

It's Conquest, Not Just Conversion

Swami Dayananda Saraswati

Note from Editor :

Pujya Swamiji had a keen insight in to any important subject matter, be it Veda, Vedanta or even social and religious topics. He has an unique way of getting in to the core issue involved and suggest solutions in a dharmic way.

His declaration 'conversion is violence' can never be disputed by anyone. His various talks on a range of topics were either published in newspapers or circulated among intellectuals over a period. Among them some of the topics are listed below, which we intend re-publishing in our News Letter in the forth-coming editions:

- 1. Conquest, not Conversion 2000*
- 2. Conversion 1999*
- 3. Conversion is Violence.*
- 4. In the name of religious freedom.2007*
- 5. Legitimacy of religious minorities.2005*
- 6. Spectre of religious freedom2006*
- 7. Understanding of Secularism 2014*
- 8. UniformCivilCode2003*
- 9. Welcome the Ordinance2002.*

These articles were compiled by Swamini Agamanandaji. Although some of these topics covered, are two decades old, they are still relevant in its basis of the issues.

It's Conquest, Not Just Conversion

As a State guest of India in December 1999, Pope John Paul II declared in Delhi his mission to "plant the cross in Asia" in the current millennium. The announcement of this mission signaled alarm to non-Christians, Christians, and even to a few Catholics. The expression "plant the cross" is an obvious metaphor for conquest, consistent with the history of the Catholic Church and its stated ideology. Paradoxically, this concept of conquest is far removed from the deeply personal realm of religion, much less spirituality. But concealed in the choice of words "plant the cross" is an even more disturbing dimension to this message, one that is well-understood by, and no doubt directed to, Roman Catholic theologians. The Roman Catholic tra-

dition holds that Christ, like common criminals, was crucified on a garbage dump outside of the gates of the city of Jerusalem so that his sinful blood, when spilled, would not pollute the Holy City. However, being who he was, the tradition holds, the spilling of Christ's blood on this site had the effect of purifying it and making it a holy site. Planting the cross, therefore, means both claiming for God what is estranged from God, and purifying that which is impure. The sentiments covertly reflected in this phrase "planting the cross" used by Pope John Paul II in December 1999 were made clear in the recent declaration "*Dominus Iesus*" issued by the Vatican August 6, 2000 and brought to public attention in a press conference on September 5.

In this controversial and disquieting document, the Pope opened with a clear directive to Catholic theologians to obey the scriptural mandate to "baptize all nations." That the Church's mission is one of conquest rather than personal religious conversion is made clear in this incongruous expression "baptize all nations." This is corroborated throughout the document which impresses upon its faithful the necessity to convert *all people* to Christianity. They are reminded that they have a mandate "to proclaim and establish among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God," noting that God "cannot be detached either from Christ or the Church." Attempting to pacify reactions to the Pope's statements in Delhi, Archbishop Alan de Lastic of New Delhi downplayed the Pope's remarks by saying that he was merely referring to a "conversion of heart." In this recent declaration, however, the Vatican is clearly concerned with correcting just such interpretations of the mission of the Church. Nothing new is stated in the declaration in terms of the Church's doctrinal position. But in order to execute its mission of complete global conversion to Catholicism, the Church has historically allowed its real agenda to be concealed. Now, however, the sense of urgency to complete the mission of converting all people has caused the Church to abandon all pretense about its mission.

Lamenting that at the close of the second millennium "this mission is still far from complete," the document declares that "God wills the salvation of everyone through the knowledge of the truth." Since this 'truth', which is a non-verifiable belief, is entrusted only to the Church, however, and "because she believes in God's universal plan of salvation, the Church must be missionary." The universal scale and funda-

mentalist stance of this position, taken by all proselytizing religions, have far reaching consequences. The non-negotiable goal of the Catholic Church is conversion of each and every person in the world, not just to Christianity, but to Catholicism. There are no exceptions. Every person, including non-Catholic Christians, who values his or her beliefs, culture and intellectual integrity has been put on notice that all of these are, have been, and will continue to be under systematic assault by the Roman Catholic Church.

The document repeatedly makes clear the Vatican's position that salvation is only possible through Christ, mediated through the Roman Catholic Church. Non-Christian religions are unequivocally declared inadequate. At best, they may have some prayers and rituals that are preparatory to the Christian Gospels. These are not, however, considered to be of "divine origin" nor to have "salvific efficacy." But even more condemning than this is the contention that some rituals in these non-Christian religions "constitute an obstacle to salvation." This open disparagement of non-Christian religions, without making any attempt to understand them, is in stark contradiction to the Church's profession of tolerance, compassion and the "sincere respect which the Church has for the religions of the world." There is no tolerance here, much less respect. On the contrary, there is an attempt to justify what amounts to destruction of all non-Christian religions.

Consistent with this view, the document specifically targets religious pluralism, viewing the thinking behind it as a danger to "the Church's constant missionary proclamation." The document itself is, in fact, meant to be a "remedy" for this thinking and expressly states its aim to "rule out in a radical way" the thinking that "one religion is as good as another." With this type of agenda, where is the place of inter-religious dialogue, so assiduously pursued by the Church? This is made clear. Inter-religious dialogue, the declaration states, "is part of the Church's evangelizing mission." The palpable contradiction between dialogue and the stated evangelizing mission of the Church is evident. Dialogue is an exchange of ideas among equals, ideally towards a mutually enlarged understanding. There is no mutual exchange intended here, rather, a commitment on the part of one group to coerce another into a predetermined outcome. Dialogue is a misnomer for coercion. It is not surprising, therefore, and to their credit, that two Rabbis refused to participate in an October 3

symposium on dialogue as a protest against this document, forcing the Vatican to cancel the symposium. The remarks of a secretary of the Vatican's office might more appropriately apply to anyone who enters into dialogue with the Church. "It is difficult to have a dialogue when one side is missing."

In the light of its stated views on non-Christian religions, there is no equality in such inter-religious dialogues either. The declaration offers a convoluted response to this by saying, "*Equality*, which is a presupposition of inter-religious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in the dialogue, not to doctrinal content, nor even less to the position of Jesus Christ." One wonders what would possibly be the concept of personal dignity referred to here. What personal dignity is accorded a human being, a rational being, when one is invited into a dialogue with the covert intent of hijacking one's reason? What personal dignity is accorded a person when his or her religion, the sacred core of his or her being, is denigrated and targeted for destruction?

As for the sacred writings of religious traditions, the document claims that the designation "*inspired texts*" applies only to the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. The sacred books of other traditions are not regarded as revealed works of divine origin, and if they have any merit in them at all, they "receive from the mystery of Christ the elements of goodness and grace which they contain." In the world view of the Church, this statement, in effect, endangers the survival of every one of the world's sacred works, except the Bible. Works that do not reiterate Biblical teachings are heretical and those that do, derive their merit from "the mystery of Christ" and are, therefore, redundant. In the burning of the library at Alexandria, history has shown us the disastrous consequences of precisely this thinking.

At the recent United Nations Summit of World Religious Leaders, a Roman Catholic Cardinal defended the Church's right to convert by citing Article 18 of the United Nations Bill of Rights which grants everyone the "freedom to change his religion or belief either alone or in community with others." In light of the Pope's intention to "plant the cross" globally, and the doctrine and intentions set forth in the "*Dominus Iesus*" the Church has declared a position that threatens to place it in violation of several human rights assured by this Bill. One of the basic principles stated in the preamble of the Bill of Rights is the freedom of belief. The same Article 18,

cited by the Cardinal. grants every human being the “right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.” A systematic, often coercive and even covert effort to impose one’s religion on another is a clear violation of this basic human right. Article 5 of the Bill of Rights states that no one shall be subjected to degrading treatment. The denigration of one’s religion, the humiliation that accompanies the conversion experience, and declaring another’s religion as an “obstacle to salvation” are all violations of the dignity ensured to every human being. Article 19 grants every person the freedom to hold opinions, and matters of belief, no matter how fervently held, are matters of opinion. Article 22 ensures that everyone is entitled to the cultural rights indispensable for his dignity. Every convert from a non-Christian tradition suffers an irreparable alienation from his culture and, tragically, from his own family. The family, in turn, is alienated from the community. With the conversion experience come shame, isolation, deep personal conflict and ultimately, the seeds for discord. History testifies to the devastating loss of rich and diverse cultures, gone forever in the aftermath of religious conversion. Article 26 (2) requires that education “shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups.” The Church knows better how much religious “understanding, tolerance and friendship” it promotes in its schools. Human rights violations plague every member of the United Nations, but the Vatican, not just as a member state but as a religious body has a special responsibility to honor the very basic human rights of every human being, rights which, as a member of the United Nations, it has pledged to protect.

The Vatican’s document is an eye-opener for all those who believe in religious pluralism. They have to safeguard their noble belief, as even Mahatma Gandhi did all through his life.

Om Tat Sat

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