EXCURSUS

CONVERSION AND MISSION

The process of religious conversion attracts the attention and scholarship of psychologists, anthropologists, historians and theologians alike. It has been simply defined as the adoption of a new religion or a change in the orientation of one’s faith; yet it is much more complex than this would suggest. Religious conversion is often experienced as a re-birth or awakening, leading to a sudden change in one’s worldview, lifestyle and environment. Conversion does not occur at a specific moment. It is “not mere syncretism, neither can conversion involve a simple and absolute break with a previous social life”¹ but rather acts as a religious passage which is ongoing and partial.

The “convert as a social type”² has been constructed on the basis of how one uses language and procedure to prove herself/himself as a convert. In such a typology, we witness a change in the convert’s “universe of discourse”. She/he dissolves and reconstructs her/his past life. New meaning is given to old facts; everything is interpreted through a new worldview. The convert enters into a “master attribution scheme”, through which she/he assumes a “master role”, that is the generalisation of the convert role is seen as prestigious, daily routines carry added significance, a new identity is announced.

The convert does not simply replace her/his old belief system with another one. She/he will adopt new beliefs which are, at first, interpreted through an existing reference system.³ The latter is enlarged through affiliation with a new group which performs and acts upon shared religious beliefs. In this sense, “…the worldview of the convert exists not only as abstract ideas but also as embodied reality, practising

the adopted religion acquires not only the gradual assimilation of the meaning of terms and concepts based in the language and symbols of another culture, but also the performance of ritual postures and gestures requiring retraining of deep-seated somatic responses.\textsuperscript{4}

The convert is not converted automatically. Usually, she/he will initially participate in rituals, freely and actively. Conversion to a new belief system comes later. Through these experiences, the convert relates to the adopted religion either with zealous adherence or selective performance. She/he may grow more “fanatical” or may remain syncretistic.

The process of religious conversion is often more emotional than it is intellectual; part of a quest to belong. The religious authority provides leadership, structure and order/organisation while the religious group provides acceptance and love. Faith offers a relationship to a transcendent being.\textsuperscript{5}

\begin{center}
\textit{Conversion to Islam in South Asia}
\end{center}

There have been many theories on the main impulses triggering mass conversions to Islam in South Asia\textsuperscript{6} are characterised as: “religion of the sword”, “religion of social liberation”, “Sufi missionary,” “political patronage” and “ecological influences”. To this list are added the “warrior Sufi”, “immigration” and “forced conversion” theories.\textsuperscript{7}

The forced conversion of non-Muslims to Islam characterises the “religion of the sword” theory. There is however, little evidence which supports the application of this process in practice. In fact, conversion of large masses to Islam was usually not forced though there were exceptions to it. Most Muslim kings showed tolerance or neutrality regarding the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam; only a few exercised political persecution. Eaton’s research further shows that even though parts of India were exposed to the Muslim military force, there is “an inverse relationship between the degree of Muslim penetration and the

\textsuperscript{4} Sachs Norris “Converting to what?”, p. 171.
\textsuperscript{6} Ernst: Eternal Garden, p. 156.