

## February 2008

Editorial - Hans Ucko	2
Introduction of Rev. Dr. Shanta Premawardhana	4
Towards an Ethical Code of Conduct for Religious Conversions – Hans Ucko	6
Testimonies from a Multifaith Hearing on Conversion, Lariano (Italy), May 12-16, 2006	
- Wande Abimbola	20
- David M. Elcott	23
- A. Rashied Omar	27
- Anantanand Rambachan	30
- Alice Shalvi	34
Report from the Interreligious Consultation on “Conversion – Assessing the Reality”	38
Towards an Ethical Approach to Conversion , Toulouse (France), August 8-12, 2007	
- Hans Ucko, Welcoming Words to the Participants	40
- Fio Mascarenhas, SJ.	42
- Tony Richie	47
- Thomas Schirmacher	55
- Hermen Shastri	67
Book Review	71

Staff of the programme on Inter-Religious Dialogue and Cooperation:  
Rev. Dr Hans Ucko, Editor  
Rev. Dr. Shanta Premawardhana  
Ms Rima Barsoum  
Ms Yvette Milosevic  
Ms Marietta Ruhland

ISSN 1814-2230

Current Dialogue can be found on: [www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/index-e.html](http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/index-e.html)

---

## Editorial

Hans Ucko

Dear friends,

In the best of worlds, this issue of Current Dialogue would have been a joint publication by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) and the Programme on Dialogue and Cooperation of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The entire issue is devoted to a topic, which for many years has been a matter of conversation in staff meetings between the two offices: conversion as an issue in interreligious relations. We began reflecting on the topic, alerted to the increasing problems between our constituency and other faith communities. We heard about problems in India between Hindus and Christians, where aggressive evangelism destroyed the fibre of good neighbourly relations and where legislation against conversion was not ruled out. We heard about conversion as a bone of contention between Buddhists and Christians in Sri Lanka. Also here the threat of legislation against conversion hangs as the sword of Damocles over the communities. We heard about the same in Malaysia as an issue between Christians and Muslims, where the case of Lina Joy caught media attention. We have heard about it in Pakistan connected to accusations of blasphemy against Christians. We heard about it in the case of Afghan national Abdul Rahman, who had converted to Christianity, arrested and charged with apostasy under what was interpreted to be traditional Shari`a laws.

The PCID and the WCC have had a very good and friendly relationship through their dialogue programs. They have addressed issues that have been cutting-edge issues in a world, where religion matters. I think the issue of conversion is one of the most important issues to be addressed by people of religions today. Conversion touches Christian self-understanding, mission, religious freedom and respect for the other, sharing faith. It has ramifications on how we live with each other. It is not only an issue for Christians.

This thematic issue begins with some of the contributions from Lariano, Italy, where the two offices sponsored a multifaith hearing on conversion. Although we have presented the report from Lariano in an earlier issue of Current Dialogue, we decided to reprint it here to provide comprehensive information. The second block of contributions hail from Toulouse, where we organised an intra-Christian consultation in August 2007 trying to articulate topics to be particularly addressed in the end product of this common project: an ethical code of conduct for religious conversions. The key note presentations will give you an idea of where this project needs to go to respond to the many voices present in Toulouse: Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Protestants, Anglicans, Orthodox and Catholics.

This issue would have merited a joint publication of Current Dialogue and Pro Dialogo. Although it was not possible to do so, this issue bears witness to an ecumenical endeavour, which I hope will be a sign for the future, in relations between Christians and in relations between Christians and people of other faiths. I hope the code of conduct will be something Christians could refer to and that people of other faiths could remind Christians of, in situations where arrogance and denigration of the other reigns.

I myself will not be part of the continuation of this project. I have resigned from my position as Program Executive in the Program on Dialogue and Cooperation. I leave the WCC after 18

---

years and most of them as editor for Current Dialogue. This task has given me invaluable contacts with our constituency and in the case of the Dialogue program, our constituency and readers are Christians as well as people of other faiths. I would like to thank the readers for a pilgrimage together, where we have been able to explore and penetrate together issues in interreligious relations, whether expressing common ground or divisive issues. It has been a privilege. Thank you.

This editorial gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to my friend and colleague in the PCID, Msgr Felix Machado. "The Holy Father appointed Msgr. Felix Anthony Machado of the clergy of Vasai, India, under-secretary of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, as bishop of the diocese of Nashik (area 57,532, population 20,295,000, Catholics 86,750, priests 111, religious 406), India, with the personal title of archbishop." Blessings of peace upon Fr. Felix in his new ministry.

Finally, we also welcome the Director for the Programme Dialogue and Cooperation, Rev. Dr. Shanta Premawardhana. Shanta introduces himself in this issue of Current Dialogue He has already embarked upon his new role to lead the work of dialogue in the WCC. "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and for evermore".

Sincerely

Hans Ucko  
Editor

Dear Friends,

I begin with an expression of gratitude and best wishes to my friend and colleague Rev. Dr. Hans Ucko who since 1989 has given outstanding leadership to WCC's Program on Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation. Cutting edge programs such as the consultations on conversion that are featured in this issue, the work of the Thinking Together group, the Critical Moment in Interreligious Dialogue conference only begin to scratch the surface of WCC's recent accomplishments in interreligious dialogue. We wish him well in his new endeavors.



I am deeply honored to step into the shoes of such ecumenical luminaries as Stanley Samartha, Wesley Ariarajah, Hans Ucko and Tarek Mitri who, among others, have left an indelible mark on the ecumenical movement's journey into interreligious dialogue. My spiritual formation in religiously diverse Sri Lanka and in the ecumenical environment of Sri Lanka's Protestant theological college has prepared me for the present challenge. I offer the following brief self-introduction in humility and gratitude.

I come to this work from the National Council of Churches USA, where I served as the Associate General Secretary for Interfaith Relations and the Director of its Interfaith Relations Commission.

Among the highlights of that tenure is a Jewish-Christian dialogue table that I co-convened on behalf of Christian partners, which brought together executive staff leaders from the mainline Jewish organizations and Christian denominations in the United States. The strength of the table was its ability to weather serious tensions that occurred, for example, during the 2004 controversy over divestment of funds from corporations that do business in Israel and the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war. The partners agreed that particularly during times of heightened tension religious people must be in dialogue with each other. A similar Muslim-Christian leaders' dialogue table is presently being planned.

Convinced that Christian theology as a discipline does not take the reality of religious diversity with adequate seriousness, I organized on behalf of the Interfaith Relations Commission, a series of sessions at the American Academy of Religions. Aimed at theologians and seminary deans, it seeks to influence mainstream Christian theological thinking and to encourage a re-evaluation of seminary curricula. The commission also explored the methodological ramifications of WCC's "Thinking Together" model exploring how the Christian theological table must seek the participation of scholars and leaders of other religious traditions, to test, refine and sharpen our own theological reflections.

At the same time, since the work of interfaith relations must move beyond theological conversations, I advocate for "faith-based diplomacy" where religious leaders take the lead in diplomatic initiatives, particularly in conflicts that are religion-related and where diplomatic manoeuvres of politicians are failing. The WCC program on Accompanying Churches in Situations of Conflict lends itself easily to such diplomatic engagement by religious leaders.

Prior to my tenure at the National Council of Churches USA, I served as the senior pastor of Ellis Avenue Church (Alliance of Baptists) in Chicago, leading them to invest considerable

resources in building relationships with other religious communities. A coalition that brought organized communities across religious, racial/ethnic, linguistic and economic lines proved to be powerful in winning victories for economic justice and immigrant rights. I also served my denomination as its vice-president and the chair of its standing committee on ecumenical and interfaith relations.

At a time when religions are often implicated in wars and violence, the work of interreligious dialogue and cooperation is critical. While we will continue to engage senior religious leaders and scholars to experiment with the most cutting-edge models for this work, we will also seek new ways to encourage our national and regional partners as well as local churches to engage their neighbors from other religious communities.

I am very aware that many excellent initiatives of interreligious dialogue and cooperation are going on in local, national and regional contexts in many parts of the world. I encourage you to be in communication with our office, to let us know the exciting achievements of your work and the challenges that you face, so that we may learn from what you are doing. It is only through such communication that our work can be mutually enhanced.

In the meantime, I seek your friendship, collegiality, encouragement and prayer.

Sincerely,

Shanta Premawardhana  
Director, Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation

## Towards an Ethical Code of Conduct for Religious Conversions

Hans Ucko

The following reflections have grown out of many years in interreligious dialogue and in intra-Christian discussions on the understanding of the witness of the church in a religiously plural world.

### 1. To convert to and to convert from

We differ in relation to the issue and reality of conversion. Christians have fairly easy conversions into and out of the faith, resentfully accepting people leaving Christianity for another faith. Jews have difficult conversions into and even more out of the faith. Muslims have easy conversions into the faith but have major difficulties with conversion out of the faith. When Dalits in great numbers decide to convert from Hinduism to Buddhism or Christianity it creates tensions and there are calls for legislation against conversion. A Theravada Buddhist-Christian consultation organised by the WCC in 2004 addressed the question of conversion in the following way:

Conversion has become a threat and tension for religious diversity and harmony. We need to understand that conversions take place in different socio-economic-political contexts for different reasons. It can happen due to dissatisfaction with one's own religion, life-changing experiences, but also through the use of force and aggression. ... While some conversions may be genuine and spiritual, some others may not. ... We express our concern learning about increased tensions and expressions of intolerance between Buddhists and Christians in some Theravada Buddhist countries.<sup>1</sup>

The issue of conversion into the faith is understood as an integral part of both

Christianity and Islam. Although the concept of conversion is understood differently in Islam and in Christianity, it is a complex reality in both religions. Both religions advocate "conversion to" but oppose in very different ways "conversion from". The Qur'an is very clear about no compulsion in religion (2:256). And yet, as we have seen in the very recent controversy around Pope Benedict's lecture "Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections" in Regensburg in September 2006, there are quite a few Christians, who want to tell Muslims what Islam is all about and polemically insist that Islam is spreading the faith through the sword or teaches the killing of apostates, quoting words like "Whoever changed his Islamic religion, then kill him."<sup>2</sup> The Western world and quite a few Christians are cashing in on words like these and neglect the Muslim struggle how to interpret such a sentence.<sup>3</sup> In this context it is interesting to read what Iqbal Ansari recently wrote in an editorial in the publication *Interreligious Insight*: "Islam as a proselytizing religion began by preaching the basic doctrine of the right of the individual to choose his religion freely. It was the insistence by the tribal lords of Makkah on adherence to the ancestral creed, and the rejection of this insistence by Muhammad, that led to conflict and to Muhammad's prolonged persecution – including the plot to assassinate him – which drove him to seek asylum in Madina."<sup>4</sup>

As Christians we need to remember before anything else embarrassing texts in the Bible or parts of the uncomfortable history of Christian dealings with people of other faiths. It is a question of the log in the eye.<sup>5</sup>

Hans Ucko

Conversion out of Judaism is looked upon as next to a mortal sin. A convert is almost seen as a traitor. Conversion reduces the Jewish people, already a dwindling minority. Jewish scholar Emil Fackenheim once said that continuing Jewish life and denying Hitler a posthumous victory was the 614th commandment. Catholic theologian Gregory Baum, himself a convert from Judaism, elaborated on Christian views toward conversion and building upon Fackenheim, saying: "After Auschwitz the Christian churches no longer wish to convert the Jews. While they may not be sure of the theological grounds that dispense them from this mission, the churches have become aware that asking the Jews to become Christians is a spiritual way of blotting them out of existence and thus only reinforces the effects of the Holocaust".<sup>6</sup>

Jews, Christians and Muslims would do well to recall the story about Abraham's conversion from idol worshipper to becoming a worshipper of one God. The father of faith, the one who brings Jews, Christians and Muslims together is himself a convert.

If Christians and Muslims have a particular sense of mission in the world, other religions have other visions. There is certainly a Buddhist mission to the West but it does not have that absolute ring about it as do conversions to Christianity and Islam. Other religions are either not explicitly witnessing to make people convert or through the course of history they have given it up or they never engaged in seeking to bring the other into their community.

## 2. Obligated to invite to conversion?

The conversion of the other is definitely an objective in traditional Christian self-understanding. The statement by theologian Elton Trueblood is said in many different ways and by very many Christians, when the issue of mission and witness is discussed: "There is no such thing as a non-witnessing Christian." The topic of

conversion has today become divisive. It has the potential of not only putting people of different faiths against each other but also creating frictions among Christians themselves. It is a problematic issue within the church. Yes, everyone should have the right to change his/her religion. This issue needs rethinking in many faith traditions but equally important is the question of whether we should be involved in making others change their religion. There are those who feel that seeking out others to convert them from their religion is divinely ordained and nothing can thwart this heavenly injunction. I remember one of my first experiences in Jewish-Christian dialogue, meeting a Christian theologian actively involved in a society for Christian mission to Jews. I asked him if the church could honestly and with integrity continue advocating mission to Jews, considering what had happened fifty years ago in Germany. Should not the Shoah rather convert the Church in its relationship to the Jewish people? Could the Church go about its business as usual after the Shoah? The theologian said to me: "I realise what you are saying. What happened in Auschwitz was terrible. It was an atrocity, it was dreadful, but it does not change anything. The gospel tells us that there is no other name by which we can be saved". He told me that he might personally regret that there was no other way for him to go but to seek the conversion of the Jews. But he had to obey the Gospel. He said, "I wish it were different, I wish I could say: There will be no more mission to Jews - but I cannot".

The ordinary man or woman in the street in Europe is likely to consider mission seeking the conversion of people of other faiths as something bigoted, intolerant and aggressive. But there are also Christian theologians who feel that the conversion of others is no longer the business of the church, given the history of forced baptism and mission enterprises in the accounts of colonial and other subjugations of people of other faiths.

They are seeking to formulate the mission of the church not in seeking converts but in converting our world to become a world, where justice reigns and human dignity is a commandment. They prefer talking about *Missio Dei*, the mission of God, to which the church as well as people of other religious traditions may be called to participate. But such a view is controversial and contested, and by those advocating mission as inviting people to convert often labelled as post-modernist relativism.

### 3. Conversion through mission or proselytism

I want to claim that seeking the conversion of the other or targeting the other for conversion, is for me the same as proselytism. Many Christians will object and will claim that it is their obligation to follow the so-called Great Commission in Matthew 28, 18-20 "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." They will say that not only do they have an obligation; it is also their right to seek the conversion of the other.

Am I avoiding the Great Commission? No, I am reading the same text but cannot make a clean cut between these words and the effect of these words in history. Conversion is not a result of proselytism per se but tensions regarding conversion are often related to proselytising activities by another actor, individual or organisation. The word has changed meaning. A *proselytos* in the New Testament refers to a convert to Judaism hinting at a time when Judaism too was involved in seeking converts.<sup>7</sup> The Acts of the Apostles mention the first Pentecost; there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. One region after the other in Asia Minor, Asia and North Africa is mentioned and finally it is said that there were also "visitors from

Rome, both Jews and proselytes" (Acts 2, 10).

To proselytise has today gained a very loaded meaning. "To induce someone to conversion is to proselytise", says the WCC Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement (1991, p.828). Proselytism has become such a negative word that even those who are involved in the conversion of others would prefer using other words than proselytism. What they are doing is, they say, an invitation to others to join the Christian faith. They say that they do not proselytise but they have the right to manifest, the right to teach, the right to express, the right to impart religious ideas. And they would say that the right to issue such invitations is supported by the world community having signed on to the UN Declaration of Human Rights. It is a question of freedom of religion.

### 4. UN declarations on freedom of religion or belief

The most important international legislation on the freedom of religion or belief is article 18 in the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR) from 1966. It in turn builds upon article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (DHR) from 1948, which says, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."<sup>8</sup> Other statements support the DHR and CCPR, e.g. the considerations in the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981). There is also a special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief in the UN system.

The wording of CCPR article 18 says

1. *Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and*

Hans Ucko

*religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.*

*2. No one shall be subject to coercion, which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.*

There can be no question about the right to communicate one's faith. And no one shall be coerced to maintain his/her religion or belief. No one should "impair" the right to change religion; yes, the state has an obligation to actively ensure the right to change religion or belief. Included in the freedom of expression is also a right to seek and to receive information. The freedom of assembly and the freedom of association are important expressions of the UN declarations.

But, those who rightly quote the right to change religion and the right to persuade others to change often forget that the UN declarations also talk about the right to maintain one's religion or belief. No one shall be coerced to change his or her religion or belief. The right to religious freedom is actually limited by other human rights. In addition, one person's religious freedom may be limited by the religious freedom of another. Thus one interesting field for exploration is the interaction between the freedom to propagate religion on the one hand and the freedom to practice one's religion without interference on the other. The CCPR has a clause on the right to privacy in article 17, which, for instance, will protect the home from forced invasion by people seeking your conversion.

The question is of course how to balance the right to engage in faith persuasion against the right to maintain one's religion or belief. How do we protect the juxtaposed claims of majority and minority religions? How do we consider the relationship between material aid and missionary

activities and questions of unequal distribution of material resources, sometimes along other lines than numerical minority and majority situations? It is important to remember the vital role that factors such as power (cultural, financial, mental etc.) of the proselytiser plays in the relationship with the one who is the object for faith persuasion or conversion.

### **5. Common Witness and Proselytism**

Christians want to make distinctions between what is called "bearing Christian witness" and improper proselytism. Therefore the former is rather called "true witness" or "true evangelism", which a report drawn up in 1956 under the auspices of the World Council of Churches describes as an essential mission and a responsibility of every Christian and every Church. Improper proselytism represents a corruption or deformation of true witness. According to the same report, improper proselytism may take the form of activities offering material or social advantages with a view to gaining new members for a Church or exerting improper pressure on people in distress or in need. It may even entail the use of violence or brainwashing; more generally, it is not compatible with respect for the freedom of thought, conscience and religion of others. The Third Joint Commission of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church drew up a document entitled "Common Witness and Proselytism". The Joint Commission says, "Proselytism embraces whatever violates the right of the human person, Christian or non-Christian, to be free from external coercion in religious matters, or whatever, in the proclamation of the Gospel, does not conform to the ways God draws free men to himself in response to his calls to serve in spirit and in truth".<sup>9</sup>

The commission document emphasizes these ideals:

*A common witness is given when Christians recognize the spiritual gifts in other*

Hans Ucko

*churches and testify to what they have in common.*

*Christian witness must be coherent with the spirit of the gospel; it should not offend ongoing inter-Christian dialogue.*

*God-centred Christian witness focuses on His glory and man's salvation, not on the advantage of one confession over another. It always respects the freedom of those to whom it is addressed; it never exploits their weakness or their poverty; it never offers material or social benefits resulting from a change of confession; it excludes all methods of compulsion, including the uncritical use of mass media.*

*Christians bearing witness to their faith do not denigrate the faith of others. Witnessing Christians do not spread prejudices about other Christians. They do not distort their own spiritual convictions to attract others.<sup>10</sup>*

Although the document does mention non-Christian faiths, it is obvious that the document first of all is an agreement between Christians belonging to different confessions. And we are still not able to say that we have implemented these ideals in inter-Christian relations let alone in interreligious relations.

Following the implosion of State Socialism, many Christians, not only from evangelical churches and para-church groups but also from mainline churches in the US, in the Nordic countries, in Korea went to Russia to proselytise among Russian Orthodox Christians. Soup-kitchens were established offering soup and bread and the invitation to conversion. Orthodox Christians ask the WCC what it means when advocating "partnership in mission" when the WCC seems unable to make Protestant Christians aware that Orthodox Christians are also Christians. And Protestant missionaries in Russia retort and claim the right to religious freedom.

## **6. Proselytism and mission in WCC interreligious bilateral dialogues**

Proselytism has been and is discussed in bilateral interreligious dialogues. A WCC-document "Striving Together in Dialogue - A Muslim-Christian Call to Reflection and Action says":

*While recognising that mission and da'wa are essential religious duties in both Christianity and Islam, Muslims and Christians need to uphold the spiritual and the material well-being of all. Many missionary activities, and the methods they use, arouse legitimate suspicions. There are situations where humanitarian service is undertaken for ulterior motives and takes advantage of the vulnerability of people. Thus the clear distinction between witness and proselytism become crucial. It is the basis for the recognition that people of faith can enjoy the liberty to convince and be convinced and, at the same time, respect each other's religious integrity, faithfulness to one's tradition and loyalty to one's community.<sup>11</sup>*

The issue of mission to the Jews has been a recurrent theme in the Jewish-Christian dialogue. The Ecumenical Considerations for Jewish-Christian dialogue are explicit on the issue:

*Christians are called to witness to their faith in word and deed. The Church has a mission and it cannot be otherwise. This mission is not one of choice.*

*Christians have often distorted their witness by coercive proselytism - conscious and unconscious, overt and subtle. Referring to proselytism between Christian churches, the Joint Working Group of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches stated: "Proselytism embraces whatever violates the right of the human person, Christian or non-Christian to be free from external coercion in religious matters". (Ecumenical Review, 1/1971, p. 11).*

Hans Ucko

*Such rejection of proselytism and such advocacy of respect for the integrity and the identity of all persons and all communities of faith are urgent in relation to Jews, especially those who live as minorities among Christians. Steps towards assuring non-coercive practices are of highest importance. In dialogue ways should be found for the exchange of concerns, perceptions, and safeguards in these matters.*

*While Christians agree that there can be no place for coercion of any kind, they do disagree - on the basis of their understandings of the Scriptures - as to what constitutes authentic forms of mission. There is a wide spectrum, from those who see the very presence of the Church in the world as the witness called for to those who see mission as the explicit and organized proclamation of the gospel to all who have not accepted Jesus as their Saviour.<sup>12</sup>*

I referred earlier to a document, the result of a conversation between Christian and Buddhist religious and political leaders in Theravada Buddhist countries.<sup>13</sup> Similar conversations have taken place between the WCC and Hindu leaders, although the WCC has not yet formulated specific guidelines or principles for the relationship between Hindus and Christians.<sup>14</sup> Attempts have been made. A workshop on issues in Hindu-Christian Relations was held in Madurai in October 1995, to draw up some preliminary guidelines in examining how Hindus and Christians live together in India.

Here some of the challenges in the relationship were boldly addressed. The document says: "The Hindus find the absolute claims made for the Church, for Jesus, the traditional methods of missionary activity and the labelling of non-Christians as sinners etc., very offensive. There are also such accusations as extraterritorial loyalties, deculturalisation, etc. already levelled against Indian Christians." It goes on to speak of how "Christians are

uncomfortable with the tendency of their Hindu friends to minimize the differences that exist between religious traditions and make Hinduism as an all-inclusive umbrella of truth. Likewise, they find it difficult to understand the Hindu's proclivity to play-down the reality of suffering, oppression and discrimination by reducing them all to Karma and fate. The age-old problem of Untouchability, socio-economic exploitation, and gender injustice still persists in the name of religious sanctions."

The document called for sensitivity "to the sensibility of peoples to their respective faith traditions. For example, it is customary for Hindus to understand Jesus Christ as one of the avatars. But they must understand that Christian view of Incarnation is historical and so much more than the mythological assuming of a form by God. Similarly, when Christians easily dub Hindu idol worship as idolatry, they must understand that not all Hindus are idolatrous in using idols in their worship." On the issue of conversion, the document stated that any "form of manipulation or enticement to win over others to one's own faith community is immoral and irreligious. So also to use religion to gain economic, political or any other form of favour and advantage is equally immoral and irreligious."<sup>15</sup>

The document, although more than 10 years old, would merit another reading and seen as a basis for an ongoing conversation, not only because it is a good piece of work but because it is the situation in India that in many ways has sparked off the many-faceted WCC interest in this issue.

## **7. The WCC is prompted by its constituency**

Member churches in India were worried by the attempts in some states to legislate against conversion. They felt that they were the victims of what para-church groups, often with foreign funds, were involved in. Their evangelisation campaigns and

Hans Ucko

crusades antagonised Hindus, who either did not want to distinguish, or could not distinguish, which church proselytised and which church abstained from aggressive evangelism. Member churches were afraid that their diaconal work, their schools would be considered instruments for conversion and banned by law.

Intra-Christian discussions followed in the wake of legislative proposals or implementations. The issue of conversion is an interfaith issue. How does a convert relate to that community, religion, which s/he has left? The Indian lay theologian M.M. Thomas said once that a convert to Christianity should remain in solidarity with his original community. But more often the convert learned consciously or unconsciously to denigrate the faith or religion of origin or to allow a polarisation between the religion one had left and the religion one had entered.

The mainline churches find themselves in a dilemma, accused by evangelicals for not fulfilling and living up to the great Commission of our Lord. Their question rings in the ear: "Does the ecumenical church still have conversion on its agenda?"

Although most of the spectacular calls for conversions are made within the so-called "evangelical" camp, it is probably not so easy to dissociate oneself clearly from the proselytism of these Christian brothers and sisters.<sup>16</sup> For Christians conversion is a command. Their opponents see conversion among the poor as an act of Christian cowardice. Gandhi is reported to have said: "Why are you Christians converting the depressed classes? Come and convert us instead."

### **8. Aid-evangelism**

The issue of conversion in the discussion has focused on so called aid-evangelism. It is a recurrent theme. The relief work following the earthquake in Gujarat, India led to suspicions that Christians and

Muslims got less help than Hindus. On the other side of the fence, there were suspicions that Christian relief work was connected with conversion. At the Millennium Peace Conference in August 2000 in New York, I was part of a small group addressing the particular issue of conversion in India. We agreed upon an "Informal Working Understanding - Freedom from Coercion in Religion."

*We agree that the free and generous preaching of the Christian Gospel is welcome in India.*

*We condemn proselytism; we particularly reject the exploitation of the issue of poverty in religious outreach and missionary work.*

*We agree that the giving of aid to those in need is a primary commandment of all our religious and spiritual traditions; we are resolved that this act of justice should never be tied to compulsory conversion.*

*We commit ourselves to a continuing dialogue in the spirit of interreligious harmony, mutual respect, and the co-operative common effort to build a better world. In this way, we will discover trust in one another that any altruistic work will not be a means for conversion.<sup>17</sup>*

The issue of aid-evangelism does not go away. It is not made up. It is practised and there are many who, following the post-tsunami relief work can point to flagrant examples of proselytism that cannot be properly understood unless prefaced by the word 'coercive'. It is coercive proselytism.

Christians in India were reluctant in the end to have the WCC enter the conversation on conversion. It might underline, they said, a Hindu perception of Christians in India being more linked to the West than to India and to have their ultimate loyalty in Rome, Jerusalem or Wittenberg than in India.

### 9. Is there a conspiracy to convert Muslims?

Conspiracy theories, particularly rampant in the Middle East, about Christian Church organisations having secret meetings with CIA or Mossad in order to strategize the evangelization of Muslims mar relations between the WCC constituency and its Muslim neighbours and prompt the WCC to seek ways to explain the complexity of Christian churches. In such situations the WCC affirms and reaffirms religious freedom and condemns methods of coercion or “seduction” used for missionary purposes but also needs to say that Christians are not a monolithic block. Of course there are Christian churches and Christian groups involved in evangelisation campaigns directed at people of other faiths. Most of them perceive the WCC as liberal and secular. The groups would consider membership in the WCC as a betrayal of the Gospel. Conservative Christians criticize the WCC for having neglected the obligation to obey the “great commandment”. We should however not forget that the numerical success of Pentecostal and Evangelical churches throughout the world may be a temptation also for main line churches witnessing their numbers going down.

The 1976 Christian-Muslim conference on Mission and Da’wa sought to find ways where Christians and Muslims address together problems related to conversion and their impact on relations between communities. There have been conversations to establish a Christian-Muslim body whose task would be to protect Christian-Muslim relations from the pernicious and long-lasting effects of sensationalism, exaggerations, misperceptions and politically suspicious propaganda as a follow-up of the conference. The fundamental principle affirmed in the conference was the rejection of all forms of coercion, pressure or undue enticement, direct or indirect, aimed at leading groups or individuals to renounce

the religion of their parents and join another religious community. And yet, stories abound about the WCC strategising for the conversion of Muslims worldwide.

### 10. Conversion as an issue in interreligious relations

At yearly staff meetings between the staff of the Office on Interreligious Relations and Dialogue (IRRD) of the WCC and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue of the Vatican (PCID), we exchanged news from our constituencies. One topic came back: conversion. It concerned above all relations between Hindus and Christians in India and Christians and Muslims worldwide. We heard the same stories about unethical conversion, about aid evangelism, about conspiracy to overturn Islam and we realised that our counter-parts in dialogue or their constituencies were not always able to distinguish between Christians. The WCC tried to articulate the dilemma in its recent Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions:

*Although dialogue by its very nature is direct encounter, there are invisible participants on each side in every dialogue. Our dialogue partners will every so often hold us responsible for what fellow Christians have done or neglected to do, said or not said. While this in some ways is inevitable and even sometimes understandable, we are well aware of deep disagreements within religions and we know that the dividing lines do not always go between religious communities but often within religious communities. The differences may be not only theological, but relate to social, political, and moral issues. We may for various reasons find ourselves in opposition to some of those with whom we share a common faith. We learn that religious communities are not monolithic blocks confronting each other. Plurality of positions on each side should not be ignored or suppressed while defending what is perceived to be the interest of one’s*

Hans Ucko

*community. Commitment to a faith does not entail identification with what is done or not done in its name. Therefore, we should not be defensive, but remain confident of the potential of dialogue to changing deeply held opinions or prejudices.*<sup>18</sup>

In an effort to address the issue, the two offices on dialogue initiated a project entitled "Interreligious Reflection on Conversion - From Controversy to a Shared Code of Conduct". Although the project is to focus mainly on 'intra-discussion' among Christians on the topic of conversion, the project was initiated in May 2006 through a multireligious hearing, assessing the reality. What are the memories, experiences, reactions and comments from our counterparts in other religious traditions on the issue of conversion? What are the issues? What should we as Christians bring to the table from the interreligious reality on the issue of conversion? What do Muslims, Hindus say about conversion? How do we address the fears of people wanting to become Christians but living in countries, where another religion is dominating the religious landscape?

Our intention with this project is to assess the reality of conversion in relations with people of different faiths. The project should then through intra-Christian conversations lead us to conversations with Pentecostals and Evangelicals about conversion? How do we understand together what it means to live and witness in a religiously plural world? Can we arrive at a code of conduct on the issue of conversion? This should be the end result, where we try to respond to the multifaith reality and the theological concerns we have explored.

The report from the interreligious consultation on "Conversion – Assessing the Reality", held in Lariano, Italy in May 2006, stated among other things:

*That inter-religious dialogue, to be meaningful, should not exclude any topic,*

*however controversial or sensitive, if that topic is a matter of concern for humankind as a whole or for any section/s thereof*

*That freedom of religion is a fundamental, inviolable and non-negotiable right of every human being in every country in the world. Freedom of religion connotes the freedom, without any obstruction, to practice one's own faith, freedom to propagate the teachings of one's faith to people of one's own and other faiths, and also the freedom to embrace another faith out of one's own free choice.*

*That while everyone has a right to invite others to an understanding of their faith, it should not be exercised by violating other's rights and religious sensibilities. At the same time, all should heal themselves from the obsession of converting others.*

*That freedom of religion enjoins upon all of us the equally non-negotiable responsibility to respect faiths other than our own, and never to denigrate, vilify or misrepresent them for the purpose of affirming superiority of our faith.*

*That errors have been perpetrated and injustice committed by the adherents of every faith. Therefore, it is incumbent on every community to conduct honest self-critical examination of its historical conduct as well as its doctrinal/theological precepts. Such self-criticism and repentance should lead to necessary reforms inter alia on the issue of conversion*

*That conversion by "unethical" means is discouraged and rejected by one and all. There should be transparency in the practice of inviting others to one's faith*

*That humanitarian work by faith communities should be conducted without any ulterior motives. In the area of humanitarian service in times of need, what we can do together, we should not do separately.*

Hans Ucko

*That no faith organization should take advantage of vulnerable sections of society, such as children and the disabled.*

*That we are sensitive to the religious language and theological concepts in different faiths. Members of each faith should listen to how people of other faiths perceive them.*

*That there is a need to collectively evolve a "code of conduct" on conversion, which all faiths should follow. We therefore feel that inter-religious dialogues on the issue of conversion should continue at various levels.<sup>19</sup>*

Media attention on the common project on conversion of the PCID and IRRD has been beyond expectation and put the WCC in the headlines in a way that it has seldom experienced. Not only church or religious media covered the project but secular media throughout the world wrote about the project, interviewed participants and solicited comments from the organisers. It would be interesting to explore more in depth why the issue of conversion raises this kind of interest in circles that go well beyond the religious communities.

The second consultation in the project, an intra-Christian event in Toulouse, France August 2007, welcomed the company of participants, who had often been referred to in the Lariano-meeting but who were not physically present. The only Pentecostal representative at the Lariano-meeting made us all realise that we all need to work with our prejudices. There are Pentecostal theologians wrestling intensely with the issue of religious plurality and doing so from a Pentecostal theology of optimism and hope. The consultation in Toulouse benefited from representatives of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), Christians from the Assemblies of God and the Church of God in the USA. Together with charismatic Catholic Christians, Orthodox Christians from the Oriental as well as the Eastern

traditions, the Toulouse consultation provided quite a good range of Christian participation. And the discussions proved that we are headed in the same direction. While we may differ (and we do) in terms of understanding our mission and witness, we were of the same mind that conversion is the prerogative of the individual and God. I convert. You cannot (or should not) convert me). The same was emphasised in one of the keynote addresses: "(w) e all agree that we cannot convert someone. We can witness, we can explain to him what conversion means, we can call him to conversion, but we cannot convert him. A human being can only convert his own heart to his creator and this conversion is only possible because of God's grace and the wonderful action of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, the saying 'I converted him' easily slips from our lips, even though it is both theologically wrong and can easily be misunderstood by outsiders."<sup>20</sup> The discussion in Toulouse focused on some issues that are likely to be addressed in the third and last consultation in the project on conversion:

1. Family and Community
2. Respect, Transparency and Honesty
3. Economy, Marketing and Competition
4. Violence, Politics, Coercion and Manipulation

These headings and what they might signify in various contexts and encounters will most likely play a leading role in what we hope will become an ecumenical ethical code of conduct on religious conversion. It is around these topics that Christians should articulate their basic beliefs in encounter with people of other faiths.

#### **11. A Critical Moment on conversion**

The question of conversion emerged as one particular issue during a major interreligious event, the Critical Moment-Conference organized by the WCC 6-9 June, 2005 in Geneva. The charge was made by several

Hans Ucko

---

participants that the WCC needed to be much clearer on the question of conversion as a problematic issue in interreligious relations. If one wanted to be serious in interreligious dialogue, one needed to speak out against those who sought the conversion of others. A Muslim woman from Egypt said: "It is my assumption, that we have moved beyond the conversion mentality and that we share a post-conversion mentality. We believe in the freedom of religion and everybody must enjoy the freedom of expressing and practising his or her religion and calling others if he or she wishes others to do so. It is my conviction that we should recognise the conversion mentality, that either you are with me or against me as something of the past".<sup>21</sup> The report from the conference addressed the issue of conversion and said:

In our relationship in dialogue we need to address also issues of controversy as difficult as they may be. But we cannot pretend that they are not there. In many of our dialogues there is an asymmetry, which we must be aware of and attentive to.

The issue of conversion remains for many an issue of pain. The question of mission and conversion is highly sensitive, yet at the centre of some religious traditions' own sense of self-understanding. Making distinctions on the issues of conversion could be a topic for interreligious dialogue. Such dialogues may help clarify what conduct should be identified as proselytism, and perhaps also lead to greater understanding as to why witnessing is so highly valued within some religious traditions. In addition, Christians and Muslims, above all implicated in mission and da'wa, might through interreligious dialogue be encouraged to pursue this question through intra-religious dialogue within their own communities.

How do we balance the right to individual and collective self-understanding linked to the notion of religious freedom with that of

self-defence in the name of preserving often long historical religious traditions? It goes without saying that interreligious dialogue should enable us to share fully our beliefs but at the same time we must be mindful of sharing in a way that will not offend others. There should be no coercion in religion and we need to reflect on how to refine the ethics of conversion.

Many of us feel that religions should overcome the mentality of conversion as a strategic mechanism to convince people to change religion. A mentality of conversion fails to recognise the integrity of the other and the other's religion. The subject of conversion is complex. It raises tensions within and between religious communities. Violence and anger are not uncommon results. Although our religions provide tools with which to tackle this problem (e.g., 'there is no compulsion in religion', Qur'an 2:256), we have to acknowledge that conversion is a reality present in our religious histories. However conversion can not be the goal of and is contrary to interreligious dialogue. We denounce conversion by unethical practices such as using threatening behaviour, material benefits (bribes?) or any forms of coercion. Conversion does have a role in religion but historically we need to recognise the instances when it has taken place under duress.

To this end, we need to emphasise less the old meaning of conversion as a change of belief, and practice instead the kind of conversion that requires a change of heart. Without this new kind of conversion process, fears will not be overcome and the building of a stronger interreligious agenda for social transformation towards the common good will remain outpaced by the growing crises of our world. A politics of conversion of the heart is a sine qua non for an honest dialogue that includes the development of joint cooperation for peace and justice....

Hans Ucko

We recommend that the WCC looks into the question of conversion as an issue in interreligious relations and in particular initiates conversations between our faith communities. An outcome for such deliberations could be to formulate a protocol on conversion. Participants from the Critical Moment Conference will continue a similar conversation in their own communities. Such conversations should not undermine the particularities of our faiths but embrace the divinely-given diversity of religion.<sup>22</sup>

## 12. Thoughts of a convert

What is conversion? It is the transformation of one thing into another. We find the term used in many walks of life. A particular event may result in a transformation or conversion. Europeans may have to convert from Fahrenheit to Centigrade in order to understand how hot it could be in the US. We must be familiar with currency conversion from rupees to Euro. Conversion is also understood as a spiritual enlightenment causing a person to enter another religious tradition. In psychiatry it can be understood as a defence mechanism repressing emotional conflicts which are then converted into physical symptoms that have no organic basis.

It would be interesting to discuss philosophically whether the different usages would allow us to look upon the convert, be it in relation to degrees, currency or change of religion, as basically the same as before, only seen with other glasses or from another angle. But these may be only the naïve wishes of a convert that after all the heat remains the same, the Euro the same, etc.

The convert is looked upon with suspicion by those s/he left and those he joined. There are of course reasons for this. The history of Jewish-Christian relations knows of many cases, where converts from Judaism to Christianity became more anti-Semitic than their new-found Gentile

brothers and sisters. Anton Margarita converted from Judaism to Christianity in 1522. His book, "Der gantz Judisch Glaub" ("The Whole Jewish Faith"), greatly influenced Martin Luther, who cites it frequently in his late tract, Von den Juden und ihren Lügen ("Of the Jews and their Lies"). Margarita, the son and grandson of rabbis, had a "checkered" career, having denounced his own community to the non-Jewish authorities two years before his conversion. After his conversion he became an instructor in Hebrew at the University of Vienna. At the command of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, Margarita debated Joseph (Joselmann) b. Gershom of Rosheim, a leader of the German Jewish community, at the Diet of Worms in 1530.<sup>23</sup>

It is true that many converts become more Catholic than the Pope as the saying goes. I recall Catholic priests in Sweden not very happy with the converts from the Church of Sweden, who left the Swedish church because they could not deal with women ordination. My Catholic friends said; "We don't want these converts. They are more conservative than the Vatican and are actually stuck in a pre-Vatican II spirituality."

But is it the whole truth? Is a convert someone who will have to prove his/her credentials by being more Catholic than the Pope or by denigrating that which s/he left? Is a convert per definition a renegade, someone who looks down upon that which s/he has left? Is it not more often that converts usually come from the periphery rather than from the centre and that their conversion is not first of all a conversion from the core of a religion but a move to the core of a religion? Of course, it is difficult to put all converts together as if they were all of one mind. What I want to say is that not every convert hates the religious tradition s/he left. S/he is probably more at home in that s/he found but not necessarily in opposition to what s/he left.

Hans Ucko

I have mentioned earlier Gregory Baum as a different kind of convert. One could add others. There are reasons to recall the impact of converts on the change that took place in the Roman Catholic Church in relation to Jews. Many Jews, converts to Christianity, brought about the conversion of the church in relation to the Jewish people. When celebrating *Nostra Aetate*, we should remember that this document would not have existed as it is today, were it not for people like John Oesterreicher and Bruno Hussar. Did not Cardinal Lustiger in many ways support the French Bishops in their work on changing the teachings of the church in relation to the Jewish people?<sup>24</sup> The question is whether conversion *a priori* suggests that accepting one religion means rejecting another religion?

Can one be a convert without endorsing conversion? I would like to paraphrase a Swedish stand-up comedian, who said about the prayer, "And lead us not into temptation...'", thank you very much, you don't have to lead me, I can very well walk

myself into temptation." Applying it to conversion, I do not think I need to be converted by someone, I can convert myself. What I mean to say is, the problem with conversion is the arrogance of those who think that they have a right to convert others and particularly so when they refer to UN declarations as a support. Claiming the right to seek out the other for conversion is nothing else but turning the other into an object for my design. It is meeting the other as an object, not interested in the encounter and where it might take us.

There will always be people who, for various reasons, will want to break up and look for other pastures. One cannot erect walls high enough to prevent them from leaving. The wall is not built that will hinder their flight. It is better to let them leave without clipping their wings. We live in a world, where encounters and dialogues will lead some to seek other ways than the ones just travelled. This is the right that UN declarations talk about - the right of and in each of our religious traditions.

<sup>1</sup> Towards a culture of religious diversity and communal harmony - Report from a consultation of Theravada Buddhist and Christian leaders, <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/cd43-08.html>

<sup>2</sup> The Pope in a lecture about his own struggle with faith and reason in Europe deviated into an unwarranted verdict of Islam by referring to Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus saying: "Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached". <http://tinyurl.com/j7uuh>

<sup>3</sup> Is Killing An Apostate in the Islamic Law? <http://tinyurl.com/qomuy>

<sup>4</sup> Interreligious Insight, No.3, July 2006, p.6

<sup>5</sup> Karen Armstrong: "We cannot afford to maintain these ancient prejudices against Islam"

The Guardian September 18, 2006 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1874653,00.html>

Our Islamophobia dates back to the time of the Crusades, and is entwined with our chronic anti-Semitism. Some of the first Crusaders began their journey to the Holy Land by massacring the Jewish communities along the Rhine valley; the Crusaders ended their campaign in 1099 by slaughtering some 30,000 Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem. It is always difficult to forgive people we know we have wronged. Thenceforth Jews and Muslims became the shadow-self of Christendom, the mirror image of everything that we hoped we were not - or feared that we were.

<sup>6</sup> Ed. Gregory Baum, *The Twentieth Century. A Theological Overview*, (Orbis Books Maryknoll, New York - G. Chapman, London 1999)

<sup>7</sup> The Greek word used is how Septuagint translated the Hebrew word *ger*, sojourner' or 'resident alien'.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.idir.net/~cnc/UN\\_UDHR.htm](http://www.idir.net/~cnc/UN_UDHR.htm)

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/jwg/doc/e\\_jwg-n3\\_06.html](http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/jwg/doc/e_jwg-n3_06.html)

<sup>10</sup> Cf. "Report on common witness and Proselytism," Annex II to the Third joint Report adopted May 1970, in *Dokumente wachsender Übereinstimmung 1931-1982*, pp.625-634.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/striving-e.html>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/j-crel-e.html>

<sup>13</sup> Towards a culture of religious diversity and communal harmony - Report from a consultation of Theravada Buddhist and Christian leaders, <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/cd43-08.html>

<sup>14</sup> For the dialogue between Hindus and Christians, see e.g. Wesley Ariarajah: Hindus and Christians, A Century of Protestant Ecumenical Thought, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.hvk.org/articles/0397/0080.html>

<sup>16</sup> Conversations on the topic conversion with representatives of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) and representatives of different Pentecostal churches have made it clear that labelling Christians as Evangelicals is a very blunt way of referring to people. We have allies among people from the WEA and the Assemblies of God and the Church of God in dissociating ourselves from aggressive proselytism and unethical evangelism.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/cd43-01.html>

<sup>18</sup> Ecumenical considerations for dialogue and relations with people of other religions - Taking stock of 30 years of dialogue and revisiting the 1979 Guidelines, WCC 2002

<http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/glines-e.html>

<sup>19</sup> Report from the interreligious consultation on "Conversion – Assessing the Reality" organised by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican City, and the Office on Interreligious Relations & Dialogue of the World Council of Churches, Lariano (Italy), May 12-16, 2006, <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/cd47-18.html>

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Schirmacher, World Evangelical Alliance, Toulouse, August 2007

<sup>21</sup> Changing the Present, Dreaming the future – A Critical Moment in Interreligious Dialogue, ed. Hans Ucko, Geneva: WCC 2006, p.22

<sup>22</sup> ibidem, p.81

<sup>23</sup> Margarita, Anton, Der gantz Judisch Glaub: Mit sampt einer grundlichen und warhafftigen anzeigunge, aller satzungen, Ceremonie[n], gebetten, heymliche und offentliche gebreuch, dere[n] sich die Juden halte[n], durch das gantz Jar, mit schonen unnd gegründten Argumenten wider jren glauben / durch Anthonium Margaritham Hebreischen Leser, der loblichen Universitet unnd Furstlichen Statt Leyptzig, beschriben unnd an tag gegeben. Franckfurt am Mayn, 1544

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?id=2550>

## Wande Abimbola

Conversion is an important aspect of some of the world's religions, especially Christianity and Islam. Christians, for example, are encouraged by the Holy Bible to share the "good tidings" of Jesus Christ with the unbelievers. This may or may not lead to conversion, but if the other party takes to heart the "good news," he or she may eventually become a Christian convert.

On the surface, it would appear that there is nothing wrong with sharing the message of your religion with other people, but as we will soon see, conversion is not often carried out without some kind of subtle brainwashing, and in some cases, even the use of force. As a matter of fact, conversion has become an important stock-in-trade of Christianity and Islam. This is an international business worth trillions of dollars, without which some evangelical missions could hardly survive. But there are some very important implications of the whole idea of conversion. This short paper is an attempt to focus on some of the problems which conversion has brought about. If we really want peace, harmony and respect in the modern world, it is imperative for us to take a hard look at the whole issue of conversion.

Historically, conversion has often been accompanied by large scale conquest and enslavement of indigenous peoples. This has led to the disappearance of many indigenous peoples of North, Central and South America, the Caribbean, Australia, Asia and Africa. There is no gain-saying the fact that so much evil and suffering have been perpetrated by the erroneous idea that conversion is a legitimate right of some of the most powerful religions of the world. Much money and resources of the world have been needlessly wasted by the developed countries in an attempt to convert indigenous peoples. Progressive people the world over need to

join hands together to put a stop to this new form of slavery and colonialism. While chattel slavery came to an end in the nineteenth century after about 350 years of suffering, other forms of slavery continue.

Conversion often leads to the obliteration of the value systems of other people, which in turn leads to loss of identity. When conversion is carried out on a massive scale, it is actually a form of genocide. When a people are persuaded, cajoled, or forced to abandon their value system, this leads them to forget their language and to adopt the language of the oppressor. Since language and religion are the two pillars of identity, when a people lose both, they no longer exist as an identifiable ethnic group. Many languages of the world have already been lost as a result of the evil effects of conversion and globalization, and many more are on the verge of extinction even as we speak.

This writer holds the view that the demise of any language, value system, or culture is a tragedy which will impoverish our world, both in terms of ideas, and in terms of cultural productivity and artistic expression. People who value the power of ideas, and the contribution that artistic expression can make in the world, should struggle against any power, principality, church or authority who think that it is fair game to continue to impoverish the world through conversion. Let us collectively curb the arrogance that makes someone think that his own religion is the only legitimate religion. Anybody who still holds such antiquarian ideas in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is an ignorant person.

At this juncture, we need to ask the question: Is conversion morally right? Are some leaders of the religious communities of the world committing heinous crimes and sins

when they convert other people? Why should a people with superior military, technological or material means have the authority to compel other people, who are not as strong, to their own world view? When a people's world view is eradicated from the deep recesses of their minds, serious economic and psychological problems soon follow.

There is certainly an economic angle to conversion, which on the scale of profit and loss is a plus for the colonial power doing the conversion, and a minus for the subordinate people being converted. As a matter of fact, when a technologically advanced people sell their religion to a subordinate people, they do not stop there. They also sell so many products of their factories, and as time goes on, make the converted people develop a taste for those material products, which then leads to the establishment of economic control and sometimes the disappearance of the products of the converted people. This occurs simply because the converted people, as a result of the mental processes of conversion, may no longer value their own products, even if those products are superior. This is how capitalism has been developed, in some parts of the world, while the indigenous peoples of the third world have become more and more impoverished.

Conversion leads to loss of values, which in turn leads to loss of economic strength, which brings about poverty. On the other hand, if a people have not been converted, their world view and value system remain inviolate, and they, as a result, are prosperous and impregnable. This is probably how the countries of the developed world have become so prosperous, while the countries of Africa have become so poor. Conversion of indigenous people is the key to economic power in a globalized world.

There is also the medical, psychological, and physical health consequence of conversion. When a people have been converted or made to change or abandon their values, they have

lost their identity, their language, and beliefs. Many diseases of the body and mind soon begin to rear their ugly heads and afflict the converted. The pity of it is that the converted people no longer see any value in their own indigenous health care systems.

The argument of the missionaries is that when a person is converted to Christianity or Islam, he will go to heaven when he dies. Therefore, when the missionaries convert a person, they are saving his soul from hell fire. But the point is that when a person loses his or her value system, and he becomes confused, neurotic or mentally deranged, he would have suffered his own hell fire here on earth before he dies. Nobody can save him, since he will not accept the validity of the herbs, roots, and concoctions of his own people. Since he may not have the money to attend a western type hospital, he will be condemned to suffering before he dies an ignoble death. It is arguable that he would not be welcomed by his ancestors in heaven when he dies. He may not even go to the same heaven as his ancestors.

In conclusion, conversion is an evil and terrible thing that does no good to anybody, except that it brings more people to the fold of the conquering religion doing the conversion, and, as a result, probably brings more money to their coffers. Millions of people have been wiped off the globe as a result. Conversion is a form of genocide. It is a cruel aspect of colonialism, slavery, arrogance and hegemony of one people over another. Let us all, as religious leaders of the world, struggle against this terrible aspect of religion in the modern world.

The religion that I represent, the Yoruba religion, is a non-proselytising religion of West Africa. We believe that all religions of the world are equally valid. In spite of the fact that we have suffered greatly from conquering and proselytizing missions of Islam and Christianity, we remain committed to the notion that it is an act of disrespect for any

religious leader to condemn another religion. As a matter of fact, one of the chapters of our sacred literature, the thirteenth Odu of Ifa, Otura Meji, is a salute to Islam.

We believe that a better world free of religious wars, hated or bigotry is possible. One hundred and sixty years of Christian evangelism and nine centuries of Islamic proselytisation have not succeeded in wiping us out. As a matter of fact, most Yoruba Christians and Muslims still participate openly or clandestinely in our religious ceremonies and rituals. Our religion still remains strong and powerful and is spreading like wild fire in the Americas.

Let me close this short address with a song of Ifa:

*Iro ni won pa  
Ifa o lee parun  
Eke ni won se  
Ifa o lee parun  
Atelewo la bala  
A o meni o ko o  
Iro ni won pa  
Ifa o lee parun.*

*It is a lie they are telling  
Ifa can never be destroyed  
It is deceitful words they are uttering  
Ifa can never be destroyed.  
We met the marks of our palms there  
Nobody knows who put them there  
It is a lie they are telling  
Ifa can never be destroyed.*

---

**Dr. Wande Abimbola occupies the position of Awise Awo Ni Agbaye, "spokesperson and ambassador for the Yorùbá religion and culture in the world." This is a position he was chosen to fill in 1987 by the assembled elder babaláwos of Nigeria. Formerly President of the University of Ifè and then Leader of the Nigerian Senate, he has devoted his life since the dissolution of the Senate to Ifá, the Yorùbá system of divination, and to his role as Awise, spokesperson and ambassador.**

**Dr. Abimbola currently teaches in the US, at Boston University. He has also taught at Harvard and Colgate. He gives courses in Ifá and Yorùbá religion & culture at selected locations in the US, principally Boston.**

## David M. Elcott

The irony of a discussion concerning conversion is that Judaism approaches conversion from a very different place than most religious communities. Biblical Israel knew no conversion – patrilineal descent determined tribe affiliation and, therefore, one's relationship to the Israelite community. In spite of later rabbinic exegesis, there are no converts. Ruth remains a Moabite; her children are Israelite by virtue of their paternity. In fact, the move to matrilineal Jewish inheritance is first seen in the story of Ezra following the return from exile. He forces the Jewish men to give up their foreign wives, thus demanding absolute endogamy – essentially both parents must be Israelite. One can only surmise that this shift, coming from the priestly clan, fully protects Israel – only inherits tribal affiliation (or, at this point, priesthood, Levite and Israelite) from the father and Judaism from the mother.

There is a place for non-Israelites in the system. Standing at Mt. Sinai, as recorded in Exodus 19, were all the Israelites and the *erev rav*, the non-Israelite masses. Our reading of Deuteronomy 29 is that all those who will ever be Jewish, including all converts from the future, stood at Mt. Sinai and experienced the covenant with God. The Mishkan and later the Temple allows for sacrifice by Gentiles in their own section and the Bible values the *ger tzedek* – the righteous Gentile – as a non-Israelite who is good and just. But there is no case of a move from Gentile to Israelite in the Bible.

Rabbinic Judaism provides for conversion and retrojects its rules concerning both conversion and matrilineal descent to explain Ruth's inclusion as a Jewess and *ger tzedek* as a foreigner who becomes Jewish. However, this tells us more about the Rabbis than about Bible. For the

Rabbis of the early centuries of the Common Era, their experience of conversion turned sour. Clearly during this religiously tumultuous period, there was a wide range of Jews and even of those who associated with Judaism: those who kept the Sabbath, those who followed the God of Israel but (males) were not circumcised, those who called themselves Jewish and accepted Jesus as messiah. The Rabbis could not abide by this diversity and moved to apply many of the rules they had initially developed exclusively for their own exclusive *Chevra* – the rabbinic community. We now see *mitzvot* (sacred rituals and rules of behavior) as normative for all those who are Jewish. In this system, one who is willing to accept *ol hamitzvot* and *ol shamayim* (the yoke of law and of heaven) could become a Jew. In counter-distinction to Christianity, the path to conversion was purposely onerous and not encouraged. Following the destruction of the Temple during the rebellion against Rome in 70 CE, conversion becomes – for all practical purposes - irrelevant.

One may also assume that the rabbis developed an aversion for conversion due to their experience on both sides of coercion. Under the Hasmoneans, especially John Hyrcanus, Gentiles in the Galilee and in Idumea were forcibly converted much as Jews were forcibly circumcised during the Maccabean revolt. Not only did these forced conversions result in Herod as king, but the rabbis concluded – as Ezra had before and perhaps influenced by the Dead Sea sects and other purists – that such additions to the people of Israel “dilute” the community and undermine its sense of wholeness and purpose. On the other side, centuries of battling those who used force to convert Jews certainly extinguished any rabbinic interest in

conversion. Jews were a *mamlechet kohanim and goy kadosh* – a kingdom of priests and a sacred nation – and also the remnant through whom redemption would come. Whether by conscious religious choice or as a response to their political circumstances, the rabbis and Medieval Jews decided that the other peoples and faiths of the world could have power and numbers; Jews had God and Torah and the true covenant and viewed power and coercion as Gentile values.

For biblical Israel as for rabbinic Judaism, entry into the covenant with God allowed no exit. Simply, once a Jew, always a Jew: “Israel, even in sin, is still Israel.” There is no conversion out of Judaism. The child of a woman who converted from Judaism to Christianity or Islam, even if that child was brought up in another faith, is still considered Jewish. Since I cannot leave, I do not expect others can leave either. Hence, there is no pressure or even desire toward developing an ethic or program for conversion.

One note: it is clear from multiple rabbinic sources that a God-fearing, righteous Gentile gained his or her place in the world to come. One did not need to be Jewish to achieve salvation. In fact, goodness was all non-Jews needed to enter heaven while for Jews, observance was demanded along with goodness. In this sense, God hears the prayers of all human beings, acknowledges righteousness, and gives eternal merit for all human beings whether or not they are of the covenant of Abraham and Sarah. Once again, this militates against seeking converts.

Until the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with increased intermarriage and Jewish interaction with those who are not Jewish, little alters in the Jewish view of conversion: we do not need nor want converts; coercion of any form invalidates a conversion, and attempted conversion for another purpose

(such as marriage or access to Jewish professions) is prohibited. Two things have changed: Liberal (Reform and some Conservative) Jews have begun to promote conversion to Judaism for the “unchurched” and certainly for those planning to marry a Jew. This comes with other changes, such as the acceptance of patrilineal descent as valid along with matrilineal, a willingness to offer conversion for the sake of marriage, and the reality of millions of Jewish homes in which there are Jews, children of Jews, non-Jewish spouses of Jews and extended families that are not Jewish. Many synagogues are trying to find a place for the non-Jewish member of a synagogue family – without conversion. And certainly, conversion is offered even to those who are not prepared to take on the traditional rituals and behaviors of rabbinic Judaism. This has provoked a crisis in the Jewish community where there is great debate over who is to be considered Jewish, especially in Israel where State religious courts make these determinations.

Since the rise of modernity in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Jews became players in a global market community – of ideas as well as capital. Jews vigorously presented, defended and critiqued ideas – think about socialism, communism, liberalism, neo-conservatism. With the Jewish reentry into history and reengagement with political, economic and social affairs, we have been forced to sort out our issues of uniqueness and separation. As a community, we continue to invest in explaining Judaism to others, advocating for a Judaism that fits well into the modern world even as we became players on the national and international scenes. The reestablishment of the Jewish state allows for the experiment of a Jewish polity as a model for nation building. In this environment, Judaism must and is prepared to compete with other religions regarding our theology, meaning and exegeses. I generally views such competition as a healthy sign because the

danger for a small religion is that it can be overwhelmed by acceptance and love. We are uncomfortable with terms such as Judeo-Christian heritage since, in a Europe or United States that is essentially Christian dominated, Judeo-Christian obscures the uniqueness of Judaism. So it may be better to keep the distinctiveness and allow for competition.

The problem of conversion for Jews is not a fear of Christians or Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists approaching Jews to proclaim their faith. Rather, there are two issues that have soured the openness that Jews would accept. One is the use of power or coercion, both overt and subtle, to promote conversion. The second is surreptitious methods and non-transparent behavior as a form of religious seduction.

Christian and Muslim expansion as religious communities paralleled imperial conquests of nations and peoples throughout the world. Even today, the missionary maps of many churches reflect the different areas and periods of colonization by imperial European powers. There was nothing benign here – populations were murdered and others forcibly baptized. Clearly, coercion of that magnitude is a source of shame for any religious community and has been rightfully repudiated by most.

But coercion comes in other forms. Mahler's conversion to become conductor in Vienna is one example of many where the only means of advancement was to convert into the dominant religion. The same could be said of gaining admission to a high school or university or purchasing property where religion is weighed as a factor that influences the decision. In countries where religious institutions wield power over the political system or join with those in control of nation, that influence can be a factor in creating a push toward conversion. Obviously, this is more subtle – no one "forces" an individual to join the majority and

gain access to otherwise unattainable positions. We will have to consider whether these pressures are residual in today's Christian societies.

I am not sure how to respond to the coercion that comes from missionaries who provide food and health clinics and housing for the indigent and needy of the world and use these settings to promote their religious beliefs. On one hand, doing good that saves lives models the righteousness of that religious community. However, where the intent is to couple the benefits provided the needy with opportunities to proclaim the faith and promote conversion, one could argue that a pernicious form of coercion is at play. A lack of transparency, where helping the desperate needy through acts of goodness as a subterfuge for missionary work, seems ugly and profane. In the United States, this issue can be found in the debate over Charitable Choice where government funding goes to overtly religious institutions to be used in settings that merge religious activity with social services. If the government funds a food pantry where the only way to receive the food is beneath a cross and with a Christian blessing, I see a problem. If a family clinic or social service agency accepts government funding but refuses to offer services that are legal (distributing birth control or counseling the availability of abortion), a form of coercion is being applied. Of course, these agencies need not accept government funding and then should be absolutely free to promote or discourage behavior and beliefs within their settings according to the principles of their faith.

The issue of transparency looms large. Recently, a synagogue was established in Philadelphia with all the trappings of Judaism – a Torah, tallitot (prayer shawls), a rabbi and prayer books. Yet this was a messianic Protestant group with the clear goal of luring Jews into a warm and inviting "Jewish" setting for the sole purpose of conversion to Christianity. To try to convert

David M. Elcott

by using deceit or subterfuge of any kind should be a transgression for any truly religious community. It is a form of shady marketing and advertising that we all abhor. It must be unequivocally rejected.

So that I am clear – the right of proclaiming the faith in an open society should be protected. It reflects the rich market of ideas that make up a free society. The terms of an open society are honesty with a principle of truth in that which we promote, be it religion or cars. It is unwise in a world of freedom to think that we can or should forbid conversion – whether in Russia or India, in Israel or Pakistan. To prohibit debate about faith is a form of suppression; to block access to new or different religious experiences to those seeking faith in their lives, is a political sin. Our religious communities must be at the forefront of

protecting each individual's right to seek God and, frankly, we should be delighted when those who are in need find in a sister religion the faith that heals their souls. Paths to holiness are everywhere – it is hubris and ultimately a form of idolatry to believe that God can only reside in my own religious tradition, that God is limited to the terms my faith has set for that which is infinite. If the religious paths we offer are controlled by coercion and force, if one walks them with deceit and guile, then we model a false God. Our job as religious leaders is to be a guide for those seeking God. In our speech and our behavior, we must model, as images of God, ways to be a partner with God in healing the hemorrhaging in our world. As Jewish scripture teaches, "God's ways are ways of goodness, and all God's paths lead to peace."

---

**Dr. David M. Elcott is the former Executive Director of Israel Policy Forum (IPF), the organization that advocates active American engagement in producing Israeli-Arab peace. Before joining the Israel Policy Forum, Dr. Elcott was Director of U.S. Interreligious Affairs for the American-Jewish Committee.**

**Dr. Elcott was a lecturer and organizational consultant, helping communities in the U.S. and Canada create leadership institutes and community-wide projects grounded in the Jewish principles of Tikkun Olam - improving (literally, "repairing") the world. He previously served as Vice-President of the National Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL). Dr. Elcott has lectured on the Middle East, Arab politics and Muslim-Western cultural conflict to corporate leaders and House members on Capitol Hill, and to Christian and Muslim religious leaders and heads of major Jewish organizations. He earned a doctorate in political psychology and Middle East studies with a specialty in Islam and Arab culture from Columbia University, and is the author of *The Jewish Quest for a Perfect World*, as well as numerous articles and monographs.**

## A. Rashied Omar

In February 2006, an Afghan national, Abdul Rahman, who had converted to Christianity in 1990 while working as a medical assistant for a Christian non-governmental aid group in Peshawar, Pakistan, was arrested and charged with apostasy under what was interpreted to be traditional shari`ah laws. The case received worldwide publicity with an Afghan court threatening to execute Abdul Rahman if he did not repent and revert to Islam. As a direct consequence of the vociferous international outcry over the persecution of Abdul Rahman, he was released after the judge dismissed the case on grounds of insanity. Despite his acquittal the defendant was forced to leave Afghanistan and was given asylum in Italy for fear of social recriminations from Afghan civil society.<sup>1</sup>

The case of the conversion to Christianity of Abdul Rahman has once again highlighted the urgent need for Muslims to seriously re-examine the restrictive traditional shari`ah laws on religious conversion from Islam. It is not good enough for Muslims engaged in interreligious dialogue to skirt this issue by hiding behind their support for the historic 1976 Chambesy Christian-Muslim statement affirming "the right to convince or to be convinced."<sup>2</sup> It is palpable from a close reading of the Chambesy discussions that despite their support for the declaration the Muslim interlocutors were equivocating. At one point in the discussions, Bishop Kenneth Cragg was compelled to spell out unambiguously the Christian concern about the Muslim position on religious freedom in the following manner: "...we are not talking about freedom of belief, or of religious practice, but the freedom of movement of belief; and there is a radical difference between these two. A faith which you are not free to leave becomes a prison, and no self-respecting faith should be a prison for those within it."<sup>3</sup>

The current reality is that the right to convert from Islam to another religion is held by a minority of Muslim scholars and is not shared by the vast majority of Muslim scholars both past as well as present. The prevailing view of classical and modern Muslim jurists regard apostasy (riddah), defined as an act of rejection of faith committed by a Muslim whose Islam had been affirmed without coercion, as a crime deserving the death penalty. All traditional books of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) deal extensively with the penalties to be imposed on apostates such as the disposition of the apostates property and inheritance and the dissolution of their marriages.<sup>4</sup> In light of the preponderance of classical Islamic positions proscribing apostasy the harsh contemporary Muslim responses to apostasy is understandable? Contemporary Muslim jurists are uncritically transporting medieval juristic positions that were negotiated in radically different historical circumstances to present day realities.<sup>5</sup> How else can one explain the widespread attachment to the death penalty verdict among traditional Muslim scholars and the social ostracization meted to so-called apostates in many Muslim societies?

No doubt, a number of modern Muslim scholars have argued for more lenient and humane positions on apostasy and have marshalled strong evidences in support of their views.<sup>6</sup> In this regard the viewpoint issued by Louay Safi of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) in the context of the Abdul Rahman furore in Afghanistan is commendable. Safi espouses an unequivocal position that a "Muslim who converts to Christianity is no more a Muslim, but a Christian and must be respected as such."<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding these and other tolerant Islamic positions on religious conversion, Muslims engaged in interreligious dialogue need to be more honest and forthcoming about the enormous

challenge they face in reforming the hegemonic traditional Muslim position on apostasy. To use the words of the Muslim scholar, Ataullah Siddiqi, in the context of Christian efforts to curtail aid evangelism, "there is a big gap between our pious hopes and our practical realities, something which we do not perhaps wish to face."<sup>8</sup>

In order to strengthen the Muslim case to reform traditional laws on apostasy will require some Christian help. Their Christian interlocutors might need to labor hard to calm aggressive Christian proselytization efforts. Without such a moratorium on aggressive proselytization, as recommended by the Chambsey declaration, it will be hard to convince Muslim hardliners that the reform of apostasy laws are not opportunistic Christian demands to make conversion possible.

A number of Muslim scholars, such as Mahmoud Ayoub, have pointed out that apostasy was a political problem in both early and later Muslim societies with the advent of colonialism and the rise of Christian missionary activity.<sup>9</sup> While it would be incorrect to suggest that the harsh shari`ah views on apostasy were first formulated in the colonial era, there can be no doubt that Christian missions during this period definitely influenced a harsher interpretation of the law period. In this regard it is instructive that the recent debate triggered by the legal persecution of Abdul Rahman because of his conversion to Christianity had been provoked in a war ravaged context where relief aid for the victims of the war was dispensed by agencies linked to the perceived aggressors. I contend that the issue did not happen in spite of war but precisely because of it. Here the right to religious conversion and the ethics of aid evangelism arise in a war context. There are of course many other instances of religious conversion which do not take place in a the context of aid evangelism, which still incur religious persecution in Muslim societies. However,

these cases are regrettably overshadowed by the former.

To its credit both the Office on Interreligious Relations of the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council on Interreligious Dialogue have since Chambésy reaffirmed their commitment to eschewing unethical forms of mission including that of aid evangelism. In fact during a 1999 WCC sponsored "Christian-Muslim Consultation on Religious Freedom" held at Hartford Seminary, Connecticut, the participants recommitted themselves to "the relevance and value of the 1976 Chambésy statement" and affirmed the importance of distinguishing between proselytism and witness as the WCC has done within the Christian context, and emphasize the necessity to express an ethics of mission and da'wah to which both Christians and Muslims can agree."<sup>10</sup> Yet, more recently, the former President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, proposed that "Christians do not engage in works of mercy as a pretext for preaching about Jesus Christ but, like the Good Samaritan, out of compassion for those who are suffering. So it can be said that interreligious dialogue is not aimed at bringing the partner in dialogue into the Catholic Church."<sup>11</sup> This Catholic understanding of the Christian narrative of the Good Samaritan is not shared by the evangelical relief organization bearing the same name.

In April, 2003 almost exactly one month after the United States of America launched a pre-emptive war against Iraq, Time Magazine reported that a Christian aid organization, the Samaritan's Purse, was waiting on the border between Jordan and Iraq for a green light from the US military command to enter Iraq in order to engage in what they called "aid evangelism".<sup>12</sup> The Reverend Franklin Graham, son of the influential evangelist Billy Graham and head of the Samaritan's Purse, justified their

A. Rashied Omar

actions by claiming that the goal of the aid ministry in Iraq was “to heal people, and hopefully they will see God”. This was, however, not the first time in recent history that Christian evangelists had used a war as a means for spreading the Christian gospel. It is well-known that during the 1991 Gulf war, Rev Franklin Graham’s organization gave US Soldiers deployed in Iraq 30,000 Bibles in Arabic for distribution in Iraq and the neighboring Muslim majority countries.

In conclusion it seems clear that while various Christian denominations disagree about the ethics of aid evangelism in the context of war, Muslims are far more united in their condemnation of it. The reverse is the case on the question of the right to religious conversion. While Muslims are

ambivalent about the right of their co-religionists to change their religion, Christians are more affirming of this right. It is clear that the different theological postures adopted by Christian and Muslim scholars are profoundly influenced by historical reality and power relations. Honest dialogue can only begin with recognition of this reality. The challenge for both Christians and Muslims committed to interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding is to go beyond mere declarations of the right of any individual to change his or her religion as long as unfair means are not employed to entice the person to switch his/her faith, but to find creative ways of making such affirmations a key part of the *modus vivendi* of convivial relations between the two communities.

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account of the Abdul Rahman conversion and trial in Afghanistan see website: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdul\\_Rahman\\_\(convert\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdul_Rahman_(convert))

<sup>2</sup> For the full proceedings of the Chambesy meeting see *Christian Mission and Islamic Da’wah: Proceedings of the Chambesy Dialogue Consultation* (Leicester, UK: Islamic Foundation, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> *Christian Mission and Islamic Da’wah: Proceedings of the Chambesy Dialogue Consultation* (Leicester, UK: Islamic Foundation, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> for a useful summary of the classical Muslim position on apostasy see Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.121-159.

<sup>5</sup> This point is well argued by Louay Safi “Apostasy and Religious Freedom,” see website: <http://1insight.org/articles/Print/Apostasy.htm>

<sup>6</sup> For a survey of some modern discussions of the topic see Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed, *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam* (Ashgate Publishing, 2004). See also Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Freedom of Expression in Islam* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1997), Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im “Islamic Law and Apostasy and its Modern Applicability” in *Religion* (1986) 16, 197-224; and Mahmoud Ayoub, “Religious Freedom and the Law of Apostasy in Islam,” *Islamochristiana* 20 (1994) 73-91.

<sup>7</sup> Louay Safi, “Apostasy and Religious Freedom,” <http://1insight.org/articles/Print/Apostasy.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Atallah Siddiqui, “Fifty Years of Christian-Muslim Relations: Exploring and Engaging In a New Relationship,” paper delivered on the occasion of the Pontificio Instituto Di Studi Arabi E D ‘Islamistica’s (PISIA) 50th Anniversary , 12th May 2000. For text see <http://www.islamic-foundation.org.uk/FiftyYearsofChristian-Rev.05.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Mahmoud Ayoub, “Religious Freedom and the Law of Apostasy in Islam” in *Islamochristiana* 20 (1994), 75-91.

<sup>10</sup> “Report from the Consultation on ‘Religious Freedom, Community Rights and Individual Rights: A Christian Muslim Perspective,” *Current Dialogue* (34), February 2000 (Geneva: World Council of Churches). <http://www.wcc.coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/cd34-19.html> (accessed March 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Unpublished keynote address delivered by Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald at a conference titled “In Our Time: Interreligious Relations in a Divided World, sponsored by Brandeis and Boston College, March 16-17, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Johanna McGeary, “A Faith-Based Initiative,” *Time Magazine*, April 21, 2003. See also: Laurie Goodstein, *Seeing Islam as ‘Evil’, Evangelicals Seek Converts*, N.Y. Times, May 27, 2003, at A3.

## Anantanand Rambachan

I want to begin my contribution to this deliberation by noting the fact that most, if not all, religious traditions, despise the convert. Like a traitor in relation to the nation-state, the convert's action is disparaged as treasonous. The convert elicits an intensity of suspicion and hate surpassing that which is directed towards the outsider who is different and never belonged.

The reasons for the depth of hostility directed to the convert are complex and many and include the convert's attitude to the religious community that is left behind in the embrace of a new one. At a more fundamental level, however, the convert from our tradition to another disturbs and unsettles us and our discomfort finds expression in antipathy towards the convert and the tradition that becomes his or her new home. The convert disconcerts us because the act of embracing a different religious tradition sharply challenges our settled assumptions about the adequacy and self-sufficiency of our religious worldview. Conversion disturbs by holding out the possibility that our answers are not the only ones or the only satisfactory ones. We interpret the act of conversion as one of primal rejection and, because our traditions so deeply inform our identities, we perceive the act as one of disloyalty to ourselves and to our community. Conversion engenders the sense of personal rejection and betrayal in favor of that which is strange and alien.

Rejecting the challenges and opportunities for critical self-examination of self and tradition that conversion affords, it is not surprising that our principal response is also an accusatory one. We see the convert as disloyal, but also as a childlike and immature individual who is incapable of exercising independent choice and judgment. The convert, we prefer to think,

does not cross religious boundaries because of any legitimate dissatisfaction with inherited tradition or anything of intrinsic worth in the values and insights of the other tradition. We find it much easier to think of conversion as the consequence of coercion, material inducement or seduction and not as reflecting anything problematic in our tradition or worthwhile in another.

Many of us who condemn the convert do so from positions of power and privilege within our traditions. Since we experience our religious traditions as good for us, we assume that it is similarly good for all who are born into it. Through circumstances of birth and opportunity we live without ever experiencing religiously justified oppression and violence that demean and negate our dignity and self worth. We do not or do not want to see how that which is good for us may not be good for others whose experiences within our faith may be quite different. It is instructive, for example, that the largest numbers of converts from Hindu traditions to Buddhism and Christianity come from the so-called untouchable castes. Yet, Hindu responses to conversion do not reflect any significant self-critical reflection on the fact that a tradition that espouses, at least in theory, a doctrine of human equality and equal value, will be attractive to those whose dignity and self-value are systematically denied by the religious legitimization of a cruel social system. Conversion presents a challenge and opportunity for religious reform and renewal. We need to be attentive to the complexity of factors that motivate persons to convert from one religion to another and not further demean the convert by regarding him or her as a childlike individual who needs to be always protected from the lures and deceptive practices of the other. On the other side of the picture, the convert is welcomed and celebrated in his adopted

religion in ways that contrast with the treatment of those who are born into the faith. The winning of converts is represented as confirmation of religious claims to superiority and as justification of arguments for the false and/or incomplete teachings of other traditions. The convert is publicly championed as the insider who reveals authoritatively the unworthiness of the religious community that he has abandoned. He is employed as an “expert” witness in the case made against his community and, in doing so, reinforces his ostracism and alienation.

Hindu traditions urge and commend adherents to share their wisdom and insights. The Bhagavadgita (18:68-69), for example, promises the highest reward for the person who fulfills this obligation;

*When he shares this deepest mystery/with others devoted to me/giving me his total devotion/ a man will come to me without doubt.*

*No mortal can perform/service for me that I value more/and no other man on earth will be more dear to me than he is.*

The motivation for such sharing love and the conviction that the teachings of one’s tradition are universally relevant and conducive to human wellbeing. One must hope that the consequence of such sharing is that the other is persuaded to embrace these teachings by awakening to their truth and beauty. In addition, varying truth claims are vigorously argued, advocated and defended among the multiple perspectives comprising the family of Hindu traditions. This original motive has nothing to do with empire-building or political ascendancy through increasing numbers. In the late nineteenth century Swami Vivekananda undertook the hazardous and pioneering journey from India to the United States inspired by the conviction that the message of the Vedanta tradition was needed by and

good for persons in the West. His path continues to be followed by Hindu teachers.

Hindu traditions, therefore, are not unfamiliar with the religious motive of sharing one’s conviction and persuading others about its validity. To claim otherwise is not to be faithful to important strands of Hinduism. While traditional, it has also generated missionary movements. At the same time the traditions of India evolved a certain ethos, largely unwritten, that guided the nature of their relationships with each other. The absence of institutionalization and centralization meant that there were no organized and systematic efforts to supplant different viewpoints. Discussions among the traditions that shared significant common elements and a common culture were, on the whole, dialogical and would even result in conversion to the other’s viewpoint. Even so, persons with different religious commitments belonged to the same larger religio/cultural community where boundaries were flexible and permeable. There was no inherent negativization of the fact of religious diversity and the latter was seen as a natural reflection of the diversity of human nature and experience. A widely shared understanding of the limits of human reason and symbols resulted in the understanding that truth always exceeded the comprehension and description of any one tradition and justified relationships of theological humility.

Into this evolved ethos, aggressively proselytizing religions such as Christianity and Islam entered, in the main, as partners in political empire-building adventures. Because of this alliance with empires, these traditions came to be associated with the imperialist attitudes of the colonizer and the disdain for India’s religious expressions. Imperialist political claims were seen as finding echo in exclusive theological claims to truth, revelation and salvation and in the proclaimed hope to replace the traditions of Hinduism. Christian theology in relation to Hinduism was mission oriented.

The identification, during the colonial period, between the Christianity and the culture of the west, resulted in the experience of these as inseparable. This identity between religion and culture, along with the fear that converts may revert to ancestral practices, led to systematic efforts to define a Christian identity over and against the prevailing Hindu ones. Christian converts took on new names from the Biblical texts, renamed villages to reflect their new faith, constructed churches following the architectural models of Europe and adopted new musical forms. In many cases, converts also adopted new forms of dress and cuisine. Such forms of self-definition help a community, especially a minority one, to maintain its new identity. At the same time such deliberately sharp distinctions between self and other are a source of tension and resentment. This is especially so when the basis of such distinction is the claim also to religious superiority and when the other (Hindu) is seen as fallen and in need of religious rescue. The nature of the Christian church as a voluntary association with membership implied and necessitated boundaries and also a sharp distinction from Hindus.<sup>1</sup> This significant dimension of identity was absent entirely from Hinduism and engendered also a sharp sense of difference between self and other. Colonialism, exclusive theology, identification with and adoption of missionary culture, and voluntary membership in a new religious community separated the convert from the larger community and intensified fear, resentment and suspicion. It is important that Christians take seriously the legitimate Hindu concerns about conversion and especially the concern about a Christian program for world conquest.

We can all agree that meaningful faith is not awakened and nurtured through aggressive proselytizing or exploitation of the vulnerability of others in conditions of tragedy and need. At the same time, the freedom to engage in religious inquiry and choice, traditionally honored in Hinduism,

must be extended to other religions and the integrity of such choice needs to be respected. Although some of the long-established Christian churches in India have made theological and cultural efforts to address some of the sources of tension between our two traditions, it is also true that many of the more recent missionary organizations are conservative and evangelical in orientation and insensitive to the ethos of religious diversity in India. They perpetuate the identity of Christianity and western culture and reignite fears about colonialism with a religious face.

Concerns about proselytization have resulted in the implementation of legislation by several Indian states to prohibit conversions through coercion, allurement and fraud. In the words of the Rajasthan Anti-Conversion Bill (2006), "No person shall convert or attempt to convert either directly or otherwise any person from one religion to another by the use of force, or by allurement or by any fraudulent means nor shall any person abet such conversion." Although this Bill and others like it do not make the act of converting from one religion to another illegal, consensus on the meaning of terms like "force," "allurement," and "fraudulent," is nearly impossible. The threat of "divine displeasure," for example, is included in the definition of force. A tradition is unlikely to find any grounds for conversion legitimate if it lacks a spirit of self-criticism and considers itself superior in all respects to other religions.

The dependence on the state as the arbiter among religions in the matter of conversion is sad concession of our own failure to resolve the tensions in mutually acceptable ways. The empowerment of the state to intervene in matters of religious relationships, however, may, in the long run, work to the detriment of all religions. Religions it would seem flourish best when no particular tradition is privileged by the state and when they do not control or serve the state.

As already noted, Hindus can understand well the impetus to share one's religious convictions and experiences with others since a similar impulse is commended in Hinduism. At the same time, this urge finds different expressions in the world's religions. What particularly disturbs the Hindu is the evidence in Christianity of what seems to be an obsession with converting the entire world, a suspicion that this is the most fundamental of all Christian motives underlying all words and actions.

What we need, above all else, is a shared ethos that informs our relationships in communities of religious diversity. This ethos is one that will go beyond mere tolerance and promote active efforts to understand each other outside of proselytizing encounters. We need more opportunities to listen and to share, to ask

questions and to be questioned. We need the humility and openness for mutual witness. We need relationships that can affirm the intrinsic value of the other in his or her religious uniqueness and not merely as a potential convert. We need relationships that inspire cooperative action to overcome unjust and oppressive structures of all kinds and that work to heal and transform communities through equal justice and dignity. We need relationships that reject violence and are passionately devoted to peace making. Through such mature relationships of mutual respect some of us may be challenged by the example of the other to a deeper way of being religious. Others may freely embrace another faith or reject faith altogether. In all cases we should be content and rejoice in our relationships of love and justice.

---

<sup>i</sup> I am indebted to Thomas Thangaraj for helping me to understand better the process of Christian identity formation in India. He traced some of the elements of this process in an unpublished paper entitled, "Who is the *Other?* - An Indian Christian Perspective," delivered at a World Council of Churches "Thinking Together" Consultation, Tampa, December 2003.

---

**Dr. Anantanand Rambachan is a Professor of Religion, Philosophy and Asian Studies at Saint Olaf College, Minnesota, USA, where he has been teaching since 1985.**

**He is the author of several books and numerous articles and reviews in scholarly journals. A series of 25 lectures by Prof. Rambachan was transmitted around the world by the British Broadcasting Corporation.**

**Prof. Rambachan has a deep and sustained interest in interreligious dialogue and, in particular, the dialogue between Hinduism and Christianity. He has participated in numerous consultations and meetings convened by national and international organizations concerned with interreligious issues. He has been very active in the dialogue programs of the World Council of Churches, and was Hindu guest and participant in the last three General Assemblies of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver, Canada, and Canberra, Australia and Harare, Zimbabwe.**

## Alice Shalvi

“Conversion” implies change, transformation, voluntary or involuntary, from one state to another. I wish to relate two types of conversion – *to* Judaism and *away from* it.

### Conversion to Judaism

Judaism is not – nor, on the whole, has it ever been – a deliberately proselytizing religion. Those who wish to convert to Judaism must express a sincere desire to join the Jewish *people*, since in Judaism peoplehood and religion coincide, are co-extensive.

There are two outstanding examples of such choice. The first is Abraham, who obeyed God’s command to leave his homeland and birthplace for an unknown destination and accepted the principle of monotheism, thus becoming the father of a new *nation*. The other is Ruth the Moabite, who expressed her choice in her beautiful, loving words to her mother-in-law Naomi, who urges her to remain with her own people: “Whither thou goest, I will go; wheresoever thou dwellest, I shall dwell. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” One should note the progression from the personal relationship, to the concept of territory/place, thence to peoplehood/nation, and finally to the acme, as it were, of faith. Significantly, it is from this “convert by choice,” that the House of David is descended – the House from which the Messiah, too, will emerge. Traditionally, when people convert to Judaism they are considered as becoming “new” people, taking a new name – Avraham, in the case of a man, Ruth in the case of a woman (cf. the Christian concept of “born again.”).

So important is it that the proselyte really wishes to become a Jew that the rabbis of the Talmudic period at first actually took pains to dissuade them, by referring to the

fact that “the people of Israel are wretched, driven about, exiled, and in constant suffering.” Only if the prospective convert expresses full awareness of this fact and of a willingness to convert in spite of it, is he/she informed of all the precepts of Judaism and the chastisements for transgressing them. (*Yevamot* 47a). Today, too, many rabbis request that the candidate for conversion wait at least a year before making a final decision. Then begins a process of learning what is required of a Jew by way of religious observance – a process which may take several years, leading to an oral examination before a “board” of three rabbis. Study is, in fact, an essential part of the conversion process, as it is, indeed, of Jewish practice in general. This means studying not only the religious laws and practices incumbent on Jews, but also a knowledge and awareness of Jewish history and traditions. The practices expected of a convert, even by the most lenient standards, are observance of the Sabbath and the holy days of the Jewish calendar (and, especially, of the High Holidays, the Days of Awe, which include the fast of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement) and observance of the dietary laws of *kashrut*.

So far as observance of the *mitzvot* or commandments is concerned, there are two schools of thought. One is that a person must demonstrate such observance prior to conversion, thus making it quite clear that he/she is really sincere in observance of what is a fairly complex way of life, relating to Sabbath observance, dietary laws and so on. The other is that, since one cannot expect a non-Jew to observe the commandments incumbent on a Jew, conversion should *precede* insistence on such observance. Currently, one of the disputes in Israel regarding observance of the *mitzvot* is between the Orthodox rabbinical

establishment, which is the ultimate arbiter on conversion, and which demands evidence of observance even before the act of conversion and a firm undertaking to continue such observance (e.g. by sending one's children to a religious school), and those who take a more lenient approach, namely that one should not demand of a person that they be observant Jews so long as they are not actually Jews.

The act of conversion itself involves circumcision and immersion in a *mikve* or ritual bath, for men; and immersion only for women. The immersion takes place in the presence of a *beit din* (or court) of three rabbis.

Given the degree of persecution of which Jews have been the victims, which even today finds expression in anti-Semitic attacks on individuals and institutions, it is indeed hard to understand why anyone should choose to become a Jew. There appear to be three main reasons:

1. Religious conviction, i.e. an act of faith stemming from a conscious conviction of the truth of monotheistic Judaism; this, for example, was what happened in the case of a Christian student of theology, a young German woman, who in the course of her studies reached the conclusion that Judaism was the true faith and thereupon not only converted but studied to become a rabbi. She is currently practicing this profession in Berlin, where she heads a Conservative congregation and *Lehrhaus*. In this category one might also include the concept of intra-religious "conversion," as in the case of a secular/non-believing/non-observant Jew who decides to "convert" to Orthodox or other, non-Orthodox, Jewish practice.

2. Desire to marry a Jew and be officially recognized as one. This is particularly true in the case of non-Jewish women, since Judaism is automatically conferred on

anyone born to a Jewish mother. In Israel today no Jew may marry a non-Jew, according to Orthodox Jewish law, which has sole jurisdiction over matters of personal status, such as marriage, divorce and legitimacy. Nor are such marriages encouraged in the Diaspora, where the non-Jewish partner is expected to convert.

It should also be noted that, according to the Israeli Law of Return, only Jews automatically acquire Israeli citizenship upon immigrating to Israel. From this springs the desire to convert of those non-Jews who wish to become Israeli citizens and to bestow that citizenship on their offspring.

3. A further phenomenon, which I find particularly fascinating, is the number of Germans for whom conversion on grounds of conscience appears to be a gesture of reparation. Perhaps there is no better way of identifying with victims of persecution than by becoming one of them.

### **Conversion from Judaism**

Conversion *from* Judaism, most often to Christianity of one or another kind, although in Israel we also find an albeit infrequent phenomenon of Jewish women who marry Muslims and convert to Islam.

There is, on the whole, a certain revulsion against conversion away from Judaism, an abhorrence, a sense of distress at what many Jews perceive as a kind of betrayal not only of our religion but also of our peoplehood and our history. We have, after all, in the past suffered bitterly from persecution on grounds of our religion. Jews have been martyred for studying Torah, as the great Rabbi Akiva was; we have our martyrs of 1096 and the forced conversions, the tortures and the burnings at the stake, of the Inquisition in Spain, Portugal and even South America, as late as the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, we think with pride and amazement of those *conversos*

who continued clandestinely to practice religious rites such as candle-lighting on the Sabbath, or eating unleavened bread at Passover, thus risking discovery and death. Hence the negative, even unforgiving attitude to converts from Judaism.

Yet it is precisely this history of persecution which has led some Jews to convert to Christianity and to attempt thus to dissociate themselves from the Jewish people. However, in Jewish law, a Jew remains a Jew, "even if he has sinned." It is hard, even impossible, to escape one's *national* Jewish identity.

There are, of course, certain grounds for conversion from Judaism. One, as in conversion to Judaism, is a change of faith, of theology, of belief, of what many Christians refer to as "seeing the light." One thinks of someone like Edith Stein, for example.

Historical and personal circumstances may also lead to conversion, as was the case with numerous Jewish children who were given shelter and refuge in Christian institutions, convents and monasteries during World War II and were brought up as Christians, or even baptized, by their rescuers. Many of them were never aware that they were in fact Jewish by birth, they did not consciously become Christians, and for some of them the discovery of their Jewish origins led to profound trauma. Some of them returned to Judaism; others, who had led profoundly Christian lives, in some cases even becoming monks or priests, remain in a kind of psychological – though not necessarily religious – Limbo. I think of the case of a Polish priest who discovered only comparatively recently that his "real" mother was not the woman who raised him in a Catholic household, but a Jew who was murdered in Auschwitz. He now keeps in his home, side by side, photographs of both mothers and, on the same shelf, both a cross and a

Magen David. One prays that he has found peace of mind and heart.

Other historical circumstances brought about conversion on grounds of what one might call convenience. Until the European Enlightenment of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Jews were outsiders, denied civil rights, barred from equal educational and professional opportunities or admitted by virtue of *numerus clausus*, restricted as to place of residence, whether in the ghetto or the Pale of Settlement. The only way out of this condition of social ostracism was via conversion. Even if they did not themselves convert, many parents had their children baptized, so that they, at least, might have access to the privileges of education and an entrée into society. Amazing as it may seem, this is what happened even in the family of the great Jewish philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, whose son Abraham not only baptized his children, including the musicians Felix and Fanny, but ultimately himself converted to Christianity.

At a time before civil marriage was instituted, numerous Jews – especially women – converted to Christianity in order to be eligible for marriage by the Church. This was the case in many of the marriages between well-educated and socially eligible Jewish women and non-Jewish men of rank, some of whom are numbered among the great salonières of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Not all of those who converted for reasons of convenience actually became *believers* in Christianity, nor were they particularly punctilious regarding, for example, prayer, even if they regularly attended church. In fact, in the eyes of many of their non-Jewish compatriots they continued to be perceived as Jews. Perhaps the greatest tragedy that overtook the converts away from Judaism and their descendents was the passing of the Nuremberg Laws in Nazi Germany in September 1935. In defining Jews and distinguishing between

---

them and Germans the Nazis went back as far as an individual's grandparents. Even if only one of these was a Jew, and even if, halakhically speaking (i.e. in terms of Jewish law), that individual was not a

Jew, because he/she was not born to a Jewish mother, in the racist eyes of the Führer and his followers, they were ultimately doomed to extermination.

---

---

**Dr. Alice Shalvi is the Founder and Honorary President of the Israel Women's Network and was its chairperson from its founding in 1984 until 2007.**

**Born in Germany in 1926, she received her B.A. and M.A. degrees in English literature at Cambridge University. She then went on to study social studies at the London School of Economics. In 1949 she was appointed a professor of English at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.**

## **Report from the Interreligious Consultation on “Conversion – Assessing the Reality”**

**Organised by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican City, and  
the Office on Interreligious Relations & Dialogue of the World Council of  
Churches, Geneva**

### **Introduction**

We, the participants in the inter-faith reflection on “Conversion: Assessing the Reality”, met at Lariano (Italy) on May 12-16, 2006. We, 27 of us, belong to Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Yoruba religion. We shared our views and experiences on this important subject over five days of co-living in the peaceful, idyllic and spiritually vibrant surroundings of Villa Mater Dei – a kind of inter-faith pilgrimage, brief but fulfilling. Our deliberations were intense, and took place in an atmosphere of cordiality, mutual respect and commitment to learn from one another’s spiritual heritage, which together constitute the common inheritance of the entire humankind.

We affirm our commitment to the process of inter-religious dialogue. Its necessity and usefulness have increased exponentially in our times for promoting peace, harmony and conflict-transformation – within and among nations in our speedily globalizing world --, especially since religion has often been used, rather misused, to shed blood, spread bigotry and defend divisive and discriminatory socio-political practices.

We hold that interreligious dialogue, to be meaningful, should not exclude any topic, however controversial or sensitive, if that topic is a matter of concern for humankind as a whole or for any section/s thereof.

It is our conviction that honest and candid dialogue can enlighten and deepen our

understanding even on the most contentious of issues. The clarification and, hopefully, resultant reduction in the areas of disagreement and ignorance can help communities to expand the possibilities for reconciliation and living together in peace, love and amity, according to our respective religious precepts.

Therefore, we wholeheartedly welcome the initiative taken by the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, Vatican City, and the Office on Interreligious Relations & Dialogue of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, for organizing this consultation on an issue that is rarely a subject of inter-faith dialogue. We convey our sincere thanks to them. Our own comprehensive deliberations over the past five days on religious conversion – in its theological as well historical and contemporary contexts – have testified to the value and usefulness of sharing our reflections on an issue which is often the cause of misunderstanding and tension among communities in many parts of the world.

Many differences and disagreements among the participants remained at the end of the consultation. Indeed, there was no unanimity even on the meaning of “conversion”. Nevertheless, we wish to record that our deliberations helped us develop a convergent understanding of the several aspects of the issue of religious conversion, making us more sensitive to each other’s concerns, and thus strengthening our understanding that such

concerns need to be addressed through appropriate action locally, nationally and internationally.

### **A summary of reflections and recommendations**

This document summarizes the main points of view expressed by the participants. It also records some consensual recommendations for the consideration of our respective communities, and of the countries and organizations to which we belong.

1. All of us believe that religions should be a source of uniting and ennobling of humans. Religion, understood and practiced in the light of the core principles and ideals of each of our faiths, can be a reliable guide to meeting the many challenges before humankind.

2. Freedom of religion is a fundamental, inviolable and non-negotiable right of every human being in every country in the world. Freedom of religion connotes the freedom, without any obstruction, to practice one's own faith, freedom to propagate the teachings of one's faith to people of one's own and other faiths, and also the freedom to embrace another faith out of one's own free choice.

3. We affirm that while everyone has a right to invite others to an understanding of their faith, it should not be exercised by violating other's rights and religious sensibilities. At the same time, all should heal themselves from the obsession of converting others.

4. Freedom of religion enjoins upon all of us the equally non-negotiable responsibility to respect faiths other than our own, and never to denigrate, vilify or misrepresent them for the purpose of affirming superiority of our faith.

5. We acknowledge that errors have been perpetrated and injustice committed by the adherents of every faith. Therefore, it is incumbent on every community to conduct honest self-critical examination of its historical conduct as well as its doctrinal/theological precepts. Such self-criticism and repentance should lead to necessary reforms inter alia on the issue of conversion.

6. A particular reform that we would commend to practitioners and establishments of all faiths is to ensure that conversion by "unethical" means are discouraged and rejected by one and all. There should be transparency in the practice of inviting others to one's faith.

7. While deeply appreciating humanitarian work by faith communities, we feel that it should be conducted without any ulterior motives. In the area of humanitarian service in times of need, what we can do together, we should not do separately.

8. No faith organization should take advantage of vulnerable sections of society, such as children and the disabled.

9. During our dialogue, we recognized the need to be sensitive to the religious language and theological concepts in different faiths.

10. Members of each faith should listen to how people of other faiths perceive them. This is necessary to remove and avoid misunderstandings, and to promote better appreciation of each other's faiths.

### **Conclusion**

We see the need for and usefulness of a continuing exercise to collectively evolve a "code of conduct" on conversion, which all faiths should follow. We therefore feel that inter-religious dialogues on the issue of conversion should continue at various levels.

## **Welcoming Words by Rev. Dr. Hans Ucko to the Participants of the Conference**

Welcome to this second phase of a project of the PCID and the IRDC.

...

For quite some time in our contacts with our constituency we have had the same experience: the issue of conversion as an issue in interreligious relations is increasingly problematic for some of our member churches. In some parts of our constituency the fiber of peaceful living together between Christians and Hindus, Christians and Buddhists and Christians and Muslims has begun to unravel. There have been attacks on churches. There were legislation proposals against conversion or stringent measures to be applied when a person wanted to convert from another religion to Christianity. In some countries, there were initiatives to reconvert Christians back to the religion of the land.

In some cases local Christians pointed to Christians from abroad having come to do mission work and the contacts between the local Christians and those from abroad were not the best.

...

In other parts of the world, the Christian churches felt targeted by the authorities. The freedom of movement and expression was curtailed. Who would define what was the ordinary life and witness of the church and what was illegitimate and unethical proselytism? How was one to deal with legislative action and threat when someone converted to Christianity?

Questions emerge relating to the interaction between the right to religious freedom and respect for other religious traditions. The right to religious freedom is limited by other human rights. One person's religious freedom may be limited by the religious freedom of another. An

emerging question is the equilibrium between a freedom to propagate religion on the one hand and the freedom to practice one's religion without interference on the other.

The issues related to conversion are thus legion. They concern our relationships with people of other faiths. They concern our solidarity with Christians in situations seeing their freedom of movement curtailed. They concern the limits to freedom of expression and whether the right to propagate one's religion is a right, a privilege or a responsibility.

When addressing the issue of conversion we wanted to bring in these different aspects. We didn't want to be apologetic. That is why we first of all invited people of different faiths, all of whom we know and trust, people who have for years been involved with the PCID and/or IRRD and who trust us enough to be open and vulnerable. We invited these friends for a multifaith hearing to listen to their concerns and grievances in relation to the issue of conversion. Out of this meeting in Lariano in May 2006 came the report, which is a report and not a received or adopted document. It is a report produced by people in our network. We wanted to listen and remember what they told us that it could accompany us in our process. It is a report, which sets some of the parameters for us. It tells us that we as "dialogue institutions" have a particular mandate, i.e. that of looking at the issue with an interfaith perspective.

...

Building upon the multifaith hearing we are now in the second phase of this project, which is one of an intra-Christian reflection of what could or should be part of the code

of conversion that we are aiming for, some kind of considerations that we could offer to our constituencies in their attempt to be faithful and respectful. Such a code of conduct would have no other weight or authority than the impact it may have in the hearts and minds of people who read and study the code of conduct. We hope that the final outcome would be so persuasive that the code of conduct on conversion might commit Christians in their relations with people of other faiths. We hope that people in other religious communities might benefit from the way Christians have committed themselves to this code that they again could trust Christians in their life and witness. We hope that a code of conduct could be picked up as an alternative to legislation against conversion, which to us seems such a blunt instrument. If Christians in dialogue with authorities could say, we stand by this conduct; maybe it could ease tensions and make Christians less defensive about their life and witness. We hope that the code of conduct could be a source of inspiration in other religious communities, in a way also obliged to rethink their *modus operandi* in relation to Christians.

In whatever we do, we need to ask ourselves the question of who is at the table. It would have been a different ballgame if at the table were sitting the representatives of the WCC constituency and the Roman-Catholics. It would still be difficult but we would constantly be tempted to tell Hindus and Muslims that the reason why we have ended up in a situation of distrust and legislation and discrimination etc. is because others and not we are the ones guilty of the crusades, proselytism and unethical conversions. Often we would be tempted to say that it is those Pentecostals and Evangelicals who are to be blamed.

We are only the innocent victims. But it wouldn't be true.

This has become tragically clear these last weeks; the plight of the Korean hostages in Afghanistan. These young Christians come from Saemmul Presbyterian Church in Seoul, part of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK), a member church of the WCC. While we all pray for the release of these young people, there are questions as to the *raison d'être* for such a mission into Afghanistan. It is obvious that it wasn't only the concern for the social and human plight of the Afghans that brought them to the country as was first said about this journey. The question of transparency and honesty cannot be dissociated from our assessment of what is taking place right now.

We are glad that we around the table today have managed to get representatives of the Pentecostal and Evangelical communities and we thank you for engaging with us in addressing the various dimensions of the issue of conversion. We are grateful that some of you have been with us from the beginning, in Lariano and in our brainstorming for this meeting in Toulouse. We are now together at the table and we need to address together the issue of conversion. It is on our table and our hope is that we will be able to address the issue carefully, learning from each other and with respect for each other.

## Christian Witness in a Multireligious World

- Fio Mascarenhas, SJ

The Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, and the Office of Inter-religious Relations and Dialogue of the World Council of Churches, are sponsoring three meetings on this subject of "conversion." The first meeting was held in Lariano, near Rome, in May 2006. Here in Toulouse, we are participating in the second meeting, which is supposed to build on the findings of that first meeting. The third and final meeting of this three-phase project, to be held sometime in the future, will attempt to arrive at some conclusions which can give *new impetus and direction to our common efforts at fruitfully evangelizing the whole of needy humanity.*

The first meeting involved dialogue with people of *other faiths*. It was titled, *Inter-religious Reflection on Conversion*. 27 Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and members of traditional religions whole-heartedly welcomed the initiative of the Vatican and the WCC in convening that meeting. However, while acknowledging the usefulness of the meeting, they admitted at the end that there was no unanimity even on the meaning of the term "conversion," and they asked that the exercise continue so as to collectively evolve a "code of conduct" regarding conversions. They reaffirmed the *"fundamental, inviolable, and non-negotiable right to freedom of religion of every human person,"* and that this included the right *"to propagate the teachings of one's faith to people of one's own and other faiths, and also the freedom to embrace another faith out of one's own free choice."*

At the same time, they declared that *"freedom of religion enjoins upon all of us the equally non-negotiable responsibility to respect faiths other than our own, and never to denigrate, vilify or misrepresent them for the purpose of affirming superiority of our*

*faith."* Acknowledging that errors have been perpetrated and injustice committed by the adherents of every faith, they concluded: *"Therefore, it is incumbent on every community to conduct an honest self-critical examination of its historical conduct as well as its doctrinal/theological precepts. Such self-criticism and repentance should lead to necessary reforms inter alia on the issue of conversion. A particular reform that we would commend to practitioners and establishments of all faiths is to ensure that conversion by "unethical" means are discouraged and rejected by one and all. There should be transparency in the practice of inviting others to one's faith... We see the need for and usefulness of a continuing exercise to collectively evolve a "code of conduct" on conversion, which all faiths should follow. We therefore feel that inter-religious dialogues on the issue of conversion should continue at various levels."*

Taking off from that meeting's conclusions, the title chosen for our own meeting here is, *Towards an ethical approach to Conversion, Christian witness in a multi-religious world.* The goal of our present meeting is to arrive at some agreement among us Christians as to how to continue to fulfill our Lord and Savior's mandate to preach and witness to the Good News about salvation and new life in Jesus Christ, *in the new context of today's world of religious pluralism.* I have been asked by the organizers to try to present the Catholic viewpoint on this subject, with a view to encouraging a discussion on the general theme of "Conversion." It is hoped that we will arrive at some agreement among ourselves about how to carry out the Great Mandate, all the while respecting the dignity of every person (a fundamental tenet of inter-religious dialogue). Evangelization is an

imperative for every Christian, but experience shows that it is problematic in the way it is carried out by some Christians in today's multi-religious society. We Christians certainly must want to convert people to Jesus Christ, but never by unethical means, and never denigrating or undervaluing their dignity.

A 2002 document of the WCC entitled, "Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding," pointed out that today, *"Christians in almost all parts of the world live in religiously plural societies. Persistent plurality and its impact on their daily lives are forcing them to seek new and adequate ways of understanding and relating to peoples of other religious traditions... There is greater awareness of the interdependence of human life, and of the need to collaborate across religious barriers in dealing with the pressing problems of the world. At stake is the credibility of religious traditions as forces that can bring justice, peace and healing to a broken world."* It went on to acknowledge, *"Most religious traditions, however, have their own history of compromise with political power and privilege and of complicity in violence that has marred human history. Christianity, for instance, has been, on the one hand, a force that brought the message of God's unconditional love for and acceptance of all people. On the other hand, its history, sadly, is also marked by persecutions, crusades, insensitivity to Indigenous cultures, and complicity with imperial and colonial designs... Further, most religious traditions exhibit enormous internal diversity attended by painful divisions and disputes. Given the context of increased polarization of communities, the prevalent climate of fear, and the culture of violence that has gripped our world, the mission of bringing healing and wholeness to the fractured human community is the greatest challenge that faces the religious traditions in our day."*

My country, India, can provide a good example of a multi-religious society.

Christians are only about 2% of the population of over 1 billion (of whom 75% are Hindu, and 10% Muslim, with Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis, tribals and animists making up the remaining 13%). India is a secular state according to the Indian Constitution, but in the recent past at national level, and even now in some regional states, a very militant anti-Christian political party has been espousing the cause of *Hindutva*, and openly persecuting Christians by passing anti-conversion laws and imprisoning or causing physical harm to "missionaries." But apart from this new situation of hostility, the fact remains that after 2000 years of Christianity, Jesus Christ is still looked upon as a "Westerner," and Christianity as a foreign import. On the one hand, thousands are being drawn to Christ and are baptized every year in various parts of the country, but on the other, the proselytizing efforts of some Christian denominations and their pastors are proving to be big obstacles to the great cause of evangelization.

In such a context, I believe, it is worth recalling some insights and suggestions that our late Pope John Paul II proposed in his Letter to the Church of Asia, *Ecclesia in Asia*, dated 6 November 1999, and titled, "JESUS CHRIST THE SAVIOUR, AND HIS MISSION OF LOVE AND SERVICE IN ASIA." Insisting that evangelization is not an option, but a command of the Lord, and is therefore both our duty and privilege, this great Catholic leader pointed out that therefore the question is not *whether or not* to evangelize, but "the urgent question now facing the Church in Asia is *how to share with our Asian brothers and sisters* what we treasure as the gift containing all gifts, namely the Good News of Jesus Christ" (EA19).

He exhorted Catholics to proclaim Jesus with *loving respect and esteem for every listener* (EA20), taking care never to violate *the listener's freedom of conscience* (EA20), because *the Holy Spirit* is also at work in

Asia's religions, cultures and philosophies (EA15). Such a new approach (of respect, dialogue, inculturation, etc) is *not* a strategy to beguile people, but an expression of *the Church's fuller grasp of God's designs* regarding the creation and salvation of the human family, and the Church's understanding of her duty *to fulfill her mission in a new way*. In the perspective of the Second Vatican Council, the Church is newly conscious of the all-embracing saving love of God who wishes to communicate himself and share eternal life with all people (DV3), and of the possibility of salvation for people even when they do not know Christ, or even God (LG16):

*"All this applies not only to Christians but to all men and women of goodwill, in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners in the Paschal Mystery" (GS, 22)*

*"The Church is supremely aware of the reality of the inner man, of what is deepest and incorruptible. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, this inner 'spiritual' man matures and grows strong... The hidden breath of the Divine Spirit enables the human spirit to open, in its turn, before the saving and sanctifying self-opening of God" (DeV, 58).*

*"The breath of divine life, the Holy Spirit, in its simplest and most common manner, expresses itself and makes itself felt in prayer. It is a beautiful and salutary thought that, wherever people are praying in the world, there the Holy Spirit is the living breath of prayer..." (DeV, 65).*

The Pope went on say that we must take the *situation of the listener to heart*, so as to offer a proclamation *adapted to the listener's level of maturity* (EA20), introducing people *step by step* to a full appropriation of the mystery (EA20). *"If the Church in Asia is to fulfill its*

*providential destiny, evangelization as the joyful, patient, progressive preaching of the saving Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ must be your absolute priority"* (EA2). He suggested that we use an *evocative pedagogy* (using stories, parables, symbols, so characteristic of Asian methodology in teaching - EA20), employing images of Jesus which are intelligible to Asian minds and cultures, and at the same time faithful to Sacred Scripture and Tradition (*Christ as the Enlightened One, the Teacher of wisdom, the Healer, the Liberator, the Spiritual "Guru", the Compassionate Friend of the poor, etc - EA20*). He stressed *"particularly the importance of the biblical word in passing on the message of salvation to the peoples of Asia, where the transmitted word is so important in preserving and communicating religious experience"* (EA22).

A most important and new insight contained in this *Letter to the Church in Asia* is that whereas Christ's message of reconciliation and solidarity is very necessary for Asia, it could be obscured from the beginning by an *untimely emphasis* on the uniqueness of Christ as Savior. Instead, we must share in such a way that *Jesus is perceived by the Asian people* as the response to their needs (*"their deepest questions answered, their hopes fulfilled, their dignity uplifted and their despair conquered"* - EA14). The direct access to Christ should not be blocked by dogmatic statements which followers of other religions initially may find arrogant and offensive. The Pope's suggestion is that we let them *first discover the attractive person of Jesus*, and allow Jesus to slowly imprint Himself on their minds and hearts, eventually leading them in the Spirit to faith in Him (and eventual baptism).

John Paul II stressed that inter-religious dialogue is an essential part of evangelization: *"Contact, dialogue and cooperation with the followers of other religions is a task which the Second Vatican Council bequeathed to the whole Church as*

*a duty and a challenge... It is important for the Church in Asia to provide suitable models of inter-religious dialogue and suitable training for those involved' (EA31). There is also "need for a dialogue of life and heart... Inter-religious relations are best developed in a context of openness to other believers, a willingness to listen, and the desire to respect and understand others in their differences. For all of this, love of others is indispensable. This should result in collaboration, harmony and mutual enrichment" (EA31).*

The Letter also stressed that *"Evangelization and inculturation are naturally and intimately related to each other" (EA21). Inculturation is the incarnating of Christian life and the Christian message within a particular cultural context. Its primary focus is not so much liturgy but lifestyle: using the local language, art, music, dance, architecture, meaningful customs, etc. Inculturation is not a goal in itself but a necessary means to more effective evangelization. "Through inculturation, the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is, and a more effective instrument of mission... This has a special urgency today in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural situation of Asia where Christianity is still too often seen as foreign" (EA21). "The Holy Spirit is the prime agent of inculturation of the Christian faith in Asia," and therefore inculturation is "the obligatory path for evangelizers in presenting the Christian faith and making it a part of a people's cultural heritage... In the process of encountering the world's different cultures, the Church not only transmits her truths and renews cultures from within, but she also takes from the various cultures the positive elements already found in them..." (EA21).*

John Paul II often pointed out that *"the first form of evangelization is witness" (RM42). He therefore reminded Asian Christians that "a missionary who has no deep experience of God in prayer and contemplation will have*

*little spiritual influence or missionary success. The Church in Asia is called to be a praying Church, deeply spiritual even as she engages in immediate human and social concerns. All Christians need a true missionary spirituality of prayer and contemplation" (EA23). "A genuinely religious person readily wins respect and a following in Asia. Prayer, fasting and various forms of asceticism are held in high regard. Renunciation, detachment, humility, simplicity and silence are considered great values by the followers of all religions. Lest prayer be divorced from human promotion, the Synod Fathers insisted that the work of justice, charity and compassion is interrelated with a genuine life of prayer and contemplation, and indeed it is this same spirituality which will be the wellspring of all evangelizing work" (EA23). Hence, the service of human promotion, the dignity of the human person, preferential love of the poor, the Gospel of Life, health care and education, the environment, etc., are all integral parts of evangelization (EA32ff).*

From these various insights culled from our late Pope's Letter to the Church in Asia, and with the situation of the Church in India as background, and also as follow-up to the Lariano Report, I would like to propose that all of us at this meeting, representing various Christian realities, express our unanimous conviction that *it is according to the will of our Lord Jesus Christ that.*

1. We continue, with renewed energy and the anointing of the Spirit, to make every effort to bring the Good News to more and more of needy humanity.
2. When preaching the wonderful Good News of Jesus Christ, we never stoop to belittle or condemn other religions (*"for the purpose of affirming the superiority of our faith,"* as the participants of the first meeting at Lariano put it).

3. We never use unethical means of “inducing” people to convert to our faith, e.g. by offering financial help or other material benefits.

4. As *baptized Christians*, we work in harmony with the pastors of other churches and denominations functioning in that geographical area, thus giving witness to true “Christian unity” (Jn.17:21).

5. We foster true ecumenism, and never (even tacitly) encourage “sheep-stealing.”

6. We “evangelize” in a holistic way, and not “proselytize;” that is, we *commit ourselves* to make efforts to *foster* inter-religious dialogue and religious harmony in the local areas of our operation, and cooperate wholeheartedly in human welfare projects for the uplift of all people in that neighborhood.

7. etc., etc.

---

**Fr Fiorello Mascarenhas, SJ., is an international speaker and charismatic priest from Bombay, India. He worked as ICCRS (International Catholic Charismatic Renewal Services, Rome) resident Director from 1981-1984, and became Chairman of its international Council in 1984. Thus he had many opportunities to meet personally with and dialogue with Pope John Paul II and Vatican officials about the strengths and weaknesses of the worldwide Catholic Charismatic Renewal. He has visited over 80 countries to preach at Leaders Seminars, Clergy Retreats, and Charismatic Conferences.**

## A Threefold Cord: Weaving Together Pentecostal Ecumenism, Ethics, and Evangelism in Christian Conversion

Tony Richie

### Introduction

According to an ancient Jewish sage, “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (Eccl 4:12b). In this presentation, I wish to weave together three strands of the Pentecostal cord often deemed disparate: ecumenism, ethics, and evangelism. My hopeful prayer is that the result will agree with the sage’s observation. My own intuition indicates our assigned task of moving “Towards an Ethical Approach to Conversion: Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World” requires an integration of these three values.<sup>1</sup> Attention to our “multi-religious world” manifests a need for commitment to ecumenism. An “ethical approach” highlights the importance of ethics. Of course, “Christian witness” emphasizes evangelism. My goal is to suggest a way these three worthwhile values may relate positively in contexts of Christian conversion practices from a Pentecostal perspective. Like the strands of a threefold cord, ecumenism, ethics, and evangelism are distinct but not separate, and weaving them together greatly enhances their working strength. Where crises or confrontation precipitated at least in part by performance of Christian evangelistic mission in interreligious contexts occurs improved relations may be thus more readily (and realistically) attainable.

### Context of Pentecostal Status and Insights on Ecumenism, Ethics, and Evangelism

Few, if any, have been better positioned to evaluate the ecumenical identity of Pentecostalism than Mel Robeck. An accomplished and widely published

Pentecostal historian/historical theologian (Fuller Theological Seminary), former president of the Society for Pentecostal Studies and editor of its official journal, he’s also been a leading ecumenist on the international level for decades. His “Taking Stock of Pentecostalism” is especially helpful for the present task because it so clearly and concisely illuminates and integrates the status of Pentecostal insights in the areas of ecumenism, ethics, and evangelism. He insists Pentecostals are indeed ecumenical but just don’t know it, primarily because their ecumenism is perhaps unconsciously qualified by complex political, social, and theological factors.<sup>2</sup> He notes the incredible diversity, or “multi-cultural” identity, of Pentecostalism. Culturally, politically, racially, socially, and, to some extent anyway, theologically, Pentecostalism is definitely not monolithic. However, Pentecostals have not learned how to deal with their own diversity without pain to themselves and others. Yet their diversity is worth sustaining and celebrating as it leads into more openness ecumenically and otherwise.<sup>3</sup>

Robeck makes the obvious observation that Pentecostals are also evangelistic; but he lambastes the movement for being “*indiscriminate about the appropriate objects of our evangelistic efforts.*”<sup>4</sup> Here he faces fearlessly the issue of Pentecostal proselytism. He thinks three factors contribute to the problem: zeal, fear, and ignorance. Though focusing on historic Christian churches, he makes it clear that proselytism is a problem with non-Christian religions, including even other biblical religions such as Judaism and Islam. Pentecostal evangelistic zeal is often viewed by religious others as fomenting “acts of betrayal and proselytism.” Fear,

especially fear of losing distinctiveness and power, is probably behind an all-too-common ecumenical reluctance, and greatly contributes to the problem of indiscriminate evangelism. Ignorance of what God is doing among religious others is another clear contributing cause to the problem of proselytism. In all of this, indiscriminate evangelism is an overarching issue. Robeck accordingly calls Pentecostals to engage in some serious introspection and reflection about the movement's evangelism motives and methods.<sup>5</sup>

Robeck advances four important elements of advice for Pentecostals. First, become less judgmental and more willing to listen and act with respect toward religious others. Second, look past ourselves and our own contexts to become participants in the larger work of God in the world. Third, commit to understanding and participating in the globalization process already underway today. Fourth, and especially for North American Pentecostals, turn our attention to the areas of greatest differences with Christians around the world in seeking better and more critical self-understanding. For Robeck, the ecumenical enterprise is part of a grand, all-encompassing development of Pentecostal identity and theology.<sup>6</sup>

My own research confirms and further informs Robeck's.<sup>7</sup> Inherent within Pentecostalism is an innate unifying agency of the Holy Spirit, an impulse toward ecumenism and inclusivism, in relation to religious others which has often been neglected, probably at least partly due to over identification with anti-Pentecostal ideologies. Arguments and examples from the New Testament, historical precedents in early classical Pentecostalism, and contemporary practice of missions by the global Pentecostal movement support this thesis. Pentecostals may enthusiastically embrace ecumenism and inclusivism in meeting challenges of religious diversity and plurality with an uncompromising, all-

encompassing stance faithful to Christ and his Spirit through the apostolic injunction of "the unity of the Spirit" (cf. Eph 4:3). Pentecostals ought to view religious diversity as an opportunity rather than a problem. A trajectory of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue consistent with ethical evangelism is true to an original and authentic Pentecostal ethos.

My work also probes problems with the terminology and philosophy of "aggressive evangelism."<sup>8</sup> I am not fond of the term "aggressive evangelism" as it carries a connotation of coercion. I favor "energetic" or "enthusiastic" evangelism. These are consistent with primary Pentecostal values of power and fullness indeed dear to Pentecostals based on pneumatological texts such as Luke 24:49, Acts 1:8, and 2:4. Remarkably, the biblical tradition stresses responsible, responsive Christian evangelism (e.g., 1 Pet 3:15). Therefore, Pentecostal evangelism should rid itself of any residual elements of aggression in the sense of coercion or manipulation. That is unethical evangelism. However, do not expect Pentecostals to surrender their energy and enthusiasm for evangelism. That is appropriate evangelism.

Furthermore, I explore potentiality in the concept of "dialogical evangelism."<sup>9</sup> As the Christian Church endeavors to be faithful to its evangelistic mission, increasingly intense problems arise in international contexts of cultural diversity and religious plurality. Pentecostals, often noted for aggressive evangelism, are frequently at the forefront of such negative encounters. A complementary paradigm of dialogical evangelism, however, is sensitive to this situation without stilling the voice of evangelism. Based on the encounter of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10), in which the Christian apostle and the devout pagan learned from each other as the Holy Spirit worked conviction of sin, dialogical evangelism is as much about the conversion of Peter as it is about the

conversion of Cornelius (though in somewhat different senses). Here the gospel is objective, standing over against both evangelist and evangelized so that both may together learn of Christ. Otherwise, an evangelist is only a propagandist! Undoubtedly, all Christians should share their experience of Christ with others but the question is how to do so without internal contradiction of the message. The dialogical approach is especially well suited to contexts of religious plurality.

In Robeck's "Taking Stock of Pentecostalism", ecumenism and evangelism are directly and explicitly addressed (and assessed!), while ethics, with Robeck's strong hortatory angle, indirectly and implicitly underlies everything. However, a disappointment is that it does not deal directly with the interreligious aspect in any depth. Robeck focuses on ecumenism in the narrower sense of the Christian *oikumene* or household or faith.<sup>10</sup> Recently Dr Robeck explained that though he has felt it necessary in his own work to concentrate on relations between Christians, he is convinced of the importance and relevance of Pentecostals working on relations with non-Christian religions.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, he fully affirms interreligious relations and dialogue from a decidedly biblical and Pentecostal perspective.<sup>12</sup> Amos Yong and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen have surely shown that this is a fertile field for contemporary Pentecostal theology.<sup>13</sup> Yong, through his category of "pneumatological imagination," insists that a robust trinitarian pneumatology befitting of Pentecostals suggests the presence and influence of the Holy Spirit in or among non-Christian religions. Kärkkäinen explains that a truly trinitarian theology of religions, always identifying the Spirit in relation to God and to Christ, also opens up the way for talking about the Spirit's relationships beyond the Church with the Kingdom and with the world.

As for ethics, Mel Robeck's implicit ethical assumptions are probably generally applicable for most Pentecostals. He makes these assumptions more explicit elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> Robeck believes Pentecostals inherited from the revivalism and Holiness movement a commitment to social transformation that they have unfortunately unfaithfully fulfilled. Robeck offers a threefold explanation for this phenomenon. First, Pentecostals adopted a premillennial eschatology that tends to downplay social action. Second, the rise of liberalism's association with the social gospel tainted social activism for typically conservative Pentecostals. Third, peer pressure came into play from Evangelicals whose values were further set against socially minded liberals.

The upshot is that Pentecostal social ethics often reveal a considerable gap between the ideal and the real but the ideal is still real. Our task then requires not only outlining theological bases but also implementing practical steps for actual improvement. Nevertheless, hopefully what has been accomplished thus far is to affirm and undergird the assumption that an accurate ideal Pentecostal ethic does indeed address and embrace religious others in a way that positively influences ecumenical and evangelistic endeavors or interaction. In other words, Pentecostal ecumenism, ethics, and evangelism ought to go together. Tension sometimes experienced between them at the level of interreligious relations is, therefore, due to an improper or unbalanced application of one or more of these reciprocating realities.

### **Cooperative Discernment on Ecumenism, Ethics, and Evangelism**

I have suggested that fundamental to moving "Towards an Ethical Approach to Conversion: Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World" is the appropriate balancing of ecumenism, ethics, and evangelism. This assertion is consistent

with the biblical pattern. Jesus' incredible ecumenical prayer is uttered in the context of evangelistic mission (John 17:20-23). His great commandment concerning evangelistic mission carries an explicit ethical imperative of discipleship (Matt 28:16-20). His uniquely Christian ethic is attached to evangelistic mission (John 13:34-35). In addition, all of these elements meet and merge in Paul's paradigmatic speech in Athens (Acts 17:16-34). The next step seems to be discerning when these interlocking relations are being put into practice appropriately or not.

Yong observes that the process of Christian discernment in the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition includes elements of both the divine and human.<sup>15</sup> Assuming the paramount significance of the former, I wish to highlight some helpful hints for the latter (cf. 1 Co 12:10 and Pp 1:10). Having concluded that ecumenism, ethics, and evangelism belong together, how are we to correlate them? My first suggestion has to do with a *reciprocity rule*. I refer to improper or unbalanced applications mentioned above. When Pentecostals or other Christians emphasize either ecumenism, ethics, evangelism all out of proportion to the other two then problems are inevitable. We should be surprised if no problems surfaced under such circumstances.

Just suppose we emphasized evangelism almost exclusively in comparison to ecumenism. Then unethical evangelism either unaware or unconcerned with how religious others, Christian or non-Christian, are affected inevitably occurs. A certain amount of psychological and sociological coercion or manipulation may be tolerated based on a sort of the end justifies the means mentality. When criticized, as we most surely will and should be, we indignantly defend our attitudes and actions based on our preeminent commitment to evangelism. But our defense is faulty. It is not faulty because evangelism is faulty, but because it is being faultily practiced. And it

is being faultily practiced because it is not being properly balanced in relation to equally important values of ecumenism and ethics. Other speculative scenarios could be suggested where values of ecumenism, ethics, and evangelism are allowed to get out of balance with inevitable detrimental effects. By creatively mixing and matching values, we could probably come up with problems of imbalance *ad infinitum* (or at least, *ad nauseam*).

The safeguard is simple. I suggest a *principle of boundary impingement*. Whenever one or the other of our values begins to impinge upon—to encroach upon or to infringe upon—that of the others, it is improper and unbalanced. We must chart a new course. Probably this state will reveal itself to practical observation. For example, if in the performance of evangelism I find myself frequently forced to face choices between it and ecumenical and/or ethical issues I'm surely overstepping somewhere somehow. The time has come for adjustment. This principle of impingement will help us guard against overdoing one of our triad of values to the diminishment of another.

Perhaps more difficult is the task of guarding against the negligence of a value. When one or more of our triad of values is underrated though not ostensibly upstaged by another, how are we to know? Here I'd offer an idea on *the invalidity of a vacuum*. Of course, I'm not questioning the scientific concept of a vacuum, say for example, in outer space. What I am suggesting is that here on earth in the human religious realm a vacuum does not really tend to exist for long. Something else will rush into the empty region and fill it even if it doesn't originally belong or if it is actually wrong. This is surely so for our present discussion. Wherever we neglect, again, for example, evangelism, then ecumenism or ethics will rush in to fill the void. Obviously, the principle of impingement will soon start to show itself. We will violate the rule of reciprocity. Then, if we are only observant,

we will know that we've got out of balance in quite another way. We can accordingly make course corrections. Significantly, this process of discernment requires honesty and humility on our part and, especially, prayerful openness to the Holy Spirit (John 16:13; 1 Co 12:10).

### **Current Progress Regarding Christian Conversionary Thought and Practice**

In the spirit of the preceding, I will use remaining space and time to look at the text of a preliminary statement produced in Lariano, Italy by the forerunner of the gathering in Toulouse, France to address "Towards an Ethical Approach to Conversion: Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World." Though not final or conclusive, it still made several important contributions capable of profitable appropriation.<sup>16</sup> My intent here is to look at it from the perspective of the holistic Pentecostal ecumenism, ethics, and evangelism set forth above. That this process may contribute in some small way to our final goal of developing an adequate "code of conduct" regarding Christian conversion is my hopeful prayer.

On the positive side, all three of our values, ecumenism, ethics, and evangelism, are prominently present. The Lariano Report has an attractive, even, irenic tone. It affirms the overall value of the religions and of religion. Significantly, it asserts the universal freedom of religion, including the right to practice and to share one's religion, and the right to convert from one religion to another.<sup>17</sup> More negatively, evangelism is mentioned positively only rarely. Most references are markedly negative. In part, this understandably arises from the fact that the meeting's participants, consisting of both Christians and non-Christians, convened to address problematic evangelistic efforts and attendant incidents in multi-religious settings. It should nonetheless warn us to watch out for reflexively denigrating a core value of

evangelism in the process. Our task is not to decide on or even discuss *whether* we evangelize but the *way* we evangelize. For Pentecostals, and probably for most other Christians, evangelism, that is, our witness of Christ, is nonnegotiable.

A question arises in this connection as to whether our participating non-Christian counterparts see this process in the same way as do we. The answer is, probably not. After all, we've a different frame of reference. Do they at least understand that this is not a process of curtailing evangelism because of ecumenical and/or ethical concerns so much as it is a uniting and directing of all three in tandem? That is an incredibly important distinction. That they/we were not consciously making it when drafting the Lariano document is further reflected in that, not counting the entirely ecumenical "Introduction," five of the ten summations avidly affirm ecumenism and even conclude somewhat climactically ecumenically. Indeed, one almost senses an ecumenical crescendo throughout. At the time, and still for that matter, I felt this to be a good thing. Yet I'm anxious not to usurp evangelism at the expense of ecumenism (or *vice versa*). I wouldn't wish to see frayed fiber on any of the strands of our threefold cord. While serious concern shows first for ecumenism and then for ethics, the same is not clearly visible for evangelism.

The Lariano Report contains excessive, and therefore offensive, anti-evangelism language (e.g., healing from "obsession to convert"), but appropriately lifts up the importance of "self-criticism and repentance". It is sometimes vague to a fault (e.g., "*inter alia*," or "among other things"!)). This ambiguity is a great concern where it censures exploiting vulnerable people without carefully defining vulnerability. Yet its advocacy of transparency and hints about "ulterior" motives in humanitarian aid are primary and proper concerns.<sup>18</sup> This is the issue of honesty. Evangelism that is intentionally

unclear about its intentions is dishonest, and dishonesty is unethical. Yet it is unfair to ask Christians to conceal their faith. That would be dishonest too.<sup>19</sup>

Some (unintentionally) hidden complexities are present too. A practical note that “all faiths should follow” the code of conduct we devise may be an overly optimistic or misleading statement. We ought not to interpret this through an idea of enforcement. Most of all this process is of a primarily voluntary nature. Nonetheless, the power of positive peer pressure can be effective in making this thing work well. Perhaps this is something people of other faiths should understand about Christians, especially some of us from non-hierarchical groups. In the same vein, how much right do Christians have, even with non-Christians sitting in on our procedures, to expect “all faiths to follow” what will still be an essentially Christian code of conduct? Furthermore, several great religious traditions are not evangelistically inclined at all. Is it honest to imply they’re keeping this code in the same sense that Christians are expected to do so? Perhaps the most we can expect from our friends in these faith traditions is their cooperation with us as we keep it. Not that that in itself won’t be of great service and value. It may be, along with conscientious Christian cooperation, the key to its success. However, we will need to make sure it doesn’t deteriorate into a way to constrain or control Christian witnesses while everyone else remains pretty much undisturbed. If Christians do witness righteously according to an agreed upon standard, what do we have a right to expect from other faiths? Are we unreasonable to expect amicable acceptance of Christian witness by religious others? Are we both really willing to allow the objects of such evangelism to make

their own choices unfettered by any intervention?

As already said, overall, the Lariano Report, and more importantly, the direction it sets for our work of moving “Towards an Ethical Approach to Conversion: Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World,” can be enthusiastically affirmed. Yet it needs further development. At least some of that development ought to aim at a more conscious (and conscientious) application of an integrative utilization of ecumenism, ethics, and evangelism. As it stands, ecumenism dominates ethics and, even more so, evangelism to the point that evangelism is handicapped and undermined. Yet we ought not to mute its beautiful ecumenical nature either, but only better relate it to other equally important needs.

### Conclusion

**“A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (Eccl 4:12b). Interlocking concerns of ecumenism, ethics, and evangelism indicate that each ought to be grounded in and guided by the others in faithfulness to their own unique goals. In short, ecumenism ought to be ethical and evangelistic as well; ethics ought also to be ecumenical and evangelistic; and, evangelism ought in addition to be ecumenical and ethical. For the present task, this especially means we should examine whether our evangelism praxis is sufficiently united with and directed by ecumenical sensitivity and ethical honesty.<sup>20</sup> If not, as sometimes seems to be the case, our challenge is to make appropriate changes. In my opinion, Pentecostals can and should help lead the way in this important process.**

<sup>1</sup> I originally presented this paper to the Consultation on Christian Conversion jointly sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID, Vatican) and the Inter-Religious Relations Dialogue (IRRD, World Council of Churches) at *Institut Catholique de Toulouse* in Toulouse, France on 8-12 August 2007, co-chaired by Fr. Felix Machado and Dr Hans Ucko.

<sup>2</sup> Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. "Taking Stock of Pentecostalism: The Personal Reflections of a Retiring Editor," *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 15:1 (Spring 1993), pp. 35-60 (39-45).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid: pp. 46-51.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid: p. 51. Italics are original.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid: pp. 51-58.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid: pp. 58-60.

<sup>7</sup> See Tony Richie, "The Unity of the Spirit: Are Pentecostals Inherently Ecumenists and Inclusivists?" *Journal of European Pentecostal Theology Association* (2006.1), pp. 21-37, and "Azusa-era Optimism: Bishop J. H. King's Pentecostal Theology of Religions as a Possible Paradigm for Today," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 14:2 (April 2006), pp. 247-60. For a more developed and expanded version of the latter, see Tony Richie, "Azusa-era Optimism: Bishop J. H. King's Pentecostal Theology of Religions as a Possible Paradigm for Today," *The Spirit in the World: Emerging Pentecostal Theologies in Global Contexts*, ed. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Eerdmans, forthcoming 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Tony Richie, "A Pentecostal in Sheep's Clothing: an Unlikely Participant but Hopeful Partner in Interreligious Dialogue," *Current Dialogue* No 48, Geneva, WCC, December 2006, pp. 9-15 (p. 10).

<sup>9</sup> See Tony Richie, "Revamping Pentecostal Evangelism: Appropriating Walter J. Hollenweger's Radical Proposal," *International Review of Mission* (forthcoming July-October 2007). Note now that dialogical evangelism as expounded in this paper is *not* advocating using interreligious dialogue as a stealthy conversion technique. It simply suggests that in a mutually respectful conversation the Spirit's transforming power may work in and among us all.

<sup>10</sup> Although some use "ecumenism" or "ecumenical" in a broader sense including Christian and non-Christian religions, a distinction is quite correctly maintained by most regarding ecumenism and interreligious/interfaith. Contra Hans Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths to Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), p. xiv. In this essay, I use the terms ecumenical and ecumenism partly because this is also an *intra-Christian* conversation.

<sup>11</sup> Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. "John Paul II: A Personal Account of His Impact and Legacy," *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 27:1 (2005), pp. 3-34 (27-28).

<sup>12</sup> See *The Suffering Body: Responding to the Persecution of Christians*, eds. Harold H. Hunter and Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. (Bletchley, Milton Keynes MK: Paternoster Press, 2006), pp. xx-xxii. I am grateful to Mel for bringing this reference to my attention.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Theology of Religions*, (JPTSUP) (Sheffield: Sheffield, England; 2000) and *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, & Contemporary Perspectives* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004) and *Trinity and Religious Pluralism: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> See Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., "Pentecostals and Social Ethics," *Pneuma* 9 (Fall 1987), pp. 103-07. Cf. also M. D. Palmer, "Ethics in the Classical Pentecostal Tradition," *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, eds. Stanley M. Burgess and Eduard M. Van Der Maas (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002), pp. 605-10 (605-07).

<sup>15</sup> E.g., see Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, p. 249.

<sup>16</sup> "Report from Inter-Religious Consultation on 'Conversion—Assessing the Reality'" (Lariano, Italy, May 12-16, 2006). The complete document is available at <http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=2252>. In my original presentation at Toulouse, I did a point-by-point critique of this document. For the sake of space and time, I here condense it to a few summary paragraphs.

<sup>17</sup> Though not explicitly stated, this affirmation clearly presupposes the 1948 United Nations *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, Article # 18: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in

---

community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

<sup>18</sup> Helpful background to a discussion of just what entails “unethical” behavior or “ulterior” motives in winning converts may be found in the The Report from the Fourth Phase of the International Dialogue 1990-1997 Between the Roman Catholic Church and Some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders on “Evangelization, Proselytism, and Common Witness,” especially paragraphs 90-97. See <http://www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyberj4/rcpent97.html>. Thanks to Mel Robeck for reminding me of this document.

<sup>19</sup> At Lariano, we discussed these points in the context of so-called “aid evangelism.” The consensual sentiment was that humanitarian aid is not an appropriate excuse for coercive evangelism but that still all one does in Christian love is in itself something of a righteous witness of Christ. In general, our Toulouse talks suggest carefully defining vulnerability is a vital matter as well. Particularly impressive were the insights (in their keynote presentations) of the Catholic Charismatic Dr. Fiorello Mascarenhas of the Catholic Bible Institute and the Evangelical Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher of Martin Bucer Seminary regarding ethical evangelism in ecumenical settings.

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Drs. Raymond Hodge and Amos Yong for reflections on an earlier draft of this paper, and to all of the participants at the Consultation on Conversion at Toulouse for their stimulating discussion.

---

**Rev. Dr. Tony Richie, Bishop/Senior Pastor, New Harvest Church of God in Knoxville, TN, is also a missionary teacher at SEMISUD (Quito, Ecuador) and does adjunct teaching at the Church of God Theological Seminary (Cleveland, TN). He serves Society for Pentecostal Studies as liaison to the Interfaith Relations Commission of the National Council of Churches of Christ. Since 2007 he is a member of the WCC’s Commission of the Churches on International Affairs.**

## **“But with gentleness and respect”: Why missions should be ruled by ethics – An Evangelical Perspective on a Code of Ethics for Christian Witness**

**Thomas Schirmmacher**

### **Mission corrupted**

“The First Book of Common Prayer” of the Anglican (Episcopal) Church, authorized in 1549, says in its liturgy:

“There was never any thing by the wit of man so well devised, or so sure established, which in continuance of time hath not been corrupted.”

This is even true of Christian mission, of spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ, the “Prince of peace”. This is why, for example, the Pope apologized to the Jews and to scientists<sup>1</sup> for using force against them in history, instead of trying to listen to them, convince them by good argument, and live peacefully together with them.

The international ‘Lausanne Covenant’ of 1974, probably the most influential Evangelical document in existence, not surprisingly calls heartily for mission, nevertheless states in article 12:

”At other times, desirous to ensure a response to the gospel, we have compromised our message, manipulated our hearers through pressure techniques, and become unduly preoccupied with statistics or even dishonest in our use of them. All this is worldly. The Church must be in the world; the world must not be in the Church.”

Article 13 therefore sees the peace of a country as an important matter:

“It is the God-appointed duty of every government to secure conditions of peace, justice and liberty in which the Church may obey God, serve the Lord Jesus Christ, and preach the gospel without interference.”

I am very sorry, as is the World Evangelical Alliance, (WEA) for any case, in which evangelicals, especially those connected with the 140 national Evangelical Alliances, have put undue pressure on other people to call them to conversion or have violated human rights in the name of mission. Evangelicals love the Bible and by using unethical means of evangelism, those who have used such methods were disobedient to God’s word, as the First letter of Peter commands:

“But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak badly against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.” (1 Peter 3:15-17)

Even though the WEA and the national alliances often do not have the influence on their members they would wish to have and surely have no influence on the millions of other evangelicals, who even refuse to go together with the international evangelical bodies, the WEA is willing to use its influence in any way possible to ensure that mission stays away from any misuse of people and never violates their human rights and dignity.

### **1 Peter 3:15-17**

Let me return to 1 Peter 3 to give my ideas a biblical foundation. Here you find a complementarity of the necessity of witness, even apologetics (the Greek texts says ‘apologia’, originally defense in a court) on the one side, and respect for the dignity of

the other human being in “gentleness and respect” on the other side. The dignity of man does not lead us to hide our hope, but to clearly state, explain, and even defend it, but the clear answers to questions with a bad intent can never allow us to destroy the dignity of the people with whom we are talking. Both sides are complementary, as both are an inevitable essence of our faith.

Christians see others always as images of God, even if they totally disagree with them. In Christianity, their human rights do not stem from being Christians, but from being men and women, as God created all people and created them equal. There are religions, which only accept human rights for their own adherents, but Christians defend even the human rights of their enemies – and pray for them and love them.

At a time, when especially Islamicists pour violence on many Christians and in which Hindu or Buddhist nationalists go against Christians and others in countries like India or Sri Lanka, it would be easy just to point to the others. But the Christian faith is very self-critical – the Old and New Testaments mainly criticise the people of God and not other people. We do want to say with the Pharisee in Christ’s example: “God, I thank you, that I am not like the others”, but we need to say like the tax collector, who said: “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (from Luke 18:11-13). So our first question as Christians is not: What do others do, but, as Peter’s letter says, even in the middle of false accusations: Are we gentle and full of respect to our fellow human beings, to whom we try to explain our hope and faith?

I know that many of the delegates – Catholic, Orthodox, Oriental and Protestants alike - come from countries where Christians are under much pressure from a State religion or by politically extreme wings of religions, like those from Algeria, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal or Myanmar. But even as we do not want to hide any crimes in the name of religion, your testimonies show, how important it is and what a testimony it is when we do not pay back but want to react

Christ-like to pressure, violence and even martyrdom.

### **Why Evangelicals?**

Evangelicals always have been highly dedicated to religious freedom, including the religious freedom of non-evangelical churches. When in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, pastors of state churches and independent churches in Europe started to meet across borders, thus forming the earliest ecumenical movement, religious freedom in Europe, where religion was still often compulsory, was one of their major goals. In 1852 e.g., a high ranking delegation of the Evangelical Alliance visited the Ottoman sultan on behalf of persecuted Orthodox churches and in this tradition today well equipped evangelical religious freedom lawyers have run and won cases in the European Court for Human Rights for several non-protestant churches, like the Bessarabian Church or the Greek Orthodox Church. The orthodox churches in Turkey as well as the dying old churches in Iraq today find their greatest help in evangelical organizations, as evangelicals heavily use international media, but also – as in the case of Germany – the help of parliament and governments.

The estimates for the number of evangelicals range from 300 to 700 million; the WEA seeks to serve a global constituency of 420 million. These evangelicals seem to be more often in the middle of the problems, when it comes to confrontations between non-Christian religions and Christianity, and even within Christianity. Why is this so? What does the professor of sociology of religion in me say self-critically about the movement to which I belong?

1. Evangelical groups overall have the highest percentage of Christians who come from a non-Christian background and become Christians as adults or at least as teenagers. Only among sects like the Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses are there sometimes higher percentages of first generation adherents. The evangelical

movement is rapidly growing in Africa and Asia (primarily through the witness of Africans and Asians) and producing a lot of Christians with no local or general history of peaceful interaction within the culture. In Turkey for example, 95% of all evangelicals are converts from Islam. Of course they draw much more attention and threats than the historic churches, which often have paid for their existence the price of never intervening with the rest of the population.

2. Evangelical groups seldom represent old autochthon churches. There are no 'Evangelical' countries like there are Catholic, Orthodox, or Lutheran countries. Even though they make up hundreds of millions, Evangelicals are not the major religious grouping in any country of the world, perhaps with the exception of Guatemala.

3. Many evangelical groups have large branches within traditional and mainline churches. This is the reason why the WEA probably has half of its adherents within the mainline churches of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and half of it in churches outside the WCC. The evangelicals tend to be very active church members and stir up much more discussion in the denominations, hopefully often for the good, but sometimes for the bad.

4. Evangelical groups often have an Anglo-Saxon background and transport the American idea of total freedom of speech and press and total freedom for the individual, as well as less respect for old traditional structures and cultures. But as American evangelicals make up only 8% of all evangelicals in the world, this is rapidly changing.

Religious Freedom in its modern form – not the anti-religious and violent form of the French revolution – but the modern, peaceful form, was, so to speak, 'invented' by Baptist Roger Williams at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Providence – Prof. Gary Colpepper from Providence College is among us. We are glad about this start, but

not all countries are prepared for the form of religious freedom that America, Canada or Australia have long practised. Christian Western Germany, for example, adopted this kind of religious freedom only in 1949 and even then it was only gradually really accepted by churches and people. And some forms of freedom of speech in the USA even concern Europeans and European Christians.

5. Evangelicals mostly have a very flat hierarchy and non-denominational bodies like the WEA have moral authority but no direct means to get bad sheep to change. (Of course that is no different from the WCC.) As the Bible and the emphasis on a very personal decision for one's faith hold the movement together, the WEA has its major authority through theological teaching and exposition of the Bible, which show that certain things are unethical in light of Divine revelation.

6. Evangelicals recently are very much driven by the enthusiasm of the Majority World ('Two-Third World'), no longer by the Western type of religion.

Asia has become one of the big centers of Christianity and the leading one in absolute numbers. South Korea is second only in number of missionaries in all the world to the USA – be it Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical or Pentecostal missionaries, and India and China have each more fulltime and lay evangelists within their countries from all Christian branches than any other countries. And if the vast growing number of Catholics and Evangelicals eager to evangelize China and the whole world get political freedom to do so, this development will rapidly speed up.

The large Christian bodies, whose hierarchies are still often dominated by Western people, cannot just tell Christians in Africa and Asia how they should behave. Only together with their enthusiasm for Christ, their deep spiritual life, and their theological and academic insight, can we find good ways for the future.

*On the other hand*, evangelical groups are very highly dedicated to defending religious liberty worldwide and are rarely involved as a party in civil wars, and are not connected with terror groups in any way. This should be honored more by other groups!

In countries like Sri Lanka or the historic Catholic islands in Indonesia, there is no longer much difference between the pressure on new evangelical churches and those Catholic and Orthodox churches, who have been there for centuries.

One of the founders of the German Evangelical Alliance, Theodor Christlieb, professor of practical theology and mission at Bonn University, fought for years at the International Alliance conference, using a book in several languages discussed in the British parliament and other means, against the Indo-British opium trade. He did so because he saw it as both immoral politics and an immoral way of doing mission, and a wrong mixture of presenting the gospel by using political and military pressure.<sup>2</sup> There are many similar examples which show that Evangelicals have a history of being aware of unethical means of spreading the Christian faith.

### **From WEA perspectives**

Let me add some words from the specific perspective of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA).

We need to agree on a code of acceptable conduct in the spreading of the Christian Gospel and what conduct needs to be banned, such as inducing people to convert by bribing them, using harassment, threats or political force, robbing children from their parents or lying about one's own faith. From our point of view these are universal principles and a code should not be directed solely against Evangelicals and Pentecostals (which is a branch of Evangelicalism). As Evangelicals and Pentecostals carry out a great part of all Christian missions, if we want to pursue the black sheep within Evangelicalism

/Pentecostalism we will only succeed if the wording of any Code is acceptable to the WEA constituency as a whole. Otherwise Evangelicals will rightly say: "This is one of the long list of statements against Evangelicals". To be frank, many Evangelicals have often had the impression that any warning against 'proselytism' is actually a veto against any evangelism or at least against evangelism by evangelicals, by not differentiating between the many different evangelical groups. In the past it has seemed as if only evangelicals made mistakes in evangelism.

I do not say this to accuse anybody, but to ask you to give us a chance to be involved and to ask you to understand how we can win over Evangelical 'black sheep' to adhere to acceptable modes of evangelism. In the same way as the Catholic church has moved away from using politics as a means to safeguard or expand the church, so evangelicalism has its own developments leading to our being part of this meeting, and I hope we all are willing to distinguish between the groups meeting here in general, and certain of their wings that create problems in their own bodies as well as with outsiders.

WEA and Evangelicals in general are very upset about what some American televangelists say from time to time about other religions, such as turmoil in countries like the recent turmoil in India. Think, for example, of Pat Robertson's statement that all Muslims should leave the USA, which was a headline on many major Indian newspapers next day, arguing that if Christians want Muslims to leave 'their' country, why do they object if Hindus want Christians to leave India! I just happened to be in India that day and was shocked. This was a good example of a bad mixture of evangelism and party politics with a very strange and unfeasible political idea.

I also ask all churches and branches of Christianity to stand together against violent attacks by others. The growing attacks in e.g., India and Sri Lanka, with anti-

conversion laws against Catholics and Evangelicals at the same time, should be answered together and not by pointing to another Christian confession's fault. If there are faults, and most often they are on all sides, we need to find ways to discuss them among ourselves, not through public press accusations and statements.

In countries like Malaysia or India, the Catholic Church, the National Councils of Churches, and the National Evangelical Alliance have already formed joint umbrella organizations, that can speak to the State with one Christian voice and can help to stand together in the middle of persecution.<sup>3</sup>

I propose, in order to get around the whole topic of theological and ecumenical pitfalls, that we keep this strictly a discussion leading to a written code of conduct, where Christians see the borderline between acceptable missions protected by religious freedom and undue forms of trying to call people to conversion, especially through economic and political means. We, then, as the whole body of the largest world religion, could ask other world religions not to follow our code, but to agree on and write a code for and with themselves, setting aside any problem of syncretism among religions and setting aside the problem of Christians needing to agree somehow on missions to non-Christians.

### **An ethical code**

#### **Improvements in recent Christian history**

But let me now leave speaking specifically to evangelicalism and turn to our common task.

Changing one's religion – and the political unrest following it – is not a new phenomenon, but a very historic one, be it famous people like Augustine, be it whole continents (e.g., Southeast Asia to Buddhism, Europe to Christianity or Northern Africa and the Near East to Islam) and it has often played a central role in local and world politics.

In Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist societies not changing one's religion was

very often more due to the pressure of culture and surroundings, than due to conviction. In history, probably more people were forced to change their religion or to stay in their own religion, than there were people, who freely and knowledgeably chose or kept their religion.

In most of the past centuries Christians were often, like most Muslims are today, demanding that other people leave their religion and convert, but not allowing to leave one's own religion, be it Christianity or Islam, punishing apostasy with all kinds of civil results, from losing family, civil rights, reputation and jobs to losing one's life.

We experienced and still experiencing the end of the Constantinian era, which includes the end of safeguarding Christianity by means of the Caesar and forcing people into the church by political, juridical, economical and other civil pressures. Most Christians feel this is not a catastrophe but an advantage. The Christian faith again can live by spiritual means and through the power of the Holy Spirit, and does not need the help of the worldly powers, be it armies, governments or business.

In the overall picture, Christianity and its churches as a whole have taken the right course in the last hundred years, abstaining more and more from violence, from being involved in wars or civil wars, and from using political means or economical pressure for missions. I do not say that there are not still some bad situations, but if you compare the year 2007 and roughly a century ago, today bad situations like Northern Ireland or the so-called Christian terrorist organisation 'National Liberation Front' (NLFT) in Northeast India or the Nagaland rebels are at the fringe of Christianity, and the churches or Christians involved are criticised by the vast majority of Christians or churches worldwide, while e.g., in the First World War in Europe many major churches fuelled the war and gave their authority to European countries involved in war as well as in the whole colonial world. Praise God, there no longer

is a broad acceptance of violence in propagating its own message in the Christian world. There is just the opposite development as in Islam, where the Islamicist's acceptance of violence to conquer the world makes inroads into the Muslim community even where they lived peacefully with other groups for centuries.

The forced conversion of the Saxons by the German emperor or the Goa inquisition in India are mainly history, and we Christians are glad, because they belong to the darkest pages of church history. Today millions become Christians every day, who do not come from a Christian background, but do so by pure conviction without any pressure. More people are converting to Christianity than at any time when Christians allowed violent expansion to corrupt its message. What the gun boats of Western colonial powers did not achieve in China, the gospel message achieves nowadays without outside help.

Nowadays it is more the Christian community that suffers hard persecution in certain countries and areas and the number of martyrs is growing daily. Virtually all 'Christian' or former Christian countries grant religious freedom to all religions, while the number of "non-Christian countries" that do not grant the same rights to Christian churches is still high.

The arguments for anti-conversion laws in some states of India (three since the 60s and 70s, some more just recently) and in Sri Lanka are mainly in vain.<sup>4</sup> Besides true or half true historic examples and the devastations by liberation armies with a background in Christian areas the examples they quote do not stand the test of research or belong to the area of conspiracy theories, e.g., Christian missionaries bringing deadly bacteria to Brazilian tribes.

If we want to fight the persecution of Christians, if we want to fight for the right to testify to our faith and practise it in public, we should start even more to ban any means of practising our faith and witness

which violates the human rights of others! And we should ban them together.

### **Holding the next generation to one's religion?**

We have to see that worldwide developments do not make things easier. Globalisation will lead to an ever growing meeting or confrontation between religions, from the private level up to world politics, whether it be peaceful and fruitful, or whether it be senseless or harmful. A higher percentage of the world population changes their religious affiliation every year than ever before. There are three major reasons for this.

1. Children today often change the profession, life style and music of their parents, even move to totally different places or countries, and many feel less and less obliged to follow the traditions of their forefathers. A growing number of orphans or displaced people even have no chance to get to know their parents' culture and home. In the Western countries parents have to pay for their children's education, even if they do not like the professions their children choose. What started in the West makes inroads into one country and culture after the next.

Religion is no exception here and it can hardly be made the only exception.<sup>5</sup> In the Western world it is just normal that children change religion and political orientation. In other regions of the world statistically this phenomenon is on the rise and often meets cultures that are totally unprepared and experience this as a shock.

2. Globalisation including radio, TV and internet confronts every adherent of a specific religion at least in theory with all the many other religions in the world, while 100 years ago the vast majority of the world's population never got into contact with the message of another religion or another confession in their whole lifetime!

3. In a democracy there is religious freedom and religious pluralism. That normally helps small religious communities without any

political influence more than the majority religions, who in pre-democratic times often could rely on the help of politics and civil society for at least subtle pressure of the whole culture to stay with the religion in which one was born. Especially in democracies many young people choose their favourite religion as they choose their favourite music style or even cell phone company and have no grasp what major impact this has for society, culture and tradition. In Eastern Europe many churches and religious groups are experiencing this more and more since 1989 and for many it is like a thief in the night.

The human rights revolution protecting religious freedom has brought about a religious balkanization and a growing war for souls, which all kinds of anti conversion laws have often tried to stop— usually with no real results.

What we need to achieve as Christians is - from my point of view – the combination of a clear *YES* to spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ and to prayer, that the Holy Spirit convinces the heart of people, with a clear *NO* to unethical ways of doing it, ways that go against the command and the spirit of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

### **From Lariano to Toulouse**

The inter-faith reflection on “Conversion: Assessing the Reality”, met at Lariano (Italy) on May 12-16, 2006. 27 people, representing Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and the Yoruba religion agreed that a code of conduct for propagating one’s own faith should be achieved. The meeting was organised by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican City, and the Office on Interreligious Relations & Dialogue of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, and was supposed to be the first phase of a three phase process.

The first meeting was supposed to be an inter-faith meeting discussing the whole project in general and give a chance to listen to the complaints of people of four

non-Christian religions. The second meeting, which was prepared by a small group meeting January 11-12, 2007 in Geneva, was supposed to be a larger meeting of all branches of Christianity (though some other faiths could be present as observers to bridge the process from the first to the third phase), trying to achieve the text of a code of conduct. The third phase will be more of an inter-faith meeting again, trying to enlarge the idea of a code of conduct to all religious groups as far as they are willing to get involved.

In my opinion the central result of Lariano is in the following two paragraphs.

“Freedom of religion is a fundamental, inviolable and non-negotiable right of every human being in every country in the world. Freedom of religion connotes the freedom, without any obstruction, to practise one’s own faith, freedom to propagate the teachings of one’s faith to people of one’s own and other faiths, and also the freedom to embrace another faith out of one’s own free choice.” (Report Lariano 2006, no. 2)

“We affirm that while everyone has a right to invite others to an understanding of their faith, it should not be exercised by violating other’s rights and religious sensibilities.” (Report Lariano 2006, no. 3)

The theme of the second phase was agreed to be “Towards an ethical approach to conversion: Christian witness in a multi-religious world”. Thus the main task will be to fill in the details to thesis no. 6 of the Lariano Report: “A particular reform that we would commend to practitioners and establishments of all faiths is to ensure that conversion by ‘unethical’ means is discouraged and rejected by one and all. There should be transparency in the practice of inviting others to one’s faith.” (Lariano Report 2006, no. 6)

The theme “Towards an ethical approach to conversion: Christian witness in a multi-religious world” clarifies two things:

### 1. The second phase is an intra-Christian phase.

The idea is that Christians first of all find a code of conduct among themselves and are willing to bind themselves in applying it also in their relations with other religions. If even Christians are unable to find a peaceful way of doing missions among each other in a way that respects the human dignity and rights of others, how could it be found among the different religions?

But if Christians *can* find a code of conduct, it could bring encouragement to other world religions to find a code of conduct among their own branches and finally those codes could be compared and possibly built into a code of conduct for all religions.

Christians should start with a self-obligation, not to make a deal with other religions, but because they want to act morally right and Christ-like, and possible mistakes of others do not give them the right to act unethically.

If Christians agree to a code of conduct, they can also start to put it into practise among their own followers. Often local Christians groups – e.g., Catholic or Evangelical – will not always listen to their representatives on a world level (eg the Vatican or the World Evangelical Alliance), but a code would be a good starting point for discussion and hopefully put a lot of moral pressure on Christians who combine mission with unnecessary offense to people, or with unethical economic and political pressure.

### 2. The second phase has a practical and ethical goal, not a mainly theological one.

From my point of view, it should not be the center of the discussion to find a common theological definition of missions because:

1. A lot of good documents have been produced by ecumenical and evangelical study conferences on these topics;
2. ethical standards on how to deal with other Christians and other religions can be put in place even when theological agreement is not yet achieved or cannot be achieved for

the time being. The center should be a code of conduct to which we all agree, describing ethically what should never happen in the realm of mission.

Theological and confessional pitfalls should not allow us to be sidetracked from a discussion leading to a written code of conduct, where Christians see the borderline between acceptable missions protected by religious freedom and undue forms of trying to get people to convert, mainly through means in the area of the economic and political world. We then, as the whole body of the largest world religion, could ask other world religions – if not to follow our code - , to agree on a code of conduct for and within themselves, leaving out any problem of syncretism and the Christian needing to agree somehow on the evaluation of non-Christian mission.

A code of conduct that bans ways to urge conversion by unethical means only makes sense if it is not directed against any one group alone. If it is true, what the Lariano Report writes for all religions, then it also must be true for *all* branches of Christianity: “We acknowledge that errors have been perpetrated and injustice committed by the adherents of every faith. Therefore, it is incumbent on every community to conduct honest self-critical examination of its historical conduct as well as its doctrinal/theological precepts. Such self-criticism and repentance should lead to necessary reforms inter alia on the issue of conversion.” (Lariana Report 2006, no. 5)

There are needs to be clarification of language too. Not only, because language of warfare can easily sound like using unethical means in mission, but also because wrong theological language can lead us into problems.

So e.g., we all agree that we cannot convert someone. We can witness, we can explain to him what conversion means, we can call him to conversion, but we cannot convert him. A human being can only convert his own heart to his creator and this conversion

is only possible because of God's grace and the wonderful action of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, the saying 'I converted him' easily slips from our lips, even though it is both theologically wrong and can easily be misunderstood by outsiders.

### **3. The second phase includes discussion of human rights in general**

A code of conduct – even though formulated by Christians only for the time being - would be of great value in talking to *governments* that want to know how to permit religious freedom legally (including the right to do mission), but at the same time to defend against using religion for suppressing human dignity or unnecessary social unrest.

Many governments are nervous and fear that religions will fuel strife, violence and social unrest. We can help them a lot by speaking with one voice and giving them a practical code from our side.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, besides discussing Christian mission, we also have an ethical-political topic. How can we preserve the human right of religious freedom, while at the same time preserving the same right of others and preserve all other just human rights?<sup>7</sup>

Article 18.2 of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights says: "No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice." We want this to be true for us, but we also want this to be true for others, with whom we engage in discussion.

Let me add one thing for the sake of completeness, which is often forgotten: Violence and undue pressure cannot only be used to get people to leave a religion, but also to stay in it! To force young people to stay in e.g., a natural religion in a Brazilian tribe, is as bad as to force them to become e.g., Christians. You also can violate human rights by preventing people from converting to another faith.

#### **Unethical means**

The Roman Catholic Church stated at Vatican II in 'Ad Gentes': "The Church

strictly forbids forcing anyone to embrace the Faith, or alluring or enticing people by worrisome wiles."

What could some of those unethical means be? E.g.:

- Bribe people by money, goods, medical treatment, opportunities or offices, that is, offering people non-spiritual rewards for their conversion.

- Threaten people with civil consequences, putting undue psychological pressure on them or press them for decisions they cannot oversee, e.g., because they are too young or mentally ill.

- Use the authority of a state function while in office (e.g., as police or state school teacher).

- Give or refuse financial advantages (e.g., through banks or in inheritance laws).

- Preach to 'captive audiences', who cannot freely leave (e.g., army officers to their soldiers or a prison director to inmates).

Let me give one example of what a code of conduct could contain concerning the use of military force (and that should be in agreement with all Christian bodies):

"The State and its army has the duty to defend peaceful Christians if they become the victims of illegal violence, but it does not do it specifically because they are Christians, but should do so for anybody else becoming a victim of violence. But, at the same time, an army can never have the task to defend Christianity, propagate the gospel or conquer land for Christianity. In history many Christian areas were conquered by armies, but this was wrong, and using an army to spread a religion is always a wrong mixture of the different tasks of the Church and the State."

It is similarly true that Christians may use the legal system of their states to defend their rights.<sup>8</sup> But equally they should not use the laws and the courts to hinder the rights of other religious groups, if they legally and ethically practise their freedom of religion.

I know that in Islam, Hinduism and partly even in the Jewish faith, the religious law applies one-to-one to all worldly things including the state and makes a separation of church/organised religion and state difficult. But even more so I think that Christians should take the lead and in a kind of self obligation declare that they no longer want to use the monopoly of force of the state for churches' purpose.

To be condemned are violence, coercion, threat, harassment and enticement, as are lies and feigning of false facts to win people for Christ, who otherwise would not follow him.

It will not be easy to nail those unethical means down in a concrete code of conduct, especially as historical, religious, cultural, and political conditions are so different in the world, e.g., if you compare Germany, India, Saudi Arabia and Nepal. But nevertheless we should try to become concrete and not to leave everything loose in only general terms.

Is a forced conversion a conversion? I think all Christian confessions agree that a conversion has to be a deeply personal, finally thought through move of the heart. A forced conversion is nothing we want and nothing we can accept. Therefore if people tell us that they want to convert, we should always give them and offer them time for discernment and should not be speedy to

baptise them, but be assured that they really know what they are doing. There also should be honesty and transparency concerning what Christian faith means and what is expected of Christians after their conversion. Christianity is not a secret cult but open to the public. We do not have anything to hide (Matthew 10:26-27). Jesus said concerning those who want to become his followers: "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?" (Luke 14:28; see vv. 27-33). We have to help people to calculate the costs, not to rush them into Christian churches, only to find out later, that they have been cheated.

Ethics and mission belong together. The Christian witness is not a room free of ethics; it needs an ethical basis to really do what Christ commanded us to do.

**When people today see daily in TV that religious groups are willing to use any means to further their cause, Christians clearly have to state what means we never will use – and that if some Christians use them anyway, they have lost their right to call this method Christian. The teenager's motto from the US WWJD ("What would Jesus do?") has to guide us especially when we fulfil Jesus' Great Commission.**

### Literature (alphabetical)

- Abdullahi Ahemd An-Na'im (ed.). *Proselytization and Communal Self-Determination in Africa*. Religion and Human Rights Series. Maryknoll (NY): Orbis Books, 1999
- Yaruigam Awungshi. *Hinduism and Christianity in India: A Study of Socio-historical Process of Conversion*. New Delhi, India : Uppal Pub. House, 2005
- The Challenge of Proselytism and the Calling to Common Witness. Joint Working Group between the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. 25.9.1995. <http://www.oikoumene.org/de/dokumentation/documents/oerk-kommissionen/gemeinsame-arbeitsgruppe-der-roemisch-katholischen-kirche-und-des-oerk/25-09-95-challenge-of-proselytism.html>
- Conversion. *International review of Mission* 72 (1983), Vol. 287 (whole volume)
- Evangelize or Proselytize? *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20 (1996) Jan (whole volume)
- Burkhard Guntau. „Möglichkeit und Grenzen der Religionsfreiheit“. *Materialdienst der EZW* 70 (2007) 9: 325-336

- 
- Harold D. Hunter, Cecil M. Robeck. *The Suffering Body: Responding to the Persecution of Christians*. Milton Keynes (GB): Paternoster, 2006
- Jean-Paul Marthoz, Joseph Saunders. "Religion and the Human Rights Movement". pp. 40-69 in *Human Rights Watch World Report 2005*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2005, also separat under [www.hrw.org/wr2k5/religion/religion.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/wr2k5/religion/religion.pdf)
- Paul A. Marshall (ed.). *Religious Freedom in the World: A Global Report on Freedom and Persecution*. Broadman & Holman Publ.: Nashville (TN), 2000 [Religious Freedom in the World 2007 forthcoming Lanham (MD): Rowman & Littlefield, 2008]
- Paul Marshall (ed.). *Radical Islam's rules : the worldwide spread of extreme Shari'a law*. Lanham (MD): Rowman & Littlefield, 2005
- J. Paul Martin, Harry Winter, O.M.I. „Religious Proselytization“. pp. 29-50 in: Abdullahi Ahemd An-Na'im (ed.). *Proselytization and Communal Self-Determination in Africa*. Religion and Human Rights Series. Maryknoll (NY): Orbis Books, 1999
- Mary Motte, Joseph R. Lang (ed.). *Mission in Dialogue*. Maryknoll (NY): Orbis Books, 1982. pp. 443-488 („Religious Freedom and the Local Church's Responsibility for Mission“)
- Andreas Nehring. "Bekehrung als Protest: Zur Konstruktion religiöser Identität der Dalits in Indien". *Zeitschrift für religionswissenschaft* 12 (2004): 3-21
- Thomas Schirrmacher. *The Persecution of Christians Concerns Us All: Towards a Theology of Martyrdom*. Idea-Dokumentation 15/99 E. VKW: Bonn, 2001
- Thomas Schirrmacher. „Trinity and Work“. S. 63-82 in Brian Wintle u. a. (ed.). *Work – Worship – Witness*. Festschrift for Prof. Ken Gnanakan. Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 2003
- Thomas Schirrmacher. „Missio Dei“. pp. 165-188 in: Klaus W. Müller (ed.). *Mission im Islam: Festschrift für Eberhard Troeger*. VTR: Nürnberg & VKW: Bonn, 2007
- Thomas Schirrmacher, Klaus W. Müller (ed.). *Scham- und Schuldorientierung in der Diskussion: Kulturanthropologische, missiologische und theologische Einsichten*. VKW: Bonn & VTR: Nürnberg, 2006
- Paul M. Taylor. *Freedom of Religion: UN and European Human Rights Law and Practice*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2005
- M. Thomas Thangaraj. "Evangelism sans Proselytism: A Possibility?". pp. 335-352 in: John Witte, Richard C. Martin (ed.). *Sharing the Book: Religious Perspectives on the Rights and Wrongs of Proselytism*. Religion and Human Rights Series. Maryknoll (NY): Orbis Books, 1999
- Towards Common Witness: A call to adopt responsible relationships in mission and to renounce proselytism. WCC commission 'Mission and Evangelism'. 19.9.1997. [www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/mission-and-evangelism/19-09-97-towards-common-witness.html](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/mission-and-evangelism/19-09-97-towards-common-witness.html)
- Hans Ucko (ed.). *Changing the Present, Dreaming the Future: A Critical Moment in Interreligious Dialogue*. Geneva : World Council of Churches, 2006
- Johan D. van der Vyveer, John Witte (ed.). *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspectives: Legal Perspectives*. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1996
- John Witte, Michael Bourdeaux (ed.). *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia*. Religion and Human Rights Series. Maryknoll (NY): Orbis Books, 1999
- John Witte, Richard C. Martin (ed.). *Sharing the Book: Religious Perspectives on the Rights and Wrongs of Proselytism*. Religion and Human Rights Series. Maryknoll (NY): Orbis Books, 1999
- John Witte, Johan D. van der Vyveer (ed.). *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspectives: Religious Perspectives*. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1996

<sup>1</sup> When speaking about the Galilei-affair.

<sup>2</sup> See my „Christlieb, Theodor“. S. 188 in: A. Scott Moreau (Hg.). *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*. Baker Books: Grand Rapids (MI) & Paternoster Press: Carlisle (GB), 2000; „Christlieb contra Opiumhandel“. pp. 105-109 in: Karl Heinz Voigt, Thomas Schirrmacher. *Menschenrechte für Minderheiten in Deutschland und Europa: Vom Einsatz für die Religionsfreiheit durch die Evangelische Allianz und die Freikirchen im 19. Jahrhundert*. zugleich *Idea-Dokumentation* 3/2004. VKW: Bonn, 2003; and my first doctoral thesis: *Theodor Christlieb und seine Missionstheologie*. Wuppertal: Telos, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> The number of books and study conferences, where the through bodies are presented equally, are on the rise, e.g., in Carl E. Braaten (ed.). *Church Unity and the Papal Office: An Ecumenical Dialogue on John Paul II's Encyclical Ut unum sint*. Grand Rapids (MI): Eerdmans, 2001, where there is a strong evangelical statement included. See also the ecumenical statements in Harold D. Hunter, Cecil M. Robeck. *The Suffering Body: Responding to the Persecution of Christians*. Milton Keynes (GB): Paternoster, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Eg „Conversion Tactics - Violence“. [www.christianaggression.org/tactics\\_violence.php](http://www.christianaggression.org/tactics_violence.php). Andreas Nehring. „Bekehrung als Protest: Zur Bekehrung religiöser Identität der Dalits in Indien“. *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 12 (2004): 3-21 proves, that anti-conversion laws are not grounded in any Christian danger whatsoever, but in the protest of the Dalits against Hinduism and the political reaction of those Hindus, who do not want to loose the caste identity of India. See also Yaruangam Awungshi. *Hinduism and Christianity in India: A Study of Socio-historical Process of Conversion*. New Delhi, India : Uppal Pub. House, 2005

<sup>5</sup> See the discussion in Paul M. Taylor. *Freedom of Religion: UN and European Human Rights Law and Practice*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2005, that discusses the centrality of the right to change one's religion for religious liberty and the human rights in general.

<sup>6</sup> See the excellent discussion in Burkhard Guntau. „Möglichkeit und Grenzen der Religionsfreiheit“. *Materialdienst der EZW* 70 (2007) 9: 325-336.

<sup>7</sup> The best discussion of this topic known to me besides the article of Guntau is: Jean-Paul Marthoz, Joseph Saunders. „Religion and the Human Rights Movement“. pp. 40-69 in *Human Rights Watch World Report 2005*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2005, also seperat under [www.hrw.org/wr2k5/religion/religion.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/wr2k5/religion/religion.pdf). See also John Witte, Johan D. van der Vyveer (ed.). *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspectives: Religious Perspectives*. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1996; Johan D. van der Vyveer, John Witte (ed.). *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspectives: Legal Perspectives*. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> See my „Darf ein Christ vor Gericht gehen?“. S. 143-156 in: Thomas Schirrmacher, Thomas Zimmermanns (Hg.). *Ein Maulkorb für Christen? Juristen nehmen Stellung zum deutschen Antidiskriminierungsgesetz und ähnlichen Gesetzen in Europa und Australien*. Bonn: VKW, 2005. zugleich *idea-Dokumentation* 12/2005.

**Professor Thomas Schirrmacher holds chairs in ethics, in missiology, in world religions and in international development in Germany, Romania, USA, Turkey and India, and is rector of Martin Bucer Theological Seminary (Bonn, Zurich, Innsbruck, Prague, Ankara).**

**As an international human rights activist he is on the board of the International Society for Human Rights, manager of the Religious Liberty Commission of the German and the Swiss Evangelical Alliance, member of the Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance and director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom (Bonn, Cape Town, Singapore) of the World Evangelical Alliance.**

## Depolitising Conversion: The Case Of Religious Freedom In Malaysia

Hermen Shastri

### **Introduction**

*Malaysia is a multi-racial and multi-religious country of 25 million made up of Malays, Chinese, Indians and indigenous groups. Religiously 60% of the population are Muslims, 19% Buddhists, Christians (9%), Hindus (6%), and 6 % comprising others which includes Sikhs, Taoists, Bahais, tribal faiths and those who profess no religious affiliation.*

When Malaysia gained its independence as a nation in 1957, after years of colonial rule by the British, it immediately faced the onerous task of forging a nation whose strength would lie in its multiethnic and multireligious make-up. The Federal Constitution which was drawn up, based on a referendum referred to as “The Reid Commission”, took into consideration the aspirations of all ethnic and religious group, and it became a document of “shared destiny” that all parties could identify with. It was based on an understanding of a binding “social contract,” that although Muslims made up the majority population at the time of independence, the Federation of Malaysia then, would be governed as a parliamentary democracy where the fundamental rights of its citizens would be protected by provisions contained in the constitution. As inferred to in Article 4, the Federal Constitution would remain as the “supreme law of the land”, and provide the basis upon which the plurality of its national composition would be guided and managed. Although Islam would be referred to as “the religion of the Federation”, nowhere in the Constitution is it stipulated that the country would be referred to as an “Islamic State”. Matters related to the administration of Islam was delegated to the various states

where Shariah laws and courts would deal with matters related to personal and family laws, marriage, inheritance, and welfare of Islamic institutions.

Since the eighties, Malaysia has seen the resurgence of Islam manifesting itself not only in the political rhetoric, but also in government administration, the construction of mosques and other Islamic Institutions and in personal attire and life styles. The non-Muslim population of the country has monitored the trends, and found solace in constitutional fundamentals which guarantees the freedom of all citizens based on secular law.

In recent years, the interface between the aspirations of the majority Muslim population (60 percent) and the rest (40 percent), has come under pressure as the issue of religious freedom took center stage. A series of high profile court decisions has put to test the guarantee of religious freedom under the Constitution vis.a.vis the growing demands of Islamic administration and control.

The most prominent of court cases had to do with an individual by the name of Lina Joy, who as a Muslim, asserted her constitutional right to choose a religion, dictated by her individual conscience, and as a right fundamentally, guaranteed to her under the provisions of the Federal Constitution.

### **Constitutional Provisions For The Freedom Of Religion**

In respect of freedom of religion, Article 3(1) states that Islam is the religion of the

Federation, but it goes on to say that all other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony. The mention of Islam as “*the religion of the Federation*” was meant to assure the Malays, who by constitutional definition were also considered as Muslims, did not in any way impede the right of any citizen to choose a religion based on individual conscience. But as was envisaged, Islamic theorists in the country emphasized that the freedom of religion as formulated by the Constitution implies freedom of religion for non-Muslims only but not for Muslims.

The freedom of religion as stipulated in the Federal Constitution ( Art.11) guarantees every person the right to three things: to profess, to practice and subject to Art.11(4) to propagate his/her religion. The exception of Art 11(4) stipulates that no proselytisation of Muslims is allowed by adherents of other religions. The preaching of other religious doctrines to Muslims are regulated by state law.

Many non- Muslims complain that this amounts to unequal treatment under the law. It is one of the pre-independence compromises between the Malays/Muslims and the non-Muslims against powerful proselytising forces that had been prevalent during the British colonial administration. In other words, ethnicity and religious identity became merged as far as Malay/Muslim identity was concerned, and the freedom of religion provision as contained in the Constitution was seen by them as applying to the non-Muslim only. The renunciation of Islam would automatically mean, as some argue, abandoning the Malay community because Islam is one of the defining features of a “*Malay*” in Article 160(2).

### **The Right To Convert: Lina Joy’s Case**

The right of a Muslim to convert out is not mentioned explicitly in the Federal Constitution, but scholars argue that the Constitution is equally silent about the right

not to convert out. Every citizen under the Constitution has a right to choose his/her religion and to practice it. In public discourse, this right is alluded to by Malaysia’s endorsement of Article 18 of the UN’s international Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966 and Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The prevailing Muslim view in Malaysia is that as Islam is “ the religion of the Federation” by constitutional definition, all Muslims are to be governed by Syariah laws (regulated by State laws) when it comes to apostasy. The nation that freedom to believe includes the freedom not to believe is rejected by Muslims, not until the Syariah allows it.

Lina Joy is a Malay/Muslim woman who converted to Christianity in 1990 and was baptised to the Catholic faith in 1998. She took the name Lina Joy and discarded her earlier Muslim name of Azalina binti Jalini. Since 1997, Lina made multiple applications to the National Registration Department (NRD) to have her name changed to reflect her new-found faith. Her application for a name change was approved in 1999, and she was issued a new identity card. Her identity card, however, stated that she was still a Muslim according to a new policy that came into force requiring all Muslims to have their religious identity reflected on their new identity cards, The NRD refused to change her religious status and insisted that she obtain an order from the Syariah court stating that she had become an apostate.

After several court hearings her case was referred to the Federal Court, the apex court of the country, to decide on whether the NRD had the right to reject her application to take out the word” Islam” as stated in her new identity card.

On May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2007, a three judge panel delivered a 2-1 majority decision that the NRD had the right in requiring Lina Joy to produce a declaration from the Syariah

court stating that she is no longer a Muslim. While the majority decision based its argument on the fact that apostasy is within the jurisdiction of the Islamic law and the Syariah court and therefore the civil court cannot interfere, the minority decision, however, asserted that it would be unreasonable to force Lina Joy to go to the Syariah Court, knowing that apostasy is a criminal offence under the Syariah law and she would be punished. The Minority judgement stipulated further: “ *Legislations criminalising apostasy or limiting the scope of the provisions of the fundamental liberties as enshrined in the Constitution are constitutional issues in nature which only the civil courts have jurisdiction to determine*”

Ecumenical bodies in the country expressed grave concern over the court’s decision. The Council of Churches of Malaysia stated that, “*Lina Joy and all other former Muslims who have chosen to convert out of Islam will find no redress in the country’s civil courts, and therefore be denied of their fundamental right as guaranteed under the Federal Constitution.*”

The Christian Federation of Malaysia noted with much concern that the majority decision reflects a growing trend of decisions in the courts where “ *civil courts are abdicating their responsibility of providing legal redress to individuals who only seek to profess and live their religion according to their conscience.*”

The statement went on to say; “*it is now more pressing for the government and lawmakers to revisit the relevant legislation and to reinstate the jurisdiction of the Civil Courts so that equal protection of the right to choose and express one’s religion is accorded to all Malaysians*”

The Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism issued a statement entitled, “ *Unity Threatened by continuing infringements of religious freedom.*” (15<sup>th</sup>

*June 2007*). in which it pointed to the worrying trends of an increasing Islamization of law and public policy in the country. It stated; ‘This creeping Islamization process has created a sense of fear amongst non Muslims comprising Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Taoist and others, who form 40% of the population of the country. Many Malaysians from all races and religions are frightened how easily the safeguards entrenched and enshrined 50 years ago in our Federal Constitution are being eroded through the back door.’ The Statement highlighted the legal impediments non-Muslims were facing by exercising their right to find redress in civil courts as a result of cases of apostasy and dissolution of civil marriages due to the conversion of spouses to Islam.

### **Depoliticising The Right To Convert**

As is shown, part of the difficulty in understanding the social and religious interaction in Malaysia is the politicisation of ethnic differences where religious, linguistic and cultural cleavages tend to coincide. Because religion largely coincides with ethnicity, inter-religious relations are greatly affected by perceptions of others in the political and social spheres. Championing the cause of Islam appeals to the majority Muslim electorate and it reinforces the perception that the protection of the interest of the Malays is synonymous to maintaining the preeminent position of Islam in national governance.

In order to diffuse the sensitivities of inter-racial and inter religious relations, inevitable in a plural framework, the way forward seems to be the task of reinforcing constitutionality. Citizenship should transcend ethnic barriers, where each citizen is assured of fundamental liberties guaranteed under a secular constitution. For that reason, the recent judgement of Lina Joy to consider the position of Syariah courts as being on par with the civil laws of the country is worrying. The secular state as

envisaged by the Federal Constitution is seen as a bulwark to resist the imposition of an Islamic State.

Conversion is a contentious issue not only for the Muslims but also for the faith traditions. Christian conversion activities are perceived with suspicion by other faith communities as they see themselves "targeted" and bombarded with the zealous "marketing" of religion that tends to denigrate the spiritualities of others. In a country where ethnic identity is pronounced, losing converts to Christianity directly diminishes the numerical strength of each respective community.

The Christian Federation of Malaysia, in its undivided commitment to inter-religious harmony, felt it important to draw up a "code of conduct" in order to clarify its position on conversion. The statement on "An Affirmation on Christian Witness" adopted in 1996, prescribes a standard of practice that denounces "unethical means" and denigrating tendencies in seeking to convert others. The following are emphasized;

*"**FREEDOM OF RELIGION** is specified and safeguarded in the Federal Constitution. It is fundamental human right. From a Christian perspective, every right presents us with a solemn responsibility: that we value it for every human being, we protect and defend it, we practice it for the common good and in a spirit of fairness to all, and that it is not abused and taken unfair advantage of.*

***OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST** prescribes the golden rule that "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you..."(The Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:12). Due consideration must therefore be given to the*

*other person and the same rules of conduct must apply to both parties.*

***IN SHARING THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST**, unethical means do not justify a righteous end. In spreading religious faith and introducing religious practices, everyone ought at all times to refrain from any manner of coercion or persuasion that could be regarded as dishonourable or unworthy since such action would be an abuse of one's right and a violation of the rights of others. Unethical means can only bring poor and temporary results, shame, guilt and ill-repute to the Christian Faith. In this matter, we appeal to heads of churches and senior Christian leaders to help Christians under their charge to adopt only wholesome approaches to sharing the Gospel."*

By making such a declaration the Christian community in Malaysia is prepared to be responsible and mutually accountable in its relations with other faith communities in the country.

Continued harmony among the people of different faiths is integral to the happiness, welfare and harmony of Malaysians as a whole. It is imperative that laws, policies and administrative action consciously advance and promote unity and harmony. Regard needs to be paid to the rule of law and the supremacy of the Constitution. There must be integrity in the way laws are applied, in a non-religious way intended by civil laws subservient, to a constitution upon which a secular state is established. It must give due regard to Malaysia as a nation made up of diverse races, religions and cultures in which the national destiny of all the people are entwined as one.

---

**Dr. Hermen Shastri is the General Secretary of the Council of Churches of Malaysia and co-moderator of the WCC's Faith and Order commission.**

## Hermeneutical Explorations in Dialogue:

### *Essays in Honour of Hans Ucko*

Editors:

Anantanand Rambachan

A. Rashied Omar

M. Thomas Thangaraj

Interreligious Dialogue is facing new challenges and consequently taking new directions in today's world. People of all religions are challenged to re-examine and re-interpret their religions in such a way that they become motivating forces for peace and non-violence.

Should such a task of reconstruction be an intra-religious exercise and thus merely limited to an in-house conversation? Or, should it be done in the company of and in conversation with people of religions other than one's own? The authors of this volume belong to a group of theologians and religious thinkers who opted for the latter. They offer here a set of essays where people of scholar-practitioners of religions, such as, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism engage in a hermeneutical task that intentionally re-interprets their own traditions with a profound awareness of the presence of "the other".

ISPCK, Dehli, 2007

ISBN: 978-81-8458-015-0

US\$ 8.00 – UK Sterling 6.00 – Rs. 115.00 (only in India)