Reviewing the Intricacies of Religion & Religious Conversions

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Abstract

Religion is a congregation of ethnical & belief systems, besides a worldview which link human race to spirituality and sometimes, to ethical values. Religions across the globe have narrations, insignias, traditions and holy pasts which talk about the origin of cosmos and life. Each religion has its own doctrines and set of guidelines which its supporters follow or instructed to follow. Throughout its past, religion has played a vibrant part in influencing the culture of a nation. While probing through philosophies of evolution of religion, it was found that functionalist relate the development of religion taking into account the basic needs of humanity. However, every culture besides witnessing the progression of its religious thought also view some issues linked with conversion. The word 'conversion' symbolizes a drastic change in one's spiritual dogmas and manners. In its broader sense, it refers to both personal and communal changes. This paper reviews complexities of religion and religious conversion.

Key words: *Religion, Religious Conversion, Secular, Hinduism, Christianity*

Introduction

Religion is an assemblage of cultural systems, belief systems, and worldview which connect humanity to mysticism and sometimes, to ethical standards [1]. Religions all over the world have accounts, signs, ethnicities and sacred pasts which have talked about the origin of cosmos and life [2]. The evolution of religion has taken diverse forms in different cultures. A number of religions laid stress on belief, while others emphasized on practice. Some focused on the subjective experience of spiritual individual, while others considered the activities at community level to be the most significant. Anthropologists Peter Just and John Monoghan state that:

"It seems apparent that one thing religion or belief helps us do is deal with problems of human life that are significant, persistent, and intolerable".

And the manner in which the religious dogmas attain this is by providing a set of philosophies about how and why the world is fabricated which help the people to deal with hardships [3]. One of the modern academic theories on religion propounds that religion is a modern concept that advocates all spiritual practices and worship, follows a model similar to the *Abrahamic* religions as an orientation system which helps to understand the reality and describe human beings [4]. India is a land of religious multiplicity which, besides acting as a basis of native religions, brought into it numerous other religions through traders, travelers, immigrants, and even invaders and conquerors. It is the birth place of four major religions of world namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism [5].

Throughout its history, religion has played a vital role in shaping the culture of a country. Religious diversity and religious tolerance are established in a nation by law and custom. A vast majority of Indians associate themselves with one religion. Constitutionally India is a secular nation. In the preamble of Constitution of India the term 'Secular' denotes the threefold relationship among man, state and religion. It states:

"...We the people of India, having solemnly resolve to constitute India in to a sovereign socialist republic 'secular' democratic republic and to secure to all its citizens...and give to ourselves this constitution..."[6]

Being an important part of culture and significant aspect of human life, religion has existed all through the history of human society. In nineteenth century, the Sociology of religion was concerned with two main queries, 'How religion begins?' and 'How it evolved? This evolutionary approach was governed by Darwin's theory on the origin of species, published in the year 1859. Just as Darwin, tried to explain the origin and evolution of species, so the sociologists also made an effort to elucidate the beginning and development of social institutions and society. As far as the origin of religion is concerned, two main theories, namely, animism and naturism, were advanced to account for its origin [7].

Animism, i.e. the belief in spirits, is considered to be the most primitive form of religion and Tylor argues that animism derives its source from man's attempts to answer two questions, 'What is it that makes the difference between a living body and a dead one?' and 'What are those human shapes which appears in dreams and visions?' He further argued that, religion in the term of animism, originated to gratify man's logical nature, to meet his need to comprehend sense of death, dream and vision [8]. Naturalism on the other hand, means the belief which considers that the forces of nature have supernatural power. Max Muller (as cited in Haralambos, M. & Heald, R. M., 2008) considered this to be the earliest from of religion. He argues that since nature holds amazement, fear, wonders and miracles, naturism arises from man's feelings. Awed by the power and wonder of nature, early man transformed abstract forces into peculiar agents and personified nature [9].

Thus, animism finds the basis of religion in man's rational needs, while naturalism seeks it in his emotive needs. Religion is a set of communal beliefs and held by the group of people often codified as prayer and spiritual law. The English word "religion" is derived from the Middle English word "religioun". 'Religion' comes from the old French word 'religion' which was initially been derived from the Latin word 'religo' which connotes 'good faith', 'ritual' and other alike meanings [10]. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary says that religion is one of the systems of faith that are based on the belief in the reality of a particular god or gods [11]. The New Collins Dictionary gives the meaning of religion as any formal or institutionalized expression of the belief in a supernatural power(s) considered to be divine or to have control of human destiny [12]. According to Michel Danino:

"...Religion is a Western concept; the Indian concept is neither religion nor even Hinduism nor any 'ism' - it is *Sanatana Dharma,* the eternal law of the universe, which cannot be formulated in any rigid nor final set of tenets..." [13]

From a functionalist perspective, Emile Durkheim argues that all societies divide the world into two categories, the sacred and the non-sacred and this division forms the basis of religion. It is '*a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden*'. The relationship between man and sanctified things is exactly the connection between man and society. Durkheim argues that, '*Primitive man comes to view society as something sacred because he was utterly dependent on it*'. He further argues, '*it was easier for him to visualize and direct his feelings to awe toward a symbol than towards so complex a thing was a clan*'. According to Durkheim, "life is impossible without the shared values and moral beliefs which from the 'Collect

Conscience' and in their absence, there would be no social order, social control, social solidarity or cooperation. Thus, religion strengthens the collective conscience and supports the values and moral beliefs which form the foundation of social life [14]. Bronislaw Malinowski perceives religion as the means of fortifying social norms and values to uphold social harmony. Malinowski's distinctive contribution to the sociology of religion is his argument that religion encourages social solidarity by dealing with situations of emotional stress which threaten the permanence of society [15]. Max Weber on the other hand, has shown a close association between particular social groups-the emerging capitalist class – a particular form of religion – ascetic Protestantism [16].

While examining the theories of evolution of religion, it was found that; functionalist relates the development of religion taking into account the basic needs of humanity. Thus, religious thoughts and beliefs, in day to day life, influence the human behavior. But, the contemporary world is viewing the wars being fought in the name of religion and disputes linked with religious freedom are gaining importance. Retaining equilibrium between individual's liberty and community's concern are bullying democracy. The first decade of 21st century would best be reminisced for the revitalization of religion in politics across the globe. It has become terrible to separate religion from contemporary political configuration, be it is India or the world. There never was a word, more accountable, in times gone by, for producing such amount of trouble in society than 'Religion'. India is a nation where politics is linked with religion. The first war of independence was struggled on religious grounds and one cannot overlook the fact that, two independent states were produced because of this politics. Not only this, deliberations on religious conversion have stormed in India right from the first half of 19th century and have sustained till date. The issue of conversion has ruined the associations between different religions, demanding a thoughtful consideration. Thus, it has become essential to converse factually at length and with intellectual equality, the subject of religious conversion.

Historical Perspective

In today's communally thrilling upbringing state of affairs, conversion has developed an extremely complex act. It has been declared a type of violation in many states if one adapts to any other religion than Indic religions like Hinduism, Buddhism or Jainism. Conversion, is not simply the change of religion, rather it is very intricate process and encompasses much more than change of religion. It is social, political and cultural, besides, personal problem. Philosophers and humanists have tried to capture the topic of conversion with their own experience.

The word '*conversion*' is primarily a Jewish, Christian and Muslim term symbolizing a drastic change in one's religious beliefs and behaviors. In its broader sense, however, it refers to both personal and communal changes and change in community affiliation" [17]. In Old and New Testaments of Bible, conviction and conversion are linked together. Phrases like '*born again*', '*born from above*', '*newness of life*' '*made alive in Christ*', '*a new creation*', '*as a new-born babe*', and, '*being raised from dead*' are used to describe conversion. In Bible, the Hebrew word '*shubh*' is used to convey the meaning of conversion. For Christians, the word 'conversion' is mainly a radical change in religious beliefs and conduct of an individual. In its broader sense, however, it refers to changes both at individual and communal level and. There is another closely related term for conversion '*metanoia*' which means, "A change of mind and has connotations of conversion comprising of a change of mind after reflection; a going beyond the present attitude, status or outlook; or repentance". According to Eric Routley, "Conversion means- stopping, turning, attending and pursuing a new course" [18].

In Eastern religions, particularly Hinduism, 'conversion' is understood more as a process of change rather than a moment of drastic conversion. Southhard (1992) in his study on Hinduism says that Hinduism is not a fixed set of principles or a doctrinal creed. The significance of conversion in such a diverse religion cannot be defined simply. In Hinduism, there are, "Doctrines ranging from worldly atheism, pantheism, and polytheism, to monotheism and abstract monism". Southhard in his studies pointed out two assumptions essential in the Hindu view of conversion- personal spiritual pilgrimage, with the goal of *Moksha* (salvation, enlightenment or final realization) and path to *Moksha* including *Karma Marga* – or paths of duty, *Bhakti Marga* – or the path of devotion, *Jnana Marga* – the way of wisdom. Conversion is therefore defined not as a deep-seated change in beliefs but as an evolutionary evolution of beliefs that lead a person to self-realization [19]. Indian Hindu thinkers discard the western definition of conversion. Swami Vivekananda, at the World Religious Parliament in Chicago, 1893 explained his view on conversion. He said, "The Christian is not to become Hindu or a Buddhist, nor is the Hindu or Buddhist to become a Christian. But, each must integrate the spirit of others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth" [20]. For some Indian thinkers, "Conversion means entering a course of action – a way of life...'not creed but conduct'... 'A change of behavior', the highest road to truth is "*Satyagriha*", the unswerving search for truth. Conventional Hinduism insists on the highest seekers to leave the society and become *Sanyassins*".

Today, conversion is becoming a broad and multifarious theme of research. A few opinions of scholars and human scientists can be useful in theorizing conversion. William James, Edwin Starbuck and G. Stanley Hall describe conversion as a sudden, dramatic, radical change in the life of a convert. According to William James conversion is the affair of an individual person in seclusion and an experience in loneliness. However, the circumstances and experiences of conversion of different people from different cultural and historical backgrounds have raised debates amongst human scientists. Some stress on the suddenness of conversion, while others view conversion as a steady process.

William James explained conversion, where individual men in their seclusion suddenly experience a radical change, but for Wayne Proudfoot the conversion experience is gradually shaped by a complex pattern of ideas, obligations and prospects. Wayne Proudfoot differs from William James; he considers William James' approach as narrow. According to Wayne Proudfoot the formative factors among individuals play an important role in decision making. The conversion experience therefore is not an issue in seclusion but is related with the past experiences. Proudfoot suggests that "Even a narrow focus on "individual men in their solitude" needs to be tempered by an acknowledgment of the formative role that language and beliefs, and through them society, culture and history have upon individual "feelings, acts and experiences" [21]. John Steinbeck understands conversion with or without the religious element with five basic types of experiences and one of them is traditional transition where, "Someone leaves one major religious tradition for another...these changes typified as change in worldview instead of personal orientation and self-transcendent experience. Such transitions are painful and yield some form of syncretism" [22].

Most studies of mass movements in context of India have dealt with the conversion of tribal peoples or untouchables to one of the great literate traditions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism. Conversion in case of tribal peoples is alike those of other non-literate cultures. Non-literate cultures tend to take a realistic approach to religion and are keen in utilizing whatever appears most effective. However, once a literate tradition is recognized, boundaries become clearly

defined. While non-literate peoples may willingly convert to the literate tradition, movement away from it appears more difficult [23].

According to L. W. Grensted, "Religious conversion is a building-up of a sense of entirety. His conviction that the key issue in conversion is completeness, allowed him to see the person as a total unit and view conversion as an aid in uniting human kind". However, Orlo Strunk equates conversion experience with that of 'actualization', the process which helps to calm down, exteriorize and encourage people. Conversion is defined by its effect, and is the process by which individuals understand themselves" [24].

Indian social system operates on the basis of the division of people according to their caste, class and occupation, which was given by Hindu religious philosophy governing the social order in India. People in general live in different stratifications in Indian society [25]. Pandit Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, said that the history of the Christian Church in India "*is as old as Christianity itself*" [26]. But, there is no documentary evidence available to arrive at any precise knowledge about the origin of Christianity in India. There are two views among scholars concerning the origin of Christianity in India. According to one, the foundations of Christianity in India were laid by St. Thomas, the Apostle, or even by two apostles, St. Thomas and St. Bartholomew. The other view ascribes the arrival of Christianity in India to the enterprise of merchants and missionaries of the East-Syrian or Persian Church [27]. Christianity, as per the tradition in India has existed since the first century when one of Christ's Apostles, Thomas called Didymus, traveled through Parthia to North West India. He preached the gospel and from there sailed to Malabar and arrived in Murisis in AD 52. The Apostle's mission initially focused on the Jews who were living in Malabar, but, he soon began to preach to the Hindu inhabitants of district and according to the tradition he enjoyed remarkable success despite the advanced and established Hindu culture. Thomas built seven churches and the success of his work drew the hostility of a group of Brahmins at Mylpore and St. Thomas was martyred and buried at St. Thomas Mount.

Another ancient tradition connects St. Bartholomew with India, but, these references appear only in early Western Christian writings. The mission of Bartholomew to India is confirmed by Rufinus, a contemporary of Jerome, and by a number of other Christian writers. There is hardly any information on the subsequent progress of Syrian Christians in South India until the 4th century [28]. Till the upsurge of Islam, when Muslim domination of trade and sea brought deterioration in their position, the Syrian Christians of Cochin, Cranganore and Malabar were wealthy and influential communities. The Syrians, in spite of various difficulties, managed to maintain their connection with the Eastern Church. The pre-sixteenth century Christian community consists of majority of South Indians and a few foreigners. The bulk of South Indians were in all likelihood Dravidians who had not yet established the caste conscience which we see developing later as the result of the progressive *Aryanization* of South India [29]. Vasco da Gama discovered the sea route to India. It is this discovery, which caused a permanent establishment of the Portuguese in Goa at the end of the 15th century, bringing western Christianity with them in addition to energetic missionaries to spread the gospel. During the early centuries, Christianity absorbed some of the Indian cultural forms and expressions, but after the arrival of Portuguese and the colonial powers, the Church in India inclined to project a more western image [30].

Arrival of St. Francis Xavier in 1542 marked the beginning of the era of Christian expansion in India and the Far East. He worked harmoniously with the Syrian Christians and brought thousands of converts to Christianity and established mission stations run by the Society of Jesus in different

parts of India. During his stay in India he led the religious and educational foundation of Jesuit missions, which reached its peak in the 50 years that followed. The primary targets initially for both the Apostle Thomas and the Portuguese were individuals from among the upper caste, mainly *Brahmans*. From 18th century onward, during the *Mugal* Empire the majority of Hindus become defensive about their religion and culture. The *Mugal* domain finally collapsed in the middle of the 19th century, by which, British and French, as well as Portuguese, had acquired possessions in India. Major growth of protestant churches in India took place during 18th and 19th centuries. The entry of Protestant missionaries is directly linked with the strong enthusiastic revival movements, which started in Europe and United States in the end of the 18th century. These movements produced a number of active and influential missionary societies. For almost a century the Anglican societies mainly the Society for Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) and Church Mission Society (CMS) were active in India. According to Brain, the Anglican Church was a leading denomination in India, in terms of having more missionaries, educational & medical institutions. The work of Anglican Church amongst the deprived sections of society included, famine relief, establishment of educational institutions affecting both upper and lower caste people. By the middle of the nineteenth century the educated upper caste community was the target of conversion. During this period many enlightened young Hindu students began to question the validity of caste system and other Hindu rituals and customs. The young people influenced by western education, made a call for improvement in Hinduism. It is during this period that many individuals belonging to upper-caste Hindus got converted into Christianity. The upper caste converts finally evolved in articulating Indian Christian theology, using *Vedantic* philosophy as tool of expressing this theology. During this period there were many anonymous believers of Jesus Christ in India, who had not accepted Christianity by baptism as per Church rituals, but, believe in Christ without presenting themselves for baptisms [31]. Firth, a historian in his study on history of Indian Church during British India mentioned that educated Hindus who were dissatisfied with Hinduism took Christianity seriously. They found Hinduism stationary and felt the need of its reorganization. For many religious minded Indian people, "...Christianity of the West was the most challenging alternative..." [32] Conversions continued until the close of 19th century. However, Hinduism had power to absorb Christian teaching and it was also the time when the spirit of nationalism began to capture the mind of Indian people. Firth described in his writings on Indian Church history that,

"... As the nineteenth century passed over into the twentieth, reinterpretations of Hinduism and above all, political nationalism gathered strength and turned men's minds away from Christianity..."

Later the conversions from upper caste started becoming fewer. Before the mass movements began, missionaries were mainly concerned to convert upper caste Hindus, with the hope that since upper caste had control over the lower caste, hence by converting upper class, they would be easily able to grab the lower caste. Missionaries saw "castes only as obstructions to the spread of the gospel, never as channels along which it will spread" [33]. Conversion of individuals or masses had one common factor: that both individuals and masses had lost their place in the social setting of Indian society. However, James Massey a leading *Dalit* speaks about disparity in relation to the attitude of missionaries towards converts. He says, "Missionaries gave status to upper class converts whom they felt had given up much, while they saw *Dalits* as 'mass movement Christians', and not even as converts" [34].

Hence, the conversion of Brahmans and other high caste people throughout the 19th century was considered to be of great value and importance by the Churches in India. However, the main growth was not through the conversions of the upper classes in India, but by mass movements or group conversions among much more lowly sections of the people. Mass movements from depressed communities to Christianity took place throughout India. South India particularly witnessed the large turnout of people from Hinduism to Christianity. But, the converts from lower section of communities and lower castes had a double dose of isolation [35].

Arvind P. Nirmal a prominent *Dalit* theologians points out that, "*Most of the contributions to Indian Christian theology in the past came from high caste converts to Christianity. The result has been that Indian Christian theology has perpetuated within itself what I preferred to call 'Brahmanic tradition'*" [36]. Material help, availability of jobs, housing, medical care and education were the major factors that attracted people from the economically lower class, outcaste and untouchable backgrounds to opt for the Christian faith. In general, the communities which adopted Christianity were from poor, lower caste, outcaste or untouchable backgrounds. All these people decided to flee from poverty, social degradation and exploitation in search of a new individuality, self-esteem and a new socio-spiritual worldview [37].

The forefathers of Indian constitution, who were well aware of the threats of religious arsenal in politics, after independence, made enough safeguards to ensure that the life of nation marches ahead on a secular edifice. All across the civilized states, freedom of religion and belief is considered to be a basic human right. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees everyone right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion which includes freedom to change religion and belief. As a democratic republic, India, giving priority to its secular credentials, too has assured all persons equally freedom of conscience, profession, practice and propagation of religion. Freedom of religion and conscience is considered as being significant to every democratic constitution. The freedom in civilized countries today extends not merely of holding the precise beliefs but to the nonappearance of belief in religion [38].

Conclusion

Freedom of religion is featured in numerous international documents like Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Declaration on Elimination Based on Religion or Belief, European Convention for the protection of Human Rights, American Convention of Human Rights, African Charter, etc. [39]. Thus, religious conversion in India is a sternly discussed and highly provocative topic. Presently, this issue is getting extensive coverage in local as well as international media. India, a modern multi-party democracy is the home of many religions, languages and races. Though Hindus account for nearly eighty to ninety percent in the overall population of about a billion people, it is a secular country and the constitution provides freedom to follow any faith of choice among other things. Religious conversion has a long history. Hinduism and India have been under attack for thousands of years. First it was Islam, and then came Christianity that created havoc to the fabric of Hindu society. Muslim invasions have frequently used forced conversions– through direct assault or penalizing taxation. Another conversion strategy of Muslims was of course abduction and enslavement of non-Muslim women, and raising the children from such unions as Muslims.

There is a similar persistence on conversion into Christianity although not with violence as in the case of Islam. The people of India, single-handedly and non-violently unfettered

themselves from thousand years of control by foreign opportunists. Foreign invaders spent half of the life span of Christianity, trying to strip the Indians mostly Hindus, of their wealth, religion, heritage, language and esteem. Hinduism and Indian culture are the oldest and unbroken religions of the world. Among the major religions, Christianity and Islam actively seek converts. The missionaries believe that only people who accept Jesus as Savior will be saved and go to heaven. The doctrine of racial superiority that the Europeans used to justify their colonial rule is gone, but the attitude of Christian religious superiority continues.

Thus, the conversion debate is motivated by the following presumptions:

✓ Firstly, the strength of every religion has been misused and theoretically projected which is conflicting to the fact that the actual strength of any religion is in its capabilities to provide a social order free of prejudice and misuse.

✓ Secondly, religious conversions under all circumstances are outcome of manufactured uncertainties that have been undermining the modern human society.

✓ Thirdly, the process of religious conversion can either be 'forceful' or 'willful'. It is 'forceful' when leading religious apply the force cruelly to manipulate the demographic balance in their favor, and it is 'willful' when the people from below opt to change their religion because of the prevalent discrimination and exploitation in the existing social order.

✓ Fourthly, there had been intricate relationship between the political power on the one hand and religious power controlled by religious men on the other, particularly prior to the advent of modern secular democracy.

Hence there is need to:

1. Find out the main reasons behind the religious conversion with reference to Hindu-Christian conversion

2. Find out the motivational factors responsible for religious conversion

3. Access the socio-economic status and religious background of people undergone conversion

4. Evaluate the circumstances which force people those undergone religious conversions again come back to original religious community

5. Know community's perception on conversion and reconversion

6. Analyze the determinants of religious conversion

Religion and thought forms the basic part of man's nature and any intrusion with the free exercise thereof would be experienced as a severe violation of an intrinsic human right. The freedom to hold beliefs of one's choosing and to change them is central to human development. It is the individual's search for meaning and the desire to know who we are as human beings [40].

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