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The Process of Conversion

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The meaning of conversion has been explored in several studies in India in recent months, such as the one made at the N.C.C. Consultation at Narsapur in March. I am sure that quite a few papers at the Tambaram Conference will also be concerned with it. This paper is, therefore, being written on the process of conversion rather than on its meaning.

Conversion is a process by which a man comes to be gripped by a new force that enters his life, changing or moulding it and the relationship between him and his environment. The new force may be the drive of a new loyalty to which the man pledges himself, the vision of a goal for himself or his society that he decides to live and fight for, or the adoption of a philosophy which necessitates adjustments or even drastic modifications in the values he pursues in life. In religious conversion it is commonly and primarily a consciousness or conviction of being 'apprehended' by God. Any new force, however, usually supplements the good or the evil forces already at work in man or in society. Also, the quality of the new force is largely determined by the means by which it is generated. Hence the relevance of the present study of the nature and methods of conversion.

THE NEED FOR CONVERSION

Christians are generally agreed that conversion is essential in Christianity though they differ widely in their understanding both of what conversion is and why it is necessary.

To many Christians, Christianity is little more than a set of beliefs and the observance of certain conventions or the performance of certain religious exercises. In their view, therefore, conversion is something that only the non-Christian goes through when he as a 'convert' adopts those beliefs and conventions in his own life. This was the typical attitude of the Pharisees in the time of Jesus. They did not see any need for conversion in their own lives because their lives were lived in meticulous conformity to the traditions of their own religion. They thought of conversion only in relation to those who did not follow those traditions—sinners, publicans and gentiles. They were understandably scandalized, therefore, when Jesus called them to repentance and told them, 'Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise

perish'. Jesus also said that they were blind because they could not see that they had no spiritual orientation at all.

Christianity is a faith. A faith involves suspension of reason in order to adopt a perspective or a set of beliefs on an authority which is different from or—as the 'convert' is usually persuaded—higher than reason. Such a suspension may be deliberate or it may be unconscious as in those who are said to be 'brought up' in the faith. Either way it is giving a turn to the mind.

Christianity, or religion as Jesus preached it, is, however, much more than just a turning of the mind. It is a totalitarian dynamic urge of the spirit as it impinges upon the whole personality of man. It is like the conversion of water into vapour in steam engines which may be used at once for different purposes such as propelling a train and blowing a whistle. It may be the conversion of one form of energy into another as in the life of Paul, when zeal for the law gave place to a passion for the Gospel and the mania for persecution of the Christians was transformed into a life-long crusade for Christ. But it may also be the release of fresh energy such as is obtained by nuclear fission from apparently inert and unpromising materials, as when a 'weak-kneed, pusillanimous' Peter erupted as a volcano of defiance and determination that threatened and eventually triumphed over the State religion that Sanhedrin and Pharisee had established in Jerusalem over the centuries.

'Evangelical' groups and preachers keep reminding us that conversion must bring about a change and vitalize the convert into action even if it is no more than to shout Hallelujahs. Some recent Christian thinkers have made a deep study of the energy that Christianity and Christians must continually put forth. In our own country P. Chenchiah wrote a great deal about the life of a Christian as a 'new creation' and urged his fellow-Christians to develop a *yoga* of the spirit. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin also pleaded for a study of the 'science of human energetics'. These men realized that conversion must be a continuous process of the manufacture or conversion of energy and not just an isolated, 'once-for-all' experience that belongs to the past. In Biblical language it is the 'renewing' of the 'inward man day by day'.

THE NATURE OF CONVERSION

Whatever else conversion may or may not be, it is a psychological experience of change or orientation. In Christian conversion this means that, as van Buren says, 'the converts' understanding of themselves and their lives and all things is determined by their understanding of Jesus'.¹ The process by which this change happens is not one that is determined or

¹ Paul M. van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (London, 1963), p. 138.

directed by the subject but one that he is subjected to. To quote Van Buren again: 'The language of faith says, I did not choose; I was chosen. I did not take this piece of history as the clue to my life and understanding of all history; it took me.'²

It might be possible to distinguish between spiritual and purely psychological changes and classify what may be called conversions by harassment of mind under the latter. William Sargant has shown how conversions might be a 'battle for the mind' and not battles in or of the mind.³ But there can be no spiritual change which is not at the same time a psychological change. While this means that we should not undervalue psychological manifestations in conversion, we should also not resort to manifestation of the mind in the name of religion. Sargant writes: 'Though men are not dogs, they should humbly try to remember how much they resemble dogs in their brain functions and not boast themselves as demi-gods. They are gifted with religions and social apprehensions and they are gifted with the power of reason; but all these faculties are physiologically entailed to the brain. Therefore the brain should not be abused by having forced upon it any religious or political mystique that stunts the reason, or any form of crude rationalism that stunts the religious sense.'⁴

Even a pseudo-religious experience is often welcomed when it produces a desirable change in moral behaviour. Even rationalists like Bernard Shaw have argued that the myth of a god who watches and punishes is not to be lightly discarded when it is hard to find any effective alternative motivation for children to act rightly. In the same way the end of a reformed or puritanical moral behaviour is often considered sufficient justification for any kind of religious conversion from which it has resulted. But such a conversion can hardly be called Christian, since the essence of Christian conversion is an experience of, and a commitment to, God in Christ where reformation of character is not the goal but a corollary.

An 'experience of God' may, however, be real or illusory. Few people may make deliberately false claims of having had such an experience. But the mind of man is so susceptible to self-manipulation and his imagination or fancy so impressionable that he may easily see visions that are purely subjective and mistake the upheavals taking place in his own mind under the stress of worked up emotions for the impact of the supernatural on his life. It is not rarely that we come across men and women who deny the claims they have made in the past of an encounter with God and declare, like a man who may have fallen in love for the tenth time, that all former

² Paul M. van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (London, 1963), pp. 140 f.

³ W. Sargant, *Battle for the Mind* (London, 1957).

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 236.

experiences were illusory and that only the latest is the 'genuine article'.

Certain Christian sects have tried to lay down norms for genuine conversions to distinguish them from spurious and incomplete ones. A candidate for confirmation once said to one that he had been told by a member of one such sect that he could not be sure that he had been converted until he had gone through the experience of weeping for hours together over his sins. We know of Christian groups that apply the test of ecstatic utterance. St. Paul, however, anticipated the development of such perverse standards and wrote about 'the more excellent way' which would be at once the test and the fruit of conversion in the spirit. In this he was only adopting the criterion of Jesus himself: 'By their fruits ye shall know them.'

METHODS OF CONVERSION

Ideally speaking all Christian conversion is of the spirit and by the Holy Spirit. In the last section we have considered the possibility of conversion stopping short of the spirit. In this we shall speak of the role of human agencies in conversion. A human agency is not indispensable but, in actual fact, it plays a part in most of the conversions we know of. It is also a Biblical and theological truth that the Holy Spirit employs men and women in the work of conversion. All groups of Christians who are out to bring about conversions may, therefore, claim to be assisting the Holy Spirit. But just because this is a staggering claim, it is very important that the methods used by them should be worthy of the Holy Spirit too. In a small book called *Battle for the Soul* the author, Owen Brandon, writes:

'Some of the methods currently in use in the work of evangelism are not beyond reproach. I could write a whole chapter on abuses, but would hesitate to make public some of the details I have accumulated. I appeal to all who engage in evangelism . . . to use all restraint and to spurn the use of mass-suggestion techniques and other "tricks of the trade" to obtain conversions. After all, the work they are attempting is worthy of the highest and best methods. These . . . are some of the main problems . . . the tendency to stereotype the conversion process, the temptation to include unduly a sense of guilt and/or fear; undue social pressure resulting in over-emotional conversions; the danger of premature decisions . . .'

In his book, *Battle for the Mind*, Sargent has pointed out that some of the methods of conversion employed even by John Wesley were not distinguishable from the techniques since employed by ruthless fanatics of totalitarian political régimes to obtain confessions, recantations and consent to new doctrines. Basically they consist in reducing the mind to a state of despair

and fear or agony in which any proffered release is accepted without further resistance. Such methods may not have appeared to be wrong in pre-democratic days, when thinking and reasoning on political or religious issues was considered to be the duty and privilege of only the few. But in modern days there can be no defence of methods of indoctrination which have the effect of depriving a man of his capacity or his responsibility for thinking. And yet, many Christians connive at or even justify such methods if they can persuade themselves that men receive faith and salvation through them. This is the reason, I believe, why 'high-powered' evangelists of dubious theological views are invited by presbyters and even bishops to conduct 'revival' meetings or 'conventions' in their churches. It is assumed that this is the only effective means by which conversions can be secured and that once people are converted—by any means—they will thereafter become active members of the Church. The reasoning is analogous to that by which direct or indirect compulsion of students of other faiths to attend Christian worship or religious instruction is defended even today in certain Christian schools—the compulsion is for the good of the souls of those who are compelled.

But, as Gandhiji said, Christian evangelism, like Caesar's wife, must be above suspicion. Besides, it is well known that ends cannot justify the means for the simple reason that means and ends are spiritually correlated. The ends are here in the means and fructify out of them. Hence bad means will not achieve the good ends in view but nullify or distort them. The effect of Christian conversion ought to be liberation of the mind and spirit—'the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free'. But the nature of several methods of conversion is such that, in the words of Sir John Wolfenden, a Vice-Chancellor, quoted by Gabriel Hebert in *Fundamentalism and the Church of God*, the minds of young people become 'firmly closed, locked, bolted and barred, not just about the Bible and religion in general, but about all sorts of other things as well, philosophy, politics and history among them'.⁵ Sargant says that the use of such methods is often as effective in paralyzing certain mental functions as an operation to remove a few selected lobes of the brain. At a conference some months ago a famous layman asked whether the best thing that could happen to a young man was not that he should get converted by a fundamentalist group and then grow into maturer experience of the freedom of mind that a group like the S.C.M. might be able to give him. Another layman pointed out, however, that such a development or growth into maturity was most unlikely and that where a change did take place it would be in the nature of a 'Counter Conversion'.

⁵ G. Hebert, *Fundamentalism and the Church of God* (London, 1957), p. 140.

And there was a young theologian in the group who could testify that this was precisely what he had had to go through.

Apart from the dangers of engineering conversions or mutilating minds as a result of overzealous or dogmatic attitudes to conversion there is also the danger of binding the convert to a rigid set of doctrines and making it impossible for him to appreciate diverse theological views. Only a few converts have claimed or been given the opportunity to 'prove all things, hold fast to that which is good' in Christian doctrine. But the general rule has been for converts to have a body of beliefs forced upon them at the time of their baptism or conversion. The effect has been that, instead of exploring the 'riches' of Christ, starting with the convictions and experiences of men of God in the past, the convert got the idea that he had arrived somewhere where he should stay for the rest of his life. Hence the need to enable the convert to look upon conversion as a continuous process of discovering the mind of God and upon the Christian life as a continued adventure in orientating one's whole life and relating one's environment to the discoveries made.

THE FRUITS OF CONVERSION

Conversion might have different effects according to the processes by which it is achieved. It might produce fanatics for whom zeal for doctrine or denunciation of other faiths might be the supreme virtue. Quite often, however, it has produced devout men living in faith and righteousness but having no concern for, and even deliberately withdrawing themselves from, 'secular' areas of life. Even today there are many genuine conversions of this type. In recent times, however, there has been a great deal of thinking about the inadequacy of such a conversion for the fulfilment for God's purposes in this world.

An attitude of withdrawal of devout Christian men from the world has proved to be a calamitous abandonment of the world to the evil passions of self-seeking men or to the imperfect wisdom of men whose minds have not been enlightened by the knowledge of 'God's design and man's disorder' that comes from Christ. It is now being realized, however, that the fruits of conversion should be primarily *for the world*. In this view what conversion is *for* is as important as whether there is any conversion at all.

The new insights about conversion have been expressed by Burkardt in the statement that every Christian ought to have two conversions, first to Christ and then to the world. But really these are not two conversions but one and the same. Christ is at work out in the world and it would be impossible to turn to him without turning to the world. Any other turning to Christ can only be a turning to an *image* of Christ whether in the Bible or in the Church.

Conversion for its own sake can hardly be Christian. It would appear that the Corinthian and the Galatian Christians of Paul's time believed that their conversions had been only for their own sake. It is no wonder that within a few years their churches got into a mess with factions, heresies and even moral laxity. For the spirit of God is given to man so that he may venture forth into the world with it and fight for justice and flood the dark places with light and transform his society and nation at least a little into the likeness of the Kingdom of God. The spirit, *pneuma*, must keep blowing through the world and any attempt to bottle it up within the Church or the Christian man would be to distress it and eventually to lose it altogether. It must either be constantly reinforced and released at pressure into the world to create and transform whatever it penetrates, or the world will rush into the vacuum in the congregation or the Christian from whom it is withdrawn, because it is not released into the world. Conversion, then, is the continuous process of the generation of the energy of the spirit and the maintenance of the pressure by which it continuously rushes out into the world to make all things new.

A BASIS FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

The following statement of aims and objectives was adopted at a meeting of the Governing Council of the United Theological College, Bangalore, earlier this year:

'The College is founded on the faith that in Jesus Christ God has given new life and hope for man and that He has called the Church into being to share this life and this hope with all mankind through worship, witness and service. Believing that, for the fulfilment of the Church's calling, God has given to it a variety of forms of ministry and differing gifts appropriate to each, this College will seek to provide a programme of study, devotional life and practical experience and seek to be a community appropriate for preparing men and women for the different ministries to which they are called. Because the good news of Jesus Christ is addressed to all men irrespective of religious and other affiliations, this College will offer facilities for men of all faiths who may want to undertake a programme of study for acquiring religious knowledge and in search for truth. In the work of the College special emphasis will be given to the study of the Bible and to its interpretation both in history and in modern times.'