

Up, Over, Through:

Rethinking ‘Conversion’ as a Category of Hindu-Christian Studies

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Between October 1999 and March 2000, I had the privilege of living in the South Indian city of Chennai to study the non-dualist Hindu tradition of Advaita Vedānta. During this period, in a sense, I shuttled back and forth between two worlds. I lived and took all of my meals in a Jesuit religious community at the Tamil seminary and dialogue center Arul Kadal, just down the street from the San Thome Cathedral Basilica, recognized by the Catholic Church and many Indian Christians as the tomb of the great first-century evangelist, Thomas the Apostle. At the same time, six days a week, I jumped on my bicycle and rode to the heart of the Brahmin district of Mylapore to receive individual instruction or attend public lectures by my Advaita teacher. Though these two worlds existed in close proximity to one another—San Thome Cathedral itself stands at the edge of Mylapore—they also stood at significant remove, religiously and politically.

This fact caught me by surprise, but it should not have: the years 1998-1999 marked a significant moment of transition in a broader and longer controversy about religious conversion and proselytization in India.<sup>1</sup> Such major Hindu leaders as Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) in

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<sup>1</sup> For Hindu and Christian overviews of this controversy in its several phases, see Sita Ram Goel, *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters, AD 304 to 1996* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1996), and Sebastian C.H. Kim, *In Search of*

the late nineteenth century and Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948) in the early twentieth century expressed strong opposition to proselytization by Christian missionaries, and the various affiliates of the Hindu nationalist Sangh Parivar movement added a militant dimension to this critique, echoed and fostered in part by the writings of such Hindu apologists as Ram Swarup (1920-1998), Sita Ram Goel (1921-2003) and Arun Shourie (1941- ) in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> Several rites of reconversion, “purification” (*śuddhi*) or “welcoming” (*parāvartan*) had been developed beginning in the nineteenth century, and these were deployed aggressively by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and other activist movements in the 1980s and 1990s to stem a perceived tide of conversions to Christianity and Islam, by directly converting non-Hindus or, more commonly, as a means of integrating or “sanskritizing” those marginalized caste-groups and *ādivāsī* or tribal communities perceived to be particularly vulnerable to Christian mission work.<sup>3</sup> Several Indian states enacted anti-conversion legislation.<sup>4</sup> In 1998, the new, Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee called for a “national debate on conversions” in light of Christian missionary work in *ādivāsī* communities, and this call was punctuated—not coincidentally, in the view of some observers—by the brutal murder of the Australian missionary Graham Staines (1941-1999) and his two young sons in January 1999 in a tribal region of Orissa.

Into this charged context, enter me, with my dissertation project in Hindu-Christian

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*Identity: Debates on Religious Conversion in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Kim, *In Search of Identity*, 139-51; Ram Swarup, *A Hindu View of Christianity and Islam* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1992); idem., *Hinduism and Monotheistic Religions* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 2009); Sita Ram Goel, *Jesus Christ: An Artifice for Agression* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1994); idem., *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters*; Arun Shourie, *Missionaries in India: Continuities, Changes, Dilemmas* (New Delhi: ASA, 1994); idem., *Harvesting Our Souls: Missionaries, Their Design, Their Claims* (New Delhi: ASA, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> See Iris Vandevelde, “Reconversion to Hinduism: A Hindu Nationalist Reaction Against Conversion to Christianity and Islam,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 34 (2011): 31-50; Lise McKean, *Divine Enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu Nationalist Movement* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 106-108; Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 101-107; and the background in Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19th-Century Punjab* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1976), esp. 129-35, 202-15, and 303-12.

<sup>4</sup> See Kim, *In Search of Identity*, 76-81; and Chad Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion in Hindu India*,

studies, bicycling back and forth between the Catholic seminary and the Hindu lecture hall. Now, it should be noted that my Christian hosts were leaders in interreligious dialogue, my Hindu teacher strongly disinclined to controversy, and the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala well-known for their history of social harmony. I might well have missed the controversy altogether, had the first part of my stay not coincided with a visit to India by Pope John Paul II and, importantly, a public letter addressed to him by the Advaitin teacher and public advocate Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1930- ), entitled "Conversion is Violence." In this letter, after an initial, cordial welcome, Dayananda called on the Pope to announce a "freeze" on all conversions in India and, ideally, throughout the world. He wrote:

Among the world's religious traditions, there are those that convert and those that do not. The non-converting religious traditions, like the Hindu, Jewish and Zoroastrian, give others the freedom to practise their religion whether they agree with the others' tenets or not. They do not wish to convert. I would characterise them as non-aggressive. Religions that are committed by their theologies to convert, on the other hand, are necessarily aggressive, since conversion implies a conscious intrusion into the religious life of a person, in fact, into the religious person.<sup>5</sup>

Hinduism is in a special situation, Dayananda contends, because Hinduism is deeply, inextricably bound up with Indian culture. Non-converting religions like Hinduism, moreover, stand defenseless and unarmed before the Christians' "one-sided aggression":

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1868-1947 (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 1-5.

<sup>5</sup> Swami Dayananda Saraswati, "An Open Letter to Pope John Paul II: Conversion is Violence," *Indian Express*, 29

In any tradition, it is wrong to strike someone who is unarmed. In the Hindu tradition, this is considered a heinous act, for which the punishment is severe. A Buddhist, a Hindu, a Jew, are all unarmed, in that they do not convert . . . We don't believe in conversion, even though certain Hindu organisations have taken back some converted people. Thus, conversion is not merely violence against people; it is violence against people who are committed to non-violence.<sup>6</sup>

There is little evidence that John Paul II read the letter, or that he would have been receptive to its sentiments if he had: a little over a week after the publication of Swami Dayananda's letter, the Pope, during his visit in Delhi, occasioned still more intense controversy when he spoke of a “great harvest of faith” in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*.<sup>7</sup>

Though my studies did not directly address the question of conversion and, indeed, touched only tangentially on the history of Christianity or Hindu-Christian relations in India, it was impossible to avoid some of the questions being debated in the public sphere. Most difficult for me, perhaps, was the absolute contrast drawn by Swami Dayananda between “aggressive, converting” religions like Christianity and Islam and “non-violent, non-converting” religions like Hinduism. Is it really true that Hinduism does not convert, except (as Dayananda concedes) in self-defense? I had spent enough time at Swami Dayananda's ashrams in India and the United States to know that a small but significant number of his students and some senior Swamis and Swaminis were non-Indian in origins, presumably from Christian backgrounds in most cases. And, while in India, I had come across a book devoted to the life-story of the great eighth-century

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October 1999, <<http://www.indianexpress.com/Storyold/129355/>>, accessed 5 May 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See Kim, *In Search of Identity*, 155-63, and Peter C. Phan, ed., *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

“missionary” Ādi Śaṅkarācārya as a model for the work of Dayananda's teacher Swami Chinmayananda and his Chinmaya Mission.<sup>8</sup> This evidence suggested to me that the reality might be more complex than Dayananda's sharp distinction allowed.

I was not, of course, the first to ask this question. Such works as Reinhart Hummel's landmark 1987 study *Indische Mission und neue Frömmigkeit im Westen* and Carl Jackson's 1994 *Vedanta for the West* had traced the development of the Ramakrishna movement, the Self-Realization Fellowship, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Transcendental Meditation and other modern Hindu missions in North America and Europe.<sup>9</sup> In 1999, the Indian theologian C.V. Mathew published a more holistic study of what he viewed as a single, relatively coherent “Saffron Mission” in both India and the West. This has been followed by several more pointed and polemic studies by a Salesian priest, J. Kuruvachira, between 2006 and 2008.<sup>10</sup> For Mathew, the emergence of distinctively modern movements like the Ramakrishna Mission and the reconversion work of the VHP and other Hindu nationalist organizations can ultimately be traced back to much older patterns of Sanskritization and Brahminization embodied in the Vedic dictum *kṛṇvanto viśvamāryam*, “Let the whole world become Aryan.”<sup>11</sup> While Kuruvachira more strongly emphasizes the novelty of this development in the modern period, he also interprets processes of Sanskritization, rites like *śuddhi* and *parāvartan*, and especially Swami

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<sup>8</sup> *Śaṅkara the Missionary*, rev. ed. (Mumbai: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Reinhart Hummel, *Indische Mission und neue Frömmigkeit im Westen: Religiöse Bewegungen Indiens in westlichen Kulturen* (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1980); Carl S. Jackson, *Vedanta for the West: The Ramakrishna Movement in the United States*, Religion in North America (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> C.V. Mathew, *The Saffron Mission: A Historical Analysis of Modern Hindu Missionary Ideologies and Practices* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1999); and J. Kuruvachira, “Hinduism as a Missionary Religion,” *Mission Today* 8 (2006): 265-84; “Hinduism’s World Mission,” *Mission Today* 9 (2007): 39-56; *Hindu Nationalists of Modern India: A Critical Study of the Intellectual Genealogy of Hindutva* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2006); and *Politicisation of Hindu Religion in Postmodern India* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2008). See also C.V. Mathew, *Neo-Hinduism: A Missionary Religion* (Madras: Church Growth Research Centre, 1987); P.D. Devanandan, “Hindu Missions to the West,” *International Review of Missions* 48 (1959): 398-408; idem., *The Gospel and Renascent Hinduism*, I.M.C. Research Pamphlets 8 (London: SCM Press, 1959); and Wendell Thomas, *Hinduism Invades America* (New York: Beacon Press, 1930).

Vivekananda's oft-quoted exhortions, “Up, India, conquer the world with your spirituality,” and “the world must be conquered by India” as, collectively, an unambiguous mandate to convert.<sup>12</sup> “In the course of time,” he writes, “increased travel facilities, modern communications networks, globalisation, rise of Hindu cultural nationalism, better organisation and animation of the Hindu diaspora and so on have contributed greatly in making Hinduism emerge as an 'aggressive' missionary religion, seeking followers not only in India but also overseas, especially in the West.”<sup>13</sup> When Dayananda claims that Hindus do not convert and thus stand defenseless before Christian and Muslim aggression, in other words, he is either seriously misled or he is engaged in deliberate deception.

A far more nuanced, and certainly more comprehensive, view on this question can be found in Arvind Sharma's quite recent monograph, *Hinduism as a Missionary Religion*.<sup>14</sup> Though Sharma acknowledges a prevailing consensus that Hindus remained “non-missionary” at least well into the modern era, he contends against this consensus that “Hinduism has always possessed a missionary character.”<sup>15</sup> He locates some of the most compelling evidence in the Vedic and Classical periods, adducing not only the Ṛg-Veda exhortation noted by Mathew, but other Vedic passages, the *Manusmṛti* and the epic literature to suggest that foreigners could be and not infrequently were re-constructed as “lapsed Hindus,” rendering them eligible for incorporation into Hindu tradition and into the twice-born castes, more particularly.<sup>16</sup> Even here, however, Sharma finds the received terminology an obstacle – especially the language of conversion. Parsing terms carefully, he insists that, even as a “missionary religion,” Hinduism

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<sup>11</sup> Mathew, *Saffron Mission*, esp. 6, 36-40, 121, 192-94, 196-97, 203, 284-85.

<sup>12</sup> Kuruvachira, “Hinduism as a Missionary Religion,” 266-70.

<sup>13</sup> Kuruvachira, “Hinduism's World Mission,” 39-40.

<sup>14</sup> Arvind Sharma, *Hinduism as a Missionary Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, esp. 65-83. On this point, see also Arvind Sharma, “Ancient Hinduism as a Missionary Religion,” *Numen* 39 (1992): 175-92.

does not "seek converts" and re-defines conversion itself in non-exclusive terms as "acceptance of a universal point of view."<sup>17</sup> Stated another way, there is and has been "conversion" to Hinduism, but the distinctive character of Hinduism transforms the meaning of the term.

One of the difficulties with Sharma's study, like the earlier contributions of Hummel, Jackson, Mathew, Kuruvachira and others, has to do with the ambiguous character of yet another defining term, namely "Hinduism." Though some continue to insist that Hinduism either has existed eternally or was the invention of the British colonial project, an increasing body of scholarship contends that the construction of modern Hinduism emerged from a complex historical process of consolidation and harmonization that perhaps began in medieval and early modern India, even if it took a distinctive shape under the British Raj.<sup>18</sup> One point that seems certain is that, prior to the medieval period, what we now call Hinduism consisted of many different traditions, which contested as vigorously with one another as with Buddhists or Jains. In part for this reason, my current project is directed to discerning the rough contours of ancient and modern missionary theologies not in "Hinduism" as an abstraction, but more strictly within the Hindu tradition of Advaita Vedānta, from Ādi Śaṅkarācārya to the Ramakrishna Mission, the Chinmaya Mission and other Advaita movements in the modern period.

Such work, I believe, remains deeply relevant to social and political life in India and abroad. Though the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lost its majority to the secular Congress Party in 2004, controversies about conversion, reconversion and the relations of Muslim and Christian minorities with the Hindu majority have continued to generate unrest, notably in the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in the state of Gujarat and the Hindu-Christian riots in

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<sup>17</sup> Sharma, *Hinduism as a Missionary Religion*, 134.

<sup>18</sup> On this point, see especially Andrew Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), as well as Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Orissa in 2007 and 2008.<sup>19</sup> The roots of these conflicts are complex, socially and politically, and theological arguments are unlikely to play a large role in resolving them. But since they are frequently rendered as the result of theological differences by Hindu apologists in particular, it seems appropriate to try to address them theologically, as well. And given the prominence of Advaita in contemporary constructions of Hindu identity, close study of this tradition may, hopefully, also shed some light on the wider debate.

In this essay, I focus on just one, central question from my project: namely, whether and in what respect modern Advaita movements may be said to advocate religious conversion. In the first section, I try to identify what I consider a key methodological defect in the controversy: namely, a univocal concept of conversion.<sup>20</sup> From this methodological discussion, I move to consider several model narratives of Advaita converts, beginning with Swami Dayananda himself, and subsequently, in a third section, reconsider these narratives as examples of what has been called "Sanskritization." Finally, more briefly, I offer a preliminary reflection on some ways that such an Advaita theology of conversion might, in turn, offer resources for reconsidering, reimagining and redescribing conversion to Christ, on the model of that most famous of converts, the Apostle Paul.

In his study of conversion controversies in India, *In Search of Identity*, Sebastian Kim has

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<sup>19</sup> See Martha Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007); Lancy Lobo, "Christianization, Hinduization and Indigenous Revivalism among the Tribals of Gujarat," in *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*, ed. Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010), 211-33; Angana P. Chatterji, *Violent Gods: Hindu Nationalism in India's Present: Narratives from Orissa* (Gurgaon, India: Three Essays Collective, 2009); and Chad M. Bauman, "Identity, Conversion and Violence: Dalits, Adivasis and the 2007-08 Riots in Orissa," in Robinson and Kujur, *Margins of Faith*, 263-90.

pointed out that Hindu and Christian controversialists have, from the colonial period to the present day, tended to talk past one another, due to the radically different frameworks they bring to the question. Christians have, for example, tended to argue from a liberal Enlightenment perspective on human rights, whereas Hindus have appealed to the close relation of Indian culture and Hindu identity and Hindu traditions of religious tolerance.<sup>21</sup> "The Hindu-Christian debate of 1998-99," he writes, "helps us to see that interpretation of religious conversion requires more than an examination of personal changes of religious commitment or the socio-political changes taking place in a community. Study of the debate . . . suggests that it is also due to a clash of two radically different religious frameworks."<sup>22</sup>

Though the substance of my argument in this essay will ultimately support Kim's contention, I have also been struck by the fact that the impasse between Hindu and Christian controversialists can sometimes be traced not only to what differentiates them, but also to what they share: namely, a common narrative structure of aggressive conquest and victimization. Such a structure can be readily discerned by comparing Kuruvachira's work with that of one of his chief interlocutors, Sita Ram Goel. In his magisterial *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters*, for example, Goel offers a valuable documentary archive, with many diverse views on freedom and religious conversion represented through long, largely unedited quotations. This complex history of many voices is, however, framed by a fairly simple narrative structure. Christianity, Goel claims to demonstrate, exists for no other purpose than to advance its "dogma" as "a subterfuge for forging and wielding an organizational weapon for aggression against other people."<sup>23</sup> This represents a state of "permanent war," waged "on non-Christian societies and cultures with a

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<sup>20</sup> Sharma offers a similar critique of the term in *Hinduism as a Missionary Religion*, 134-37.

<sup>21</sup> Kim, *In Search of Identity*, 184-90.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>23</sup> Goel, *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters*, iv-v.

view to conquer and convert them completely.”<sup>24</sup> The preferred weapons of this war are force, symbolized by the sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier, and fraud, symbolized by Roberto De Nobili and his successors in today's Christian ashram movement.<sup>25</sup> The deepest fraud is the Christian preaching of Christ itself, which has no credible basis in theology, spirituality or history.<sup>26</sup> In a companion volume, *Jesus Christ: Artifice for Aggression*, Goel writes that “Nobody can beat the Christian theologians, not even Hegel, when it comes to camouflaging with pompous rhetoric and linguist tricks the complete collapse of their logic.”<sup>27</sup> The deepest shame, of course, is that the Hindus, overwhelmed by the financial resources of Western colonial and neo-colonial powers, lacking the requisite intellectual resources, and intrinsically, self-defeatingly disposed to generosity for others in their midst, repeatedly fall victim to this massive deception.<sup>28</sup> Deliberately echoing Adolf Hitler, Goel dismisses the Christian proclamation as a “big lie,” and its gospels as the “First Nazi Manifesto.”<sup>29</sup>

Kuruvachira writes in part to respond to Goel and other Hindu apologists,<sup>30</sup> and his narrative is more diffuse, distributed across several articles on missionary Hinduism and two books devoted to an analysis of major figures in the development of Hindu nationalism. It nevertheless reveals significant structural affinities with Goel's account, just with different actors in the assigned roles. In this case, the primary aggressors are the Hindu missionaries and nationalists, particularly the VHP, BJP and other affiliates of the Sangh Parivar in the latter half of the twentieth-century. These activists propagate a vision of “one religion, one race and one culture,” fundamentally opposed to religious freedom and motivated by “hatred of persons

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 465-66.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 10-21, 386-404; see also Sita Ram Goel, *Catholic Ashrams: Sannyasins or Swindlers?* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> Goel, *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters*, 446-47, 462; Goel, *Jesus Christ*, vi, 60-66, 90.

<sup>27</sup> Goel, *Jesus Christ*, 65.

<sup>28</sup> Goel, *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters*, 4-6, 49-50, 88-90, 112-14, 236-38, 240-42, 252-53, 324, 367.

<sup>29</sup> Goel, *Jesus Christ*, 68-71, 76-79.

belonging to other faiths and communities.”<sup>31</sup> They advance this agenda, again, through deception, including social service, school programs and curricular reforms, large amounts of funding from international sources, and even the use of “enticement and allurements”—here echoing common accusations against Christian missionaries.<sup>32</sup> The biggest deception, in this case, is the claim not to proselytise or convert in the name of Hinduism: indeed, such a claim, belied by conversionary rites such as *śuddhi* and *parāvartan* in India and the work of the Ramakrishna Mission, Transcendental Meditation and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) abroad, represents nothing but a “big lie.”<sup>33</sup> The worst part of this deception, Kuruvachira goes on to claim, is the extreme vulnerability of its victims, who include oppressed religious minorities, *dalits* and *ādivāsīs* in India; credulous, hospitable and overly accommodating Indian Christians; and even unsuspecting Westerners, whose increasing secularism make them particularly susceptible to missionary Hinduism.<sup>34</sup> Finally, in a recurring leit-motif, Kuruvachira draws frequent parallels between the Hindu nationalists in particular and Adolf Hitler.<sup>35</sup> It is Sita Ram Goel and his Hindu peers who, on this reading, represent the actual Nazis and true perpetrators of violence against those committed to non-violence.<sup>36</sup>

Obviously, my brief overview here does not do full justice to the arguments of either Goel or Kuruvachira, and I judge that none of the claims on either side are entirely without merit. Even the mutual accusations of Nazism clearly have some basis in history: no one can credibly

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<sup>30</sup> See especially Kuruvachira, *Hindu Nationalists*, 192-227; Kuruvachira, *Politicisation of Hindu Religion*, 207-49.

<sup>31</sup> Kuruvachira, *Hindu Nationalists*, 36-37, 122-23, 140, 176-77, 228-35, quotations at 36, 231.

<sup>32</sup> Kuruvachira, “Hinduism as a Missionary Religion,” 271-80, quotation at 279; Kuruvachira, *Hindu Nationalists*, 29-32; Kuruvachira, *Politicisation of Hindu Religion*, 130-77.

<sup>33</sup> Kuruvachira, *Hindu Nationalists*, 162-63; see also *ibid.*, 53; Kuruvachira, *Politicisation of Hindu Religion*, 234-36.

<sup>34</sup> Kuruvachira, “Hinduism as a Missionary Religion,” 280-84; Kuruvachira, *Hindu Nationalists*, 216-17, 228-31; Kuruvachira, *Politicisation of Hindu Religion*, 209, 216-17, 230-31, 237-38; Kuruvachira, “Hinduism’s World Mission,” 55.

<sup>35</sup> E.g. Kuruvachira, *Hindu Nationalists*, 36-37, 122-23, 157-59, 179; Kuruvachira, *Politicisation of Hindu Religion*, xii, 96-103.

<sup>36</sup> See especially Kuruvachira, *Hindu Nationalists*, 222.

deny the roots of Hitler's anti-Semitism in earlier, Christian teachings of anti-Judaism, for example, and leading Hindu nationalists have publicly invoked fascist and Nazi ideals for emulation in India.<sup>37</sup> My point in presenting these two narratives in parallel here, then, is not to discredit them, but simply to illustrate their striking resemblance. Sita Ram Goel and J.

Kuruvachira disagree fundamentally about who should be identified as the real oppressor, the real victims and the real Nazis of this controversy; they do so, however, within a highly coherent, shared interpretive framework with many of the same categories and reference points.

Importantly for my purpose, one point on which Goel and Kuruvachira strongly agree is the fundamental nature of religious conversion itself—or, at least, the nature of conversion in the *other* tradition. Goel draws his working definition from a 1947 Christian pamphlet entitled *The Right to Convert*. According to this pamphlet, conversion consists of “changes of faith, together with the outward expressions that such changes normally involve, and efforts to promote such changes.”<sup>38</sup> Though Goel notes that Christians may describe their missionary work in many different ways, this is mere subterfuge, designed to lure victims into the “missionary trap” of conversion, change of faith and destruction of other religions and cultures.<sup>39</sup> Kuruvachira, as we have seen, accuses Hindu activists of a deeper deceit: to deny their own doctrine of conversion, particularly by disguising it as a mere return of converts to their natural, pre-Christian, pre-Muslim or pre-tribal state. “But upon closer examination,” he writes, “one can understand that the so-called *shuddhi* or 'reconversion' is a semantic misnomer.”

In essence it is another term for religious conversion which involves missionary work,

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<sup>37</sup> In *The Clash Within*, 50-51, 160-63, 276-78, for example, Nussbaum adduces evidence that school textbooks produced under BJP rule presented Hitler as a kind of national hero.

<sup>38</sup> Goel, *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters*, 262.

<sup>39</sup> See Goel, *Jesus Christ*, 74-75, 90-93, quotation at 75; Goel, *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters*, 465-67.

preaching, teaching and the use of specified rituals and ceremonies on the part of Hindus, and acceptance of new doctrines, creeds, practices and ways of life, and a change in mental attitudes on the part of the converted.<sup>40</sup>

Goel and Kuruvachira thus agree on what the theorist Gauri Viswanathan calls the "most transparent" meaning of conversion: namely, a "change of religion."<sup>41</sup>

For simplicity, I will call this "transparent" understanding of conversion "Conversion-Over;" insofar as it envisions religious conversion as a horizontal shift from one faith *over* to another, from one system of doctrines, practices and worldview *over* to another. Conversion-Over is what Christians and Muslims aggressively promote and Hindus, Buddhists and Jews resist and reject, according to Swami Dayananda and Sita Ram Goel, among others. Contrary to such claims, Conversion-Over is what is fully manifest in rites like *śuddhi* and the evangelical work of ISKCON and other missionary movements in the modern age, according to a critic like J. Kuruvachira. But neither asks whether this understanding of Conversion-Over itself may be deeply problematic.

Here, I think, is one place where a study of Advaita missionary movements may have something to offer. At the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, the great Advaitin teacher and missionary Swami Vivekananda famously eschewed such notions of Conversion-Over, declaring, "Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid."<sup>42</sup> Yet, he did not hesitate to initiate disciples and to describe his mission in strongly evangelical terms, including spiritual conquest and even

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<sup>40</sup> Kuruvachira, "Hinduism as a Missionary Religion," 271.

<sup>41</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), xi.

<sup>42</sup> Swami Vivekananda, "Addresses at the Parliament of Religions," in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. I (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama: 1970), 24.

religious conversion.<sup>43</sup> One of his successors in the movement, Swami Budhananda, revels in this apparent contradiction, describing the Ramakrishna Mission as “a missionary organization with an intriguing apathy for proselytization.”<sup>44</sup> For critics, on the other hand, such mixed messages suggest incoherence or, at worst, deliberate deceit.<sup>45</sup> Does the Ramakrishna movement promote conversion, or not?

The answer, I think, is: yes, the movement works for religious conversion, but the form of conversion it propagates is not primarily *Conversion-Over*. I would call it *Conversion-Up*.<sup>46</sup>

To trace the dynamics of *Conversion-Up* in Advaita traditions, I suggest, the interpreter need not and indeed should not focus exclusively on the term “conversion,” much less on rough analogues like spiritual conquest, *śuddhi* or *parāvartan*; one should look instead at these traditions' central doctrines of personal transformation, as they are described and promoted by movement leaders and devotees.<sup>47</sup> Consider, for example, the ubiquitous mantra from *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.3.28, recited often after teaching in the Ramakrishna Mission and many other modern Hindu settings:

*asato mā sadgamaya//tamaso mā jyotirgamaya//mṛtyormā amṛtam gamaya*

“Lead [us] from the unreal to the real, from darkness to light, from death to immortality.”

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<sup>43</sup> See especially Mathew, 134-40; and Paul Hacker, “Vivekananda's Religious Nationalism,” in *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedānta*, ed. Wilhelm Halbfass (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 319-36.

<sup>44</sup> Swami Budhananda, *The Ramakrishna Movement: Its Meaning for Mankind* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1980, 1994), 38.

<sup>45</sup> E.g. Thomas, *Hinduism Invades America*, 118-19; Jackson, *Vedānta for the West*, 74; and Kuruvachira, *Hindu Nationalists*, esp. 52-56, 60-61.

<sup>46</sup> Though I did not know it at the time that I formulated this language, this distinction was anticipated by Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan and T.M.P. Mahadevan, the latter of whom distinguished between “horizontal” and “vertical” conversion to make sense of the life and teaching of Mohandas K. Gandhi. See Sharma, *Hinduism as a Missionary Religion*, 58, 151n.

<sup>47</sup> See also Plamthodathil S. Jacob, “Hindu and Christian: Conversions and Transformations,” in *Conversion in a Pluralistic Context: Perspectives and Perceptions*, ed. Krickwin C. Marak and Plamthodathil S. Jacob (Pune: CMS/ISPCK, 2000), 86-111.

Striking in this single mantra is the strong sense of asymmetry between unreal and real, darkness and light, death and immortality, as well as the concrete possibility of graded progress upwards from the lower to the higher categories. This, at least, is precisely how Swami Vivekananda typically speaks of religious transformation, particularly when situating the non-dual teaching of Advaita in relation to other religious traditions both within and without the Hindu fold. “To the Hindu,” he insisted at the Parliament, “man is not traveling from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth.”<sup>48</sup> Vivekananda did not hesitate to assign definite grades to different stages of development, with Dvaita or theist religious teachings at the lowest level on the ladder, Viśiṣṭādvaita or panentheist teachings in the middle, and Advaita, the perfect non-dualism of innermost self and impersonal God, as the final stage and perfect fulfillment.<sup>49</sup> But this scheme of classification cuts across any given religious tradition as well as between them.<sup>50</sup> Hence, though he strongly encourages personal and collective evolution in the direction of Advaita, the unfolding of such change is primarily *up* from one level of understanding to another, rather than *over* from one tradition to another.

A second, somewhat different example of “Conversion-*Up*” can be found in the works of Swami Dayananda Saraswati, with whom I began this essay. In his letter to the Pope, we recall, Dayananda inveighed against conversion, which he characterizes, as we might by now expect, as a change of belief. “On the basis of reason,” he argues, “no non-verifiable belief is going to fare any better than any other non-verifiable belief. Therefore, according to reason, there is no basis

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<sup>48</sup> Vivekananda, “Addresses,” 17.

<sup>49</sup> See, e.g., Swami Vivekananda, *Swami Vivekananda, What Religion Is: In the Words of Vivekananda*, ed. Swami Vidyatmananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1972), 105-16; Mathew, *Saffron Mission*, 124-25.

<sup>50</sup> See Anantanand Rambachan, “Swami Vivekananda: A Hindu Model for Interreligious Dialogue,” in *Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. M. Darrol Bryant and Frank Flinn (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 9-19; and Francis X. Clooney, “Hindu Views of Religious Others: Implications for Christian Theology,” *Theological Studies* 64 (2003): 320-23.

for conversion in matters of faith.”<sup>51</sup>

What Dayananda does not mention in this letter, however, is that a change between unverifiable beliefs is not the only form of religious change available. In his book *Introduction to Vedanta*, he identifies a far more significant form of transformation in the words of *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1.2.12:

Having analysed the worldly experiences achieved through effort, a mature person gains dispassion, [and] discerns that the uncreated (limitlessness) cannot be produced by action. To know That (the uncreated limitlessness), he, with twigs in hand, should go to a teacher who is learned in the scriptures, and steadfast in the knowledge of himself.<sup>52</sup>

For the eighth-century Advaitin teacher *par excellence*, Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, this scriptural passage marked the transformation of the ideal disciple from a householder life, governed by the performance of Vedic ritual, to renunciant life and the discipline of knowledge. For Dayananda, it reveals a more basic transformation from personal immaturity to personal maturity, from seeking liberation—or, in his terms, “adequacy” (*mokṣa*)—through some material or spiritual change of state to seeking such liberation through knowledge of oneself as the already-liberated, limitless self of all, that is, through the teaching of Advaita Vedānta. He writes:

The mature person recognizes from examination of his own worldly experiences that what he seeks is adequacy, and is able to see that the things for which he has been struggling cannot bring that adequacy . . . . This verse tells what a *mumukṣu*, an informed

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<sup>51</sup> Dayananda, “Conversion is Violence.”

<sup>52</sup> Swami Dayananda, *Introduction to Vedanta: Understanding the Fundamental Problem*, ed. Barbara Thornton

seeker of freedom from limitation should do. An informed seeker knows that his search is for knowledge; he has become a *jijñāsu*, one who desires knowledge.<sup>53</sup>

*Mumukṣus*, seekers for adequacy or freedom from limitation, represent a subcategory within the broader category of all restless, unsatisfied human beings; and an informed seeker (*jijñāsu*) or simply “mature person” (*brāhmaṇa*), who understands that true freedom comes only through self-knowledge, represents a distinctive subcategory of *mumukṣu*. The only relevant factor is one's level of personal maturity. Whether one happens to be Christian or Muslim or Hindu is not even judged worthy of mention.

Now, one could argue—rightly—that both Vivekananda and Dayananda construct their arguments within frameworks that are already recognizably Hindu. In a number of places Vivekananda does seem identify the ultimate fulfillment of all religions in Advaita with their ultimate fulfillment in Hinduism, and, as we shall see, Dayananda does not hesitate to specify the sole authentic source of liberating self-knowledge with the Hindu *Upaniṣads*. But neither of these Advaita teachers hesitates to reinterpret Christian or other religious teachings to show how they, too, might communicate the liberating truth of self-knowledge.<sup>54</sup> The truly significant movement is not *over*; it's *up*.

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(New Delhi: Vision Books, 1989, 1997), 58.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 59. See also the fuller discussions in Ibid., 30-44, and Swami Dayananda, *The Value of Values* (Saylorsburg, PA: Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, 1993), 85-90.

<sup>54</sup> E.g., Swami Vivekananda, “Great Spiritual Teachers of the World,” in *Vivekananda World Teacher: His Teachings on the Spiritual Unity of Humankind*, ed. Swami Adiswarananda (Woodstock, VT, and New York: Skylight Paths and Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York, 2006), 107-75; Anantanand Rambachan, “Interpreting Another Tradition: Vivekananda on Christ and Christianity,” *Anima* 20 (1994): 127-33; Lasa Donnerberg, ed., *A Vedantin's View of Christian Concepts: A Dialog between Swami Dayananda Saraswati and Professor Helmut Girndt* (Saylorsburg, PA: Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, 1998).

Thus far, I have hopefully accomplished two things. I have suggested that part of the controversy between some Christians and some Hindus on conversion may stem from their shared, univocal understanding of this term as “Conversion-*Over*,” conversion from one religious tradition over to another, and I have alluded briefly to an alternative understanding—“Conversion-*Up*”—that seems more typical of the Advaita mission movements that represent the major focus of my own study. Ultimately, however, an adequate understanding of conversion cannot be satisfied with particular doctrines about religious transformation. Such doctrines should, ideally, take flesh and be tested against the narratives of actual converts. Indeed, Talal Asad suggests that such narratives may represent one way through the cultural and Christian freight carried by the term conversion itself, reflecting that “if one wishes to avoid the danger of confusing word with concept and concept with practice, it would be better to say that in studying conversion, one was dealing with the narratives by which people apprehended and described a radical change in their lives.”<sup>55</sup> So, in this section, I offer three brief narratives of radical change. These narratives are drawn from published, first and third person accounts of two named individuals associated with the Chinmaya Mission and Ramakrishna Mission, respectively, and one composite of various practitioners of Transcendental Meditation.

We begin this survey with a contemporary Advaitin who has already occupied much of our attention thus far: Natarajan Iyer, also known as Swami Dayananda Saraswati.<sup>56</sup> Growing up in rural Tamil Nadu in the turbulent 1930s and 1940s, Natarajan Iyer's early life was

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<sup>55</sup> Talal Asad, “Comments on Conversion,” in *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity*, ed. Peter van der Veer (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 266.

<sup>56</sup> Padma Narasimhan, *Swami Dayananda Saraswati: Traditional Teacher of Brahma Vidyā* (Madras: TT. Maps and Publications, n.d.).

characterized by a paradoxical combination of cool dispassion in the face of his father's death and fierce passion to defend the Hindu tradition from the attacks of teachers and schoolmates associated with the anti-religious Dravidian movement.<sup>57</sup> He continued to fight the Dravidians as a young journalist, first writing for the *Dhārmika Hindu* and then, after a brief stint with the Indian Air Force, seeking a more permanent position with the *Indian Express*.

The decisive moment in his journey came in 1952, when he attended a 41-day *Jñāna Yajña*, a public exposition of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* by the popular post-Independence teacher Swami Chinmayananda. Dayananda's biographer describes the transformation that followed:

Thereafter, Natarajan's life took a totally different turn. He joined the *Veda-Pathasālā* to learn chanting of the *Vedaḥs*. [Swami Chinmayananda] had announced that he was coming back the following year and the text would be *Taittirīya-Upaniṣad*. Natarajan was eager to learn the chanting of the *Upaniṣad*, before Swamiji came back. He also joined a Saṃskṛtam school to become proficient in Samskrtam, the language of the *Upaniṣads* . . . He was no longer interested in the job with the *Indian Express*. He waited only for Chinmayananda to come back.<sup>58</sup>

Natarajan quickly moved up the ranks of the Chinmaya Mission, first as a typist, then as a brahmacharin and editor of the fortnightly Mission publication *Tyagi*, and then, upon his initiation into renunciant life in 1962, as Swami Dayananda Saraswati. Now an authorized teacher in the tradition, Dayananda continued editorial work on various Mission publications, took up leadership for the resident program at the newly established Sandeepany Sadhanalaya in Bombay

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 9-11.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

and, in 1979, founded the first resident program in the United States, at Sandeepany West in Piercy, California.<sup>59</sup>

If the course at Piercy was the high point of Dayananda's career at the Chinmaya Mission, however, it was also the end of it: after the course, he severed his relationship with the Mission and established his own centers in Rishikesh and Coimbatore in India and in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania in the U.S. under the general title Arsha Vidya Pitham.<sup>60</sup> The roots of this split can be traced back to a period of intense personal conflict and doubt in the early 1960s, when Dayananda experienced what might be termed a second conversion. During this period, he radically called into question what he calls the “prevalent teaching” that “*Vedāntaḥ* was a theory and that we have to practise certain things to gain experience of *Ātmā*.”<sup>61</sup> Dayananda scrambled to understand the mystic teachings of Ramana Maharshi and J. Krishnamurty, as well as William Blake, William James and Zen Buddhism. A chance encounter with one Swami Pranavananda led him to dismiss Chinmayananda's theory of liberation through the destruction of *vāsanās* in favor of what he regarded as a more traditional emphasis upon the revealed word of the *Upaniṣads*, the *śabda-pramāṇam* or verbal means of liberating self-knowledge. “No more is *Vedāntaḥ* a theory,” he writes. “No more a philosophy. Just as the eyes are the *Pramāṇam* to see form and colour, *Vedāntaḥ* is the direct means of knowledge for me to remove my ignorance of *Ātmā* as *Brahma* . . . Afterwards, I had to go through the whole *Vedāntaḥ* again. I now had the key.”<sup>62</sup> This he eventually did under the tutelage of another Advaitin teacher in Rishikesh, and the difference in teaching he acquired there eventually led him entirely out of the Chinmaya movement.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 65-67, 89-106.

<sup>60</sup> See especially *ibid.*, 108.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 58.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 61. This reassertion of scriptural testimony and its consequences in the practice of Advaita in the centers founded by Swami Dayananda are developed at greater length in Neil Dalal, “Contemplative Practice and Textual

Swami Dayananda's narrative does not relate a change of faith to or from "Hinduism," as such: he starts as a self-identified Hindu and, at least so far, ends as one. Rather, his is a Conversion-*Up* or, perhaps better, a Conversion *Up-and-Up*. Dayananda starts as a Brahminical Hindu in a general sense, and this Hinduism is twice specified and purified in ostensibly life-changing ways: first, through the teaching of the Chinmaya Mission and, subsequently, through what he would identify as the "traditional teaching" of Advaita Vedānta, sharply distinguished from the deficient interpretations of modern Advaita teachers like Swami Vivekananda and his own teacher Chinmayananda.<sup>63</sup> In the terms of Vivekananda, Dayananda moves not from falsehood to truth, but from lower truth to higher truth.

At quite the other end of the spectrum, at least at first sight, lie the narratives of TM members and other Western practitioners of the "Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements" surveyed by Lola Williamson in her study *Transcendent in America*. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1914-2008), the founder of Transcendental Meditation, consistently presented TM as a simple meditation technique compatible with adherence to any authentic religion; there is, at least in theory, no question of conversion to or from the Advaita tradition or the teaching of the *Upanisads* through this meditative practice. This, at least, is certainly how many practitioners understand the TM technique. At the same time, the TM scholar Cynthia Humes has argued that, despite all statements to the contrary, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi always intended to spread the Advaita teaching in the form that he had acquired it from his own teacher Guru Dev.<sup>64</sup> Williamson herself, though she more strongly emphasizes features that TM shares with other less securely Advaita meditation movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, argues that these movements should

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Agency in Advaita Vedanta," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 21 (2009): 15-27.

<sup>63</sup> See especially his short, mildly polemical pamphlet, *The Teaching Tradition of Advaita Vedānta* (Saylorsburg, PA: Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, 1993), which is reprinted as a fitting conclusion to Dayananda's biography in Narasimhan, *Swami Dayananda Saraswati*, 213-30.

<sup>64</sup> See especially Cynthia Ann Humes, "Maharishi Mahesh Yogi: Beyond the TM Technique," in *Gurus in America*,

be regarded collectively as religion in a robust sense, with a distinctive, shared worldview, ethics, ritual practices and cosmology.<sup>65</sup>

With the arguments of Humes and Williamson in mind, it perhaps makes sense that, despite its ostensible reduction to a simple meditation technique, the narratives of some TM practitioners fit the pattern of "Conversion-Over" quite closely. One disciple Williamson interviewed, for example, described entry into TM in terms that deliberately echo the idiom of Christian discipleship:

When Maharishi came to the course, it was the first time I'd seen him in person. The only thing I could think when I saw him was that I knew exactly what Peter and James and John felt like when Jesus walked by them and said, "Come, follow me." There was a presence and a silence that was so loud, and I just felt that this was my path, and I knew without a doubt that I should follow him.<sup>66</sup>

We can also note that the first TM course, which trains new practitioners in the meditation technique and introduces them to the fundamentals of TM, includes ritual initiation and the reception of a personal mantra. Williamson describes her own initiation experience as follows:

After a second introductory lecture, I was asked to bring a flower and a clean white handkerchief on the day of initiation. When I entered the room where instruction was to occur, gifts in hand, I was greeted by a strong waft of incense. I saw an altar, draped in

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ed. Thomas A. Forsthoefel and Cynthia Ann Humes (Albany, NY: Statu University of New York Press, 2005), 66-67.

<sup>65</sup> Lola Williamson, *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements As New Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 12-14, 186-213, 226-28.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

white, adorned with flowers and a picture of Guru Dev. I listened, standing next to my instructor, as he performed a ceremony, singing in Sanskrit, waving incense, and offering the flower and cloth I had brought, along with other items, to the picture of Guru Dev. At the end of the ceremony, I was asked to kneel in front of the altar . . . I felt as though my life had taken a sharp turnabout, and I was happy with the new direction.<sup>67</sup>

Though both Williamson and some of her sources eventually became more critical of TM, she notes that the majority of her subjects continue to find in these movements the “faith and the inner peace and stability needed to meet the challenges of living and dying.”<sup>68</sup> Having entered a new social and religious world defined by the movement, they feel no pressing need to look back.

This does not, however, tell the whole story. Williamson also observes that, while some members of these meditation movements do leave their Christian or Jewish roots behind, others find ways to reintegrate these roots into their new worldview. One Catholic TM practitioner, for example, reports:

I love taking communion. It's like a yajña [Vedic fire ceremony]. For years I thought communion was kind of silly. But I don't approach it from an intellectual standpoint anymore . . . I don't know how to relate all the Vedic things I've learned like Shiva and Vishnu and Brahma and the different aspects of Mother Divine and the Absolute and the supreme value of the relative. I don't know how to relate all that to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. But it doesn't matter. Every culture expresses divinity in a different way—whether the tree is divine, or Christ is divine, or God in the abstract is divine, or Mother

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 212.

Divine is divine. It's all the same. In a way, all those different forms are part of the illusion.<sup>69</sup>

In another, remarkable example, a TM practitioner named Donna actually converts to Catholicism, due in part to her conviction that Catholic teachings on Mary reflect “all this Mother Divine stuff on the Hindu level.”<sup>70</sup> In neither case, however, do these arguments for continued practice or even conversion to Catholicism appear strongly to reflect mainstream Christian notions of faith and conversion. Indeed, it could be argued that the Advaita teaching of TM—combined with more generic beliefs about Hindu cosmology and popular psychology—has come to govern these practitioners' relation to Christianity, rather than the other way around, particularly when distinctively Christian beliefs and practices are reduced to the status of mere “different forms” in the cosmic “illusion” of relative existence.<sup>71</sup> Thus C.V. Mathew describes conversion in TM as a “positional conversion,” whereby the practice of TM functions “to uncover that which is hidden in other religions or to restore that which has been lost.”<sup>72</sup>

For our last conversion narrative, and perhaps our most conventional one, we turn back to the Ramakrishna Mission and the story of the Hindu theologian Jeffery D. Long, as related in the first chapter of his monograph, *A Vision for Hinduism*.<sup>73</sup> Long self-consciously identifies himself as a “*religious Hindu*” who grew up “the only child of middle class, Roman Catholic parents” in small-town Missouri.<sup>74</sup> Like Swami Dayananda, Long lost his father at a young age, but for him this raised many questions and provoked a “dark night of the soul” that would unfold gradually

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>71</sup> See the discussion in *ibid.*, 193, 205-6.

<sup>72</sup> Mathew, *Saffron Mission*, 266.

<sup>73</sup> Jeffery D. Long, *A Vision for Hinduism: Beyond Hindu Nationalism* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 5.

into his “formal affiliation to Hinduism, and eventually to the Ramakrishna tradition.”<sup>75</sup> Having stumbled across a copy of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* at a local flea market, his young adulthood was marked by sustained study of Hindu texts and traditions, culminating in his decision to abandon a vocation to the Catholic priesthood and join an informal Hindu meditation and *satsang* group.<sup>76</sup> His commitment was later formalized through ritual purification and investiture with a sacred thread as a condition of marriage with a Hindu partner and then, still later, by taking *dīkṣā* or formal initiation with a guru of the Ramakrishna Order.<sup>77</sup> Unlike the TM practitioners interviewed by Williamson, Long regards these rites as formal recognition of a conversion he expresses in explicitly theological and doctrinal terms, rooted in core convictions about *karma* and rebirth, on the one hand, and the acceptance of religious pluralism, on the other.<sup>78</sup> This would seem, more than any of the other narratives treated thus far, to represent a rather straightforward example of “Conversion-Over.”

But here again the evidence is not all of one piece. First of all, Long is explicitly reluctant to describe his narrative as a conversion *from* Catholicism to Hinduism. It represents, instead, a further development and expansion of his religious vision:

my worldview was transformed—a process which has not ended, even though my most basic beliefs have remained quite stable. As a characterization of this process, I think it would be more correct to say that my originally Catholic worldview gradually *expanded*, rather than that I *switched* worldviews at some discernible point in time. My attitude toward the Catholic Church is one of gratitude for my early spiritual formation, which

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 7-8, 13.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 10-12.

ultimately prepared me for Hinduism. I am not the stereotypical, angry ex-Catholic.<sup>79</sup>

This, I would contend, is the language of “Conversion-*Up*.” Perhaps even more interestingly, despite his affiliation with the Ramakrishna Mission, Long honors the Advaita foundation of this movement in a somewhat paradoxical way: he “*Out-Ups*” Swami Vivekananda, reaching above and behind the great teacher to Vivekananda’s own teacher, Sri Ramakrishna, in order to highlight the modern, composite character of the movement as an experientialist “synthesis of all previous forms of Vedānta.”<sup>80</sup> For Long the convert and theologian, it is deeply significant that the Ramakrishna Mission is not merely an Advaita mission, but also one capable of integrating wisdom from many different sources, Hindu or otherwise. His is, again, a “Conversion-*Up*,” *up* to Swami Vivekananda's Advaita and even beyond it.

These few, selected narratives do little more than scratch the surface, but they are suggestive of broader patterns.<sup>81</sup> First of all, as Reinhart Hummel concluded from his more general study some thirty years ago, conversion in these movements does not easily fit a stereotypically “Christian” model, if such a thing exists at all; rather, the template itself takes on a new shape as it is applied to the spread of Advaita Vedānta through movements like the Ramakrishna Mission, the Chinmaya Mission and TM, a template I have termed, in a very preliminary way, as “Conversion-*Up*.” It is not that the narratives are entirely unrecognizable: one can readily imagine converts to Christianity or other traditions who eventually exceed the fervor or orthodoxy of those who converted them, like Swami Dayananda; who have complex,

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>81</sup> Jackson, *Vedanta for the West*, 88-99, building on Thomas (116-19), offers a more systematic survey of Western converts to Vedanta Societies in the United States and attempts to generalize some common features, such as upper middle-class, Protestant backgrounds, self-identification as “spiritual seekers,” usually female and often foreign born. See also Séan Carey, “Initiation into Monkhood in the Ramakrishna Mission,” in *Hinduism in Great Britain: The Perpetuation of Religion in an Alien Cultural Milieu*, ed. Richard Burghart (London: Tavistock, 1987), 135-39.

hybrid religious identities like the practitioners of TM; or who, like Long, are eventually led by their study of philosophy or theology to challenge some core tenets of their adopted faith. All of these stories of radical personal change, moreover, invariably implicate their tellers in changes of other, more institutional varieties, in and out of the Chinmaya Mission, in and through transformative experiences of *pūjā*, rites of initiation and even the Christian Eucharist, radically reconfigured in light of Advaita. Nevertheless, these narratives do not fit easily into a simple pattern of “Conversion-Over.” We need a more complex interpretative framework, and one more well-suited to Advaita Vedānta in its wide variety of ancient and modern forms.

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So far, I have been working with only two categories, Conversion-Over and Conversion-Up. These categories are simplistic by design, intended to interrupt our presumption that, when we speak of conversion, we are speaking of just one thing. Recall that Swami Dayananda and Sita Ram Goel, among many others, claim that Hindus do not convert; J. Kuruvachira and C.V. Mathew say that they do. Leaving to the side more reactive, defensive measures like *śuddhi*—which leaders like Swami Vivekananda and Swami Chinmayananda sometimes endorsed, but never made primary to their own teaching and preaching—I would contend that Kuruvachira and Mathew are correct in saying that missionary organizations like the Ramakrishna Mission and even Dayananda's Arsha Vidya Pitham do work for conversion, but that Goel and Dayananda are also partially justified in their contention that the work of these traditions is not conversion in the usual sense. The conversions they work for are qualitatively distinct, not directly assimilable to “religious conversion” as commonly understood by modern Advaitins and Christians alike.

“Conversion-Up,” of course, only takes us so far in describing these distinctive features.

Hence, in this section, I would like to explore the concept of "Sanskritization" as a further resource. As I noted briefly in my introduction to this essay, Mathew introduces the interrelated themes of "Sanskritization," "Aryanization" and "Brahminization" to give his account of mission and conversion in modern Hinduism interpretative heft. Drawing on the work of Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, the anthropologist M.N. Srinivas, and an anonymous 1913 article from *The Hindu Review*, Mathew suggests that, as a missionary paradigm, "Sanskritization" involves a process of cultural transformation and, in Radhakrishnan's terms, the "gradual civilising" of lower castes, tribal communities and other cultures of South and Southeast Asia according to an ideal of perfect Brahminhood.<sup>82</sup> For Mathew, such a paradigm provides a broad historical background and justification for inquiry into modern Hindu missionary movements, as well as serving a functional role for analyzing these movements' governing ideologies. That is, the notion of Sanskritization functions primarily to illustrate *that* ancient and modern Hinduism possesses its own indigenous models of mission and conversion, and only secondarily to describe *how* it might render such models conceptually distinct.

As a first step in this direction, we can note that modern, critical theories of Sanskritization do not entirely support the simple, hierarchical image propounded by Radhakrishnan. When Srinivas employed the principle in his anthropological work, for example, he used it to describe not a missionary ideology, but a dynamic process by which caste groups self-consciously emulate Brahmin or other high-caste practices in order to advance their social status, a process akin to—if sometimes in tension with—the process of Westernization under the British Raj.<sup>83</sup> Like Westernization, this transformation never flowed in only one direction:

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<sup>82</sup> Mathew, *Saffron Mission*, 37-40.

<sup>83</sup> M.N. Srinivas, "A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization," in *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962), 42-62; idem., "The Cohesive Role of Sanskritization," in *The Oxford India Srinivas* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 221-35.

Throughout Indian history Sanskrit Hinduism has absorbed local and folk elements and their presence makes easier the further absorption of similar elements. The absorption is done in such a way that there is a continuity between the folk and the theological or philosophical levels, and this makes possible both gradual transformation of the folk layer, as well as the ‘vulgarization’ of the theological layer.<sup>84</sup>

Importantly for Srinivas's analysis, Sanskritization was only rarely promoted by Brahmins, who often viewed such cultural processes as a threat to their privilege. Rather, the primary agents were those who wanted to increase their own status, and its specific shape varied enormously, depending upon local context, so much so that Srinivas eventually attempted to generalize the concept and to divest it of any necessary, substantive connection with Brahminism.<sup>85</sup>

Sheldon Pollock's recent work on the emergence of a “Sanskrit Cosmopolis” in South and Southeast Asia between 300 and 1300 represents another insightful resource in this regard.<sup>86</sup> Pollock traces a process of Sanskritization in a very literal sense: namely, the expansion of Sanskrit from its earlier liturgical and scholastic domains to the realm of the public and the political, specifically in the proliferation of Sanskrit political inscriptions and the allied development of classical poetic forms (*kāvya*). Sharply critical of functionalist approaches—including that of Srinivas—that attempt to explain the spread of such cultural forms by appealing to their high status or their utility as tools of social legitimation, Pollock instead appeals directly

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<sup>84</sup> Srinivas, “Sanskritization and Westernization,” 60.

<sup>85</sup> See Vineeta Sinha, “Problematizing Received Categories: Revisiting 'Folk Hinduism' and 'Sanskritization.’” *Current Sociology* 54 (2006): 100-103.

<sup>86</sup> For the purposes of this essay, I have drawn my exposition of Pollock's theory from his article “The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300-1300: Transculturation, Vernacularization and the Question of Ideology,” in *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit*, ed. Jan E.M. Houben (Leiden, New York and Köln: E.J. Brill, 1996). See also his fuller development of this argument in Sheldon I. Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in*

to the intrinsic “textuality” of classical Sanskrit as “a language of cosmopolitan stature.”<sup>87</sup> Certain features of this liturgical language, he claims, rendered it particularly suitable for bestowing a “permanent, indeed eternal, expression” upon the fame of political rulers: the stability of its grammar, its aesthetic qualities of metaphor and other figures of sense, its capacity “to interpret, supplement, [and] reveal reality,” “to make the real somehow surreal by poetry.”<sup>88</sup> This cultural achievement was never imposed through coercive power or any unified religious vision; it spread by means of “some far less obvious process of cultural imitation and borrowing,” a process co-constitutive with the emergence of the textual form itself.<sup>89</sup> Contrary to the implicit and explicit claims made through the Sanskrit idiom in this period, moreover, this achievement was historically contingent from beginning to end, and it was emphatically not eternal: for Sanskrit was eventually displaced by various vernaculars.

Neither Srinivas nor Pollock is beyond reproach, of course,<sup>90</sup> and it would be difficult if not impossible to argue that modern Advaita mission movements engage directly in one or another process of literal Sanskritization.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, both theorists would seem seriously to challenge any use of this concept in terms of deliberate propagation, emphasizing as they do the relative autonomy and self-conscious patterns of imitation of those who become “Sanskritized.”

Perhaps ironically, however, I would contend that it is precisely such emphases on autonomy and imitation that make these notions of Sanskritization useful metaphors for the

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*Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>87</sup> Pollock, “Sanskrit Cosmopolis,” 239, 243.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-17, 238-43, quotations at 240, 212, 242.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>90</sup> For criticisms of Srinivas, see Pollock, *Language of the Gods*, 513-14, and Sinha, “Problematizing Received Categories,” 103-109; on Pollock, see David Shulman, “Review Essay: *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* by Sheldon Pollock,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 66 (2007): 819-73; and Rebecca Gould, “How Newness Enters the World: The Methodology of Sheldon Pollock,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28 (2008): 533-559.

<sup>91</sup> Though Swami Vivekananda and other modern Hindus did call for greater education in Sanskrit and, in some cases, Hindi as a Sanskritic language suitable for the nation of India. See Corstiaan J.G. van der Burg, “The Place of Sanskrit in Neo-Hindu Ideologies: From Religious Reform to National Awakening,” in Houben, *Ideology and Status*

processes of transformation revealed in the narratives of Swami Dayananda, practitioners of TM, Jeffery Long and other such converts, as well as the visions of movement leaders themselves.

Consider, for example, Swami Chinmayananda's description of the spread of Hinduism throughout Asia in his important work, *A Manual of Self-Unfoldment*:

One of the particularities which deserves mention is that the Hindus never thrust their religion forcibly or by trickery on other people. Peace, love, compassion, sympathy and service were their watchwords. That point will be more significant later on when the actual details of the Hindu religion are discussed. The people of the foreign countries welcomed and hailed the superior culture of the Hindus. Thus one may say that Hinduism is the mother of civilisation in the East . . . This great religion of the Hindus is a Mighty force for universal good. That is why this religion has had such a glorious and brilliant record of past achievements and why the Hindus believe that their religion is destined for a greater and more glorious future.<sup>92</sup>

As he promises, Chinmayananda clarifies what he means by the Hindu “religion” a few pages further along: it is, of course, none other than Advaita Vedānta, the universal non-dual teaching of the Hindu *Upaniṣads* and epics, as well as the Christian Bible and all authentic scriptures worldwide.<sup>93</sup> Because of its universality, its glory and its self-evident superiority, this religion need not be “thrust” on other people by force or deceit. The primary agency for its transmission lies not with its preachers or teachers, but with those who recognize its intrinsic value and

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*of Sanskrit*, 367-81.

<sup>92</sup> Swami Chinmayananda, *A Manual of Self-Unfoldment* (Mumbai: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 1975, 2000), 159.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 159-66.

embrace it as their own.

Later in the same volume, in a description of the Study Groups that would become one of the signature features of the Chinmaya Mission, a question is raised: “Study Group. Is it a subtle means of conversion to the Hindu faith?” To this, the authors give the following response:

Not at all. Vedanta is not sectarian in appeal. As experienced by a number of members of study groups all over the world, this study makes one a better individual irrespective of whatever faith he or she may belong to. Vedanta does not seek converts. It is a great catalyst for a better understanding and self integration. Its appeal is to the intellect and its application is universal. Hence is it used for self-improvement and never for conversion.<sup>94</sup>

The language of “self-improvement,” like Swami Chinmayananda's idiom of “civilization,” readily evokes images of “Conversion-*Up*” and Sanskritization, as I have developed them here. Just as Srinivas distinguished between Sanskritic theology or philosophy at one level and folk religion at another, so also here the teaching of Vedānta is situated at a higher level relative to participants' individual faith positions, such that it can serve as a catalyst for their intellectual understanding and ever greater personal integration. Potential disciples—to whom this paragraph is evidently directed—need not fear that they will be asked to become Hindu. Indeed, they need never be so asked, because the language of the teaching is universal, eternal and intrinsically oriented to, in Pollock's terms, interpret, supplement and reveal new dimensions of participants' lives. Participation in study groups simply “makes one a better individual.” The point is not to convert; it is to become reinterpreted, refined, reinscribed in the higher teaching of

Advaita. In a word: Sanskritized.

Social theorists would no doubt remind us that this eternal, universal teaching is also—no less than Pollock's Sanskrit cosmopolis—historically contingent, and, as it spreads to new contexts through deliberate propagation or self-conscious imitation, it undergoes continuous transformation and reveals its inevitably hybrid, constructed character.<sup>95</sup> And they would be right to do so. At the same time, historical and cultural contingency are not the unique prerogative of Hindu movements: modern Christianity and indeed modern notions of “conversion” themselves are no less hybrid or constructed in their historical development.<sup>96</sup> For the theologian, then, recognition of historical contingency does not excuse one from direct engagement. In the present case, I would suggest, such engagement entails a renewed consideration of the dynamics of religious conversion and, at least in part, its possible reimagination in terms of Sanskritization.

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This essay has attempted to address some aspects of conversion controversies in India by transposing the terms of the debate—above all, by transposing the meaning of its main referent, conversion. Whether one prefers the language of “Conversion-*Up*” or Sanskritization, I contend that modern Advaita missionary movements do advance coherent, intelligible visions of religious

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<sup>94</sup> Chinmayananda, *Manual*, 188.

<sup>95</sup> See Pollock, “Sanskrit Cosmopolis,” 243-47. A highly insightful treatment of these and other Hindu movements precisely in terms of the emergence of transcultural discursive forms and cosmopolitan vernaculars is available in Srinivas Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language*, Translation/Transnation (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), as well as the related arguments in Rashmi Luthra, “The Formation of Interpretive Communities in the Hindu Diaspora,” in *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, ed. Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 2001) and Agehananda Bharati's now classic article “The Hindu Renaissance and its Apologetic Patterns,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 29 (1969-70): 267-87.

<sup>96</sup> See, for example, the collection of essays in van der Veer, *Conversion to Modernities*, and Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

transformation and radical change no less challenging than Christian theologies of conversion, albeit challenging in a recognizably different way, specific to the Advaita teaching. Throughout the paper, moreover, I have presented this difference as a categorical one, between Christian or conventional understandings of “Conversion-*Over*” and distinctively Advaita theologies of self-improvement, maturation, Sanskritization and “Conversion-*Up*.”

But, this side of the eschaton, things are never so easy. In discussing the narratives of Dayananda, Long and various practitioners of TM, I noted several places where conversion in these traditions did seem to involve a change of faith and movement from one religious tradition over to another, in whole or in part. So too most Christian theologians would contend that conversion to Christ is, first and foremost, a “Conversion-*Up*” from lower to higher, from preparation to fulfillment. St. Augustine of Hippo famously described conversion, including his own, in terms of both mystical ascent and God's immediate, empowering bestowal of a new will, and J. Kuruvachira himself casts conversion in primarily vertical, spiritual terms. “None can convert another person,” he insists, “. . . What people generally call 'conversion' is transformation of the interior disposition of a person where no one has access except the person concerned and the Divine.”<sup>97</sup> The key question, therefore, may not be whether one tradition upholds one form of conversion while another upholds another form of conversion: both traditions include elements of both. The most salient differences may have to do with different understandings about what counts as *Up* in each tradition, and, perhaps even more importantly, the precise relation between and among the dynamics *Over*, *Up*, and their consequences in terms of both interior development and social filiation. Perhaps a more exact approximation would be to describe an idealized Christian theology of conversion as *Over-and-Up*, whereby one enters the religious community as a step in the ascent to God, and its Advaita parallel as *Up-and-*

*Through*, whereby the upward movement begins in one’s own tradition and takes one through this and possibly other traditions to the highest, universal truth. Whether this particular formulation succeeds or fails, it seems clear that a robust encounter with Advaita will require, on the Christian side of the conversation, a reexamination of the common teaching that the second movement of “Conversion-*Up*” implies and necessitates the first movement of “Conversion-*Over*,” that authentic conversion to Christ requires baptism and explicit religious identification with the Christian church.

Even here, it may be possible to develop a more nuanced understanding and open some room for dialogue. One of the great values of comparative inquiry is its power to unsettle and de-naturalize previously settled meanings in any particular tradition.<sup>98</sup> In this case, I would suggest, study of modern Advaita missionary movements may invite a re-assessment of that great convert and evangelist *par excellence*, whom Sita Ram Goel, quoting Ram Swarup, labeled “a menace for centuries to come”: namely, the Apostle Paul.<sup>99</sup> In a 2010 article entitled “Judaizing the Nations,” the New Testament scholar Paula Fredriksen has attempted to challenge many common tropes of Pauline scholarship, including above all the notion that Paul preached a “law-free gospel.”<sup>100</sup> In line with the so-called “New Perspective” inaugurated by E.P. Sanders,<sup>101</sup> Fredriksen argues for the thoroughly Jewish and thoroughly Hellenistic character of Paul’s preaching, particularly with regard to the pagans to whom he communicated his gospel. Like

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<sup>97</sup> Kuruvachira, *Politicisation of Religion*, 210.

<sup>98</sup> See especially Francis X. Clooney, “Reading the World in Christ: From Comparison to Inclusivism,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D’Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 63-80; and Reid B. Locklin and Hugh Nicholson, “The Return of Comparative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78 (2010): 477-514.

<sup>99</sup> Goel, *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters*, 417.

<sup>100</sup> Paula Fredriksen, “Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul’s Gospel,” *New Testament Studies* 56 (2010): 232-52.

<sup>101</sup> See, e.g. E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); *Paul, Past Masters* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and the further development and clarification of these themes in James D.G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

most people in the Hellenistic world, she argues, Paul fully identified religious identity with ethnic identity, albeit without excluding considerable permeability in practice and the rare conversion of pagans to Judaism; like many apocalyptic Jews, however, he also envisioned pagans turning to the Jewish God at the end of time, becoming “ex-pagan pagans” without thereby also becoming Jews.<sup>102</sup>

So also for Paul's communities of pagans baptized into the new age inaugurated by Christ and awaiting its imminent fulfillment. These pagans were Judaized in some key respects, receiving spiritual adoption as children of Abraham, attaining new status as a 'new temple' inhabited by the Spirit of God, and, importantly, giving up worship of other gods. But these pagans did not become Jews, and Paul continued to insist strongly on the enduring importance of ethnic Jews, the people Israel and the Jerusalem Temple.<sup>103</sup> In a strict sense of “Conversion-Over,” then, on Fredriksen's reading, Paul never converted, and neither did the pagans reborn in Christ—at least, not in any sense that Paul and other first-century Mediterraneans would have recognized as *conversion*. Jews remained Jews, pagans remained pagans, yet both received a spirit of new life through their shared participation in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. The movement of conversion is, again, not *Over* but *Up*, possibly even *Up-and-Through*. This first generation of Christians consisted, we might say, of both Jews and pagans, distinguished by religious identity but united by what we might call their shared *Christianization*.

Now, Fredriksen notes that this distinctive, highly fluid situation only obtained so long as members of the early Jesus movement expected an immediate, “fast approaching eschatological solution,” and there is no obvious way to draw a straight line from this past to the present.<sup>104</sup> But Christians have always held the experience of the first generation as normative in some respects,

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<sup>102</sup> Fredriksen, “Judaizing the Nations,” 234-43, quotation at 242.

<sup>103</sup> See especially *ibid.*, 248-49.

so it seems appropriate to ask what significance such an historical construction of Paul's gospel, should it be granted, might hold for contemporary Christian practice and Hindu-Christian dialogue.

Maximally, I suggest, the model of Paul and the earliest members of the Jesus movement recommends a renewed exploration of the possibilities of Christian mission in the service of what might be called authentic Christianization without conversion—without, that is, the strict necessity of *Conversion-Over*. This is not, in itself, a new idea at all: in the Indian context, such prominent theologians as Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, Kaj Baago, M.M. Thomas and Raimundo Panikkar have attempted to imagine radically new configurations between Christ, Christianity, and Hindu traditions like Advaita Vedānta.<sup>105</sup> But it is also not a new idea in a much deeper sense. For the interpretive efforts of such bold thinkers represent not only an innovation in the tradition, but also a kind of return to the questions of an earlier age.

More modestly, re-encountering Paul's gospel in and out of an encounter with missionary Advaita provides an additional, theological warrant on the Christian side for shifting the controversy about conversion from the categorical to the empirical, and from the general to the particular. There is, we can note, an animated scholarly conversation about whether the religious vision of an Advaitin missionary like Swami Vivekananda made him a theological “inclusivist” or a theological “pluralist.”<sup>106</sup> Certainly, he was always clear about Advaita Vedānta as the final

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>105</sup> See e.g. Julius Lipner, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (London: SCM Press, 1969); idem., *Salvation and Humanisation: Some Crucial Issues of the Theology of Mission in Contemporary India* (Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1971); Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981); and the discussion in Kim, *In Search of Identity*, 88-108.

<sup>106</sup> See K.P. Aleaz, “Swami Vivekananda: Inclusivist or Pluralist,” in *Swami Vivekananda: A Hundred Years Since Chicago*, ed. R.K. Dasgupta (Belur: Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, 1994), 230-47; Bradley Malkovsky, “Swami Vivekananda and Bede Griffiths on Religious Pluralism: Hindu and Christian Approaches to Truth,” *Horizons* 25 (1998): 223-27; and Gwilym Beckerlegge, “Categorizing the Ramakrishna Math and Mission,” in *The Ramakrishna Mission: The Making of a Modern Hindu Movement* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University

truth of all religions, the realization of which alone would bring true liberation. But he also typically affirmed the historical and religious necessity for diversity: diversity of persons, diversity of cultures, diversity of paths, and—most generally—diversity in the particular ways in which this highest truth might come to any individual or any community.

From this we can ask the question: is it also possible to speak of a necessary diversity in what it means to convert? This term, I have tried to demonstrate, does not possess just one stable meaning, from one tradition to another, or even from one historical and cultural context to another. Decisions to convert and understandings of conversion— *Up, Over* and/or *Through*—never take place in historical or cultural vacuums; they are deeply informed by a variety of identity markers, including but not exclusively religious ones.<sup>107</sup> Conversion, therefore, meant one thing for Paul and the first generation of Christians, and it will necessarily come to mean different things in each new era. There is ample space for Christians, Advaita Vedāntins 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, or indeed to “convert” in ways that violate common, received meanings of conversion and neat lines between traditions, as Advaita teachers like Swami Vivekananda and Swami Chinmayananda recommend.<sup>108</sup>

No one, I think, could read witnesses like Sita Ram Goel and P. Kuruvachira without concluding that Christians and Hindus both have a great deal to answer for. Yet, the much-

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Press, 2000), 52-78.

<sup>107</sup> See Bauman, “Identity, Conversion and Violence,” 278-86; Gauri Viswanathan, “Religious Conversion and the Politics of Dissent,” in van der Veer, *Conversion to Modernities*, 89-114; and idem., *Outside the Fold*.

<sup>108</sup> On this point, see the excellent discussion in Anantanand Rambachan, “Evangelization and Conversion Reconsidered in the Light of the Contemporary Controversy in India – a Hindu Assessment,” *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin* 15 (2002): 20-27, as well as the useful recommendations offered in the 2011 document “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct,” co-published by the World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and the World Evangelical Alliance, <[http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/2011pdfs/ChristianWitness\\_recommendations.pdf](http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/2011pdfs/ChristianWitness_recommendations.pdf)>, accessed

needed mutual self-correction will be most fruitful if it focuses on particular movements and particular practices, in particular contexts, without generalizing too broadly or too easily about either our own traditions or those of others.<sup>109</sup> The key issue may be to establish appropriate venues, with ample protections on all sides, and to cultivate appropriate discursive practices to engage in this work of examining particulars and engaging in needed reforms.

Many modern Christians and many modern Advaitins share a core conviction that the highest truth possesses an intrinsic value and power to touch anyone, in any circumstance, with potentially unexpected and enormously varied results. It would be a shame, at least in my view, if Advaitins, Christians and others did not preach, or teach, or otherwise communicate these highest truths with lively expectations of provoking one or another kind of transformation. The Devil is, as so often seems to be the case, in the details.