

Conversion destroys religious harmony

By SWAMI DAYANANDA SARASWATHI

“THERE are Christian theologians who feel the conversion of others is not any more the business of the Church.” This is indeed an encouraging statement from Dr Hans Ucko, head of the Committee on Inter-religious Dialogue and Cooperation of the World Council of Churches, a powerful body that has over 350 member churches. This statement has the potential to promote harmony among religions, particularly between Christianity on the one hand and its two main targets: Hinduism and Buddhism, on the other. Dr Ucko, as I know him, is an upright, outspoken gentleman. Personally he has “never been interested in converting people”. But, on the ground, the situation presents a total contrast. Christian missionaries, almost without exception, work with unabated zeal to convert. The conciliatory words of Dr Ucko seem to conflict with what he says next. While underplaying the conversion agenda, Dr Ucko also makes this seemingly innocuous, but profoundly theological, statement: “I believe it is more important for us to bear witness to Christ by our action of caring for people without any ulterior motive and by our exemplary living.” Here is the clue to the potential for disharmony.

Christians, regardless of their denomination, are mandated by their theology to ‘bear witness to Christ’ which, in simple terms, means sharing the faith with a stranger. Why share the faith with a stranger? The vast majority of Christian believers are firmly convinced that unless a person ‘accepts Christ as his saviour’, he is, at the very

least, denied entry to Heaven. More extreme, but not less common, believers are convinced that he will definitely go to Hell - and forever. So, given the theological compulsion to share the faith with a stranger, a serious Christian has no option except to exert and ‘save’ the person, inevitably a non-Christian, from such a fate. That is to say convert him to Christianity. See the effect. Obviously the theological belief that no faith other than Christianity can guarantee salvation, or that other faiths can only lead to Hell, cannot amount to honouring non-Christian religions. Can a Christian, who believes this, view a non-Christian religion as anything but inferior or, as is often the case, dangerous? So in the innocuous mandate to ‘bear witness’ to Christ inheres the denigration of the religion of the ‘other’, if not explicitly, certainly implicitly. Herein lies concealed the propensity and the potential for disharmony, for, when one’s religion is denigrated a great violence is done to what one holds most dear.

Older traditions, in contrast, do not believe in conversion. A Jewish person is born of a Jewish mother. A Zoroastrian is born of Zoroastrian parents. A Hindu is born of Hindu parents. And so are the followers of Shintoism, Taoism and many other ancient religious groups all over the world. They acquire their religions by birth. They do not convert anybody to their faith. Hindus stand as an example of how this approach protects ‘other faiths’, not denigrate them. When the persecuted Zoroastrians, the Parsis, came here as refugees driven from Persia, they were received here as “Athithis” and were

helped to settle in India. Identical was the case with the Jews. This is what a booklet “Indian Jews in Israel” [edited and published by Reuven Dafai, Consul, on behalf of the Consulate of Israel, 50 Pedder Road, Cumballa Hill, Bombay 26] says: “While most of the others came to Israel driven by persecution, discrimination, murder and other attempts at total genocide, the

to convert, their followers practise conversion with conviction. Undoubtedly, they have a right to believe that unless one is a Christian, one will not go to Heaven. But to claim the right to go further and exert influence to turn all non-Christians into Christians to make them eligible to enter Heaven cannot but promote conflict. Dr Ucko identifies the “key issue that haunts

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Jews of India came because of their desire to participate in the building of the Third Jewish Common Wealth. ... Throughout their long sojourn in India, nowhere and at no time were they subjected to intolerance, discrimination and persecution”. The Parsis and the Jews, protected thus, saved their religion and lived by it. The Hindus protected the early Christians and Muslims too. Our vision of God compels us to do that. We accept various forms of worship, prayers and Gods; one more really does not matter to us.

In contrast, in the other category of religions, mandated by their theology

people opposed to conversion” as what he calls “aid-evangelism,” - a euphemism for conversion by “allurement” or “fraudulent means.”

The key issue is not this, but the very assumption underlying the impulse to convert. Today we stand at a precarious juncture in world history, where a wide range of factors including monoculture, nuclear warfare, and ecological disasters threaten our survival as a human race. As never before, we stand in need of the rich knowledge base of various indigenous traditions. We stand in need of diversity, ecological diversity, bio-diversity, and religious-

diversity. We stand in need of understanding how to live peacefully with one another, without destroying one another, and our environment. While our need is diversity, conversion endangers all diversities, not just religious. Conversion comes at the cost of extermination of native people’s cultural diversity and way of living. Without preserving as they are, the existing religious traditions and the people that practised them, we cannot access these knowledge-bases that contain the lessons of harmonious co-existence.

I would unhesitatingly call the Jewish, the Zoroastrian and the Hindu traditions as non-aggressive traditions for just this reason: they do not convert. Conversion uproots individuals, devastates families, creates discord in communities and destroys ancient cultures. This is what we have been arguing for several years. We need all cultures, and therefore all religions. With the destruction of religion comes the destruction of culture. Our religion and culture are intertwined. The religion has gone into the fabric of the culture. When I say ‘Namaste’ to you, it is culture. It is religion. When you are doing rangoli, it is religion; it is culture. There is a vision behind all that. Every form of culture is connected to religion and religion itself is rooted in spiritual wisdom. As spiritual tradition informs all aspects of life, there is no cultural form or expression unconnected to religion. Destruction of culture is destruction of religion. Destruction of religion is destruction of culture. If this destruction is not violence, what else is violence? Aggression need not be

physical. It need not be the Kargil type. There are a varieties of aggression. You can either be emotionally, economically or verbally aggressive. But, the worst aggression, more than physical aggression, is cultural aggression or religious aggression. That is why we say ‘Conversion is Violence’. It is the deepest and most profound violence.

To overcome this violence we need to think of conflict avoidance and conflict resolution. Conflict avoidance implies the abstention from propaganda for conversion as that is the major cause of violence. Conflict resolution demands that the conflict-prone faiths and civilisations understand the need to internalise the acceptance of others’ view of God. Here is where the world, as two of the greatest historians Will Durant and Arnold Toynbee had said, has to look to the Hindu civilisation for relief from conflicts. Durant told the West that “in return for conquest, arrogance and spoliation, India will teach us tolerance and gentleness of the mature mind, the quiet content of the un-acquisitive soul, the calm of the understanding spirit and unifying, pacifying love for all living things”. Toynbee prophesied that “a chapter which had a Western beginning will have to have an Indian ending if it is not to end in self-destruction of the human race. At this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only way of salvation is the ancient Hindu way. Here, we have the attitude and spirit that can make it possible for the human race to grow together into a single family”. The two historians have exposed the source of disharmony and pointed to where to look for solution.