

**Conversion, Converting, Converted**  
**Response to Reid B. Locklin, "Up, Over, Through: Rethinking 'Conversion' as a Category of Hindu-Christian Studies"**

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Between his temporary home at the Tamil seminary and dialogue centre Arul Kadal, and the Brahmin district of Mylapore where he worked with his Advaita teacher, Reid B. Locklin traverses through physical space and religious place with the ease of peddling a bicycle (Reid 1). This imagery of moving from one place to another, while existing fully in neither, is powerful in the conversation about the process of conversion. What Reid accomplishes with the pedals of his bicycle--this movement and immersion from one place of significance into another--is a physical metaphor for the spiritual movement that the process of religious conversion requires.

Locklin deftly answers his initial question of whether or not modern Advaita movements can be called advocates for religious conversion: yes, indeed they can. It is the second part of this paper's goal--to ascertain *how* these modern Advaita movements espouse religious conversion--that Locklin's simultaneously respectful and sure-footed arguments gain momentum and weight. In order to explore the processes of conversion, as a stand-alone concept of religion and within the modern Advaita traditions, Locklin sets up his paper by first and foremost differentiating between the term 'conversion' as used in common parlance, and the nuanced ways in which it can be understood based on the religious traditions being spoken about. What is commonly referred to as 'conversion'--that is, conversion from one religious tradition to another--Locklin calls 'Conversion-Over', wherein religious conversion implies a "horizontal shift from one faith over to another, from one system of doctrines, practices and

worldview over to another” (13). Locklin suggests that by this definition of active conversion, the modern Advaita movements do not advocate religious conversion. However, he also calls for a more nuanced, and less univocal, definition of the process of ‘conversion’--a process he terms ‘Conversion-*Up*’. For Locklin, Conversion-*Up* in the Advaita traditions is apparent in these traditions’ central tenets on personal spiritual transformation. Utilizing the works and words of Vivekananda and Dayananda to flesh out this definition, Locklin is able to offer the reader a subtly different notion of religious conversion, wherein the practitioner is called to personal evolution, transforming his or her own level of understanding from a lower one to a higher one, instead of transferring over from one religious tradition to another. Within the Advaita traditions, then, “the truly significant movement is not over; it’s up” (16).

By setting up the categories of Conversion-*Over* and Conversion-*Up*, Locklin is able to move into the second part of his paper, wherein he uses this disruption of a simplistic definition of ‘conversion’ to consider a multiplicity of model narratives of Advaita conversions. These narratives allow Locklin to deftly illustrate that while the conversion model utilized in Advaita traditions is not analogous to the one used in religious conversions where the concept is used as it is commonly understood, it is a “qualitatively distinct” process of conversion--a Conversion-*Up* model--nonetheless (27). Since Locklin acknowledges that this Conversion-*Up* transformation within the Advaita traditions is undoubtedly one that is situated within a Hindu worldview, and given my distinct lack of knowledge about the Advaita movements in general, it was at this point in the paper that I began to question my own grasp of the nuanced differences between Conversion-*Over* and Conversion-*Up*.

Linguistically speaking, the concept of a conversion implies a change in functionality without an accompanying change in form. This is to say, that the object of conversion is transformed internally--in meaning, if you will--with no change being detectable externally save for the object's contextual situation. Can this broad, linguistic definition of the concept of conversion be applied to human subjects of conversion? Can a person be converted from a Christian to a Christian-looking Hindu? For me, Locklin's concept of *Conversion-Up* presents the first stage in a religious conversion process--the internal, private, externally inobservable transformation. This is what occurs prior to the formalized, ritualized, verbalized, external change--or what Locklin terms *Conversion-Over*. Thus, these subtly different processes of conversion can actually be seen as quite distinct. Perhaps even, as two ends on the conversion spectrum. To this end, Locklin suggests further in the paper that all conversion processes--whether Advaitan or Christian--utilize facets of *Conversion-Over* and *Conversion-Up* processes, albeit to varying degrees, to facilitate and advocate religious conversion. He suggests that, "the most salient differences may have to do with different understandings about what counts as Up in each tradition, and [...] the precise relation between and among the dynamics Over, Up, and their consequences in terms of both interior development and social filiation" (34).

These categories of *Conversion-Over* and *Conversion-Up* that Locklin has created are helpful in deconstructing the complex processes that are undertaken through religious conversion. I do not see them as categories to be used in opposition of, and in comparison to, one another. Instead, I have read Locklin's paper as a call for a more nuanced reading of

religious conversion, wherein processes of religious conversion should not necessarily be read as analogous with one another, but rather, evaluated on the individual internal paradigmatic system of operations that they undertake.

In his concluding remarks, Locklin points out that conversion meant something entirely different for first century Jewish and Pagan converts to the Jesus Movement than it does for Christian converts today. So too, he has proven in his paper that conversion means something different for modern Advaita traditions than is understood by the modern Christian conversion model. He writes, "There is ample space for Christians, Advaita Vedantins and others to discern, separately and together, appropriate means of preaching and teaching, of engaging in dialogue and debate, and of respecting one another's legitimate freedom to convert or not to convert" (38). This 'space' that Locklin refers to is vital for the construction of religious identity--necessary for that internal evolution that is so important to the processes of conversion. It is only through the destabilization of the process of conversion as a homogenous, univocal notion--something that Locklin has done so well in this paper--that this space can be explored for a deeper understanding of the minute processes of religious identity construction, thus allowing for a fuller engagement in interreligious dialogue, sought by practitioners and scholars alike.