
Journal of Religious Culture

Journal für Religionskultur

Ed. by / Hrsg. von Edmund Weber
in Association with / in Zusammenarbeit mit Matthias Benad
Institute of Religious Peace Research / Institut für Wissenschaftliche Irenik
Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

ISSN 1434-5935- © E.Weber – E-mail: irenik@em.uni-frankfurt.de
web.uni-frankfurt.de/irenik

No. 109 (2008)

Religious Conversion

Historical Aspects and Modern Perspective¹

By

Edmund Weber

Exposition of the Problem

Religious conversion has become a dangerous social and individual problem. In Latin America, a traditional Catholic area, Protestant sects are successfully converting more and more Catholics into their own communities. Therefore the Pope demands a strict control of these activities. In India e.g., the Catholic hierarchy is criticising the Indian governments which have forbidden conversion on non-spiritual reasons. Hindu organizations have started even very successfully to re-convert Indian Christians particularly of Dalit and tribal background. Buddhists are very successful in indirect and even direct conversion of many Westerners. Wah-habit missionaries spread their Neo-Islam in the Muslim societies and get more and more even non-Muslim converts. We should add the forcible and sometimes extremely cruel conversions the atheistic states had executed since the last century. Let us first have a short look at the religions concerning their understanding and practice of conversion and then see how the problem of conversion has to be treated under the conditions of modern religion.

¹ This article is based on a lecture presented at the *International Seminar on Religious Conversion* at the Hindu University Indonesia, Denpasar, Bali, 1st of June 2008.

Judaism

is not interested in religious mission or conversion. According to orthodox Judaism the Jews have their own relationship, a special covenant, with God. The relationship of the same God with other peoples they should not disturb. It is up to God to take care of the religiosity of the non-Jews. Regularly someone becomes a Jew if he or she is born by a Jewish mother. Nevertheless, conversions of individuals to Judaism are possible but in no way the intention of Judaism and they are very rare.

Islam

Mohammed was a messenger of God. It was his task to spread the good news of the all-merciful Allah to the Arabs. Conversion to the belief in the mercy of Allah was intended, was the basic interest of the message.

However, the destruction of non-Islamic religions is strictly forbidden. The Koran says: "For each we have appointed a (divine) law and a traced-out way. Had Allah willed He could have made you one community, but that He may try you by that which He has given you. So vie with one another in good works" (Koran 5,48b). According to the Koran God created all the different religious communities. The difference of religions is God's will; he wants that there is a competition between the different religious people in doing good deeds all the time. God has not told his true followers to convert other-religious people. That is up to Him. The Koran says: "If it had been your Lord's will, all who are in the earth would have believed, altogether. Will you then, force the people to become believers?" (Koran 10,99). Why is it not possible for human beings to convert people? The Koran is very clear: "No soul can have faith except by the will of Allah" (Koran 10,100). Everybody who makes converts is stealing God's monopoly of conversion making. Nevertheless Muslims have to spread the message of the merciful God and they can invite people: "Invite (all) to the path of your Lord" – however, this invitation has to be done not by force but "with wisdom and kindly exhortation, and reason with them in the most courteous manner" (Koran 16,125). Conversion of people to the right way to God is – we remember – a monopoly of God.

What about apostasy, about Muslim people leaving Islam? Allah gives a clear advice to his prophet: "Now if they turn away, We have not sent you as a warder over them." Mohammed had no police-like authority to force the apostates to come back to their old faith. Allah defines Mohammed's task: "But if they turn away, then your duty is only to convey clearly" (Koran 16,82) and "Your only responsibility is to convey the Message" (Koran 42,48). Of course, if Mohammed had no right to compel or to punish people leaving Islam, all the more other Muslim are not allowed to do that.

To summarize: The Koran says that Mohammed and the Muslim have to spread the message of the mercy of God and they should invite people to the right way to the merciful Allah. However, they are not allowed to convert people by themselves according to their own intentions and they have no right to force former Muslim to re-convert.

It's obvious that very often Muslim rulers and societies didn't and don't follow these humane principles of the Koran.

Christianity from the Beginning to the Middle Ages

From the beginning mission and conversion were essential parts of Christian self-understanding. Jesus, St. Paul and all the other apostles were missionaries. Conversion was what all mankind needed. Conversion of non-Christians was the essential and basic aim of the early Christian communities. By the ritual of conversion, baptism, the convert not only got personal eternal salvation, but also the membership of a church community. Only by belonging to such a group and following its creeds, codes and sacraments a convert could maintain his salvation and in this way avoid hell and get heaven.

As long as the pagan Roman administration oppressed the Christians, conversion to Christianity was a voluntary and even dangerous act; however, even then the children of Christians had no chance to convert; they were baptized as babies and became members of their church automatically.

When the Catholic sect got the political support of the Roman emperors in the beginning of the 4th century, the Catholic clergy pressed the rulers to oppress the other Christian churches and all the non-Christian communities. All people who lived under the rule of the Catholic emperors were forced to convert to the Catholic Church by law and all non-Catholic buildings and properties were confiscated and opposition was heavily punished.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD), the greatest theologian of the older Western Church, justified such politics. He proclaimed: 'Extra ecclesiam nulla salus' which means 'Outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation'. Any person who doesn't belong to the Catholic Church has to face eternal condemnation. His conclusion: 'Cogite intrare!' which means 'Compel (all baptized non-Catholics) to enter (the Catholic Church)', in order to save them from hell.

The majority of the Germanic tribes² that conquered the Catholic West-Roman Empire since the beginning of the 5th century ('migration of the barbarians') had converted to the non-Catholic Christian religion, the so-called Arianism.³ This Church of the new Germanic rulers was very tolerant. The Arian Christians mostly didn't compel the Catholics to convert; they even let the Catholic hierarchy continue to lead the Catholic masses. However, when the pagan tribe of the Germanic Franks which lived in the area of the rivers Rhine and Mosel became Catholics and together with the Catholic East-Romans conquered the former West-Roman Empire, the Arian rulers lost their power or converted to Catholicism in order to survive politically. Everybody had to become a Catholic once more.

² West and East Goths, Suevians, Vandals, Burgundians, Langobards

³ The Arian Church got its name from the Libyan Arius (250-336 AD) who was a priest of the Church of Alexandria (Egypt). Arius opposed the doctrine of Trinity defended by his Alexandrian bishop Athanasius (293-373 AD). The Roman Catholic, the Protestant and the Orthodox Churches officially still follow the doctrine of Athanasius. The Germanic tribes were converted amongst others by the Gothic bishop Wulfila.

All the compulsory baptized people who dared to convert to other religions were officially declared heretics or apostates will say religious criminals. They were seen as contract-breaking people acting in violation of the irrevocable baptism contract. Therefore the Catholic Church as the legal representative of God had the right and duty to claim the contractual fidelity of the heretics or apostates. And if they didn't want to fulfill the treaty they had to suffer physical and social punishment or even to die at the stake. The Catholic rulers as so-called *bracchium seculare* i.e. secular arm had to execute these sentences of the Catholic clergy.

The ban of conversion to another religion was deeply rooted in the Catholic theology: the human being has to follow the creeds, codes and rituals of the Catholic Church otherwise they will burn in the hellish fire forever.

However, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 AD), the greatest theologian of the Catholic Middle Ages, taught that an individual has to follow its personal conscience. If it tells him to leave the Roman Catholic Church, he has to obey, even if he has to await capital punishment by the so-called Holy Inquisition and the Catholic rulers.

The Protestant Reformation

The reformers Martin Luther (1483-1546 AD) and John Calvin (1509-1564 AD) denied that whole Catholic position and taught: Eternal salvation of everybody has been completed by Jesus Christ. It does not depend on religious works of the human beings anymore. It is free of charge and an unconditioned present of God. Therefore, internal faith and non-faith in free eternal salvation are free. Faith or non-faith in God's grace is only an affair between God and the individual soul. Clerical or secular authorities do not have any jurisdiction over that relationship.

The task of Christian mission is no more conversion of people into the visible Church in order to give them the chance to fulfill their eternal salvation. As its proper task the Christian church has to preach the gospel or good news that eternal salvation is free of charge and also free faith or non-faith in that. Therefore the people shall only concentrate on their motivation to fulfill their secular duties. Because morality doesn't fit for eternal salvation, it is up to the secular state to organize the moral education of the people. Only on behalf of the secular government the church managed the moral education in those times.

In 1555, the German secular Parliament (Reichstag) at Augsburg released the following law to save religious peace in the country: the princes have to decide which external religion - Catholic or Protestant - all the people of their territory had to follow, and if someone of the subjects wants to convert to the other religion, he can freely leave his home and will not be killed as an heretic or apostate. As usual, by child baptism voluntary conversion was excluded. The Protestant rulers had to apply this law, too.

In the 18th century however Protestant rulers loosened such restrictions. King Frederick the Great of Prussia (1712-1786 AD) wrote 1740: "With regard to moral there is no religion which differs from the other ones. They can be treated as equals by the government; therefore it should allow each subject to go to heaven on that way it prefers. He should be a good citizen only; nothing else is demanded from

him. Wrong religious fanaticism is like a tyrant who depopulates the provinces; tolerance, however, is like a tender mother who cares of them and makes them prosper."⁴ Conversions were possible now and the people slowly made use of it.

19th and 20th Century

In the late 18th and then in 19th century the religious individualism became the internal form and shape of religion at all. Religious conversion became a human right. The basic element of the constitution and reality of the new United States of America and other liberal countries was the right of religious choice, of conversion.

The Roman Catholic Church vehemently denied religious liberty. In 1864 AD Pope Pius IX condemned the liberal concept that "the human beings are free to choose and confess that religion which the individual – guided by the light of reason - accepts as true."⁵

Conversion of non-Christians became one of the paramount subjects of church activity in the 19th century. With the support of the colonial administrations hundreds of newly built so-called mission societies attacked the other religions. The missionaries created mission churches whose native members were very often used as obedient servants by the colonialists. That missionary movement was a result of the rise of the liberal ideology which declared Christianity as the peak of God's creation and the non-Christian peoples as underdeveloped or primitive ones. Therefore, the churches thought to have the duty to develop the underdeveloped religions will say make them Christians even by different means.

One hundred years later, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1967) officially accepted the religious liberty declaring that the individual has the natural right and liberty to convert to a self-chosen religion.⁶

Nowadays, mostly charismatic and fundamentalist sects are very extensively using that right of conversion; they have become the new agencies of mass conversions. The traditional religious organizations and milieus try to confine that new conversion movement, although they – particularly the Roman Catholic Church – continue their own mission work.

All these conversion making religions are only interested in increasing their membership, are interested in the success of their own collective organisation.

On the other side we see many born Christian individuals officially or practically converting to eastern religions – mostly not materially lured by religious groups but by their own spiritual experience and voluntary decision.

Conversion has become quite natural in the West.

⁴ Frederick the Great: *De la superstition et de la Religion*: " Il n'y a aucune religion qui, sur le sujet de la morale, s'écarte beaucoup des autres; ainsi elles peuvent être toutes égales au *gouvernement, qui, conséquemment, laisse à un chacun la liberté d'aller au ciel par quel chemin il lui plaît*: qu'il soit bon citoyen, c'est tout ce qu'on lui demande. Le faux zèle est un tyran qui dépeuple les provinces: la tolérance est une tendre mère qui les soigne et les fait fleurir." (Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand. Hrsg. V. Preuss, Johann D. E. Verleger: Rudolph Ludwig Decker, Decker-sche Geheime Ober-Hofbuchdruckerei. 1846; <http://friedrich.uni-trier.de/oeuvres/1/241/>)

⁵ Pope Pius IX, *Syllabus complectens praecipuos aetatis errores* (1864).

⁶ *The Declaration of Religious Liberty* of the 2nd Vatican Council (7.12. 1965): "The Vatican Council declares that every human being has the right of religious liberty"(I.2a).

Old and Modern Hinduism

The vast majority of Indian Hindus lived - and is still living - in a jati which is the group where the marriage partner has to be taken from. It is up to the jati to decide which religion its members had to follow. Conversion of an individual was more or less not possible. However, married women had to convert because they had to do seva, religious service, to the special deity of her husband's family. Of course, beside or within that jati religion, an individual had sometimes the chance to worship a chosen additional deity.

However, Hinduism was spread over non-Indian countries, too. Indian Hindu traders, soldiers and priests traveled, lived and worked in the vast area of south Asia and south-east Asia. The interest of native rulers in a divine legitimating of their dynasties and the attractiveness and tolerance of Hinduism in general motivated rulers and their people to take over a lot of Hindu gods, gurus, ideas, rituals, language, knowledge and costumes. The conversion to Hinduism was not so much a product of a systematic mission or conversion by force but of a slow and peaceful exertion of influence.

Religiously the Hindu dharma-concept was not favoring active mission: every community and individual has its pre-destined sva-dharma which they should not leave.

Nowadays, conversion to Hinduism has become once more possible; but this new conversion culture is an expression of the modern religion. The modern individuals, in India particularly the members of the new middle class, are starting to choose and build their individual religion. And this is exactly a modern Hindu idea.

Sw. Vivekananda (1863-1902), the Bengali founder of modern Hinduism, criticized collectivist religion and propagated radical individual religion as true religion. According to him, everybody has to convert to his individual Ishta religion which complies with his own individual nature. Therefore, all collectivist religious standards are dangerous when they are forced upon someone or blindly accepted by an individual. Religious patterns have to be strictly under the reflective authority of the individual only. Therefore, a guru and all the organized religion have only to help the individual to elaborate his specific religious culture. Under no circumstances they are not authorized to indoctrinate their own message to the individual. Religious conversion does not mean conversion to another organized religious community but to one's own individual or natural religion only.⁷

Buddhism

This Indian born religion has been a missionary movement in the beginning. Like the Buddha the bhikhus presented themselves as missionary gurus for the lay masses. Conversion to Buddhism meant to take refuge to the Buddha, to the Dharma and to the Sangha. Nevertheless, the converts were mostly not forced to

⁷ Cf., Edmund Weber, Swami Vivekananda's Ethics of Religion, *Journal of Religious Culture*, No. 04.

deny their traditional religion: all the old Gods, spirits, priests, shamans, temples, festivals, costumes etc. they could continue to worship, respect or practice.

Now we face new or more precisely modern Buddhist sects which are fundamentalists and exclude all so-called non-Buddhist elements from their pretended purified Buddhism.

After *Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar* (1891-1956), an Indian politician and leader of the Mahar caste, converted to Buddhism and got Buddhist diksha, a mass conversion to Buddhism happened in India. However, it was not a conversion of individuals who had changed their religious mind; it was a non-religious and collective one. The majority of one caste, the Mahars in Maharashtra, changed over to a religion they didn't even know. In this case we see conversion became an act of political and social protest. Therefore, a new Buddhist piety of the converts has not developed till now.⁸

Leaving the Buddhist fold, the monk gurus, the sangha community, and the dharma doctrine, the individual may face normal social sanctions outside urbanized areas. However, middle class Buddhists who live under modern urban conditions choose their own Buddhist gurus and become very often members of modern Buddhist associations.

Adequate Religious Conversion Today

In the past, religion and conversion were mostly a collective affair. The human beings were not individuals but functional members of a social body. The corporation was substance of the human being. Therefore, even religion was an issue of a social unit. Nevertheless, religions transported the utopian idea of individual religion very early. Many individuals sacrificed even their lives to live their individual religion.

The dominance of these collective conditions of inner life and personal conscience has changed radically.

The history of modern world has produced and is still and even vehemently producing a new personality, the real individual. The new individual is confronted with a global disintegration of traditional supportive and controlling collective structures on one hand and the integration of all mankind in extremely abstract social configurations, the so-called scientific-technical civilization on the other hand. Under these conditions that new individual is facing its modern fate: on one hand it has to follow the strict rules of a new external world and on the other hand it has to experience the radical liberty to cultivate its own Inner World.

This internal religious liberty is confined to its conscience so that it can't escape into artificial new or old collectivist constructions of its Inner World on the long run. What is the sense and value of the individual's life and death and what is the fundament of its whole existence, to decide that basic question of existence has become the task of the modern individual only.

Therefore, there is only one religious conversion possible in all religions today: the conversion of the individual to one's self. Otherwise the human being turns away

⁸ Cf., Edmund Weber, Ambedkar and Hindu Culture, *Journal of Religious Culture*, No. 18b

from its own determination. Such a self-alienation means the disability to build one's own inner world or religious culture. This self-alienating way shatters the modern individual's motivational fundament to take over the roles and duties which the modern society is offering and destroying all the time.

The development and realization of individual religion, the individual construction of its inner world, seems to be very difficult and extremely hard in the light of the power of still active collectivist religions. Therefore, the modern personality is very weak and vulnerable. New religious collectivist organizations, events and ideologies are prospering and booming. The masses of people pulled out of traditional but outlived social environments and living in non-defined urban relationships very often take refuge to authoritarian ideologies, institutions, persons and communities. However, in the long run, no individual can silence its own modern conscience, which tells him that its liberty and duty to take over the responsibility to convert to one's self is unavoidable.

Therefore, all the religious institutions, doctrines, leaders, communities, all the organized religion, have to take over the task of supporting the individual to find its own way of self-understanding, its own religious culture. An inter-religious cooperation and competition to develop the individual religion is what is necessary today.

Therefore, religious conversion, which doesn't respect the individual's natural religion, should be avoided at any cost.

The governments that are interested in morally highly motivated citizens should take care of all the religious organizations. The authorities should not allow organized religions to convert other people, but they should support such religious organizations which help the people to find their own way to the Holy in and by themselves.

The adequate religious conversion which suits the modern individual is only the free conversion to one's self.