

## Up, Beyond, and Back Again

### Conversion and the Task of the Comparative Theologian

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I suspect that Professor Locklin's paper, "Up, Over, Through," is going to become a major milestone in the field of Hindu-Christian studies. It certainly deserves to do so; for it takes considerable steps in the direction of clarifying the highly muddied waters of the discourse, both academic and confessional, surrounding the question of conversion to Hindu traditions.

As many have demonstrated—authors cited by Locklin, and others as well<sup>1</sup>—Hindu traditions *have* historically engaged in active solicitation of conversions—and specifically, of Conversions-*Over* of the kind to which the contemporary Hindu authors that Locklin cites reject in the strongest terms. These conversions have taken forms that would now be considered intra-Hindu—such as conversion from one form of Vedānta to another, such as from Advaita to Dvaita, or vice versa, or from a Śaiva tradition to a Vaiṣṇava tradition, and so on—as well as conversions to what are now defined as Hindu traditions from other traditions, such as Buddhism or Jainism.<sup>2</sup>

Locklin manages to avoid, however, the polemical and condescending tone of that scholarship (some of which he cites) which uses this fact to “expose” those contemporary Hindus who object to the solicitation of conversions, and who characterize their tradition as one that does not engage in proselytizing, as either being engaged in a massive fraud—a “big lie” in the words of one of Locklin's authors—or as hopelessly ignorant of their own traditions. Respecting, however, the agency and self-awareness of the people whose very

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<sup>1</sup> Such as, recently, D.N. Jha, *Rethinking Hindu Identity* (London: Equinox, 2009), 27-47.

<sup>2</sup> For examples of polemical Hindu literature extolling conversion from Jainism, see Paul Dundas, *The Jains* (Second Edition) (London: Routledge, 2002), 127.

self-understanding is a topic of his study, Locklin opts instead to interrogate the category of *conversion* itself. Might it be that those contemporary Hindus and Hindu movements that object to conversion, and yet seem to engage in it, have a very different concept of conversion in mind when they offer these objections? I believe that, with his account of *Conversion-Up*, Locklin has begun the process of clarifying this issue rather than further muddying the waters with politically charged accusations of ignorance or mendacity.

In regard to his use of my personal conversion narrative to illustrate his points, I believe I can say with some authority that Locklin has written with both sensitivity and insight. I do not take issue with his interpretation of my account, but I would like to take this opportunity to elaborate upon it.<sup>3</sup>

First, I would like to cite another one of the respondents to Locklin's paper in this forum, Chad Bauman, who cites Henri Gooren's use of the term "conversion careers," in contrast with a conversion "event," to characterize the conversion phenomenon. As cited by Bauman, Gooren sees a conversion career as involving "a religious person's passage 'within his or her social and cultural context, through levels, types, and phases of... participation.'"<sup>4</sup> This concept of conversion as a "career"—or, as I generally prefer to call it, a process—is certainly true to my experience, which, though punctuated by moments of dramatic insight and personal transformation, was gradual, and in fact remains ongoing. As I say in the narrative that Locklin cites, "My conversion was not sudden."<sup>5</sup>

The gradual and multi-stage nature of this process is reflected in Locklin's paper in his account of both Swami Dayananda Saraswati's conversion as well as mine. Swami Dayananda "starts as a Brahminical Hindu in a general senses," is then transformed by the teaching of the Chinmaya Mission, and then further transformed by his reading of the

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<sup>3</sup> And I would also like to thank Vince Evener, Managing Editor of the Religion and Culture Web Forum at the Martin Marty Center for the Advanced Study of Religion at the University of Chicago Divinity School, for the opportunity to do so.

<sup>4</sup> Henri Gooren, "Conversion Narratives," in *Studying Global Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods*, ed. Allan Anderson, et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 94.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffery D. Long, *A Vision for Hinduism: Beyond Hindu Nationalism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 6.

*Upaniṣads*. I similarly go from being a devout, though unconventional, Roman Catholic, to identifying with a generalized Hinduism, to having formal initiation into and affiliation with the Ramakrishna tradition.

As Locklin suggests, my story is, in one sense, the most conventional conversion narrative he examines—being, at first glance, a fairly straightforward case of Conversion-Over. Being, unlike Swami Dayananda, not Indian, but raised as a Roman Catholic in an overwhelmingly Protestant milieu, my casting of my religious passage as a Conversion-Over is perhaps understandable as, at least in part, an effect of the culture in which I was socialized. I saw the discrepancies between my beliefs and metaphysical commitments and those that were proclaimed in the tradition in which I was raised, I found a tradition whose professed views were harmonious with my own, and I crossed over (albeit through a gradual process of reflection and searching that included meeting my life partner, living in India, meeting my guru, and so on).

As Locklin insightfully notes, however, this seemingly straightforward account, and one quite natural to one raised in a deeply Protestant culture, in which one's religious identity is seen primarily in terms of personal belief, disguises a more traditionally Hindu conception of Conversion-Up that is actually more true to my self-understanding than the Conversion-Over narrative into which I sometimes feel that the categories predominant in my society constrain me. In Locklin's words, "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." He contends—correctly, I think—that the language I use in this regard "is the language of 'Conversion-Up.'" Very early in my "conversion career," my sense was that the ideas and the insights I found in the *Bhagavad Gita* and other Hindu sources were making me a *better* Christian. I saw Hindu thought as deepening my faith by allowing me to contextualize my (Christian) beliefs in a (Hindu) framework in a way that rendered these beliefs, I felt, more rationally grounded, thereby, in a sense, giving me permission to believe, rather than assenting to propositions against

which my mind would otherwise rebel. To see Jesus as the one and only begotten Son of God, for example, particularly if this meant calling into question the salvation of huge swaths of humanity, was something against which my mind rebelled. But to see Jesus as an *avatār*, as one of many incarnations of the infinite Christ Consciousness, known by other names and forms in other traditions, allowed me to affirm the divinity of Jesus and to participate in the ritual life of the Church without feeling that I was going against my conscience or my reason. At least this was the case until I began to engage with Christian theology more deeply during my undergraduate studies, and to realize how very deeply my beliefs were in conflict with traditional Christian teaching. This precipitated the crisis that led to my *Conversion-Over* (which is, to be sure, a real element of my conversion career, and not only an effect of Protestant cultural influence). The point, though, is that *internally*, my own sense was that I had found a rapprochement between Christianity and Hinduism that was at least satisfying to me. It was the tensions that the *expression* of my beliefs created with others in the Church, particularly given my desire to be a theologian—a “representative intellectual,” to use a term coined by my former teacher<sup>6</sup>—that led me to see my continuing self-identification as a Christian to be, at best, confusing to others, and at worst, as deceptive (and perhaps even self-deceptive).

As Locklin also points out, my process of upward conversion did not cease with my affiliation to Hinduism, nor even to the Ramakrishna tradition. As he rightly notes, I do not see the tradition as “merely an Advaita mission.” Nor, I would argue—despite the many places where Swami Vivekananda and even Sri Ramakrishna affirm non-duality as the highest level of realization—does the Ramakrishna tradition. As critical scholars, such as Anantanand Rambachan, have pointed out, there are some clear divergences between Vivekananda’s understanding of Advaita and the traditional approach of Śaṅkarācārya.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Paul J. Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 3-7.

<sup>7</sup> See Anantanand Rambachan, *The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda’s Reinterpretation of the Vedas* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

(And as Locklin mentions in his account of Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Dayananda sees Swami Vivekananda's Vedānta as a deviation from "traditional Vedānta.") Contrary to the popular identification of the Ramakrishna tradition's view with Śāṅkara's Advaita, a growing number of scholars in the Ramakrishna Order (and this lay convert theologian) represent the tradition's view as *integral*—in a sense akin to that deployed in the tradition of Sri Aurobindo, as well as by Western proponents of "integral studies"—rather than as a re-articulation of Śāṅkarācārya's non-dualism. At a recent conference, for example, on the relevance of Ramakrishna's ideas in the twenty-first century, Swami Bhajanananda, a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order, used the metaphor of a mountain to describe non-dual realization as the "peak" of spiritual experience. But he then went on to say that reaching the peak of the mountain is not the end of the spiritual journey. It is followed by a descent back down the mountain that cannot be identified with the path of ascent, due to the transformation that has been wrought by the non-dual experience.<sup>8</sup> The sensibility thus expressed is not unlike that of the famous Ox Herding portraits of the Zen tradition, in which the realization of Emptiness is not the final, tenth stage of the path, but only the eighth. This is quite distinct from classical Advaita Vedānta.

Locklin's paper is at its strongest, however, in its final section, in which Locklin moves into comparative theological mode. His analysis of that most famous of converts, Paul, in terms of *Conversion-Up*, and his suggestion that Christians would be well served to rethink conversion in these terms and to interrogate the widely held assumption that for a non-Christian to *Convert-Up* necessarily requires her to *Convert-Over* (to Christianity) is a fine example of what Francis Clooney calls "deep learning across religious borders," which is definitive of comparative theology as Clooney conceives of it.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Swami Bhajanananda's paper, as well as the others presented at this conference, is to be published in a forthcoming volume of conference proceedings. But the original presentation can be seen on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8AhEUgwDfZM>.

<sup>9</sup> Francis X. Clooney, SJ, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 10.

Were the findings of Locklin's paper to be widely disseminated, it is possible that he would not only assist Hindus in articulating a more nuanced understanding of what conversion does and does not mean for contemporary Hindu traditions—thus avoiding the unfortunate contradictions that the current denial of Hindu conversion efforts entails. He might also go some distance toward alleviating the toxic socio-political dynamic which currently surrounds the issue of conversion in India by encouraging Christians to think less in terms of proselytizing in the conventional sense and more in terms of promoting the deepening of spiritual experience and insight in many religious traditions: promoting, that is, *Conversion-Up* rather than *Conversion-Over*. Locklin's paper might thus fulfill one of the aspirations that Clooney articulates for the comparative theological enterprise: that it might yield insights that would be seen as authentic and beneficial for both of the religious traditions brought together for comparative study.

The community of scholars involved in Hindu-Christian studies, and arguably the wider Hindu and Christian communities, thus owe Professor Locklin a debt of gratitude for pursuing this avenue of inquiry.