The Society for Ecumenical Studies

Reflections On Conversion In Inter-Faith Contexts

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Introduction

I want to address some of the issues around the question of conversion from the point of view of an inter faith practitioner – that is to say, a Christian whose primary involvement is in trying to build relationships of trust and understanding with people of other faith communities. It is from that perspective that I would like to look at how conversion appears – particularly conversion from one faith to another faith. The importance of the phenomena has been underlined for me recently by reading Jonathan Romain's splendid and very readable survey of the subject, where he estimates that 'a thousand people in Britain convert to a different faith each day'. (*1*)

I welcome the opportunity to concentrate on this question precisely because much of the inter faith work in which I am involved effectively side-steps the area of conversion. This may partly reflect my own personal background – I have had a rather uneventful religious life. I was brought up as an Anglican Christian, I was ordained as an Anglican Christian, and I still am an Anglican Christian. In a sense, therefore, what follows is a preaching to myself about the need to take conversion more seriously.

Yet I think that there is something wider than a personal issue involved here. The difficulties of addressing conversion from this perspective are the consequence of deep-seated factors inherent in the situation itself. Inter faith work tends to side-step the question of conversion for a very cogent reason - namely: conversion is in fact a particularly difficult topic to address in an inter faith context.

I want to begin my presentation by expanding on why that should be so – just what are the factors which make conversion so problematic in inter faith contexts? Having outlined some of the difficulties, I shall point to some of the responses that have been made to the question of conversion from the inter faith world. Finally, I shall indicate some of the areas where I think further discussion is needed. This will be the point at which I shall be particularly glad to be making this presentation at an early stage in the consultation. Being early gives me the chance to lay some questions before you. Then it is up to you to gather together your experience and wisdom to deal with them over the next few days, and so you can absolve me from the responsibility of finding the answers myself.

1. The problematic of conversion in inter faith contexts

From the point of view of inter faith relations, the question of conversion from one religion to another between faiths is a very difficult issue to handle. Indeed, much inter faith dialogue seems largely to avoid the question in two ways: by not treating it as a substantial theme for discussion, and by not including within the dialogue circles those who have experienced inter-religious conversions in their own lives. I want to begin by outlining four kinds of problem which conversions raise for inter faith relations – respectively: political, social, dialogical, and issues relating to a sense of religious identity. (*2*)

1.1. There are several inter faith situations where conversion is a particularly contentious issue because of its wider perceived connotations, which could be described as 'political' in the broad sense of the term. An obvious example is Christian-Jewish relations, which through history have repeatedly been marked by forceful attempts to make Jewish people into Christians. Some of these have been the result of missionary attempts to bring salvation to the Jews. Others have been the alternative to expulsion presented by coercive governments wishing to bring religious uniformity to their people. In either case, though, they have been experienced by the Jewish community as

deliberate attempts to destroy Jewish peoplehood. Contemporary Messianic believers strongly deny that there is any incompatibility between being disciples of Jesus and being authentically Jewish, but for the mainstream Jewish community their conversions too are seen, against the background of this history of aggression, as a continuing attempt to destroy Israel.

Rather different political resonances apply in the case of those who convert away from Islam to another religion. In most traditional Islamic jurisprudence, this is equated with the crime of apostasy, *riddah*. A saying attributed to the Prophet says, 'Kill the one who changes his religion', and on this basis some have argued that apostasy – and therefore conversion – is a capital offence in Islam, a ruling which is encoded in the legal systems of some Muslim countries. Other Muslim scholars, by contrast, insist that the reference of the saying is not to apostasy (*riddah*) as such, but to high treason (*hirabah*), i.e. it applies only to situations where 'apostasy is accompanied by hostility and rebellion against the community and its legitimate leadership'. Such situations, they argue, rarely apply in the case of converts today, and therefore an authentically Islamic response should treat apostasy / conversion as a matter between the individual and God.(*3*) In any case, what is clear here is the extent to which questions of conversion immediately involve political considerations for Muslims. Naturally, when these questions are raised within an inter faith context, the practical import of Islamic law on converts to Christianity or other faiths will also be a concern for the non-Muslims.

A third example of the political resonances of conversions can be found in current debates about the missionary and social work of the churches in India. While Christians have tended to see the issues here in terms of minority freedom and repression in a society where traditional religion is used to support an unequal and unjust social order, the proponents of *Hindutva* resurgence have represented Christianity as engaged in an assault on the Hindu culture which they see as constituting the essence of Indian nationhood. Pointing to the presence of strong separatist movements in several Indian states with a large Christian population, they claim that the integrity of the world's 'only Hindu country' is potentially endangered. In more detail, there are bitter disputes about the alleged abuse of social welfare schemes by mission agencies as attempts to lure people into Christian faith

through offers of education, medical care, and so on, with the implication that the status of the converts is not that of those who have come to a genuinely free decision Therefore their decision to convert is not respected, or even not recognised.

1.2. These Hindu objections lead me into the second area where conversion is seen to be problematic for inter faith relationships – namely, in its effects on the social coherence of organised communities of faith. In particular, conversion is perceived to be a direct threat to the unity and continuity of the family in its role as medium and guarantor of religious observance. This threat is seen to be focussed at a number of key points. Perhaps the most controversial is that of inter faith marriages. Many individual conversions occur when one marriage partner adopts the faith of the other; even when both partners attempt to maintain their own faith, there can be a notable degree of distancing from either or both of the original communities and families, and faith practice may be weakened as a result. The issue of 'marrying out' has been a particularly fraught one in modern Judaism. Whereas Orthodox rabbis have tended to maintain a strict prohibition on the practice, the more liberal traditions have in recent years responded more often in terms of offering support for those involved – including a positive welcome for those who decide to convert to Judaism in the context of a marriage.(*4*)

The nurture of children and young people forms another area where anxieties about conversion can be marked. This will clearly be an issue in the case of children born in an inter faith marriage or other relationship, but educational institutions also provide an arena where parents and faith community leaders feel strongly about the importance of maintaining an environment which supports the inherited religious practice and culture of young people. The primary motivation here is to prevent the loss of faith, rather than the replacement of one faith by another. However, the result can be a suspicion of any attempts to introduce students to the beliefs and practices of religions other than their own – the claim being made that this would be 'confusing' to them at this stage in their life.

A (literally) final point at which the possibility of conversion may be seen as profoundly threatening is in relation to death and funerary customs. The death of one who has converted 'out of' a particular religious tradition can be a particularly painful time for the bereaved relatives, who see their family member's departure marked by alien rites – it is interesting in this regard to note the custom in some Hindu families of holding a symbolic funeral service during the lifetime of a relative who has converted to another faith. Equally, there may also be the anxiety that converts will not maintain the traditional religious observances to honour and pray for their deceased ancestors. The depth of the psychological issues involved here, and the long history of the problem in Christian missiology, can be illustrated by the poignant story of the group of Japanese who told St Francis Xavier that, though they were deeply impressed by the prospect of heaven which he gave them in his preaching, they would choose rather to go to hell since they could not bear to be parted from their unbaptised – and therefore, as Xavier had assured them, unsaved – ancestors. (*5*)

1.3. I have spoken so far about some of the powerful political and social forces which make the question of conversions so difficult to handle within any kind of inter-religious context. The third problematic area relates specifically to that mode of inter faith relations which can be described as inter faith dialogue – that is to say, situations where people of different faiths engage in conversation with the aims of understanding one another better and seeking the truth together. Such situations are always more or less fragile, and highly sensitive to nuances in mutual perception. In a dialogue, the personal presence of converts from one faith to another can prove profoundly unsettling for many participants. Even their mere conceptual presence as a subject of discussion can also be difficult to handle. Let me mention two different types of approach to dialogue which can be severely challenged by converts.

One is the attitude which in its popular mode relies on such analogies as 'many paths all leading to the summit of the same mountain', and in its sophisticated theological expression issues in the pluralism of a John Hick or

a Paul Knitter. The fundamental datum of this approach is the idea of 'rough parity': (*6*) that truth is more or less equally, if differently, apprehended, 'salvation' more or less equally, if differently, available in the various world faiths. I do not want now to argue for or against such a view, but simply to note that the phenomenon of inter-religious conversion poses quite a challenge to it. The convert appears to be one who has found in her own life that the disparity in the apprehension of truth, or in the mediation of salvation, is such that she has taken radical action to re-orient her life. I say 'appears to be', because the reasons for her conversion may actually be far more circumstantial. Nevertheless, appearances are important; as a sign of how the framework of dialogue is threatened the convert is important. For what room in the 'many paths up the mountain' model can there be for somebody who scrambles across the scree from one path to another? What sense does it make in the 'Copernican system' for somebody to hop impertinently from one planet to another? There is also the possibility that she holds in her own convictions what she signifies in appearance – that she does believe she has moved from a religion with less or even no truth to tell, less or even no salvation to mediate, to one that is better, more complete. This can be frustrating for those committed to liberal pluralism, as from their standpoint such journeys are pointless. Much contemporary Hindu writing on conversion, for example, begins by affirming Hinduism as the most tolerant of all religions, because it offers so many ways to God. It then moves quickly from that to the corollary that there is no convincing reason why anybody should feel a need to find a path outside Hinduism.(*7*)

But it is not only a liberal pluralism which is challenged by the insistent questions about truth that the convert poses. In situations where issues about the supposed fulfilment of one faith by another are at stake also, the convert may play an unsettling role. Jewish people who are accustomed to resisting evangelical Gentile Christian claims that their religion is completed through the coming of Jesus as Messiah may be profoundly disconcerted to hear the same claim being made by a Messianic believer, who has been brought up in a Jewish home and looks and behaves like a Jew. Evangelical Christians in turn, accustomed to seeing their faith as the fulfilment and authentic meaning

of Judaism, may be startled to receive an invitation from an Islamic 'revert' away from Christianity who asks them to recognise that the gospel, rightly understood, points to the coming of Muhammad, and that genuine, uncorrupted Christian discipleship is found through living according to the precepts of Islam. The confusion can be all the greater when the conversion movement is in the opposite direction – when a Christian becomes a Jew, say, or a Muslim becomes a Christian, since this directly reverses the later faith's understanding of itself as an improvement on the former. In short, converts seem to be a *skandalon* in dialogue, challenging equally the religions' claims to finality, to self-sufficiency and to parity; conversion is a destabilising factor for dialogue.

1.4. At a still deeper level, the sense of frustration, puzzlement or even indignation which the presence of the convert introduces can reach beyond the immediate context of inter faith dialogue to place a question mark against the religious identity of everybody in a multi-faith situation. Identity is a notoriously elusive concept; perhaps it is most clearly recognised when it is most felt to be under threat, and most explicitly relied upon in times of rapid social adjustment. Britain – like other western European countries – is in just such a time, as our society has moved in less than a generation from relative homogeneity to a startling diversity, at least in urban areas. Over the last thirty years, the language and concepts which have been used to express individual and corporate identities in this rapidly changing situation have themselves changed – immigrant status, colour, race or ethnicity, and culture have successively been the focus of attention.

To this complex scene the last few years have added a growing recognition of the importance of religion as a constitutive element of identity. A defining moment in this process was the controversy over Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, which saw British Muslims emerge as a high profile community in society, but the effects have been felt by other communities also, notably Hindus and the black Christian community. In the legal area, changes being prepared by the UK Government now to comply with European directives will for the first time in Great Britain introduce some measure of protection against

discrimination specifically on the grounds of religion or belief. In a parallel process, a debate continues about the possibility of legislation to outlaw incitement to religious hatred.

In most respects, this developing recognition of the importance of faith as a key element defining who people are is very welcome, and indeed long overdue. However, because it has grown out of an earlier community relations discourse conducted in terms of ethnicity, there is a certain danger of artificially 'fixing' religious identity – a risk that a monolithic and inflexible understanding of religious identity will be assumed; that people will be categorised as 'Muslim', 'Christian' and so on according to their upbringing and community membership. As several commentators pointed out during parliamentary discussion of the religious hatred bill, the 'givenness' and invariance of ethnicity cannot simply be transferred to religion. While family background will often play the dominant part in forming a person's faith involvement, there remains in principle an element of choice – and converts are those who serve as living reminders that the principle of choice is put into practice by some people.

This question mark over the fixity of religious identity operates not just at the level of social policy, but also existentially, in the challenge it conveys to individuals and communities of faith. The convert in the inter faith context is potentially subversive of the sense of identity of members of both faiths – that which she has left, and that which she has joined. For her former co-religionists, this is fairly obvious; but for her new co-religionists also, she may bring together elements of the faith they recognise with other cultural elements in a new and disturbing constellation.

The reception of converts by their new communities is not straightforward. Some groups explicitly require acculturation as part of membership, but even among those who in theory do not the re-negotiation of identity for both convert and receiving community often proves too complex or costly a task to achieve successfully. The end result is that the new believers do not become truly part of the group. If one were to think of baptism (in Pauline terms) as the

grafting of a new member into the body, then there is the possibility that the host tissues may reject the transplanted organ. While this will usually be the result of a simple failure to accept otherness and change, it would be interesting to see if there were any effects on attitudes to converts from the involvement of the receiving community in inter faith dialogue. My sense is that there is a certain pattern of dialogue which casts people of a given faith into such a determinately composed identity that it cannot easily welcome new members. Certainly, this is a widespread perception among Christian converts from other faiths in Britain, and as a result they can sometimes resent the churches' involvement in some forms of inter faith dialogue.
So there is a cluster of inter-related issues, operating at various levels, which make the conversion issue a very difficult one to handle within the inter faith context. I want now to ask what kinds of responses to this problem have been made by those engaged in various forms of inter faith dialogue.

2. Responses from the inter faith context to the issue of conversion

It seems to me that on the whole the questions of conversion have not been really faced with sufficient seriousness by those involved in inter faith dialogue– particularly not those questions which concern the underlying issues of religious identity. However, some responses have of course been made, and I want now to talk in turn about the political, social and dialogical dimensions.

2.1. Allegations that conversions represent an attack on the integrity of other faiths with political repercussions have generated some discussion in inter faith circles. There is a communications problem here, in that those inter faith circles rarely include either converts or those most vigorously seeking the conversion of others. In the case of the Christian Churches, a pressing need is the facilitation of dialogue between those Christians committed to dialogue with people of other faiths and those Christians committed to securing their conversion to Christianity. It is only when this intra-Christian connection is made that inter faith dialogue itself can engage seriously with the issues

involved; yet sometimes the intra-Christian dialogue is more difficult to establish or to sustain than the inter-religious.

Where discussions have taken place, an important principle has been to try to establish a distinction between two senses of the word ‘convert’: on the one hand, self-referentially, ‘to change one’s own religious affiliation’; on the other hand, with reference to another, ‘to seek to induce a change in their religious affiliation’. The latter usage is a Christian shorthand which is unfortunate in the resonances it creates both among Christians and others. For a missionary to say, ‘I have converted so many hundred people’ is bad for the missionary’s spiritual pride, and it is threatening to the unconverted neighbours of those hundreds. We need to purify our language at this point, to make it clear that – in Christian terms – it is only ever the Holy Spirit who is the genuine agent of conversion, operating in the intimacy of the other’s personal autonomy which nobody else has the right to violate.

This distinction of two senses of conversion is easy to grasp in principle, but it can be more difficult to define in practical situations. The line between actively commending faith and manipulating the other to change faith is not always clear. Considerable effort has been focused here on distinguishing between conversion, on one hand, and proselytisation, on the other. The former is deemed acceptable, the latter illegitimate. The availability of two words, one ‘good’ and the other ‘bad’, is very useful strategically, since everybody can readily agree that they are in favour of conversion and against proselytisation. When it comes to actually establishing the respective boundaries of the two words, though, there is no consensus even about the kind of criteria which count.

For some, the key issue is that of missionary motivation: conversions are the unlooked for consequence of the propagation of faith, whereas proselytisation involves the deliberate attempt to change people’s faith. For others, the identity of the persons changing faith is crucial: converts are responsible adults who have made free decisions, whereas proselytes are vulnerable, disadvantaged or otherwise constrained individuals or groups who have been

singled out by missionaries. A third way of interpreting the conversion / proselytisation distinction is based on the degree of respect accorded to the culture associated with the previous faith, and the extent to which elements of continuity are permitted across the conversion experience. Andrew Walls, for example, claims that authentic Christianity is committed to a 'conversion' rather than a 'proselytisation' model, as shown by its insistence on the need to 'translate' the Gospel into every culture.(*8*) Finally, the distinction may be made in a practical way through trying to regulate the methods used in mission and social work, and the extent to which access to social benefits is linked to an expectation of change of faith on the part of the recipients.
This kind of attempt to develop a shared 'ethic of conversion' is both a very important and a very complex task, with much depending on the dynamics of the particular inter faith situation. From my experience of dialogue on this subject between an ecumenical group of Christians and some leading members of the Hindu community in this country, I know how much can depend on the shades of meaning given to particular words, as is clear from the variety of ways in which 'conversion' and 'proselytisation' can be distinguished. At times, the process can feel more like negotiation than dialogue, but that is perhaps inevitable given its wider political ramifications.

2.2. Less attention has been paid from an inter faith perspective to the more immediate social implications of individual conversions for relations between communities and families, though this will surely have to change as conversions multiply in modern plural societies. Jonathan Romain's book provides a masterly survey of the complex range of reactions to conversions from families, friends and religious colleagues in both old and new faiths, and I could not attempt to summarise what he says here.

One reflection which did occur to me on reading his work, though, was about the need to develop inter faith responses to conversions associated with the marriage of somebody from one faith to somebody of another. Inter faith marriages themselves – that is to say, marriages in which each partner retains their original faith identity – are highly controversial for many faith communities, but there have begun to grow up some informal networks of

support and dialogue for such situations. These networks are found both among the couples themselves and also to some extent among religious leaders in the communities concerned. When one partner converts, however, it can seem that the marriage no longer bears any relation to one of the two faith communities, and so there is no impetus towards any inter faith consideration of it.

This is unfortunate, since the convert is likely still to have family and friends belonging to the original faith community, and in any case will still carry in his or her own self deep elements of personal identity drawn from that faith and culture. For the converted marriage partners themselves, there are questions of the extent to which conversion can be adequately described as a 'clean break', to which I shall return later. For the wider circles of those associated with the married couple, there may be a need to find ways of enabling dialogue between the two faith communities. It may be that the slowly growing inter faith relationships supporting inter faith marriages can be further developed reach into these situations also.

2.3. I talked earlier about the way in which converts can seem to threaten the very basis of dialogue between people of different faiths, as they call into radical question many of the assumptions on which the dialogues may be built. On the other hand, the motif of 'conversion' is clearly too important a theme, particularly for Christians, to be entirely ignored in an inter faith context, and so a number of strategies to handle the topic have been developed. I shall mention three inter-related themes.

One approach proceeds by emphasising the understanding of conversion as *metanoia*, meaning primarily a turning towards God. It proposes that this happens in inter faith dialogue primarily through a renewal and deepening of one's own faith commitment. In other words, according to this view, conversion means in the first place Christians becoming better Christians, Hindus becoming better Hindus and so on, as all are led closer to God through dialogue.(*9*) Indeed, it may even be the case that in some sense one could say that the person of another faith is the agent for the conversion of

their dialogue partner. If I meet in my Hindu neighbour evidences of hospitality, generosity, love which should also be core values in my own Christian discipleship, and I am challenged by that experience to a deeper realisation of my own faith, then I could say that I have been 'converted' to a renewed Christianity through the evangelism of that Hindu.

There is much of value in this approach, and it expresses an important dynamic within the inter faith context. Dialogue can indeed be a real opportunity for a renewal of such an intense nature that it can be fairly described as a conversion. Jonathan Romain distinguishes four different types of conversion – 'Acquiring Faith' (a person with no previous religious allegiance discovers faith), 'Born Again' (someone sees their nominal faith in a new light), 'Denominational (conversion from one group to another within the same faith), and 'Transference' (conversion from one faith to another).(*10*) The sense of conversion I have just been describing falls, I suppose, into his second category, although I have never heard anybody describe themselves as becoming a 'born again Christian' through their experience of inter faith dialogue – more often, being born again seems to exclude the possibility of dialogue. In any case, 'Transference', i.e. full-blooded conversion in the inter-religious sense, is only one of his four types. Nevertheless, it is the type that raises the most acute problems, and these will not simply go away through redefining the meaning of 'conversion'. We cannot assume that transference will not happen in the inter faith context, perhaps even through the process of engaging in dialogue itself.

So a second response in fact builds on this possibility, and defines one of the pre-conditions of genuine dialogue as being a mutual openness to the possibility of conversion to the position of the other. A radical orientation of oneself to 'convertibility' is the measure of commitment to a spirit of dialogue. At the same time, activity specifically designed to bring about conversion of the other is not – on this view – appropriate within dialogue. The dialogical spirit is characterised rather by a receptivity to seeking the truth together, rather than trying to persuade the other of one's already held convictions.

Here, inter-religious conversion has been given a central place in dialogue, but it has been redefined in two senses: by being given a primarily reflexive reference, back to the self rather than projected towards the other; and by drawing a distinction between 'orientation' and 'practice'. This is certainly an interesting way of addressing the issue of conversion within dialogue, but I am not wholly convinced that it is reasonable to insist that a readiness to be converted should in fact be explicitly required of those engaged in dialogue. Such a commitment would be much more exacting for some than for others – for example, in cases where conversion away from a faith is seen as culpable apostasy rather than as a rational decision to opt for another path. Moreover, this approach does not deal with the situation in dialogue of those who have already been converted.

A third response builds on this approach by adding a theological dimension to the focus on human attitudes. To express the point in Christian terms, it emphasises the space of human autonomy as the place where the freedom of the Spirit alone is privileged to operate, leading the individual to the possibility of conversion. In fact, even this inner realm of decision-making is itself best characterised as a dialogue, of the human being with God, in which the Spirit does not coerce but 'bears witness with (*summarturei~*) our spirit' (Rom 8.16). This seems to me an extremely important insight from a Christian perspective. It draws a theological line between witness as our responsibility and conversion as God's responsibility, and so it constantly recalls us to the importance of avoiding any form of coercion or manipulation. It locates the core reality of conversion in the *forum internum* of the human soul, which is generally recognised as the inalienable domain of a free conscience.(*11*) It is also not difficult to see how parallel distinctions could be made in other faith traditions also – several Qur'anic passages, for example, make a very similar point in insisting that the Prophet's responsibility is fulfilled in the faithful discharge of his witness: 'If they embrace Islam, they are rightly-guided, but if they turn their backs on it, then your only duty is to convey the message' (S 3.20).(*12*)

Even so, crucially necessary as the distinction between human and divine responsibility is for a theological framework to discuss conversion in the inter faith context, it is not in itself sufficient as a response to the complexity of the issues involved, particularly those which involve the tangled question of religious identity. I want to finish by suggesting a number of areas where more work needs to be done in understanding the issue of inter faith conversion in relation to identity.

3. Inter faith conversion and religious identity: six questions

3.1. In the 'classic' situation of inter-communal conversion, two definable groups are in contact with one another, each possessed of a differing pattern of identity where faith and culture are bound up together, and often also ethnicity and language are interwoven. In such a setting, it has proved natural to think of conversion, particularly large scale movements of conversion, in terms of conflict, whether that is understood as new forces of spiritual liberation being opposed by old forces of religious repression, or as new forces of alien aggression being resisted by old forces of cultural integrity. Conflict is not easy for dialogue to handle, and so conversion itself has proved to be a difficult issue to address in inter faith contexts when seen in these terms. *Are there non-conflictual models of conversion available – or at least models which do justice to the complexity of the factors involved in conflict?* A fascinating exploration of the complexity of issues involved in the tensions between two identity systems is found in Gauri Viswanathan's analysis of nineteenth-century conversions as involving resistance to attempts at cultural colonisation, rather than the assimilation they are generally assumed to imply.(*13*) Viswanathan points to the subversive effect of the convert's separation of religious faith from the cultural nexus of identity. On a more straightforward level, the almost forgotten patristic image of initiation, culminating in baptism, as 'illumination' (*photismous*) might provide a non-conflictual model of conversion in the Christian tradition. (*14*) There is indeed an implication that the previous existence was characterised by darkness, but this is not really the emphasis of *photismous* . It points rather to the invitation

to enter into a situation which casts new light on the identity both of God and of self. These in any case are only two possible examples; what other ways are open to speak convincingly of transference between faiths without categorising this in oppositional terms?

3.2. We also need to think of inter-religious conversion in situations other than the traditional instances of two communities in juxtaposition. This is a point forcibly made by Jonathan Romain, when he points to a growing dissociation of religious adherence from family background or community membership: 'It has become much more a matter of personal choice than of inherited tradition. People do not automatically follow the faith of their family'.(*15*) This makes possible a much more individual-centred and fluid sense of conversion. Some conversions involve entering spiritual paths where the very concept of community is exiguous, being replaced by a much looser form of networking.(*16*) Romain suggests that what we are seeing here is less the classic inter-community problem, and more something like shopping at a spiritual supermarket. I think that he may be underplaying the extent to which more conservative patterns of continuity in religious affiliation still apply. With reference to England, for example, his analysis perhaps fits middle-class people in the Home Counties better than it does working-class people in the North and Midlands. Still, the phenomena he describes are important, and raise the question: *How do we understand inter faith conversion in the absence of any significant community dimension?*

This is a difficult question for Christians to address, because the corporate dimension is so important in the understanding of our own faith. There is a certain tendency among Christians to regard these sort of conversions as not quite real – more akin to taking up a hobby than to taking on a religious commitment. But this can be unfair to the seriousness with which people take such decisive steps in their lives – and it also ignores the fact that converts to Christianity itself in modern Western societies may see their faith in terms of personal quest rather than conscious intention to participate in a community of faith.

3.3. We need to take more seriously the developing experiences of converts within the new faith they have joined. Much has been written about the reception or rejection of new adherents by their fellow believers. However, there is another dynamic which needs attention alongside this: namely, the convert's own relationship to their previous faith. It would be unrealistic to expect this suddenly to terminate completely, especially if involvement in the previous faith was active rather than merely nominal. For some converts, an internal relationship of retrospection, questioning and partial affirmation directed towards the previous faith continues to such an extent that they embody a virtual inter faith dialogue within their own persons. The question then arises: *How can such converts' experience enrich the practice of inter faith dialogue?*

In some cases, this may prove difficult or impossible – for example, when the process of conversion has involved painful experiences of rejection, or even persecution, converts may well try to obliterate all traces of their former faith from their consciousness. In other cases, however, there may develop a growing appreciation for, and in some sense a re-appropriation of, elements of the religious tradition from which the convert has come. In a longer generational frame, this reappraisal may be made not by the original converts but by their children or grandchildren, as they become aware of the depths of the religious heritage out of which their forebears came. The Pentecostalist theologian Amos Yong, reviewing a collection of autobiographical reflections by Asian-American Christians, goes so far as to describe this process as being in itself a conversion: 'Without ever leaving either Christian faith or the church', he points out, 'all of the contributors at various points in their lives were "converted" back to Asia even as they reconnected with their Asian roots and heritages. In that process, they discovered valuable resources by which to understand their Christian identities and to articulate Asian-American Christian theologies.'(*17*) Yong describes this freshly articulated identity as being in some sense 'betwixt and between' – a liminal position which can open up fresh perspectives on the complexities of religious identity.

3.4. Even more explicitly 'betwixt and between' are those people who, while remaining rooted in one faith tradition, have an intimate participation in another faith to such an extent that they can be described as having a 'dual belonging'.(*18*) It has for some time been not uncommon in an ecumenical age for people to have dual membership of different Christian traditions; despite the vastly greater complications that arise, it is natural to expect similar patterns to grow between the faiths also. The degree of joint participation in some cases may even be such as to enable us to speak of a 'partial conversion'. However, this should not be taken to suggest a 'half-way' position between two faiths, but rather a parallel life in a second faith while remaining in the first. *How can the experience of people with a dual religious identity enhance an understanding of conversion?*

Such situations may arise in various ways. Within an inter faith marriage, for example, one or both partners may join more or less regularly in the life of the other's faith community; or their children may grow up with some sense of belonging to both. A different scenario is the committed member of one faith who develops a deep interest in and knowledge of the lived reality of another, to such an extent that they have an empathy bordering on identification with the other. In this connection, it is intriguing to reflect on the way in which the Christian missionary movement has produced some of the most impressive and sympathetic scholarship relating to other religions. An analytic model often suggested in this connection is that of 'translation'. This may be proposed as an analogy, in the recasting of insights from one faith in terms accessible to people of the other, but it may also apply in a more literal sense, given the centrality of inter-linguistic communication for so much missiology and religious studies. 'Bilingualism' might be a useful metaphor for the sense of dual religious belonging,(*19*) and this could then illuminate our understanding of the dynamics of conversion as a consummation of interreligious communication.

3.5. I have spoken so far of the need to explore further issues of conversion in relation to personal religious identity. Equally, within our societies at large the phenomena of conversion highlight the need to find a suitable language to

speak coherently and sensitively about religious identity as a constitutive force in the definition and cohesion of communities. This is not merely a theoretical issue: in all the countries of the European Union at present, a directive under the Treaty of Amsterdam requires national governments to set in place legislation which will protect employees against discrimination on the grounds of (*inter alia*) religion or belief.(*20*) In other words, some legal acknowledgement will be given to their religious identity. *How can we define religious identity in a way which recognises and affirms the real possibility of interreligious conversion?*

The implications of this go far beyond the jurisprudential conundrum of whether or not is possible to frame an adequate definition of the term 'religion or belief', formidable as that challenge undoubtedly is. For one thing, religious identity does not exist in some kind of vacuum, but interlocks and overlaps with other ways in which communities may define themselves – particularly ethnicity and culture – yet never in a neat and easily categorisable way. People carry within themselves multiple layers of identity, and they may manifest different aspects in different situations. Moreover, conversion as transference from one religion to another is only the most dramatic example of the fluidity of religious identity as it is experienced by both individuals and communities. There is an enormous task to be faced in finding an adequate analytic framework to do justice to this question in all its intricacy.

3.6. Finally, and unavoidably for us as Christians, there are the underlying theological questions relating to discipleship. I have tried to map out some of the areas relating to conversions today where I think we need more discussion of how people are acting and thinking in our societies. But we also need to bring those experiential discussions into some kind of theological framework. It is clear that the call to conversion at its most basic and its most radical – the call to turn to the living God who meets us in Jesus Christ and promises us new life – is central to our faith. *How do we interpret that call within the complexities of interreligious conversions today, both towards and away from Christianity?* That is the final question which I leave for your deliberations over the next few days. I look forward to learning the answer.

Notes

1. Jonathan Romain, *Your God Shall Be My God: Religious Conversion in Britain Today* (London: SCM, 2000), p2.
2. I will be concentrating on the facts of conversions having taken place, rather than on the influences which lead to conversions or on the processes of conversion themselves. These raise huge issues in themselves – in the inter faith context, see for instance the work of my friend and colleague Andrew Wingate, or the research being undertaken by the Conversion Research Project at the University of Lund.
3. Cf Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Freedom of Expression in Islam* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1997), pp93-98.
4. Lawrence J Epstein, ed, *Readings in Conversion to Judaism* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc, 1995).
5. Letter of Xavier from Cochin dated 29th January, 1552 – cited in Kosuke Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: A Pilgrimage in Theology* (London: SCM, 1984), p169.
6. The phrase was coined by Langdon Gilkey – 'Plurality and Its Theological Implications', in John Hick and Paul Knitter, ed, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), p37.
7. E.g. Arun Shourie, *Missionaries in India* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1998).
8. Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), p47.
9. This is close to the ideal view of conversion advocated by Gandhi. Conversely, when he did use the word in its sense of moving from one religion to another, he emphasised the inwardness of its essential dynamism. His views were explained his views as follows in an address to a Baptist congregation: 'If a person discards his country, his customs and his old connections and manners when he changes his religion, he becomes all the more unfit to gain a knowledge of God. For a change of religion really means a conversion of the heart. When there is a real conversion, the man's heart grows' – cited in Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi's Religious Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p48.
10. Romain, *op. cit.*, p225.
11. The idea of the *forum internum* is central to modern human rights jurisprudence in relation to religious freedom, yet its boundaries have proved difficult to define– cf Carolyn Evans, *Freedom of Religion Under The European Convention on Human Rights* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), pp72ff.
12. Kamali, *op. cit.*, p103, also cites the following Qur'anic verses as implying the same distinction: SS 88.21-22; 42.48; 5.92, 99.
13. Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
14. E.g. Justin Martyr, *I Apol.* 61.
15. Romain, *op. cit.*, p7.
16. For example, some varieties of New Age, or some of the groups focused on centres such as Glastonbury.
17. Peter Phan and Jung Young Lee, ed, *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in Asian-American Perspective* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), reviewed by Amos Yong in *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, 3/2 (July 2000), pp327-331.
18. Cf Jacques Scheuer and Dennis Gira, ed, *Vivre de Plusieurs Religions: Promesse ou Illusion* (Paris: Les Éditions de l'Atelier, 2000).
19. David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter* (London: SCM, 1988), p69.
20. Cf the summary of the legislative framework and the theological background in the report of the Churches' Commission for Inter Faith Relations, *Religious Discrimination: A Christian Response* (London: CTBI, 2001).