simply because he and several other Jews had become believers, that these first believers would be treated as the first fruits placed on the Altar and all the Jews would therefore be brought under the sanctifying power of the Gospel. With regard to the whole world once again towards the end of his ministry Paul comes to

a universalistic understanding of the Gospel. The Church is the Elect Community but not for salvation in any exclusive understanding, rather as the fore taste and prototype of the New Human Community of Peace God would consummate in the end gathering together all things in heaven and earth under the headship of Christ. This is the understanding in the Letter to the Ephesians. In the mean time the Church armed with the armour of God should be engaged in battle with the powers which refuse to accept the Lordship of Christ.

Let us now draw our discussion on Jesus and on the Mission Mandate of the Risen Lord to a close. We saw that Jesus was radically inclusive. We also saw that there was a varied understanding of Mission depending on to whom the Gospel of Jesus Christ was addressed. Nowhere, however, any arrogant exclusivism openly advocated. Election is election for responsibility and not for privilege. When Jesus' understanding of faith is given its full meaning it is faith-partnership which Jesus emphasized and not a confessional form of faith which erects barriers between the believers and unbelievers. He did not approve of any insider vs outsider divide among people. Therefore, there is very little room, if we give primacy to the thought of Jesus for triumphalism or exclusivism. The early letters of Paul do give the impression that God had predestined some for salvation and others for damnation. But Paul very soon overcomes such an understanding and reinterprets the doctrine of election as election for the responsibility of carrying on the work began by Jesus. In the light of this we need to have a fresh look at on what basis do we advocate the on going imperative to proclaim with a call to conversion. To which task we now turn.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE ABOVE UNDERSTANDING WITH REGARD TO THE DEBATE ON CONVERSION

a. Conversion, 'Yes' Baptism, 'No'

First, even a person such as Dr. M.M. Thomas who held Salvation is Humanisation and who called the Church to risk Christ for Christ 's sake would not budge on the question whether therefore we cease to proclaim, refrain from calling people to faith and do not baptize those who respond positively.

I participated in a Seminar organized by CCA International Affairs and Delhi Forum in Chennai with M.M. as the Moderator in which eminent persons such as Swami Agnivesh, Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer, secular Humanist Prafu Kidwai and others participated.

The secular humanists were saying that religion should be purely a personal and private affair with co implications for public life which should be ordered purely on secular principles.

Swami Agnivesh on the other hand said that M.M. should issue a call to Christians to halt evangelistic efforts as he himself was asking fellow Arya Samjists to give their reconversion attempts.

To both M.M. refused to yield. He affirmed that it was because of Christ he was involved in public life although it was to uphold the

secular way of public life. Of course M.M. would have vehemently opposed those who used communalistic politics to grab power. He also told Swamy Agnivesh that while he would strongly denounce all forms of unethical evangelism in which he would include even the offer of spiritual incentives such as the promise of heaven and the threat of hell, he would not issue a call to desist from proclamation. For proclamation of the Gospel properly understood according to him, was the source and power of God for genuine politics and true community.

Swamy Agnivesh said he was very disappointed that in the end M.M. contributed to enhance the communal divide. But M.M. held firm to his position and said true proclamation of the real Gospel would promote communal harmony not communal hatred. For according to M.M. it is baptism which could be a point of division and separation. If water baptism is thought only as having the inherent potentiality to witness to spirit –baptism then we should conceive that Spirit baptism could happen without the witnessing sign of water baptism as in the case of Cornelius(Acts.10.) So M.M. would hold fast to desirability of a change of heart inspired and motivated by the Gospel without necessarily insisting on baptism and Church membership. He would also hold that such a conversion could be envisaged entirely in secular terms, but open proclamation of Christ need not and should not be a hindrance. Rightly understood it would facilitate the emergence of a true community of women and men who are committed to work for peace with justice.

The church needs to learn this hard lesson. On the other hand, I could not go all the way with M.M. to say that a converted Christian should remain in total solidarity with his original community. This is why I began the way I began. Though alienated and severed from roots, I find belonging to the new hybrid community more beneficial to live a life of freedom from inhibiting cultural traditions. It is also much more meaningful bringing joy, hope and a sense of resignation. For in the end it does not depend purely on one's own skills and efforts. For how could one be converted by Christ and remain united with a caste domination endorsing community. Christ came not to bring peace but a sword of division even into the very heart and soul of a family. Only through an initial division and polarization eventual change among the remaining unconverted group could be achieved. For those who belong to the dominant group or gender it is intoxicating to remain unconverted. Unfortunately, however, the Christian communities have retained caste loyalties and often have been totally unconcerned about the need for effective counter culture movements. So when through baptism a congregation is established by plucking them away from their original community, if there is no accompanying counter culture with kingdom values but only a hybrid culture with western cosmetics then real humanization has not taken place. This will only succeed in erecting undesirable communalistic barrier.

Water baptism, which is meant to indicate that inward Spirit-baptism has taken place, does not often fulfill that purpose. Rather, it has become a symbol of identity. In this sense it is very similar to the

nature of circumcision during the period of the early church in which the circumcised Jewish Christians found it hard to have real fellowship with uncircumcised non Jewish Christians. In Romans ch 14 Paul speaks of the circumcised Christians clinging on to their Jewish ness through rigorously observing the purity pollution laws and traditions as in fact the weaker brethren.

In a similar vein could we regard those who have been touched by Christ but who remain outside the organized Church as the stronger brethren? Such a stance would help challenge ourselves to undergo a real conversion, which will lead us into closer fellowship with such brothers and sisters.

Conversions and Re-conversions with a Socio Political Agenda

In India in the 40s Dr Ambedkar and one million Dalits became neo-Buddhists in protest against the religiously sanctioned practice of untouchability. In early eighties in a village called Meenakshipuram in Tirunelveli District of Tamil Nadu a group of Dalits of Hindu and Christian background embraced Islam to throw off the yoke of Dalit oppression.

Copnversely, The Hindu Arya Samaj Movement have been advocating conversion back to the Hindu fold. They have been wooing the Dalit and Adivasi communities by securing positive discriminatory benefits which they could not enjoy as long as any one remained a Christian or a Moslem. However, they have been insisting on a rite of purification for according to them they had become polluted and defiled because they had belonged to a foreign religion which allows impure practices such as eating beef.

First of all we need to admit that initial Christian mass movements also had social liberation as part of the agenda. If real liberation does result either from conversion into Islam or through conversion back to Hinduism we can say that Christ is present in both movements. But if the political agenda of the "evangelists" such as those backed by ISI the spy organization of Pakistan, or Hinduttwa-RSS is the dominant motive then we need to question such conversions and reconversions. It is in order to include Christian conversion also into this pale the Hinduttwa protagonists have been accusing Christians of entertaining political loyalties to Western countries.

It should not be forgotten that Hinduism itself was imported into the Indian sub continent and was imposed on the natives making the natives in the process Sudras and Dalits. The Varnashrama Dharma is foreign and does not belong to the soil. Admittedly, Hinduism was not imposed through the power of the sword. But the subtle and subversive method of gradual assimilation of the local deities into the Hindu pantheon placing them in a lower position within the alien pantheon eventually made the original worshippers of such "lesser" deities as lesser beings in the caste hierarchy. This subversive and subtle method paved the way for the alien Aryans to exercise domination over the native Dravidians for nearly three thousand years. The assimilative syncretism of Brahmanic Hinduism has created a false picture of Hindu tolerance. Hinduism has never tolerated radical reform movements like Jainism and Buddhism which arose from within.

So if Hinduttwa protagonists feel threatened by small minorities of Christians and Muslims it is because they fear their grip over the hapless Dalits and Adivasis will be loosened to great political disadvantage.

Let us come one full circle back to the question of whether we should give up baptism. When we take the full reality as it obtains today we have to say we should go on baptizing notwithstanding all the self critical assessments made. For a separate identity away from the fast growing brahminical domination is one sure way to keep an alternative open.

We need inward conversion, yes. We also need steadfast commitment. God is earning for Faith-Partnerships to emerge cutting across all barriers. But in spite of appearing to be dishonest I shall remain on the side of those who advocate propagation of the Gospel with full implications of forming a separate community. My only prayer would be that the communities so formed do become committed to the Counter Culture Movement of the Just Reign of God which is Universal and Inclusive.