

Religious Conversion in India

A message from Swami Dayananda Saraswati

Religious conversion is a widely discussed topic in the Indian media these days. I think this issue is to be understood thoroughly by all the people that count in every religion.

The various religions in the world can be categorically said to be either aggressive or non-aggressive. Each religion has a certain promise in the form of an ultimate goal. If its faithful people live the prescribed life to reach the promised goal, they are non-aggressive. Neither they nor their clergy are out to bring the people of other religions to their flock. Therefore, Zoroastrians follow their religious tradition without attempting to convert anybody to their religion. In fact, one is born to be a Zoroastrian. This is true even with the followers of the Jewish tradition, Vedic religion (now known as Hinduism), Shintoism, Taoism and many other religions of various tribes in the world. I call these religious traditions non-aggressive because they do not believe in conversion.

There are religions like Christianity, whose theologies, containing a number of basic non-verifiable beliefs, not only sanction but advocate conversion. Evangelism and proselytization are sacred commitments of the entire cadre of the highly organized clergy. The clergy-inspired laity are not any less committed to conversion.

They are zealous in their mission of preaching and conversion. In their zeal, the end more often than not justifies the means. From the days of the Inquisition, every attempt recorded in history to stop their program of conversion only stoked their flame of zeal.

Many religions with their unique cultures have disappeared, leaving behind only mammoth relics, like the ones in Greece, against the onslaught of religious aggression. The loss of such live cultures of the world is the mark of success for the zealous. The truth is that where there should be a sense of guilt and remorse, there is a sense of achievement and pride. Many leaders of non-aggressive traditions think that the method of missionary work is designed to neutralize any protest, that charity has proved a more efficient means for religious conversion than violence, any form of charity being a welcome thing in any society. One cannot totally dismiss their thinking.

Religious conversion is an act of violence. It is an act of violence because it hurts deeply, not only the other members of the family of the converted, but the entire community that comes to know of it. The religious person in every individual is the innermost, inasmuch as he or she is connected to a force beyond the empirical. One is con-

nected to various persons in one's world. The religious person is not connected to any such person, but only to a force beyond. That is the reason why the hurt of a religious person can turn into violence. That is why a religious belief can motivate a missionary to be a martyr. When the hurt of the religious becomes acute, it explodes into violence. Conversion is violence. It generates violence.

Aggressive religions and non-aggressive religions are not on the same plank. Conversion is, therefore, a rank one-sided aggression. The genius of the non-aggressive traditions cannot change, and therefore, they cannot be asked to do the same thing as the aggressive religions do. No Zoroastrian is going to convert another, much less a devout Jew.

Humanity cannot afford to lose any more of its live religious traditions and cultures. We want to enjoy the religious cultures of both Christianity and Islam as we also want to enjoy the cultures of Jews, Parsis, Hindus and others. Humanity will not let a pyramid be razed to the ground by the Egyptian Government to create a housing complex. Even though they are in Egypt, the pyramids are too ancient to be the property of that country. They are standing monuments of human genius—they belong to the whole of humanity. So too, all the monuments of the past lying all over the world. Religion and culture are not often separable. This is especially true with the Hindu religious tradition. The greeting word, *namaste*, is an expression of culture as well as religion. Even though a religious mark on the forehead is purely religious, it is looked upon as a part of Hindu culture. *Rangoli* at the entrance of a Hindu house is not just cultural; it is also religious. Indian music and dance cannot separate themselves from the Hindu religious tradition. There is no classical dance, Bharata Natyam, without Nataraja being there. The classical, lyrical compositions of Meera, Tyagaraja, Purandara, Dikshitar and many others are intimately connected to the Hindu religious traditions. Therefore, conversion implies destruction of this entire culture. A committed Christian will not wear a *tilakam*, much less have *rangoli* in front of the house. By looking at the entrance to a Tamil Nadu house, we can understand that it doesn't belong to a Hindu. Even a converted Christian woman ceases to wear Indian traditional clothes, like saris, etc. No Christian woman will wear a nose ring. It is amazing how easily cultures disappear by the program of conversion through various means, leaving only monuments to be preserved for posterity. The living religious traditions, intimately woven into the fabric of their respective cultures, have to be allowed to live and thrive. Religious conversion should stop—the aggressive religions should realize that they are perpetrating violence when they convert. We want them to live and let others live.

- Compiled by Swamini Agamananda. This is the second of 9 articles based on Pujya Swamiji's talks on the said subject matter.

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