

RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AND ITS COMPLEXITIES

Note: I recently had an opportunity to read Cultures of Conversions, edited by Jan N. Bremmer, Wout J. van Bekkum and Arie L. Molendijk (Peeters, 2006). Afterward, I remembered that I had a never-published document on file dealing with the issue of conversion. What follows is a combination of those reflections with insights gained from the aforementioned book.

What constitutes a religious conversion?

William James, of *Varieties of Religious Experience* fame, was particularly intrigued by “those striking instantaneous conversions.” While confessing that he himself did not have a “living sense of commerce with God,” he nevertheless felt endowed with what might be called “my mystical germ.” St. Paul, he claimed, was the most eminent example of such a sudden conversion.

Among the most famous conversion accounts in Christian history, in addition to St. Paul with his Damascus Road experience we find St. Augustine with his Garden of Milan experience, Martin Luther with his Cloister Tower experience, and John Wesley with his Aldersgate experience. What kind of conversions were these, and should they even be called conversions? Certainly not in the sense that a person suddenly turns from one religion to another and very different religion.

Paul was a true believer-- a Torah committed Jew. As Krister Stendhal has pointed out in his *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, this Jew-turned-apostle did not change his religion as belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Rather, he “received a new and special calling” in the service of the God of Israel and his dealings with the world. At the heart of Paul’s faith was the holy law of the Lord that embodies divine righteousness. What happened after his encounter with Jesus and subsequent instructions was that Paul changed his views about the law/righteousness nexus in light of Jesus’ fulfillment of the law in a sacrificial act of holy love.

Paul heard a “voice from beyond,” a summons that sent him on a mission. It involved a radical reorientation in thought and life; but can we really call it a radical conversion? The same can be asked of Augustine’s experience. He had a *tolle lege* moment that caused him to turn to Paul’s letter to the Romans (chs.13&14). His own account of the experience must be read in the context of his life story: his devout mother, his intellectual

journey into the Manichean heresy, his sexual escapades. “I loved the beauty of your house, but was tightly bound by the love of women.” He believed with his mind, but his heart hesitated; his soul, “contaminated” by the “revolting things” he had done, held him back. His was undoubtedly a life changing experience, but it was sudden only in the sense that a long process of intellectual/spiritual struggle reached a culmination point.

Luther repeatedly spoke about the defining moment as he sat in that tower of the Black Cloister in Wittenberg, struggling with the words in Romans 1:17 about the righteousness of God. As it had been for Paul, the law/righteousness nexus troubled him deeply. Both came to the stunning discovery that the meaning of the gospel message was to be found in the righteousness we receive “in Christ” on the basis of his fulfillment of the law. Now Luther was ready for his calling as a reformer; but he never thought of this experience as a conversion from the Catholic “religion” to a new religion called Protestantism.

John Wesley had been a practicing preacher for some time when he “felt [his] heart strangely warmed” during that Aldersgate meeting on Wednesday, May 24, 1738. He too had looked into the holy law of a holy God and was overcome with a deep sense of inadequacy for the mission to which he felt called. Looking back, after he had found inner peace, he confessed that he had been “ignorant of the righteousness of Christ.”

St. Paul heard a “voice from beyond” and received a summons (“I am sending you,” Acts 26:17), just as had happened in the case of Abraham (Genesis 12) and Ezekiel (1:28; 2:1ff.). The accounts we have looked at thus far are what some have called vocation and commissioning stories rather than conversion stories.

Do sudden and dramatic conversions occur? Church history, starting with the Pentecost experience (Acts 2), has provided us with countless testimonies of almost instantaneous transformations. But, there are also numerous stories of long intellectual/spiritual journeys that find their culmination in an act of quiet surrender to the divine will or in an experience of blissful enlightenment.

In some religions, like Islam, conversion stories of a lightning-strike nature are quite rare. As a matter of fact, the idea of “embracing” or “accepting” Islam is found much more prominently in Muslim accounts than the notion of an abrupt rebirth. *Aslama* conveys the idea of a homebound journey, a “reversion” as it were to one’s natural spiritual roots—Islam as one’s “birthright.” Many Muslims describe how they came to “recognize” basic tenets they had already believed or rejected (for instance, the Trinity and the divinity of Christ). Embracing Islam then becomes a process of transformation in the way one thinks and behaves (See Karin van Nieuwkerk’s essay in *Cultures of Conversions*, p. 151ff.).

It seems to me that the most intense transformations, whether of the vocation/commissioning or an abrupt rebirth kind, are found in circles where the sin/guilt/atonement/forgiveness dimensions of redemption are stressed in conjunction with an emphasis on a very personal relationship with the divine (for example, Jesus

Christ as my personal Savior with whom I may have an intimate relationship in the “garden of prayer”).

The Convert as Source of Controversy and Conflict

The history of religious conversions is filled with complexities, ironies, and contradictions. Converts have often found themselves caught in a world of ambiguity, a veritable twilight zone—condemned by their old world, and not quite accepted by their new one. In what follows I shall focus mainly, but not exclusively, on the Christian-Jewish dynamic with which I am most familiar from personal experience.

Converts come in many varieties and so do the reactions to them. First, there is *the convert as conformist*, the quiet accommodationist who is usually considered rather safe by both his/her old and new environment. For the community left behind, the loss of even one adherent can be a sorrowful event. It can feel like an assault on the legitimacy of the faith. Converts are perceived as a real threat, however, when they feel compelled to seek the conversion of others, particularly members of their previous faith community. On a larger scale, all propagation of the faith through organized mission and evangelism has its risky side. At what point does authentic witness end, and propaganda in the service of material or political interests begin? Or, at what point does propagation of the faith turn into proselytizing in the pejorative sense? On the other hand, how often are oppressive or suppressive measures against dissenters justified in the name of national interest and/or community unity? Or, how often are people accused (sometimes before a court of law!) of proselytizing when there is not the slightest evidence of enticement or deceit, but simply disagreement with the message or the passion with which it is delivered.

The “good convert” has often been seen as the Jew who behaves in every way like a nice Baptist, or the African pastor who dresses like the Methodist missionary and patterns congregational life after a Western church model. Much has changed in that respect, but old mentalities can survive for a long time in subtle and almost unconscious forms.

The convert as rebel or reformer is a different story. In the post-colonial era, “mission fields” have developed into independent churches and we have seen a growing movement away from Western models of church life and theology toward contextualization in terms of local cultural expressions. Among Jewish converts, the refusal to abandon all elements of their Hebraic heritage has developed into a Messianic Jewish *movement*.

This poses a troublesome dilemma for the churches. They are confronted with newcomers whose basic orthodoxy is beyond dispute, but who in considerable numbers refuse to be “gentilized” and accept the whole “package” of creeds and practices that have been adopted through the centuries. On the other hand, they are confronted with Jewish establishments that they have eagerly pursued as dialogue partners who now warn them against fraternizing with Christians who call themselves Messianic Jews.

The Jewish side claims that if, as a Jew, you want to be a Christian, you should become a *real* Christian: a totally assimilated one. In short, if you want the Jewish Jesus as Lord, you lose all claims to Judaism and Jewishness. Thus we have the ironic situation that Torah-believing Jewish Christians are considered a greater threat to the future of Judaism than Jews who abandon all Jewish traditions and accommodate to a de-Judaized Christianity, or even confess no faith in God altogether. The Christian side, on the other hand, may nod approvingly as Catholic bishops and ecumenical councils deplore the de-Judaization of the church's theology and life, while at the same time resisting any notion that Jewish Christians might be able to help them rediscover essential elements of their Judaic roots.

"Taglit screening out Messianic Jews" read a recent headline in the *Jerusalem Post*. That program organizes free "birthright" trips to Israel for young adults of Jewish descent whom they hope to inspire with a deeper appreciation for their Jewish heritage. Believers in Jesus, said the organization's CEO, do not fall within "the parameters of Jewishness in contemporary Jewish society"; they have opted out of "what constitutes being Jewish according to the accepted Jewish denominations." "Not so fast," say their orthodox Jewish brothers and sisters, "contemporary opinion cannot trump our ancient religious laws (*halacha*) according to which one cannot opt out of one's Jewishness if one has been born to a Jewish mother." As an aside, we might note that the question of "Who is a Jew?" remains a hotly disputed issue within Judaism. As a matter of fact, there is public talk of a "conversion crisis in Israel" as the Conversion Authority, which answers to the Prime Minister's office, finds itself in total disarray because of irreconcilable internal conflicts.

Returning now to the issue at hand, a young adult who has been raised in a devout Messianic Jewish home could - with or without sincerity - sign the Taglit document declaring that "I do not subscribe to any beliefs or follow any practices which may be in any way associated with Messianic Judaism" and thus be entitled to the trip. Ironically, we have many examples of formula-type declarations that Jews in the ancient and medieval periods had to sign before being admitted to the church: "I renounce every rite and observance of the Jewish religion...detest all its most solemn ceremonies and tenets...shun intercourse with other Jews," etc.

I have grandchildren of Jewish descent whom I have baptized, who in their teen-age years have professed faith in Jesus as Lord, and who had no trouble being accepted for the trip and loved it. The difference is that they had been raised in a predominantly "gentilized" environment and had never seen the inside of a Messianic Jewish synagogue. I know and have extensively written about the history of horrors perpetrated against Jews in the name of Jesus that lies behind the tragic irony and complexity we face today. How the sins of our forebears have come to haunt us and our children!

Similar examples of converts becoming a source of controversy and conflict can be found all across the religious spectrum. As Christians reach out to the non-Christian world (or, as some prefer, to people of other faiths who are our neighbors in the pluralistic global village) the transformative impulses of religion work both ways. Some

converts enter their new faith community as changed persons who also turn out to be agents of change, bringing with them insights, values and ways of life that challenge aspects of the theological tradition they now embrace.

In her contribution to the book *Cultures of Conversions* (p.15ff.), Ivy Imogene Hansdak discusses the spiritual journey of Pandita Ramabai Saraswati. Her essay bears the subtitle, “The Convert as ‘Heretic.’” Pandita Ramabai was born in 1858 of orthodox Chitpavan Brahmin parents. At a young age, she was honored by the scholars of Calcutta who, impressed with her mastery of the Sanskrit language, bestowed on her the titles Pandita (learned woman) and Saraswati (the Hindu goddess of learning). At age twenty-five, while studying in England, she converted to Christianity in the Anglican tradition. At first she was welcomed as a great “catch”; but eventually her questioning of fundamental Christian doctrines (Trinity, divinity of Christ) and her refusal to submit meekly to a hierarchy inflicted with a colonial mentality (an Indian woman could teach Indian but not British students) turned her into a threat. “Heretics,” according to St. Augustine, “are given us so that we might not remain in infancy.”

Stanley Samartha was two years old at the time of Pandita Ramabai’s death in 1922. Although not a convert himself (he was the son of a Basel Evangelical Mission pastor), in a real sense he was a product of the missionary movement that, in turn, gave birth to the twentieth century ecumenical movement. Samartha studied with such scholars as Karl Barth, Hendrik Kraemer, Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. As he steadily moved away from Western forms of systematic theology, however, he sought to make Christianity more relevant to Indian society by reconciling certain aspects of Hinduism with traditional Christian concepts—and to do so without falling into a relativistic syncretism. Using the concept of *advaita* (non-duality or oneness), he wanted to provide an antidote to dualistic tendencies in Greek and Western modes of thinking (See Kristeen Kim, *The Holy Spirit in the World: A Global Conversation*, Orbis Books, 2007, p. 73ff.).

In 1968, Samartha became a leading staff member of the World Council of Churches, which gave him a worldwide platform to advocate what were sometimes unconventional and controversial positions. In an age when Christian theological hegemony is a thing of the past, more and more converts are insisting that a pluralistic global contextualization should mean not only that other religions receive greater respect, but also that they sometimes can make a positive contribution to indigenous theologies. Thus, the churches are facing complexities with which theological education is just beginning to come to terms.

Anti-conversionary tactics

When converts are seen as a threat to religious or political establishments, the measures taken against them can run the gamut from put-downs to defamation to the death penalty.

The first line of attack in the counter-conversion move is to question the convert's ability to make sound judgments. In her discussion of Pandita Ramabai, Hansdak observes that a common perception of conversion prevalent in India is "that all conversions take place only among deprived lower caste or tribal groups, which are considered more susceptible to allurements or coercion."

A brilliant woman like Pandita Ramabai did not fit that pattern. As an upper class convert and later critic, she became an embarrassment to both sides; and the initial refusal by historians to recognize her achievements has been described as "a century-long conspiracy of silence."

Jewish converts, too, are frequently being described as the vulnerable poor and weak-minded who are easily enticed. When the great Dutch poet, legal scholar and essayist Isaac da Costa (1798-1860) had himself baptized, others in the Jewish Christian community saw him as the perfect counter-argument to that popular misperception. The magazine *Voice of Israel*, therefore, urged him to recount the story of his long and learned quest for a personal truth in their pages (See Arie Molendijk's essay, "The Rhetoric and Politics of the Conversion of Isaac da Costa" in *Cultures of Conversions*, p. 65ff.).

The next stage of attack is to question people's motives. Let me cite Ivy Imogene Hansdak once more: "In the post-colonial cultural scenario of many Third World countries today, religious conversion is frequently perceived as an act of expediency undertaken by converts for purely temporal gains, in terms of entry into a privileged socio-economic space hitherto denied to them."

In the post-emancipation Jewish community, this commonly accepted view is epitomized in an old and oft repeated joke. Three Jews are asked by their compatriots why they had converted. "I did it," said the first one, "because it would be good for my professional career." Number two gave this reply: "I converted because I wanted to save my children from the persecution which is always the fate of the Jewish people." The attention now turning to him, the third convert declared that he had become a believer in Jesus out of conviction, a remark that met with gleeful hilarity and the response: "Go tell that to the Goyim!" In other words, we Jews know better--they all must have had ulterior motives. A long history of Christian attacks on Jews as "Christ-killers" has conditioned many of them to think of conversion in terms of joining the enemy. In true reaction mode, there is also the proudly proclaimed assertion that "Jews do not proselytize," do not engage in such distasteful activities-- a claim that Saul Singer has recently described in a *Jerusalem Post* editorial as "in historic terms...grossly, even suicidally, anachronistic."

Since the idea of social or material gain is so obviously absurd in the case of today's Messianic Jews, the most common accusation against them is that they are deceitful, using Jewish symbols and practices simply as a ploy to cover up their true nature as fundamentalist Christian churches. Thus they lure unsuspecting Jews into their cause. According to Michael Cook, early rabbinic literature "denounced Jesus himself for

having attempted to ‘entice and lead Israel astray,’ that is, into apostasy and idolatry” (*Jesus through Jewish Eyes*, Orbis, 2001, p.13). Jewish scholarship today tends to view Jesus much more positively as a Jew who was faithful to Torah, but not so those who accept him as Messiah while claiming to remain Jewish. To be a Jew, it would seem, can mean almost anything in terms of faith or no-faith commitments, except belief in Jesus as Lord.

During a 1976 interfaith conference in Tripoli, Muammar al-Gaddafi declared that “Christ was sent to the Israelis” and that “an Arab cannot be a Christian.” When the Indian Christian scholar Amartya Sen received the Nobel Prize for economics in 1998, the then president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) used the occasion to declare that this was all part of a Christian conspiracy to undermine the Hindu character of the Indian nation (See Peter van der Veer’s essay in *Cultures of Conversions*, p. 1ff.). The slogan among Indian nationalists is: “To be an Indian is to be a Hindu.”

What if the convert begs to differ and persists in the “error” of his/her ways? Then there may be unpleasant consequences as verbal abuse can quickly turn into physical harm. In Saudi Arabia, one can literally lose one’s head; while in India one may be forced to submit an affidavit to the authorities or, much worse, be killed in church by roaming mobs; and in some Jewish circles one may be shunned as a heretic without honor. That leaves us with the question: What about freedom of religion?

The convert and the cause of freedom

The above remarks notwithstanding, there is still an overwhelming consensus in the world that murder, capital punishment, or any form of bodily harm to people who have embraced a religious faith in good conscience is to be condemned. In the realm of interreligious relationships the treatment of converts is often like the proverbial canary in the coal mine: a warning sign that the fresh air of religious freedom may becoming poisoned—both in theory and practice.

The authentic convert who persists in the face of religio-political and cultural pressures is a reminder that the ability to choose is a key element in what makes us human, and even more so the ability to take responsibility for our choices. Societies that suppress the human soul’s thirst for freedom deprive their citizens of their full humanity and the body politic of a healthy community life.

The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, written by Thomas Jefferson in 1779, stated that “all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion...” What about propagating the things that are professed? The correspondence between Jefferson and John Adams makes it quite clear that those great founders of the republic were not fond of missionary outreach. For instance, they held that before Bible societies distribute the Christian scriptures abroad, it might be better to devote those resources to the cleansing of corrupt influences in the churches at home.

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations defines freedom of religion as follows: “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 teachings, practice, worship, and observance.” None of the member states voted against this declaration; but the Soviet bloc states, South Africa and Saudi Arabia abstained.

More recently, we are hearing noises from Arab states, India and elsewhere that the UN Declaration was essentially a secularized version of the Judeo-Christian tradition that fails to take into account the cultural and religious context of Islamic countries. The Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam, later adopted by the Organization of Islamic Conferences, states that people have “freedom and right to a dignified life in accordance with the Islamic Shari’ah.” Anyone familiar with what it was like to live as a not-so-dignified Dhimmi (second class citizen) in the Muslim world will find little comfort in that revision of the UN Declaration.

In his book, *God for a Secular Society* (1999), Jürgen Moltmann tells the story of the Archbishop of Canterbury who, before debarking from a flight to Riad, had to change because the display of a cross on his clerical garb was not allowed. Orwellian Saudi-speak refers to services at the US Embassy as “welfare meetings” and Catholic confession as a “conference.” At the same time, we witness an increasingly assertive and aggressively Islamic missionary drive across the world, much of it financed with Saudi money. Irony is piling upon irony as consequences have often led to tragedy.

Corruptio optimi est pessima. This Latin dictum that the corruption of the best is the worst applies particularly to religion. The writer of the New Testament Book of James refers to “religion that is pure and undefiled,” describing it as a religion that keeps people “unstained by the world” and demonstrates caring love for those in distress (James 1:27).

But no religion is safeguarded from the corruption of the human heart. Hypocrisy is real, and so are the seductions of the world that have stained many a “spiritual” endeavor. Holy wars and crusades have spread unspeakable cruelty and suffering among humanity. Not all converts have acted in good faith, nor have all Christian missionaries acted in the spirit of the gospel of Christ. Some have exploited religion out of expediency, seeking social status and/or material gain. The great missionary expansion in the nineteenth century was often conducted in alliance with colonial and imperial powers that exploited the resources of whole continents. Few would claim that Jewish evangelism has always been free of questionable practices, and some converts have turned against their own people with a vengeance. An example of the latter that comes to mind is the infamous Reuchlin/Pfefferkorn controversy.

Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522) was a great humanist scholar of Greek and Hebrew texts. Johann Pfefferkorn was a Jewish convert who advocated the destruction of all Hebrew books. Emperor Maximilian turned to Reuchlin for advice. The latter, who loved the Hebrew language more than the Hebrews whom he felt should have converted

long ago, courageously fought powerful ecclesiastical forces aligned with Pfefferkorn in this “war against the Talmud.” Reason prevailed in the end, and for that both Jews and Christians owe an eternal debt of gratitude to a great humanist. He saved the day for the freedom to read and research Jewish texts!

The problems and ambiguities we encounter when facing conversions are very similar to the ones we confront when dealing with change in general. The fear of change (resistance) and the fascination with change (faddism) often do battle within the human soul as well as society at large. Some seek change out of a deep inner need or spiritual hunger; others grasp at every novelty out of boredom. Converts, either because of the very nature of their decision or because of their subsequent behavior, can be disruptive—even destructive among family, friends, or the broader community. “The rebel,” wrote Albert Camus in the book by that title, “defies more than he denies.” It is usually the revolutionary who, in pursuit of a utopian scheme, is ready to destroy the old order. I recall the Brazilian theologian Rubem Alves during luncheon meetings in the 1970s arguing that “neurotic revolutionaries affirm only their resentment, and not life.”

Faith that cannot live with ambiguity will eventually turn fundamentalism into fanaticism. There are no easy answers. It would help, however, if all religions were to recognize the healing power of a little holy humor. A laugh has a way of relaxing the passions, even of opening minds and hearts to truths that may be worth dying for, but are not worth hating for--let alone killing for.