

# Religious Conversions –

## Frequently asked questions

### 1. What is the essence of Hinduism? What does tolerance mean?

The essence of Hinduism is its pluralism, in which tolerance is a by-product. This pluralism is expressed in a shloka made famous by Swami Vivekanand during his tour of the West at the time of the World Parliament of Religions in 1893. The shloka goes as follows: ekam sad viprah bahudda vadanti. It is translated by him in English as follows: “That which exists is One, sages call It by various names”. In short, it means that each person has a unique way towards salvation, which is best suited for him/her. To be able to do this, each person has to generate his own spiritual experience. One may take advice from gurus, friends, books, etc. But, one has to apply one’s own mind and come to a conclusion of the suitability of a path for one’s ownself, and one takes responsibility for the decision. Tolerance means that while one has chosen a path for oneself, one accepts that another may choose a different path and that eventually, both will meet at the same place in salvation. This tolerance is the reason why there has been infinitesimally small religious strife in India throughout the ages.

### 2. What is the essence of Christianity?

Christianity believes that Jesus Christ is the ONLY son of God. He is supposed to have been sent to earth to wash away the sins of the people, and so redeem them. Of course, this happens only to those who accept him as the ONLY son of God. All the others do not get the benefit, and so will be consigned to that place where one is eternally barbecued.

Christianity says that it has a unique path to salvation, and all the other paths are false. While there is supposed to be some modification in these views, the acceptance is that all the other paths may at most be second best. Therefore, it is better if people accept Christianity and not take a chance. Christians believe that they have been commanded by Christ to go and convert the people of this world. This is also supposed to give them special merit when it comes to the day of final judgment.



Christianity is a hierarchical religion, and the commands of the clergy are supposed to be final. It is also this clergy that is supposed to be a link between man and God through Christ. So, if a person has sinned, and wants God to forgive him/her, he/she has to go to a priest, to ask him to speak to god on his/her behalf.

While there are many Christians who today do not believe in this exclusivity, the statements of the clergy leave no doubt that the clergy believes in exclusivity and the concept of saving souls.

### 3. If people convert due to spiritual reasons, should there be any objection?

When there are true spiritual conversions, there is no objection. This happens when the person does it on his own inquiry, and not motivated by another to make a study. For example, a person who has some emotional problems may make a change if approached by a missionary. This cannot be called a spiritual conversion.

True spiritual conversion implies that a person not only understands the new religion well but also that he is well-acquainted with his present one. In this way, he will be able to understand why the religion of his forefathers does not give him the spiritual satisfaction that he will find in his new religion. At the same time, since a man or a woman is always seeking to go on a higher spiritual plane, such a change becomes an enlightened one.

Such an inquiry can be done by one who is materially contented, and one who has the necessary education to make the inquiry. It was in this context that Mahatma Gandhi said to the missionaries that before converting the poor, they should first convert him. They did not pick up the challenge because they knew that the Mahatma had done sufficient study of Christianity and had found that his own dharma was adequate for his purpose.

### 4. Hinduism is a pluralistic philosophical concept. Why should there be an objection to conversions?

In a pluralistic society - one that believes in multiple paths of salvation - accommodating another religion is not a problem. In this respect, Hinduism has a unique record. It was only in

a Hindu land that Jews were never persecuted due to religious reasons. Similarly, the holiest place for the Parsis is in a Hindu land. The earliest Christian arrivals in India in the 4th century were what are called Syrian Christians. All of them came because of religious persecution in their land of origin.

Followers of all three religions prospered not only in terms of their religion but also in social and economic terms. This happened because they accepted the civilisational norms of the Hindu society, and worked within its parameters. They did not try to convert or propagate that their system was better than the ones of their host. The tensions started when first Islam and then Christianity came here with the power of the sword, and tried to subjugate the Hindus of the land.

A pluralistic society works in harmony only when all the members accept the norms of pluralism. However, when one tries to dominate another, then the problem starts. Conversion is a method of trying to dominate.

## 5. If Hinduism believes in “Sarva Dharma Samabhava”, why is there an objection to conversion?

The concept of “Sarva Dharma Samabhava” is one of the many gifts that Hinduism has given to mankind. It means that Hinduism accepts that all religions are equal and that there are multiple paths to salvation. Thus, new systems always keep evolving, and this has added to the dynamism in Hinduism. Thus, perhaps at a logical level, there should not be objection to conversions.

There is, in fact, no objection if the conversions take place due to spiritual reasons. However, other forms of conversions will have to be resisted.

At the same time, Hindus would like to ask followers of the monotheistic religions, like Christianity and Islam, whether they believe in the concept of “Sarva Dharma Samabhava”. And, if they do, why do they go about converting? After all, the process of conversion is to save souls – that is going to heaven instead of hell. And if the follower of another religion also goes to heaven, his soul is also saved, making conversion redundant.

According to our reading of what the clergy of these two religions say about themselves, they

do not accept the concept of “Sarva Dharma Samabhava”, and so there is an objection to their conversion activity.

## 6. Is there a legal right to convert?

This is a subject that is coming up for discussion quite a lot. There is a Constitutional provision that gives a right to propagate one’s religion. The proponents of the conversion programme say that this also implies that there is a right to ask people to convert. However, all rights are subject to maintenance of public order, and if there is a threat to it, then the right has to be restricted. This is the way all civil societies function.

The issue of conversions due to force, fraud, and inducements were debated at the time of framing the Constitution immediately after the independence in 1947. A specific provision was not put in since it was said that such conversions are immoral – a fact accepted by the Christian members of the Constituent Assembly. In the aftermath of the Niyogi Committee, Madhya Pradesh, followed by Orissa and Arunachal Pradesh, had to enact a law specifically prohibiting such activities. In all the cases, the governments belonged to the Congress party. In 1977, when these acts were challenged, the Supreme Court ruled that the states had acted legally and within the spirit of the Constitution. Thus, a fundamental right to convert has been denied by the Supreme Court.

While a person cannot be denied a right to convert himself on his own free will, and after his own study of the religion he wishes to adopt and the one that he wishes to leave, the right to ask someone else to change should be questioned. At the same time, conversions due to force, inducements, and fraud have to be determined as illegal. While today the use of force (in physical terms) is limited, given that the proselytising religions do not have the state power to back them while being in a minority, conversions due to inducements and fraud are quite rampant. Mass conversions, the so-called faith healing programs, conversions in the guise of offering social service, etc., will fall in the illegal category.

When discussing the legal provisions on conversions, it has to be understood that it causes tremendous social tensions. Thus, conversions have to be looked at from a social angle and not merely a legal one.

## 7. What are the objections to conversions?

Conversions create social tensions. The targeted community feels that it will lose out on its culture and civilisational values. Mahatma Gandhi said, “In India, one finds that conversions bring about deep disdain for one’s old religion and its followers, i.e., one’s old friends and one’s relatives. The next change that takes place is that of dress and manners and behaviours. All that does great harm to the country.” Similarly, Babasaheb Ambedkar said that by joining Islam or Christianity, the Depressed Classes would ‘not only go out of the Hindu religion but also go out of the Hindu culture....Conversion to Islam or Christianity will denationalise the Depressed Classes.’

Swami Vivekanand has expressed himself in even stronger terms. He said that a convert from Hinduism is not only one Hindu less, but an enemy more.

A non-Islamic student of Islamic theology wrote: “Islam’s aversion to the past should be viewed from the perspective of conversion. Islam aims at destroying the past completely lest it should hark the converts back to the pre-Islam days. There is always a fear of the past which threatens to jeopardise the very existence of Islam. The “fear of recantation” is more often than not dealt with violent measures. Since conversion is not without its past, Islam tries tooth and nail to expunge all the traces and remnants of the past.” This would apply equally to Christianity.

All societies try and protect the collective consciousness of the past. The destruction of a culture is not only in terms of physical structures like places of worship but also the destruction of amassed wisdom. The great library of Alexandria in pre-Christian and pre-Islam Egypt was destroyed by the followers of these two systems. In South America, we see only mute monuments of what were obviously great civilisations.

The Hindu civilisation is today the oldest surviving civilisation. This has been achieved at a great cost in terms of resisting those who came to destroy. It is easy to destroy, but difficult to preserve.

## 8. How do Christians react when members of their religions

## convert to another?

Members of all religious sects detest conversions. They feel that it is an attack on their beliefs and their way of life. Christians are no different. The Pope (a Catholic) has frequently complained about the activities of the Protestant missionaries in South America. During one of his visits, he called them 'rapacious wolves'. The ex-Catholic still believes that Christ is the ONLY son of God, but is practising his belief in another church and under another priest. According to the Christian theology, such a person will go to heaven. But the Pope thinks that it must be he alone who should save the person's soul.

The Pope is also unhappy when Catholics leave Christianity and become either Hindu or Buddhist. He asks his flock that they 'should know (their) spiritual heritage well and consider whether it is right to set it aside lightly.' Yet, the Pope has no compunction of asking the Hindus to set aside their even longer spiritual heritage aside and become Christians.

To counteract the growing popularity of the ISKCON movement among the Christian youth, one organisation said that it would be legitimate for the Christian parents to defy the law on kidnapping, false imprisonment, assault and battery, to prevent their children from joining ISKCON.

The Christians in India are also concerned when the ones whom they have converted go back to their original faith. In Northeast India, they say that if the plans of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) for reconversion go ahead they will resist it and even said that there will be a physical and religious war. The present Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Tony Blair, is a member of the Church of England, while his wife is a Catholic. Once he went to a mass in a Catholic church alone. There were a hue and cry from the Church of England clergy, who feared that he might be converting to Catholicism. One of the clergy wrote an article saying that Rome is not for Blair, and implied that the views of the Vatican may influence the decision taken by Blair as the Prime Minister.

Islamic countries prohibit Christian missionaries from operating in their countries, even to provide pure social service. In Russia, the only Christian sect that is permitted to operate is the Russian Orthodox variety. In Israel, a law prohibiting conversions was dropped when 50 Christian groups agreed not to carry missionary activity in the country. They also agreed to avoid 'activities which alienate (the Jews) from their tradition and community.'

## 9. Should not one distinguish between the various Christian sects?

The attempt to make a distinction is a new tactic used to deflect the charge of conversions made against the Christians. It is said that the conversions by improper methods are being done by what is called fringe churches and that the so-called mainline churches are epitomes of virtue. The 'mainline churches' have the same ethos as 'fringe churches', that is Jesus Christ is the ONLY son of God, and that salvation is not possible to those who do not accept this exclusivity. The 'mainline churches' have not given up their objective of conversions, except that they pretend to do in a subtle way.

Even while complaining of the activity of the 'fringe churches', the 'mainline churches' do not publicly distance themselves away. The 'mainline churches' do not specifically identify who the 'fringe churches' are. In fact, if the 'fringe churches' are attacked even when provoked, the 'mainline churches' will stand by them, and not criticise the provocation. For example, the church distributing the Bible in Rajkot is said to be of the fringe variety. But this incident is on the 'mainline' churches' list of the 'attacks on Christianity'.

Unless the 'mainline' churches give clear signals to the contrary, it is not possible to distinguish between them and the 'fringe' churches.

## 10. It is said that after the meeting of Vatican Council II in the late 1960s, there is a change in the exclusivist thinking of the Catholic church.

Hindus believe in pluralism, and will welcome any relaxation of the changes in the theological thinking of the exclusivist faiths. Many Hindus have tried to build bridges with the Christian theologians to get them to change their rigid thoughts. Due to changes in the intellectual environment, even the Christian churches have felt the need to change. What has to be seen is whether the change is genuine and enduring.

The change in the Catholic thinking is supposed to contain in the following sentences in the document of Vatican II: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrine

which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless, often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.”

These are the only sentences that are said to reflect the changes in the thinking. However, ‘rejects nothing’ is qualitatively different from ‘accepts everything’. The latter is part of the Hindu ethos, which accepts that salvation can be achieved even by an atheist. The grudging manner in which even these sentences try and project the change is clear when the Catholic church says that the other religions ‘often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.’ When one says ‘a ray of truth’, one is not accepting that there is a complete process. At best, the Catholic church seems to accept that other religions are second best.

This conclusion is confirmed when one reads the sentences immediately following the ones quoted above. It goes as follows: “Yet she proclaims and is duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (2Cor 5:18-19), men find the fullness of their religious life.” Thus, while other religions ‘reflect a ray of truth’, it is only in Christianity that ‘men find the fullness of their religious life.’ In Vatican II, at many other places, the ethos that Christ is the ONLY son of God is reaffirmed. Statements of the Catholic clergy subsequent to Vatican II, and even in the last few years, attest that the change is really not there. Christ is held to be supreme and unique.

This Catholic view of the uniqueness of Christianity is confirmed by other churches as well. In June 1994, Prince Charles of the UK expressed a desire to change his oath if he ever became the monarch. He wants to be the defender of all faiths, instead of only the Anglican variety of Christianity. In response, one senior member of the clergy said, “If (the Prince is) saying Christianity is equal with other religions, we should differ profoundly with him. As men we’re all equal before God, but are you talking about religions and saying one is as good as another? I hope he is not saying that.”

There have been cases where there is a disobeying by members of the church of the exclusivist ethos, leading to ex-communication – that is, throwing the person out of the church. This has happened to a Sri Lankan priest, who took the so-called liberal interpretation of the Vatican document produced in 1969 literally. His ex-communication was revoked only after he apologised. Also, there is the case of an Italian priest, Dom Mario Mazzoleni, who said that following the teachings of Satya Sai Baba gave him a better meaning to his belief in

Christ. He was excommunicated, and since he did not apologise, the ex-communication has remained in place. The books of the Indian priest, the late Fr Anthony de Mello, have been determined to fall outside the purview of the official teachings of the Catholic church.

## 11. So many of the intellectuals have gone through missionary schools, and there does not seem to be an attempt to convert them.

It is not correct to say that no attempts were made at conversions. It has always been the practice of the Christian missionaries all over the world to try and convert the elite in society first. This too was attempted in India - but it failed.

The intellectuals go to missionary schools located in urban areas, where an overt attempt to convert will create controversy. So, the missionaries have to show a 'sophisticated' face in the cities. The reason why the Christian attempt failed is the resilience of Hinduism. In the early 1800, some missionaries thought that Raja Ram Mohan Roy was 'ripe' for conversions because he gave the impression that he found nothing wrong with Christ. A priest was allotted the task of bringing him to the Christian fold. Not only did the priest fail in his task, but, under the influence of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the priest became a Hindu.

## 12. Why do Christian missionaries undertake social service?

The objective of the social service is to get access to the people who are targeted for conversion. Once the missionaries come to close the people, and the latter become obligated to them, the 'benefits' of believing in Christ are explained to them. This is done not on the basis that there is any special merit in the new system, but because Christ is supposed to have told them that praying to any other god will make them go to hell.

This social service is of many forms - education, medical facilities, etc. In the past, these services were concentrated in urban or rural areas. During colonial times, these services were financed mostly by the taxes that were levied on the local people. In many cases, land and facilities belonging to Hindu organisations were appropriated and given to the missionary organisations. Also, Hindu organisations were discouraged from starting social service projects.

Hence, the social service was done by utilising the money of the people who are Hindus. Even today, many of the established social service activity is funded by the state. For example, all the colleges, whether run by the missionaries or the Hindus, get state aid. Many of the other projects also receive government support through grants being given to those registered as NGOs. The funds received from outside India are then used for setting up the organisation for conversions.

### 13. If someone does a benefit to me, in terms of undertaking a social service, what is wrong with it being used as a vehicle for conversion?

True social service should be done without expecting anything in return from the recipient. Otherwise, it becomes a debased and at best can have an accidental redeeming value. If the motive is bad, then the social service has no real merit. There are many organisations that are doing noble service without expecting anything in return. And in offering such services, the Hindus are very actively involved.

During his meetings with the Christian missionaries, Mahatma Gandhi had said that they are doing social service with the ulterior motive of conversions. He asked them to give up this offensive program. He also said to them that if this situation continued in a free India he would ask the foreign missionaries to leave the country.

### 14. What is wrong with receiving foreign funds for service activity, since they come as a grant and there is no outflow for repayment?

The flow of foreign funds should not be viewed from only an economic perspective. The objective of sending the funds is of prime importance. If this objective is to work against the interest of the nation, then there has to be objection to the flow of funds. When the service activity has used a guise for conversions, then the funds are coming here for an ulterior purpose.

The flow of funds from these missionaries is quite huge. They have well documented fund-raising programmes, where the main lure for the donor that is offered is the number of

people converted. This is supposed to give special merit to the donor, on the day of final judgment. Given the vast funds, it is obvious that the donors will have control of the organisation that receives these funds. Since the headquarters of the churches are all outside India, this control has been used in the past for activities which are inimical to the interest of our nation. It has also ensured that an independent leadership in the Indian churches has not developed.

The Niyogi Committee went into the issue of how the foreign funds have been used for ulterior purposes. Many of the aggressively proselytising churches figure still receive foreign funds, as reported in an English national weekly. The use of foreign funds for subversive activities has also been documented in the Northeast.

## 15. Why do Hindu organisations not do social service, as a counter measure to what the Christians have done?

It is an anti-Hindu propaganda that Hindus do not undertake social service. If one looks at the post-independence period, one will see that the Hindus have come forward in substantial numbers to undertake social service. This is not only in terms of establishing educational facilities, but also health service, and other noble causes. However, such institutes are not identified as Hindu organisations – as per the practice of secularism in our country. Social service organisations like Rotary and Lions are manned by Hindus in very large numbers.

During the colonial times, Hindus were restricted from undertaking charity which is an integral part of Hindu culture. Simultaneously, the colonial masters gave large assistance to the missionary institutes, both administrative and financial. The latter was from the taxes that were levied on the people of this country. Given that the prosperous section of the society was Hindu, obviously it was the Hindu money that was provided for the missionaries. In addition, land and institutes belonging to the Hindu temples were appropriated and given to the missionaries.

In the post-independence period, these missionary institutes continue to receive state aid for much of their activities. In quite a few cases, because the infrastructure was built and in place, the missionary institutes were not disbanded or replaced. A Hindu sees nothing wrong in this, and rightly so. But, to call such state-funded institutes as a missionary is a misnomer.

To give an example of the work done by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the field of education, the number of schools in the Vidya Bharati fold is 10,945, and 55 colleges. The total number of teachers in these schools is 74,000 and there are 17 lakh students. In addition, there are more than 2000 one-teacher schools being run in the tribal areas.

Other projects of the RSS amount to 17,071, with an involvement of nearly 50,000 volunteers. The number of beneficiaries is more than 50 lakhs, of which 23% are from the rural areas, 42% in tribal and 35% poor urban. The Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, a unit promoted by the RSS to service the tribal population, runs nearly 10,000 projects, out of which half are in education and others in social-cultural areas. There are 1200 full time workers, besides thousands who devote part of their time.

As part of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad itself, there are more than 1390 service projects all over the country. There are other Hindu organisations that are running education institutes, like Ramkrishna Mission, Swami Chinmayanand Mission, etc. In addition, there are Hindu philanthropists that are also doing similar work all over the country.

## 16. Does Christianity use force to convert people today?

When one talks about force, it is commonly assumed to be the use of the sword, that is a weapon. The use of force to convert people in the past was the standard practice wherever in the world Christianity went. India was no exception. This was possible because Christianity went along with the programme of colonising non-Christian lands, and hence had state support. Thus the force was provided by the secular arm of the country, namely the colonial administration.

With this support no longer available, it is rare that force is used. However, one does find cases of use of force now and then. In the Dangs district, the nephew of the one of the former tribal raja was twice beaten for not falling in line with the desire of the Christian missionaries.

## 17. Does Christianity today use inducements and fraud to convert people?

With conversions by force not being possible, the methods that are applied are inducements and fraud. Inducements are the so-called social service activities, and these have been

documented by the Niyogi Committee. In most cases, the social service benefits were provided only to those who agreed to convert. A loan given to a tribal is cancelled if he, along with his family, becomes a Christian. While the commission dealt with Madhya Pradesh only, the practices that have been narrated are the ones that are a common practice all over India, and indeed in the rest of the world.

The fraud that is done is to pretend that a person has become well because of the 'power' of Christ. While treating an illness, a missionary gives medicine of no value and asks the tribal to take it while offering prayers to his present deity. Of course, there is no cure. Next, the missionary gives real medicine and asks the tribal to take it while offering prayers to Christ. The recovery is attributed to Christ and not to the medicine.

Fraud also takes place when there are programmes of what are called faith healing. 'Lame' people are said to be cured, and 'blind' recover their sight. These 'miracles' are used to establish the superiority of Christ.

## 18. Since the Christian population is only 2.6% of the total , how does Christianity become a threat to India?

One has to look not only at the overall percentage of Christian population, but how it is dispersed. The concentration of Christians is in a few pockets like the states of Kerala and Goa, and four of the seven north-eastern states. In Kerala and Goa, the churches have utilised the numbers to interfere in politics all the time. A prime opponent of the alignment of the Konkan Railway was the Catholic church in Goa. This caused delays as well increased the cost of the project.

In the north-east, the involvement of the churches in the secessionist movements has been well documented. During the reign of Jawaharlal Nehru some foreign missionaries had been asked to leave the country because they supported these anti-national movements.

Another area which is targeted is the tribal belts all over the country. These conversions have created a lot of social problem since the converts are asked to deny their past and not participate in the ancient social rites of the area. The Niyogi Committee stated that it was due to the influence of these missionaries that a demand for an independent Jharkhand nation was made.

19. The share of the Christian population in the country has come down by 0.3% over the last ten years. Does this not prove that there is no conversion?

The main reason for the fall is the steep decline in the growth of the Christian population in Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Goa and Maharashtra, which constitute 65% of the Christian population of the country. Due to improved literacy and economic prosperity, the size of the families has come down drastically.

What this fall in the share of the Christian hides is the large increase that has taken place in the Northeast. In Manipur, the share has gone up from 12% in 1951 to 30% in 1991. In Meghalaya, the share has gone up from 23% to 63%. In Nagaland, the share has gone up from 46% to 90%. In Mizoram, the share in 1991 is 90%. (The 1951 figures is not available.)

20. If the issue of conversions is to deal with the attitude of the churches, why is the Christian community being targeted?

It is wrong to say that the Christians are being targeted. The theological issue is being addressed to the churches. Unfortunately, they do not respond. Except for one missionary, no one has been killed in the recent attacks. There have been no wanton attacks on the community. Secular property of Christians has not been damaged. Also, one has to see that there has been a lot of provocation. Unfortunately, most of the Christian laity does not wish to address this issue, and they refuse to forcefully admit that conversions do create social tensions.

21. There has been violence against Christians in Gujarat. What are the reasons for it?

Much of this violence has been due to the provocation by the Christians. It is, of course, not a justification for the violence, which has to be condemned. However, unless one understands the reasons behind it, a sane society will not be able to prevent the future occurrences of the violence. If the violence is wanton, then there is one set of solution. But if there is a provocation, then, unless the provocation is removed, the violence will continue.

We will deal with three cases here. The first is the desecration of the Bible in Rajkot. The provocation was the distribution of a Gujarati (the local language) translation of the book. In addition, a pledge was taken from each student that he/she is a sinner, and that Christ is his/her saviour. This is a clear sign of arrogance on part of the authorities of the school with more than 95% Hindu students. When the parents protested, the school agreed to take the book back. Some parents, in their anger, did tear up the book and burn some copies. It is pertinent to note that the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) has immediately condemned the incident of the desecration. While the school authorities admitted their mistake, other churches have not condemned the distribution of the Bible. Even when the provocation has come out in the open, this incident is still listed as an attack on Christianity in India.

The second is the alleged exhuming of a dead body of a tribal Christian. In Kaparvanj town of Kheda district of the state, next to a temple there is an open plot of land which was used by the Hindus for religious, cultural and social functions. The converted Christians claimed that this has been allotted to them for burial purposes, and the dispute has been going on for a long time. On July 19, 1998, all of a sudden a dead body of a Christian was brought, and an attempt was made to bury it. This was resisted by the Hindus, and there was a tussle. The Christians left, leaving the body behind. When it was returned to them by the Hindus, a cry was raised that it was exhumed and then brought. No burial had taken place at all.

The third is the violence that has happened in South Gujarat in the last week of December 98. It has been the practice of the Christian missionaries for the last five years to hold what are called Christmas mass on December 25. However, this event was also used to lure Hindus to attend the programme and an attempt was made to convert them. For the last three years, the Hindu Jagran Manch has been holding a function for Hindus, to prevent them from going to these public masses. In 1998, the missionaries instigated the Christians to throw stones at the Hindu rally, and even made a physical assault on the participants. This was the provocation for the subsequent violence.

It has to be remembered that in all the violence that took place in Gujarat, there has not been a single death, and very few injuries. In fact, the one time there was private firing, it was indulged by a Christian, when nine Hindus got injured. Even in the late December violence, the estimated damage has been less than Rs 5 lakhs. The whole event has been blown out of proportion.

## 22. Please tell us about the letter given to the Prime Minister by a Sarvodaya leader working in Dangs.

The name of the leader is Ghelubhai Nayak, and a letter was given not only to the Prime Minister during his visit in January 1999, but also to the National Minorities Commission which had visited Gujarat in connection with the alleged attacks on minorities in the state, and the National Human Rights Commission when it visited Dangs district in January 1999. Ghelubhai says that he has no connection with any of the Sangh organisations. He has been working in Dangs since 1948 and so has good knowledge of the area's social issues.

He is 'anguished' to narrate the 'ground realities behind the recent violent incidents in Dangs'. They have been 'deliberately ignored by large sections of the media', which has 'violated the atmosphere further.' There is 'no dearth of evidence' to prove that the violence is a 'reaction to the organised conversion activities of the Christian missionaries'. The means are 'clearly questionable and even illegal', and a 'curious mix of blind faith and allurements' have been used. The Christian population of Dangs has increased from 500 in 1951 to more than 35,000, or over 30% of the population in the district.

Ghelubhai accuses the missionaries of 'poisoning' the minds of the tribals, and 'inculcating a spirit in them which clearly goes against true secularism.' On Christmas day 'some Christian youths pelted stones on the rally of the Hindu Jagran Manch and burnt a jeep of a tribal participant.' The ire 'against the Christians in the area has been rising for past few years and has reached a boil now because of the provocative activities of the Christians, under influence of their preachers.' There have been 15 cases of desecration of idols of Lord Hanuman, 'who is worshipped by the tribals for ages'. Tension has been created by the Christians 'publicly calling Hindu Gods as Shaitans (demons), again under the influence of their preachers.' These preachers also entice the tribals to desist from participating in the traditional festivals of the area.

The social conflicts increased on account of conversions, which tended to divide the families. The nephew of the former Bhil Raja of L for his refusal to marry his son to a Christian. The Christians there have also opposed to the construction of a Hanuman temple on land owned by the Raja of Linga, Bhavar Singh.

Ghelubhai wrote in his letter that both Mahatma Gandhi and Vinobha Bhave were against conversions, and the latter wanted a ban on them.

## 23. Please comment on the rape of nuns at Jhabua.

Rape of any woman is a dastardly act, and can never be justified under any circumstances and has been severely condemned by all. What is reprehensible in this case is that on the very day that it happened, the Sangh parivar has been blamed for the act. This has been without any justification and without any evidence. Subsequently, the Madhya Pradesh police stated that out of the 24 culprits, 12 were converted Christians, and the others had no connection with the Sangh parivar. Even then, this incident is listed as an event which is one of the causes for the Christians in particular (and minorities in general) to be concerned about the Sangh parivar.

This incident has been internationalised as well, even when there was no basis for it. One has to wonder about the motives of those who have done this, along with its politicisation.

## 24. What are your views on the burning of the foreign missionary in Orissa, along with his two young sons?

All violence has to be condemned. Like rape, killing of children is also a heinous crime, going against the Hindu tradition. The perpetrators of the crime have to be identified and the maximum penalty should be imposed on them. On this issue, there can be no second opinion.

However, one has to inquire if the activities of the missionaries have caused any social disturbance. It has been reported that due to the missionary activities, there has been a social divide between the converts and those who have retained their ancient traditions. For example, the local tradition says that it is inauspicious to plough land on the day of Makar-sankrant. But, the converts used to do the ploughing, apparently under the instruction of the missionaries.

As in other events, the Sangh organisations have been charged of the crime right from the beginning, and without any basis.

## 25. Is there any concerted plan to attack missionaries?

There is no programme of any Hindu organisations to attack missionaries, either singly or on a concerted basis. It is not part of the Hindu cultural values to indulge in violence. At the same time, Hindus have to protect themselves, at the physical and civilisation levels. If the Christian missionaries are creating harm to them, then the Hindus have every right to defend themselves. All legal methods will be first employed. If the missionaries persist in their efforts of creating tensions, then some sort of reaction will always take place. Most of the physical reactions has taken place in the tribal areas, where the Hindus are probably more sensitive, and the missionaries more aggressive. It does not take place in the urban areas, where access to legal remedies is more easy.

Ultimately, the prime cause of the violence is the action of conversions. One Christian writer said, "Whatever may be the merits of proselytism, there are demerits also. Foremost, is that it keeps the Hindus irritated, annoyed, angered and responding violently from time to time, because simple arithmetic tells them that more Christians means less Hindus, which is absolutely true. Christians, under the same circumstances, everywhere, have also felt likewise - irritated, annoyed, angered and have responded violently."

## 26. Has the issue of the attacks on Christians been politicised? If so, why?

That there have been attacks on Christians is not denied. What has to be inquired if these attacks have been for communal reasons or for secular reasons. In case of the former, there is a further need to inquire if there was a provocation or not. Analysing the cases, one will find very few which have been of an unprovoked communal type. Thus, making an accusation that the Hindus are attacking the Christians deliberately, is a clear sign that there is an attempt to politicise the issue. The media, particularly the English variety, has been a willing tool in this game. When Hindus in Kashmir were under a genuine threat, with hundreds being killed, and three lakh having to become refugees in their own country, the same media has been a silent spectator, or treated the events as not being significant.

The Christian organisations, both clergy and laity, have blown the incidents way out of proportion. Even when it has been well established that there were no Hindu organisations

behind some of the most publicised attacks, these events are still listed as attacks on Christianity. One event of the past that is listed under this list is the killing of two nuns in Mumbai in 1989. It had been established then that this was a secular crime, and yet it is still listed as an attack on Christians.

The Christian organisations have no hesitation of taking the help of Islamic fundamentalists, like the Naib Imam of the Jama Masjid of Delhi, to take the protest to the streets. The intriguing part is that the so-called secular media finds nothing wrong in this collaboration.

The reason for doing this can only be speculated. The Defence Minister, George Fernandes of Samta Party, has alleged there is a conspiracy to defame the BJP-led coalition in the centre. There could also be a programme to defame Hindus.

## 27. Has the issue of attacks on Christians been internationalised? If so, why?

The use of Christianity by western powers for their diplomatic games is well known all over the world. In the past, during colonial times, this was done openly, and the missionaries used to evaluate their work in terms of the commercial benefits that the colonial masters obtained. In the recent past, the association has been more covert. In 1982, in a secret document, the American Vice-President said, "The Catholic Church has ceased to be an ally in whom the United States can have confidence." This was revealed by an American missionary in the Philippines.

With the nuclear tests of May 1998, and a growing independent stand being taken by the BJP-led coalition in the centre, there have been reports of exasperation by some of the diplomats in the western countries. While many have expressed sympathy to India's position, some felt that the new situation will not enable them to play the games that they have been doing. The programme of the Christian churches of calumnising the Hindus coincided with the western governments anti-India programme. These governments have lent a hand to the Christians in India for taking up the issue at the international level.

These western governments have double standards. In Indonesia, hundreds of Christians have been killed, obviously on a communal basis and mostly without provocation. Yet, the international community has not raised even 10% of the noise that they have done in case of

India were only a handful have been killed. The churches are also in the same game plan, and have made frequent announcements down playing the killings in Indonesia.

The western countries should also look at within their own borders as to what is happening. In the United States, more than 100 churches, belonging to the Black community, have been burnt by the White supremacist. The racial picture in the United Kingdom is not something that the country is proud of. The German government's treatment of the Turkish guest workers has been adversely commented upon even by those within the country. Less said of the treatment of the Aborigines in Australia the better.

## 28. Is it only in India that Christians are being attacked?

Christians have been on the receiving end in many countries. Indonesia is one such example. In Sudan, there is a major problem for the Christians living in the south. In Nigeria, the Christians of the Southeast are under continuous pressure. The Coptic Christians in Egypt are frequently attacked. (In many other countries, it is the Christians who are the aggressors.)

Christians are also under attack in China, where the Communist government has set up its own Christian hierarchy different from the one by the mother churches in the west. Some of the Christian magazines have reported that the Chinese government has used prostitutes to blackmail the Christian priests.

Christian organisations are not allowed to practice, let alone do their so-called social service in almost all the Islamic countries. In Russia, a bill has been passed that prohibits the different Christian sects, except the Russian Orthodox, from functioning in the country. In Israel, a bill banning conversions was dropped only when 50 Christian organisations gave an undertaking that they would not undertake such an activity.

## 29. Why should violence be resorted to even as a provocation? Are there no legal remedies?

If violence is resorted to immediately after a provocation, without trying other remedies, then condemning such type of violence is justified. However, when the provocation persists, and the provocateur does not listen to reason, then the violence has to be seen in a different light. This is particularly the case in rural and tribal areas, where the legal system moves at a

lesser pace than in an urban area. So while any society would like violence not to exist, condemning the violence alone does not solve the underlying problem.

When violence takes place upon a provocation, the scale of both has to be seen. The provocation has been substantial, and continuing for a long time. Except for the murder of the Australian priest, there has been no loss of Christian lives in the recent incidences. Damage to property is also small. And about the murder of the priest, all the details are yet to come out. Many reporters have mentioned about party politics also being a factor in it.

### 30. Have there been attempts to have bills to regulate conversions? What is the view of the Christians towards such bills?

At the time of the debate in the Constituent Assembly, all the gamut of issues relating to conversions were discussed. Given the record of vandalism in the name of Christianity in India, and the strong objections of Mahatma Gandhi towards conversions, many members wanted to put restrictions on conversions. There was also a strong sentiments to even leave the provision of propagation out of the section of fundamental rights. However, after discussions, and due to various compromises, no specific provision was made with respect to prevent conversions due to force, inducements or fraud. It was assumed that such tactics would not be possible in an independent India. Also, due to various definitional niceties adopted, the word propagate was kept as part of the fundamental rights.

The record of Christianity in an independent India does not conform to the expectations that many thinking persons had of them. The Niyogi Committee documented the improper activities of the missionaries, and made scathing remarks about them. In this state, followed by Orissa and Arunachal Pradesh, bills were introduced to prevent conversions due to force, inducements and fraud. The Supreme Court in 1977 upheld the validity of these bills.

In 1978, there was a private members bill in Lok Sabha to enact a national legislation on the same lines as the three states. The Christian churches, aided by the laity organisations and the English media, mounted a sustained campaign against the bill. The introduction of the bill did not become possible, and with the changes in the political dispensation, the bill lapsed. The fact that the churches object to the regulation of conversions is a clear sign that they

wish to continue their practice of conversions by inducements and fraud, and apply force in subtle ways.

### 31. Please give a summary of the recommendations of The Niyogi Committee Report On Christian Missionary Activities, 1956.

This committee was set up in 1954, because of serious concerns being expressed by various people about the activities of the Christian missionaries in the tribal areas of what is now Madhya Pradesh. It went about its task in terms of meeting people, as well as doing field work. It also perused the printed material of the Christian missionaries, to understand the way they set about doing their task. Though one of the members of the committee was a Christian himself, the Christians have criticised the report as biased. However, most others have commended the report. The whole process of the work of the committee was during a time when there was a Congress government both at the centre and the state.

It is pertinent to note that the methods of fraud and inducements that the committee came across, continue even today. It would appear that the methods of the missionaries have not really changed. The following is a summary of the recommendations which have been made:

Those missionaries whose primary object is proselytisation should be asked to withdraw. The large influx of foreign missionaries is undesirable and should be checked.

The use of medical or other professional services as a means of making conversions should be prohibited by law.

Any attempt by force or fraud, threats of illicit means, grants of financial or other aid, by moral and material assistance, by exploiting any person's necessity, spiritual (mental) weakness or thoughtlessness, should be banned.

Any attempt or effort, whether successful or not, directly or indirectly to penetrate into the religious conscience of persons whether of age or underage, of another faith, for the purpose of consciously altering their religious conscience or faith, so as to agree with the ideas or convictions of the proselytising party should be absolutely prohibited.

Government should issue an appeal to the Christian missionary organisations, and the Christian community, to lay down in clear terms the policy they will follow in respect of propagating their religion, the methods to be followed in conversions, the type of propaganda which will be promoted and the attempts which will be made to confine their evangelistic activities within the limits of Indian Constitution.

An amendment of the Constitution of India may be sought, firstly to clarify that the right of propagation has been given only to the citizens of India, and secondly that it does not include conversion brought about by force, fraud or other illicit means.

Suitable control on conversion activities brought about through illegal means should be imposed. If necessary, legislation measures should be enacted.

Circulation of literature meant for religious propaganda without the approval of the State Government should be prohibited.

No foreigner should be allowed to function in a Scheduled or a Specified area either independently or as a member of a religious institution unless he has given a declaration in writing that he will not take part in proselytisation.

## 32. Some of the reported incidents of attacks on Christians have turned out to be without any basis. Why has this happened?

We will deal with three incidents here. In the case of the rape of the four nuns in Jhabua, the Sangh Parivar was held as being guilty of the crime without any foundation. Subsequently, out of the 24 people arrested, the local police said that 12 are Christians. No one who had accused the Sangh came forward to apologise to the organisation. Moreover, this incident is still listed as an attack on Christians.

After the dastardly killing of the Australian missionary, in the same state of Orissa, there was a report of a nun being raped after accepting a lift from a taxi that had men disguised as women. Right from the beginning, the story had full of holes. However, the English media lapped it up, and highlighted it as another incident of attack on Christianity and implied that it was the Sangh that was behind the attacks. The Christian churches organised a rally in the

state, protesting the rape.

Within a few days, a medical report stated that there was no rape and that the other injuries sustained by the nun were of an earlier date. The holes in the story became more apparent because the sequence of events in the incident was obviously false. After all, this came out, the papers that wrote editorials, holding the Sangh indirectly responsible, did not find it necessary to have follow-up editorials admitting their mistake, and deliberate perversions. Neither did the church apologise for trying to fabricate an event.

On Feb 2, 1998, the Associated Press, an American news service, put out a report that an American missionary, Dr. John Sylvester, had been forced by 'Hindu fundamentalists' to close down his school and clinic in Allahabad and take sanctuary in a Baptist Seminary. It turns out that Dr. Sylvester is an Indian citizen, not a priest, does not run a school, and never met the AP correspondent. One does not know what action AP has taken to punish their correspondent for sending an obviously false report.

These incidents reinforce the impression of a conspiracy, both national and international. It also reinforces the feeling that the Christian churches are involved in it. The 'rape' incident in Orissa, reflects poorly on the morality of the church, which has no feeling of remorse in getting a lady member of the organisation to humiliate herself in the public.

### 33. Are only Hindutvavadis concerned about conversions?

Here the definition of Hindutvavadi in the narrow sense, to identify those who are the supporters of the Sangh Parivar.

Many Christian writers have found that the whole Hindu samaj is concerned about conversions. One saw an 'anger' against conversions amongst her Hindu husband and their Hindu friends, who she says are 'educated, perceptive adults'. She also says, "They just don't see Christians as Indians; they see us as an alien 'other', minions of a white, Christian world that is synonymous with spiritual and racial chauvinism."

Another writer said that his Hindu friends asked him, "Why doesn't the Church confine itself to socially constructive functions like running hospitals and schools? Why do you have to preach your religion and make converts?" While saying this, he said, that there is a reproach

in the voices of his Hindu friends.

It is time that the churches hear these voices, and realise that what the Hindutvavadis are saying is nothing different from what the Hindu samaj is saying.

### 34. The tribals are said to be animists and not Hindus. Is the reconversion program not an attempt to create a homogenised (in the wrong sense of the word) Hindu society?

Animists are those who believe that natural phenomena occur due to spirits and that all animate and inanimate objects have such spirits. They attribute conscious life to nature, and that organic objects have a soul. Of course, in each area, different tribal groups have additional beliefs that are not defined as being animistic. Although these practices may appear to be primitive, for the animists they are true and valid.

The controversy of whether the tribals are not Hindus has been going on for ages. The attributes stated above are also part of the beliefs of many who are recognised as being Hindus. For example, Tulsi puja and Nagpanchami are important Hindu festivals. Tribals participate in the Hindu festivals, wherever they are celebrated nearby. The genesis of the controversy is that the missionaries wanted to divide the Hindu society, and claim that certain sections do not fall within the fold of Hinduism. During the time of the British, efforts were made to identify who are animists for the purposes of the census. And each time, the census officers said in strong terms that it is not possible to differentiate between an animist and a Hindu. The fact that the controversy continues is an indication that the old policy of dividing the Hindus still continues.

The Hindu tradition is so vast, that all the indigenous faiths fall within the scope. Each tradition, either regional or started by persons, borrow from other traditions. At the same time, they are all rooted in the essential ethos of the Hindu tradition of tolerance. For example, the Bhils and the Rajputs interact at the social and cultural levels.

However, what is clear is that animism has no convergence with Christianity. So, if a tribal is made a Christian, then a conversion definitely takes place. What the Hindu organisations are doing is to ask the tribals to come back to their traditional faith - whether one calls it a Hindu

faith or an animist. There is no attempt to either impose upon them something different from what their ancestors practised or to homogenise the Hindus into one unique way of belief.

### 35. What about the Hindu temples that are coming up in the Christian countries?

There is a qualitative difference between the Hindu temples coming up in Christian countries, and the Christian churches coming up in India. The Hindu temples come up only when there is a significant Hindu presence in an area. They are set up with the initiative of the local people and funded by them as well. The objective, therefore, is to fulfill the spiritual needs of the Hindus residing in the area and not built with an objective to convert.

The Christian churches are first set up by the missionaries in areas where there are no Christians, and where they go to offer their so-called social service. They are funded from outside, if not the country, at least outside the area of operation. The objective is to convert people to Christianity.

### 36. While many Hindus complain about the conversion activities of the Christians, they have no hesitation in sending their children to their schools.

Most of the Christian schools have been set up during colonial times. And they have been set up mostly by funds provided by the colonial masters out of the taxes levied on the Hindus. Thus, the infrastructure was created. In the post-independence period, the schools were initially funded by the state, until it was decided that the English medium schools will not receive such grants. The colleges continue to receive almost full aid. Since the funds are provided out of taxes, contributed mostly by the Hindus, it is a gross misnomer to call such institutes as missionary schools.

At the same time, if the infrastructure is created, should it be allowed to decay? And as the education facilities are becoming available outside of metropolitan areas, one sees Hindus coming forward to set them up. Even in metropolitan areas, more and more Hindus are setting up institutes of learning. In the urban areas, the conversion activities of the churches are severely restricted due to public pressure. The conversion activities take place in the



rural and tribal areas, and amongst the poor members of the society. This is done in the guise of social service.

### 37. Is it true that the number of people going to church in the Christian countries is declining?

The fall in church attendance has been going on for more than 40 years, at least. It is said that the attendance to church in Austria is less than 20%, and that about 40,000 additional numbers are leaving the church every year. By the year 2030, there will be no one attending churches in Austria. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, less than 10% of the Anglicans, the main Christian sect in the country, attend church services.

In addition to the reduced attendance to the church, the number of priests has declined drastically. One priest has to look after more than one church. Many churches are locked up except at the time of the weekly mass. Due to fewer people wanting to be priests, the number of seminaries, the training institutes for the priests, has also come down drastically.

**Courtesy - Hindu Vivek Kendra, [www.hvk.org](http://www.hvk.org)**