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## THE PROBLEM OF CONVERSION IN RECENT MISSIONARY THOUGHT

by ERIC J. SHARPE

**D**R. SHARPE, Lecturer in Comparative Religion in the University of Manchester, is well known to many as the translator of several important theological works from Swedish into English. He spent some years in the famous School of Missions in the University of Uppsala, and those who are interested in the history of Christian missions know him as an original contributor to this field of study. In the present paper he discusses a question of crucial importance which the contemporary ecumenical climate has rendered an issue of animated debate.

**T**o what extent is it necessary, or desirable, for the Christian Church to work for the conversion of the non-Christian to Christianity? The very fact that it is possible to ask such a question at the present time is in itself evidence of the far-reaching changes which have come upon the Christian concept of mission during recent decades.<sup>1</sup> Until very recently it would have been an entirely unnecessary question, since the answer would have been given as soon as asked. Christians of all shades of theological and ecclesiastical opinion would have been unanimous in answering that it is the absolute duty of the Church and her servants to use every means at their disposal to bring the non-Christian to a saving knowledge of Christ and into the Christian fellowship. Classical missionary literature deals for the most part with the problem of conversion only as a "how", assuming that the question "why" has already received a satisfactory answer. And to those for whom the traditional authorities still stand, the problem is still largely one of method. In these circles, our original question would be meaningless. *Of course* the Church must work for the conversion of the non-Christian. The gospel must be preached to the whole world; disciples must be made of every nation. How are non-Christians to believe on Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? In Biblical parlance, to "hear" means to "obey", and so it goes without saying that the aim of Christian missionary work can never be less than the subjection of the entire non-Christian world to Christ.

<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps not without significance that a book like G. H. Anderson's *The Theology of the Christian Mission* (London, 1961) contains only two incidental references to conversion.

But a variety of factors have combined, of late, to challenge this view. Some of these factors may be mentioned briefly. They fall into two broad categories—external and internal.

Among the external factors, pride of place must perhaps go to the growth of nationalism, and its close alliance in many cases with the resurgence of non-Christian religions. This is not the place to enter into a detailed analysis of this process, the course of which is still imperfectly understood here in the West. It can be seen clearly, however, in the alliance between Hinduism and Indian nationalism, between Buddhism and nationalist sentiment in Ceylon and South East Asia, and between Islam and Arab, Malayan and Indonesian nationalism. In different ways it manifests itself in places as far apart as Africa and Japan. But whatever the external forms, what these movements all have in common is the almost unquestioning identification of Christianity with the West, and therefore with colonialism. Christianity, whatever its virtues (and these may well be admitted), is, by definition, a foreign religion and therefore denationalizing.

In India, to take only one example, the national movement of the early twentieth century was allied in various ways with resurgent Hinduism, and missionaries were hard pressed to find expressions and proofs of their sympathy with Indian aspirations as a result. However, it was the Christian insistence on baptism and membership of the Church as the outward sign of Christian discipleship that proved the major stumbling-block. Nationally aware Hindus were incensed—and grew more so—at the thought of missionaries, apparently hand-in-glove with the colonial administrators, requiring Indian converts to renounce caste, and therefore nationality, as a condition of Christian discipleship. Every Indian baptized, as they put it, was an Indian lost to the national movement. This was an emotional and practical deterrent of the first order, and remains so.

The second of the external factors concerns the study of the major non-Christian religions, which in its earliest years was a concern having only incidental reference to Christian missions. But from the missionary point of view, the developments of the last hundred years have been entirely in the direction of more sympathetic appreciation of the moral and religious values of the non-Christian religions. So much so, that it is now a commonplace that the missionary should seek in the non-Christian religion for every element of truth, and accept it willingly as evidence of the working of the Spirit of God. Evidence of this might be drawn from very many sources, but we may take the words of the

Vatican II Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions as typical. In Paragraph 2 the Declaration states that the Church

... looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men . . .<sup>2</sup>

But granted that such external factors may make the quest for conversion very difficult of attainment in certain classes of certain societies; granted that sympathy for the non-Christian may prompt the question whether conversion is necessary, since his religion is not merely unrelieved darkness: still there would seem to be no genuine theological reason to abandon the quest.

It is at this point that the internal factors add their weight of persuasion. It is almost impossible to speak of these briefly, since what is involved is nothing less than the entire question of the basis of Christian theology. Changes in emphasis this century have been startling. During the period which came to an end in 1914, the dominant theme of the missionary movement from the West was that of individual conversion to Christ, and missionary success was usually reckoned in terms of the numbers of persons baptized. The words of John R. Mott may be taken as typical, that

The preaching or teaching of the revealed gospel . . . cannot be regarded as otherwise than indispensable. The chief aim must ever be to persuade human hearts everywhere that Jesus Christ is their Saviour, standing ready in an attitude of love, compassion and power, to realize to them, upon condition of repentance and faith, all that the gospel promises to do for a soul that receives it.<sup>3</sup>

The reorientation that took place during the inter-war years in Protestant missionary thought, in the direction of greater ecclesiocentricity, did nothing to invalidate this basic concern, though it did have the effect of locating it within the Christian community. Again to take only one example, at the Whitby meeting of the International Missionary Council in 1947 John Baillie said:

A man becomes a Christian when God so takes hold of him in Christ that he puts his whole trust in the good news of the dawn of a new age which makes possible this kind of life . . . Being a Christian means both believing and belonging. A man cannot really belong without believing; but if he does not belong, that is the best proof that he does not really believe.<sup>4</sup>

And significantly, one of the most penetrating works of missionary

<sup>2</sup> W. M. Abbott (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (London, 1967), p. 662.

<sup>3</sup> World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910: *Report of Commission I*, p. 312.

<sup>4</sup> C. W. Ranson (ed.), *Renewal and Advance* (London, 1948), pp. 99f.

theology to have appeared since World War II, A. G. Hogg's *The Christian Message to the Hindu* (London, 1947), contains a chapter entitled simply, "Come, Join My Church".

He would indeed be a brave man who would write such a chapter today. Disillusionment with the Church as an organization has seldom been so widespread, particularly among the young. Secular theologians, bent on seeing an ill-defined Christ in the events of the world, are urging Christians everywhere to get out and live, to leave "the comfortable pew", the "Christian ghetto", and join the poor, the oppressed, the under-privileged and the starving in their struggle for human rights and human values. "The Church", writes Valdo Galland, "is not the place where Christ is imprisoned: it is the community of those who are convinced of his presence in the whole world and who are constantly endeavouring to discern the signs of his presence and to help others to share their conviction".<sup>5</sup> Obviously a new ideal of the Church—and by implication a new concept of conversion—are involved here.

It would seem, then, as though there are at least three ideals of conversion that can be traced in twentieth-century religious debate: first, the ideal of individual conversion as a transaction between God and the soul, but which in Evangelical thought always leads to membership in a Christian community, a gathered Church. This ideal could, and did, lead to a purely numerical evaluation of missionary success and failure. Secondly, the ideal of incorporation into the life of the Church, viewed as the body of Christ and the fullest manifestation of Christ's life on earth; in theory, at least, this second view involved the rejection of individualism. And thirdly—the point at which secular theology has now arrived—the ideal of conversion to Christ apart from the organized Church: conversion into a "concerned community". If, as is increasingly the case, it is genuinely believed that this type of community—virtually the sole sign of which is service—can exist even among people who expressly repudiate the *name* of Christian, there can be no conceivable need to press for conversion at all.

We may give a practical example. In India, the type of situation has arisen repeatedly in which a Hindu individual or group has professed faith in Christ, while expressly repudiating every Christian insistence on baptism and conversion as "churchianity". The best-known of these manifestations of Hindu eclecticism is Keshub Chunder Sen's *Nava Vidhana*, or Church of the New Dispensation,

<sup>5</sup> V. Galland, "More about Christian Presence", in *Student World* 1966/2, p. 153.

a late nineteenth-century offshoot of the Brahma Samaj. A contemporary example is, however, the movement around Subba Rao in Andhra Pradesh. Subba Rao accepts the example of Christ, while vehemently rejecting "Religion, Baptism and all the rest"—by which he evidently means the Christian Church, both as a worshipping community and as an organization. To a disciple he wrote:

The very purpose of prayer and worship is to become one with Christ. Prayer and worship are just the means. You are praying [to] and worshipping the means. You have not yet become Christ, or you misunderstood the meaning of prayer and worship. The meaning, the aim and object of worship and prayer took *an ugly shape called Baptism*, and was lost in the wilderness of religion beyond recovery.<sup>6</sup>

This is essentially the mystic's rejection of organized religion, and it is, perhaps, mainly a coincidence that Subba Rao and Western secular theologians should reject religion in what appear to be similar ways. But conversion—and baptism as the symbol *par excellence* of conversion—are rejected equally emphatically by both. The Danish theologian Kaj Baagø records his conviction that Subba Rao

is essentially right in his understanding of Christ, namely that Christ is a living "guru" who never wanted worshippers of himself or believers in his divinity, but followers who serve God by serving others.<sup>7</sup>

Baagø also holds that baptism in its present form is "a contradiction of the Gospel itself",<sup>8</sup> though he would accept the idea of the Church as a caring community.

This particular understanding of the problem of conversion has grown up in the context of a particularly complex religious and social situation. Other such examples might be given, not limited to the so-called "mission fields"; for instance, the example of academic society, in which the whole concept of conversion has been rejected in favour of those notoriously ambiguous terms "presence" and "dialogue".

Roman Catholic missionary theology since Vatican II has also begun to express itself in similar ways, and the concept of conversion is being similarly questioned, at least among the more radical theologians. On one level, the evaluation of missionary

<sup>6</sup> K. Baagø, *The Movement around Subba Rao* (Madras/Bangalore, 1968), p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

success in terms of numbers of converts—as active an ingredient in Roman Catholic as in Protestant missions—is now dismissed as practically meaningless. As Fr. Eugene Hillman points out,

The dream of total populations becoming simultaneously and homogeneously Christian is now past. If we try to pursue this medieval ideal in the context of the modern world, we are going to distort completely the meaning of the Church's missionary and eschatological goals.<sup>9</sup>

Elsewhere the same theologian has written—opening up a dimension of the problem with which we cannot deal in this context—that

Such an approach to the mission of the Church is more reminiscent of the religio-political fantasies of the Middle Ages than of the Gospel message which sees the tangible reunion of all men in terms of sacramental symbolism, not in terms of their individual numerical computability.<sup>10</sup>

On another level, even individual conversion is being called in question by some Roman Catholic writers. Fr. Ronan Hoffman of the Catholic University of America has, for instance, suggested that if, after serious dialogue with the non-Christian, it proves to be the case that the non-Christian wishes to retain his religion,

Catholics must not only give in gracefully but, even further, let them know that they would sincerely like them to be better followers of their chosen religion and leave all matters to Almighty God.<sup>11</sup>

In support of this view he advances not only the statements of Vatican II, but also Acts 5: 38f. (“So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone . . .”) and Micah 4: 1-5 (“For all the peoples walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God . . .”)—an exegetical procedure which seems at least questionable.<sup>12</sup>

What we have said so far should be sufficient to show to what extent the goal of conversion, once a missionary *sine qua non*, is

<sup>9</sup> E. Hillman, *The Church as Mission* (London, 1966), p. 58.

<sup>10</sup> Idem, *The Wider Ecumenism* (London, 1968), pp. 93f.

<sup>11</sup> R. Hoffman, “Conversion and the Mission of the Church”, in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* V/1 (Winter 1968), p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> There are, of course, many more issues involved here than just those of Biblical exegesis. The interpretation of the great non-Christian religions as containing within themselves “anonymous Christianity”, i.e. effective means of salvation, has been put forward by a number of Roman Catholic scholars in recent years. A readily accessible account will be found in Hillman's book *The Wider Ecumenism* (1968). This view is defective on exegetical and theological grounds alike, but I have not thought it advisable to enter upon a detailed criticism in this context.

now a missionary problem of the first magnitude. Not only is it often difficult in practice; it is now widely held that it is unmotivated theologically, other than in a very limited sense.

Now, although it is realized that it is impossible within the bounds of one single article to do justice to all the issues involved, some comment must be offered.

The first thing to be said is that in the whole of the discussion on this subject, fresh attention needs to be called to the distinction between proclamation and conversion. Although missionary theologians have usually been aware of this distinction, a similar awareness has not been characteristic of the lower reaches of the debate, and occasional confusion tends to occur even on the part of writers who ought to know better. For instance, one Roman Catholic theologian has recently criticized the well-known motto of the Student Volunteer Movement, "The evangelization of the world in this generation", as implying that "the missionary effort was directed towards that ultimate goal of converting all mankind to Christianity".<sup>13</sup> But it is doubtful whether this was ever true; it was certainly not true of the leaders of the Volunteer Movement. John R. Mott, for instance, repeatedly stressed that the motto was a call to action, but at the same time a call to humility, since

Everything vital to the success of the movement to carry the Gospel to all the non-Christian world depends on the power of God Himself.<sup>14</sup> It is the Holy Spirit who communicates to Christians the spirit of witness-bearing and evangelization.<sup>15</sup>

And in respect of conversion,

... it is the Spirit of God who alone has power to convict men of sin. It is only when He convicts of sin and of dire need that the soul becomes willing to hear of Christ as a Saviour.<sup>16</sup>

It is true that the Evangelical missionaries *expected* the Spirit of God to work in this way; but their own personal commission to evangelize was regarded first and foremost as a commission to proclaim the Gospel. The question of human response to that proclamation they were content to leave in God's hands.

The mainstream of Evangelical missionary thought has never deviated from this conviction. God has acted in Christ for men's salvation, and it is the duty of the missionary—and indeed of every

<sup>13</sup> Hoffman, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> J. R. Mott, *The Decisive Hour of Christian Missions* (London, 1910), p. 226.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

Christian—to make that fact known. Whether the person to whom the message is addressed in fact responds in faith to the offer is a factor entirely outside the missionary's control. The desire to impose such a control has often been expressly repudiated. As an example we may take the message of the Jerusalem (1928) Conference of the I.M.C., which stated expressly that

... we would repudiate any symptoms of a religious imperialism that would desire to impose beliefs and practices on others in order to manage their souls in their supposed interests. We obey a God who respects our wills and we desire to respect those of others.<sup>17</sup>

Lest it be thought that this implies a lessening of the desire to evangelize, we may compare this further passage from the same Jerusalem message:

We cannot live without Christ and we cannot bear to think of men living without Him. We cannot bear to be content to live in a world that is un-Christ-like ... Christ is our motive and Christ is our end. We must give nothing less, and we can give nothing more.<sup>18</sup>

The same Christocentric motive has been recently attested by R. K. Orchard, who writes that

... the purpose of mission is to proclaim and bear witness to the Christ-event in such a way that men may come to know the name of their Redeemer ... Mission is essentially the act of pointing to Jesus Christ. It is testimony to something done. It is to point away from oneself—whether the "self" is an individual or a group or an institution or a way of life—to Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup>

Since Vatican II, substantially the same position has been adopted by the Roman Catholic Church; since the act of faith is by its very nature a free act, missionaries can do no more—and may do no less—than to invite men to embrace the Christian faith of their own free will. Coercion must be rejected. There is ample Scriptural warrant for the essentially un-Christian nature of coercion: this is proselytism, not evangelization.

But even when this has been recognized, there remain considerable problems to be overcome. Here we can do no more than hint at some of them. Three in particular are pressing.

The first of these concerns the level on which the Christian message is given and received. It is a widespread assumption that

<sup>17</sup> *Jerusalem Meeting Report*, Vol. I, p. 484.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 486.

<sup>19</sup> R. K. Orchard, *Missions in a Time of Testing* (London, 1964), pp. 90, 80.

in the work of evangelization, it is enough if approach be made to the conscious mind. Christian apologetics, as hitherto understood, proceeds largely on such an assumption. Conversion is tacitly regarded as the logical outcome of a rational process, and if the evidence can only be fairly stated, then results must follow. This assumption, where it occurs, is incredibly naïve. We ought to know that conversion seldom takes place as a result of argument. Was it not G. K. Chesterton who said that it is as useless to try and argue a man, as to torture him, into believing? Religious attitudes, whether positive or negative, are very often held and move on subconscious or unconscious levels of the mind. The rational is frequently conspicuous by its absence from "religious" arguments. Thus whether the communication of religious ideas be thought of in terms of proclamation or dialogue, as long as it remains on a verbal and therefore conscious level, it can never be sure of transmitting anything of value to the deepest levels of human personality. The demand, clearly, is for a mode of personal contact (which may or may not be called "presence") in which the transmission of ideas and impulses becomes feasible.

The second major problem is related to the first, and concerns the legitimate, though often unconscious, cultural heritage of the missionary himself. We have come to realize that the Gospel can never be delivered in a form altogether divorced from the cultural background of the delivering agency. This factor may be ignored, as it was by the Pietist-inspired missionaries of the Great Century, who were either not conscious of its existence or, at a somewhat later stage, attempted enthusiastically to transmit culture and religion together—and with a fair measure of success. The anti-Christian argument of which we have already spoken—that Christianity is a Western religion and therefore unsuitable for a nationally aware Asian or African—must be taken seriously, and any form of evangelism which refuses to recognize this factor is storing up trouble for itself.

To deal adequately with the third problem would require an extended treatment which we cannot give it here. The problem is this. Allowing that the aim of mission is proclamation, and that proselytism is both foreign to the spirit of the New Testament and lacking in respect for the integrity of the non-Christian individual, what exactly is to be proclaimed? The secular theologians have tried to show that it is possible to proclaim Jesus as "the man for others", and to expect only a spirit of service, a commitment to a concerned community which may or may not be the Church, to result; Catholics and Evangelicals alike stress membership in a

Christian community as the fruit of obedience, albeit with far from insignificant differences in their interpretation of what this fact might imply. The fundamental distinction would seem to be between an anthropocentric and a theocentric approach—an anthropocentric approach which both begins and ends with man, and a theocentric approach which insists that to be rightly understood, man must be seen *sub specie aeternitatis*, in the light of God's revelation of Himself in Christ.

Again it must be stressed that the Church's task of evangelism must not be confused with proselytism—the aim of getting people to join our party just because it is our party. But neither must it be confused with mere idealism. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, addressing the Bangkok meeting of the East Asia Christian Conference in 1949, laid down two simple rules for the work of evangelism: “an absolute conviction of the truth of the gospel preached, and a life conformed to that gospel”.<sup>20</sup> And he went on:

True evangelism is recognizably *not* a man's own enterprise, *not* a church's own enterprise, but the overflowing of the love of Christ into the world through lives broken and healed, mastered and set free, by that love. This is the error in the Gandhian invitation to Christians to stop preaching and let the fragrance of their lives draw men to Christ. That which does not constantly and explicitly point beyond itself to Christ is not the true fragrance of the Christian life.<sup>21</sup>

What, then, of the character of the message? Again in Bishop Newbigin's words:

Our message is to people now living, like all human beings, soon to die. It is to tell them of the true dimensions of this brief earthly existence, the dimensions of heaven and hell; of the eternal God who created them and of the eternal glory for which he created them; and of his Son Jesus Christ, by whom he has called them into that eternal glory. It is to invite them to that decision of faith by which they are made sharers now in that eternal world . . .<sup>22</sup>

“To invite them . . .” Notice: not to persuade them, or to compel them, or to force them. The evangelist and missionary does not tell men what they *must* believe, but what they *may* believe; he does not usher them into a church which they *must* join, but opens the doors into a fellowship which they *may* join. If he does so because he is a lover of mankind, all well and good. But his true motive is the love of Christ, by which he has come to know and love mankind in all its power, breadth, arrogance and lostness.

<sup>20</sup> *The Christian Prospect in Eastern Asia* (New York, 1950), p. 77.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

It was in 1925 that Professor A. G. Hogg of Madras Christian College wrote these words (since reprinted on more than one occasion):

What of the Christ-centred motive—the desire to have our Master no longer misunderstood, ignored, disappointed? Precisely because it is Christ-centred it will keep us ever humble, ever conscious of not having fully attained. It will intensify the brotherly desire to help and benefit, but at the same time it will keep brotherliness from being intrusive and domineering. For it keeps the heart centred on the infinite Christ, and therefore self-diffident. It makes one to lead men up to our Master, and to leave them there, to be mastered by Him. To bring them and to leave them there—that is evangelization.<sup>23</sup>

It may appear that all I have been saying is that the problem of conversion is to be solved only by disclaiming ultimate responsibility for conversion, proclaiming the Gospel and leaving the Holy Spirit to complete the process. It is, of course, unlikely that the critics of Christianity in any part of the world would be satisfied by such an argument; and it does not answer many urgent practical problems. And yet it is important that the Church should be aware of her own limitations in this matter; it is equally important that her motives should not be misunderstood, as they have been misunderstood in the past. A necessary first step may be to re-establish the distinction between conversion and proclamation, and to re-emphasize the Christian's duty to proclaim the good news of salvation. It will then be necessary to consider *how* the Gospel is to be proclaimed, particularly to men of other religious allegiances—a vast problem with which I have not ventured to deal in this paper. But whatever the method and the language, it must never be forgotten that, to quote Lesslie Newbigin once more, "Unless the Church has a message from beyond the world, it will not move the world by one hairsbreadth."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted from *CMS News Letter* (June 1955).

<sup>24</sup> *The Christian Prospect in Eastern Asia*, p. 82.