

## Response to Reid B. Locklin

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The matter of religious conversion has become the single most important source of controversy between Hindus and Christians in India. It is not a phenomenon that elicits only theoretical responses and exchanges on both sides. It is a highly combustible issue that ignites intense emotions, exploding swiftly into conflict that engulfs communities and leads to the tragic destruction of life and places of worship.

Hindu leaders, on the whole, believe that conversion is the most important concern of Christians in relation to people of other traditions. Some, like Swami Dayananda Saraswati, founder of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, and convener of the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha, characterize conversion as an act of violence perpetrated by an aggressive Christian tradition on a non-aggressive Hindu tradition. Christians, on the opposite side, reject the branding of conversion as violence and emphasize that the freedom to change one's religion and to proclaim and practice it in the public sphere is a fundamental human right. The open exchanges between Hindus and Christians on conversion reveal little common ground, and mutual mistrust and suspicion prevail.

Hindu apologists are reluctant to admit that the tradition seeks to win converts and cites this as a fact that differentiates Hinduism from Christianity. Reid B. Locklin attempts to shed light on this controversy by examining critically this claim, especially in relation to the tradition of Advaita Vedanta. Reid rightly notes the presence of many disciples of Christian background in the *ashrams* of Swami Dayananda Saraswati and the work of Hindu-based movements such as the Ramakrishna Mission, Transcendental Meditation and ISKCON in western countries. Is there then "conversion" in Advaita tradition? Reid answers in the affirmative, but properly problematizes the meaning of conversion, distinguishing between Conversion-*Over* and Conversion-*Up*. Conversion-*Over* is the more familiar movement across religious boundaries "from one system of doctrines, practices and worldview *over* to another." In the Advaita tradition, contends Reid, the conversion is better described as Conversion-*UP*. There is no easy definition of Conversion-*UP*, expect to say that it refers to a process of upward movement in religions based on some general notion of growth and

evolution. In the case of Advaita the movement upwards is in the direction of non-dual truth.

Reid's instinct in this matter, guided by his reading of Advaita texts and his study with a teacher of the tradition is correct. Different truth claims have always been vigorously argued, advocated and defended among the various sub-traditions (*sampradayas*) comprising the family of Hinduism. Hindu traditions are familiar with the religious motive of sharing religious conviction, debating and persuading others about its validity. To claim otherwise is not be faithful to important strands of Hinduism. The motivation for such sharing is the conviction that these teachings are universally relevant and conducive to human wellbeing. Reid's argument for the Advaita understanding of Conversion-*UP* is important for countering a widespread misunderstanding that Hindu traditions advocate the equality of all truth claims and offer us no normative grounds for evaluating contending claims. The Advaita tradition, as articulated by its classical systematizer Shankara and his disciples and by contemporary exponents like Swami Dayananda Saraswati and his disciples, does not reduce the significance of religious difference to semantic ones. There are truth claims that correspond better to the nature of reality and others that do not and that must be contested.

At the same time, there is reluctance, noted by Reid, to own or use the word conversion to describe this religious transformation from one worldview to another. One reason, emphasized by Reid, has to do with different understandings of the nature and "direction" of this transformation. There are other reasons, however, not treated by Reid in this essay and that deserve consideration. These have to do with the larger context, social, cultural and political, in which this transformation occurs and the actual process involved. I wish, in the limits, of this response to identify a few salient of these reasons.

Although many contemporary Advaita movements, noted by Reid, have become institutionalized (for example, Ramakrishna Mission, Chinmaya Mission, Arsha Vidya Gurukulam), such institutionalization is not centrally for the purpose of developing comprehensive plans and systematic efforts to target the practitioners of other traditions with the aim of conversion. Vivekananda's discourse about spiritual conquest is more hopeful grandiloquence and less programmatic. He affirms the ultimate truth of non-duality while rejoicing in religious diversity and not problematizing it

or wishing for homogenization. The “winning of converts” or the “harvesting of souls,” language traditionally associated with the missionary enterprise is alien to the tradition of Advaita.

The contemporary institutionalization of Advaita has not also fundamentally altered the traditional view that religious teaching is given in response to request made by a student to a teacher. The student seeks the teacher. Religious teaching, it is felt, speaks meaningfully to the student who has examined her experiences and discovered the limits of finite gains and accomplishments. The teacher validates the student’s predicament and imparts instruction through a rigorous process that makes special demands on both student and teacher. The giving and receiving of religious teaching requires commitment and persistence on the part of both teacher and student. Teaching offered to a unqualified student is fruitless.

I could offer more evidence of differences in the mode of sharing religious teaching between the Advaita tradition and more conventional proselytization. But my point is made that whether we are speaking of *Conversion-Over* or *Conversion-Up*, differences are not only in the direction of change but also in method. I endorse Reid’s conclusion that it would be a shame “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, however, is not only in the details but also in the means.